

# One-touch world domination

YOU CAN LOBBY, SOCIALISE, DO BUSINESS AND EVEN GIVE SIMON COWELL A VERY BAD DAY. SALI HUGHES ON JUST HOW THE WEB IS EMPOWERING WOMEN

PHOTOGRAPH DAVID NEWTON

**T**his year, I threw a big birthday party and, as I looked around the room at the hundred or so friends I'd invited, it occurred to me that I was meeting many of them for the first time. It's no exaggeration to say I came across the vast majority of my social circle on the internet. Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, blogs, forums – all these sites have transformed my social and professional life in ways I'd have dismissed, even mocked, in the past. But that's the past. In 2010, they are a vital part of my day-to-day existence.

I'm not unique in this respect. All around me, I see women whose lives have been transformed by the internet (women make up an estimated 56% of social-media users). And I'm not talking about doing the Friday 'big shop' from the comfort of home (though, let's face it, Ocado deliveries do feel like a gift from God). I'm talking about real life-changing stuff, like a new career, a support network, information, a husband and, perhaps most crucially, a voice where they didn't know they had one.

Catherine Sanderson, 37, from Bradford, was an early convert. In 2004, she was an expat living with her then partner and one-year-old daughter in Paris and working as a secretary. Unhappy in her relationship and dissatisfied in her career, she started writing a blog, *Petite Anglaise*. 'I'd always had a hunger to write,' she says. 'Then, after having my daughter, I had no social life. Writing a blog was a way of reaching out and also of reclaiming my independence.' Sheltered by the anonymity of her *Petite Anglaise* persona, Catherine was open and intimate about her life and, within weeks, had attracted more than 4,000 (mostly female) subscribers.

'Suddenly, the blog served as much as a meeting place for like-minded women

as it did an online memoir,' says Catherine. 'We would all discuss our problems and offer advice and support.'

That sense of sisterhood gave Catherine the courage to end her relationship (she is now happily married to a man who, fittingly, she met through internet dating), and the success of the blog caused a publisher to snap up Catherine's memoirs and her first novel, *French Kissing* (Penguin, £7.99), for a substantial sum. Catherine is now living her dream as a successful novelist but, like me, it's the friendships she's made online that proved the biggest reward. 'At first, there were local get-togethers in bars, then I was popping over to London to meet my virtual friends,' she says. 'I'm now at the point where, wherever I go in the world, there's someone to have coffee with.'

For many women, the internet has acted as a lifeline during times of isolation, especially for new mothers, it seems. When I had my first baby, it felt as though the only escape from the house was to mother-and-baby groups, but nowadays, if these aren't your bag, a laptop can act as a virtual mixer – where the near-anonymity of a username allows us to speak more freely without the usual social hang-ups.

Carrie Smith, 30, from Cardiff, gave birth to severely premature twins last year and doesn't know how she'd have coped without her iPhone. 'The girls were so poorly when they finally came home from hospital that it meant I couldn't go out and expose them to bugs and germs,' she says. Bored and isolated, Carrie joined Twitter and a number of forums like Mumsnet. 'Suddenly, here were thousands of women in the same boat as me – off work for the first time in their lives and adjusting to being new mums,' she says. 'Every day, we exchange



information, make jokes, bolster each other. The massive effect it's had on my ability to cope cannot be underestimated. I have a full social life during a time when I'm mostly indoors alone with young children. I'm constantly amazed when I realise I haven't physically met many of the people I rely on most.'

**E**mma Beddington, 34, is a lawyer and prominent member of the Twitter and blogging community. After just two years of social networking, she's writing a book based on the success of her popular blog, *Belgian Waffling*. 'Social media is often a catalyst for change,' she explains. 'When I started my blog, I was looking for something that was missing in my life. I found it in the shared humour and fun of an entire online community. I met my former partner before I went to university, so I missed out on the student socialising and a lot of the camaraderie that groups of friends enjoy. I found it astonishingly quickly online – perhaps because the anonymity encourages openness. We would talk about relationships, sex, family problems and our innermost secrets, and many felt heard for the first time in years. Suddenly, I could be silly and funny, which may sound like nothing, but I've found it's actually very important to my happiness.'

Like Catherine, Emma's virtual friendships have become real and lasting. 'I've made several true friends through blogging and we meet up regularly. I met my closest friend on Twitter and now we talk every day. We've even started a small business – called Cruel Tea – together.'

Business has obviously changed to an unheard-of degree since the advent of the internet and, at a grass-roots level, women are reaping the commercial rewards. In 2007, Lucy Reeves, 30, was working as a translator in London and desperately wanted to move back to the countryside, where she grew up. Less than three years later, she and her sister Emma, 33, are at the helm of *Muddy Matches*, a dating site for fans of the countryside and those living in rural areas who, without the internet, would find it hard to meet people.

'I could never be living the life I am now if not for the internet,' says Lucy.

'It allowed me to work from home in the early days and it spawned an idea for a solution to a problem that existed for people in rural communities nationwide.' In less than three years, the company has more than 40,000 members and the sisters say their quality of life has been transformed. 'Before the net, everything took place in cities,' says Lucy. 'Being online has not only given me a living, it's given me the freedom to live my life the way I want to.'

That freedom also extends to our right to reply. Last October, a column written by Jan Moir in the *Daily Mail*, on the death of Stephen Gately, caused such outrage from Twitter and Facebook users that the Press Complaints Commission launched an investigation, and the issue became one of the hottest topics on the BBC's *Question Time*. Moir later apologised. Earlier the same month, the *Guardian* was blocked from reporting on questions in Parliament that related to energy company Trafigura. Twitter users brought the issue to such prominence that the legal firm representing Trafigura was forced to abandon its gagging injunction on the *Guardian*.

Tracy Morter, 31, is a full-time mum and small-business owner, who says she escapes to the internet as a hobby. She and her husband used Facebook to launch a campaign to get Rage Against The Machine to the number-one slot last Christmas, keeping the *X Factor* winner off the top. 'It started out as a little idea,' explains Tracy. 'I used to look forward to finding out what was number one at Christmas and I felt

the Cowell programmes had taken the fun out of it all. We started the campaign online and

the response was huge. The record went to number one and has so far raised £100,000 for the homeless charity Shelter.'

What started out as a bit of fun has sparked a sense in Tracy that she can change bigger things, too. 'Every day on Twitter and Facebook, I see normal women changing things by making themselves heard. That's tremendously powerful. I'm now focusing on serious issues close to my heart, like breastfeeding education and children's issues. And I simply cannot wait to see how the General Election plays out on social-networking sites. It's a whole new ballgame now, and as we keep hearing, it's all down to women this time.'

## Every day online, normal women are making themselves heard

### THE SITES THAT MAKE UP AN ONLINE LIFE

**SALI HUGHES** opens her internet address book

- **bbc.co.uk** Fact-based news stories as they're happening, entertainment and public information. And who doesn't love the mighty iPlayer?
- **ebay.co.uk** eBay has allowed me to indulge my shopping habit, while offering a more loving home than landfill for my old purchases. It has also made countless women the boss of their own thriving small business.
- **twitter.com** The truest definition of a social networking site, Twitter acts as a virtual water cooler, where strangers chat, laugh, make contacts and speak up about political issues.
- **facebook.com** The farms, quizzes and games may occasionally irritate, but Facebook is inarguably responsible for millions of us keeping in touch with our friends.
- **Belgian Waffling** (<http://belgianwaffling.blogspot.com/>) Blogs have changed the way millions of women communicate with one another and this, my favourite, is just one example of the phenomenon. Funny, clever and beautifully written.
- **guardian.co.uk** Simple, accessible, relevant and thought-provoking, the *Guardian's* site remains, for me, the benchmark against which all other British online media is judged.
- **mumsnet.com** Part virtual coffee morning, part campaigning superpower, Mumsnet continually brings women together to share experiences, challenge one another and join as one on women's issues.
- **ocado.com** It may only be a supermarket, but Ocado (and the many copycat sites) have freed me and countless other women from the living hell that was pushing tired children up and down the aisles.
- **youtube.com** Whatever I want to watch, past and present, there's a good chance I can find it on YouTube. As a child who grew up with three channels on a coin-op telly, I am still staggered that boundless information is literally at my fingertips.
- **wikipedia.org** Wiki knows a little bit about practically everything and serves it to anyone asking, in a simple, easy-to-use format. ■