



Mary Jo Foley All about Microsoft

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“No other company in tech space matters as much as Microsoft.”

—Mary Jo Foley

Mary Jo Foley must be setting some kind of record for Microsoft-watching. A technical journalist since graduating from Simmons College in 1983, she first interviewed Bill Gates for a cover story in *Electronic Business* magazine a year later. It was her first Microsoft story and, at the time, she confesses she didn't know much about software or operating systems. But she quickly got herself up to speed. She joined *PCWeek* (now *eweek*) in 1991, and the mag-

The screenshot shows a ZDNet blog page. At the top is the ZDNet logo with the tagline "Where Technology Means Business" and navigation links for HOME, NEWS, BLOGS, WHITE PAPERS, DOWNLOADS, and REVIEWS. Below this is a breadcrumb trail "home / blogs" and the page title "All about Microsoft". The author's name "Mary Jo Foley" is displayed with a small portrait photo and the bio "An unblinking eye on Microsoft". To the right of the bio are links for "Subscribe", "Alerts", and "Bio", along with a "Pick a blog category" dropdown menu. The main content area features a post dated "June 22nd, 2007" with the title "Even Softies get the Vista installation blues". The post text begins with "This is one for all of you readers who've had trouble installing Windows Vista. Don't". To the right of the post is an advertisement for a Sony digital camcorder, with the text "THE SUMMER TO MAKE IT A WEDDING TO REMEMBER." and the WSJ logo.

azine moved her to San Francisco. Foley was asked to take over as the magazine's Microsoft reporter when the previous reporter quit. She agreed and moved to Seattle in 1993, where she has been a full-time Microsoft watcher ever since.

Over the years she has interviewed nearly all of Microsoft's top executives, and broken a number of important stories. Living in Seattle during the 1990s, Foley was invited to Microsoft's campus on a regular basis. "Given my age and casual dress, I looked like one of the employees at Microsoft, and people saw me on the campus so much that no one ever thought I wasn't an employee." Foley rode the corporate shuttle to buildings. A couple of times, employees let her in because they thought she was one of them.

But she was not always as welcome at Microsoft. After she broke a story reporting that the release version of Windows 2000 had 63,000 bugs, Foley was barred from executive interviews at the Windows 2000 launch and black-listed by certain Microsoft groups for several years. Some Microsoft executives refused to speak to her for "ages."

Foley's Microsoft activities have inspired several legends—including one that she was seen disguised as a Microsoft cafeteria employee, flipping burgers to gather intelligence. Rumors of "Mary Jo sightings" on and off campus abounded. People broke off conversations in restaurants for fear she might be listening. Foley denies most of the stories, although she admits that she got into a couple of events "illicitly"—all in the line of journalistic duty, of course.

There have been fewer sightings since she returned to the East Coast in the late 1990s, but she tells a story that demonstrates that her reputation has not diminished: "One day, I was walking to work through Madison Square Park in midtown Manhattan. I noticed a guy was matching me step for step.

"Without missing a beat, he mumbled sideways out of his mouth: 'So, when do you think Orcas is really going to ship?'

"I did a double-take, and he said: 'Well, you're the Microsoft watcher, aren't you?' He had read my blog and recognized me from my picture. You can run, but not hide, from folks connected with Microsoft."

One of her most memorable moments covering Microsoft came during that first interview with Bill Gates, which was held in the open at the Microsoft booth at COMDEX (Computer Dealer's Exhibition). The interview was interrupted when Steve Jobs, whom Foley did not know, came up to Gates and started chatting with him. Foley waited and waited, and finally told Jobs that she was trying to do an interview and suggested that he come back later. Jobs

walked off, at which point Gates asked Foley if she knew who she had just sent away. She didn't. "He's the head of Apple," Gates told her.

A more pleasant memory has to do with Windows 95. In the months leading up to its release, her job with *PCWeek* required her to write a story about "Chicago" (the code name for Windows 95) every week. It was an intensive and exhaustive series, and the day Windows 95 was released, she bravely completed a print story reporting that Microsoft had released the product to manufacturing—without receiving confirmation from Microsoft. Along with a tremendous sense of accomplishment over providing blow-by-blow coverage of the development of Windows 95, Foley was relieved that her intuition was validated.

Through rumors, legends, and blacklisting, Foley has provided more than two decades of distinctive Microsoft coverage for a variety of publications and organizations. In the late 1990s, her ZDNet column "At the Evil Empire," moved her into the vanguard of online journalism. It also earned an award from the American Society of Business Press Editors (ASBPE) for Best Original Online Column, which is just one example of the recognition her work has received.

Blogging about Microsoft

Foley's professional online activities expanded into blogging when she established Microsoft Watch (www.microsoft-watch.com) for Ziff Davis. She was almost immediately given the nickname "Microsoft Watcher."

In 2000, CNET bought ZDNet from Ziff Davis, and Foley was part of the deal. Late in 2006, she left the employ of Ziff Davis (and her affiliation with the Microsoft Watch blog, which is still published by Ziff Davis) to work as a full-time freelance writer. One of her original clients was CNET's ZDNet, and her All about Microsoft blog (<http://blogs.zdnet.com/microsoft>) went online not long afterwards.

Foley was trained primarily as a print journalist, but she has also done podcast and video work, including guesting on several ZDNet podcasts and producing a number of ZDNet whiteboard video podcasts. One of her first podcasts covered Windows product code names—which is appropriate given that Foley knows more about Windows code names than anyone else on the planet. (She once joked about putting "Codename Queen" on her business cards.)

Although she emphasizes that she is “just one of a flock” of Microsoft watchers, Foley has certainly earned the title, “An unblinking eye on Microsoft.”

In addition to her blog, other Microsoft watchers will also want to look out for Foley’s new book, *Microsoft 2.0: Life After Bill Gates* [Wiley, 2008]. The book gives insight into what will happen after Gates retires from his daily duties at the company he founded. In *Microsoft 2.0*, Foley projects where Microsoft will go next—and why—in terms of its products, people, business models, and strategies.

Today you’re a full-time freelancer, but you started blogging when you were still with ZDNet. How did that happen? Were you given the blog as a job assignment?

I was not assigned to blog—I asked to blog. [From] 2001 to 2002, I saw blogging as a growing and interesting phenomenon. I asked my employer [at the time], Ziff Davis, to allow me to try setting up a blog. The result, Microsoft Watch (www.microsoft-watch.com) was the first [Ziff Davis] blog.

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You have a degree in communications, and you've been a working print journalist for nearly 25 years. How do you contrast blogging with print journalism?

Blogging allows us writers to state our biases and admit them, thus bringing more honesty to the things we write. That's why I was really attracted to blogging. We can finally admit what's true: we all are biased.

“For me, blogging is the future of journalism.”

“Journalists” pretend that you can write without bias, but it's impossible. I've always been a journalist, and I was always interested in it, but I feel it's so disingenuous to pretend that we're not putting our bias in articles. Read any news article—the reporter's bias is in the article. There is no such thing as an unbiased article.

For me, blogging is the future of journalism. I say that a lot, and every time I [do], I always get people [replying], “Oh, come on, it's not. You're competing with journalism, not contributing to journalism.”

I strongly disagree with that. To anyone who thinks they might want to do journalism as a career, I strongly suggest that you get into blogging. Start blogging now, and I think you can make a great career for yourself. This is especially true for technology subjects.

Do you have a mission?

My mission with All about Microsoft is to provide my readers with interesting, timely information about Microsoft—its products, people, and strategies—in order to help them do their jobs better. All Microsoft, all the time. I provide Microsoft news, interesting rumors, useful tips, and pointers to other interesting stories.

What is the return on blogging for you?

Getting personal e-mail from readers saying I helped them get a thorny issue resolved, or gave them information they needed to make a tech decision. Or just made them laugh and have a nice day. Those are the best! I love blogging. I feel like my whole career was reenergized by blogging. As a blogger, it's your reputation, your personality. You have more of a vested interest in making it interesting, fun, and a good read than you do in a news story.

“I post about whatever interests me. I try to find items to blog about that are a bit off the beaten path.”

And it’s fun to break news. It keeps me going! I still love it after doing it for 24 years.

Monetarily, I get paid for every page view—that’s the ZDNet blogs model. And, immaterially, I get a lot of pleasure from learning about technology and communicating [what I’ve learned].

And being self-employed—that must be a plus.

I like it. I’ve done it before. I did it in the mid-1980s when I was going to graduate school. It’s a tough way to go, but it’s a fun way to go.

I’m also free to say what I want, without having to be concerned over commercial issues. I don’t really feel a difference as a freelancer, though. No one at Ziff Davis [which publishes Microsoft Watch] ever told me what I could or couldn’t write. Ditto here at CNET’s ZDNet (publishers of All about Microsoft).

Do your postings reflect your personal interests, or are your topic selections driven by news or sources?

I post about whatever interests me. I try to find items to blog about that are a bit off the beaten path. I don’t try to do the same stories about Microsoft you can read anywhere. I try to bring a new perspective or a new “scoopy” piece of information to my readers every day.

I’d say about 1/3 to 1/2 of my posts are comments on things I find around the Web. The rest are things I unearth myself.

Some of the unearthing must involve confidential sources.

I have a constantly growing list of sources that includes Microsoft employees, Microsoft partners, Microsoft customers, Microsoft competitors, and others who are interested in what I write. Some of my sources are people I do not know, who send me tips via e-mail. I confirm every tip three ways before running with it—so even when I don’t know the tipster’s identity, I make sure the tips are real. Confirming a tip with three independent sources was a journalistic rule hammered into me at *PCWeek*.

Does the fact that you're blogging, as opposed to writing for a magazine, have any effect on your sources?

I'd actually say I've gotten more tips and sources since blogging than when I just did print. The exposure and range of potential contacts are so much greater.

Having been blacklisted, do you feel that some people at Microsoft may go out of their way to keep information from you?

Yes. But they are just doing their jobs. They are trying to maintain secrecy for competitive reasons. My job is to expose information as soon as I can [in order to] help customers, partners, and competitors make better decisions.

Do you ever feel overwhelmed by that—by the fact that your blog influences decisions in many businesses, large and small?

No. I doubt seriously that any company of any size would base their buying decisions on anything I said. [She smiles.]

As I often remind folks with whom I'm conversing, I am a journalist, not a trained technologist. I am not a programmer. I have never taken a computer science or engineering class. I see my role as helping to make public, in a fairly understandable way, information that hopefully will help my readers make better tech decisions. But I firmly believe I am just one of a number of sources of information they'd seek out. So that keeps me from taking myself *too* seriously.

“I confirm every tip three ways before running with it—so even when I don't know the tipster's identity, I make sure the tips are real.”

What's the most difficult aspect of blogging for you? Do you ever get stuck for something to write?

The hardest part about blogging is that it takes over your life. The more I do it, the more I want to do it. It's not a 40-hour-a-week job. It's more like 24/7. It will eat you alive if you let it!

I do take vacations and vacation days. What I do is probably what everyone does. I save up some posts and have WordPress launch [them] at a set time while I'm gone. And I post a couple of items wherever I am on the road

and/or wake up early. But I try to make sure that I spend time offline every day, and don't get too crazy about not [getting] every or any story.

Everyone's at a loss for something to write, sometimes. When I can't think of something to post about, I go read my RSS feeds. There's always some food for thought somewhere out there that gets me riled enough to do a post.

And some posts I come up with are "evergreens." Not everything is spurred by news. Sometimes I get insights that I can save for a rainy day.

Do your readers ever make it tough on you? Do you sometimes get tired of blogging?

Being attacked for something—accurate or inaccurate—that you write is tough. It's tougher when you're wrong, obviously.

But I've built up a progressively thick skin over the years. So even the overzealous Mac zealots and Linux fanboys haven't made me think about throwing in the towel. It is tough to be called a "Microsoft shill"—something dedicated readers know I'm not, since I'm seldom on Microsoft's list of "favorite people." But, again, none of this has made me think about quitting.

Do I get tired of blogging? No. I find it rewarding—and humbling—that people read me daily. That keeps me going.

All about Microsoft must involve a tremendous time commitment.

I blog just about every day. I spend at least four hours a day reading, researching, and writing blog posts. I subscribe to a lot of RSS feeds. I subscribe to all the Microsoft RSS feeds, all the MSDN and all the Technet blog feeds they have—which is like 4,000 bloggers. And then I [also] have other Microsoft-related bloggers in my RSS feeds.

"My biggest criticism of the blogosphere is that so many posters and commenters opt to be anonymous."

I'm getting really good at just skipping through them really fast, based on either the headings or the first paragraph. If I don't like the first paragraph, it's, "Oh, no—I don't like that one."

That doesn't leave much time for comment elsewhere. Or do you comment on others' blogs?

My contract with ZDNet specifies I can only blog for them. I can write about anything I want, including what I blog about on ZDNet, for anybody. They don't care who I write it for, but I can't do posts or guest blogging for any other site.

Because part of your income is tied directly to the number of visitors to your site, do you take an active role in attracting readers?

ZDNet does a good job of promoting me, but I do radio, TV, and speaking appearances to try to reach folks who might not know about my blog. I also guest on ZDNet podcasts and do a regular print column in *Redmond* magazine [www.redmondmag.com] every month. That also brings in readers who might not have found me via online channels.

What do you see when you look at the blogosphere? Are there too many bloggers, some who shouldn't bother?

I don't think there are too many bloggers. There's someone for everyone out there—and that's good. Who says the “A-list”—or “B-” or “C-lists”—are the only ones who should or do matter?

My biggest criticism of the blogosphere is that so many posters and commenters opt to be anonymous. Hey—I'm not anonymous. Stand up and be counted for who you are! It makes blog-inspired discussions far more interesting.

I think many people are afraid [of posting with their real names]. They either work for a company that doesn't approve of them posting or weighing in, or [they] want to pretend to be impartial when they aren't. Some also just want license to say things anonymously that they'd never dare say in person or via e-mail. I've noticed when I e-mail some of the anonymous posters ([when] I can find a working e-mail address for them), they are relieved to be chatting and come around to revealing their true identities.

“Be yourself. Don't try to imitate someone else's style or voice.”

Do you have any advice you'd like to share with already-established or would-be bloggers?

Be yourself. Don't try to imitate someone else's style or voice.

Admit when you've made a mistake. It'll make your readers like you more.

Don't be rude—when blogging or commenting on blogs. I try to answer even the rudest, snarkiest commenters civilly. Remember the adage: You can attract more bees with honey than vinegar. And [you] can get more people to consider your products with compliments than insults.

Don't be ageist, sexist, or caught up by credentials. Some of the best bloggers out there are *not* journalists. Many are teenagers. (I am not. I am 45 and not ashamed of that.) To me, age, gender, and college degrees are irrelevant. When I started covering technology, there weren't very many women journalists doing technology coverage, and I think I had to kind of prove myself. Once I proved myself, there wasn't any discrimination because people realized I could do the job.

Don't steal—link! This seems obvious to me. But I see so many of my posts rewritten with no links that I guess it's not obvious to others. Link love is reciprocal; if you provide it liberally, it comes back to you. If you don't, you'll turn into your own walled garden.

Points to Review

Mary Jo Foley's training and experience as a print journalist helped make her one of the premier technical journalists, and continue to serve her as a professional blogger. There is much one can learn from her experiences. Here are some of the highlights that will interest bloggers of all types:

- Blogging is unique in that it offers a platform where one is free to admit biases, rather than trying to hide them as most conventional journalists do. In this sense, it promotes complete honesty.
- As a blogger, you have more of a vested interest in making your posts interesting and fun than a journalist writing a news story.
- Coming up with something to write about every day can be difficult. Store up posts that aren't news-driven, for the times when you don't have anything new to say.
- It is important to take time away from blogging; otherwise, you'll limit your perspective.

- Look for opportunities to promote yourself and your blog, and don't ignore cross-media promotion. When possible, create promotional opportunities.
- Unless you have a good reason, don't hide your identity in blogs. You're more likely to receive a better reception as yourself.
- Instead of imitating other bloggers, be yourself. If you're tempted to steal someone's post, link to it instead.
- If you make a mistake, admit it, accept it, and move on.
- Be polite. Avoid ageism and sexism in posts. You'll get more people to consider your product or viewpoint with compliments than insults.
- Credentials aren't necessarily an indicator of quality in blogging.

