Start to Blog

Content that matters

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Chapter 01

Prologue

I wrote my first ever blog post in 2015. I used Medium which was rather popular at the time and not yet hidden for the most part behind a paywall. I considered myself a casual blogger back then and I still do today; even though my audience has grown way more than I could have ever imagined, I'm making a reasonable amount of money with my blog, and I actually landed my current and previous job in large part *because* of my blog.

To be clear: I'm not making a living with my blog and I don't think I'd ever want to: there simply is too much other stuff I enjoy doing as well. On the other hand, it's a nice way of earning a little on the side for something I consider to be a hobby project.

Of course, I've moved away from Medium a long time ago. I'm a web developer, so naturally I wanted to play around with building something on my own; but more importantly: I wanted to fully own the content I wrote. Even when you're not technically inclined, I would still advice you to take that full ownership of your content instead of relying on platforms like Medium or Dev.to — something we'll for sure discuss in this book.

"Taking ownership of your content" is just one of those many things I've learned along the way. More than once, I wished there was some kind of list that bundled all those valuable blogging lessons into one central place, instead of having to scour through Reddit threads and Google. That was my main motivation for writing this little book: to bundle all those lessons I learned over the years in one central, convenient place.

Whether you're already into blogging or you're debating whether you want to get into it; I think this little book will be a great source of knowledge for you. It might inspire you to up your blogging game, or it might help you make that first step.

Now, this isn't a technical book. I won't teach you how to create a WordPress site or how to set up Google Analytics. I will teach you about the *mindset* of a blogger. How to build something out of nothing, how to stay true to yourself and your audience, how to use data to make informed decisions. In the end, I want to teach you how to enjoy this journey and how to take that passion up a couple of levels.

About me

I'm Brent, I've been programming since I was 13, and I've used that passion for programming to build a reasonably large blog within my niche — it's called stitcher.io. Over the past five years, I've seen my blog grow from just a couple of visitors a month to several thousands a day. I'm still a small blogger, but I am proud of what I managed to achieve on my own with a side project. In fact, my blog is probably one of my proudest achievements in life up until this point.

Looking back, what surprises me most is how my blog actually has had a huge impact on my personal life, outside the internet: I already told you that I earn a little bit with it. It's a nice additional income stream for a hobby project, which we'll talk about later in this book. However, the most significant impact is probably the two jobs I got thanks to my blog.

I worked as a web developer for over four years at a company, thanks to my blog. I discovered that company because the manager picked up on an early blog post of mine that went viral and shared it with his audience. Currently, I'm a content manager at JetBrains, an international software development company. The biggest part of my job today is to write blog posts and create video content to engage with our audience. It's safe to say they hired me, in large part, because of the writing I did on my blog over the years.

I've always tried to stay true to myself. I didn't want to grow my blog in meaningless ways like for example only writing with SEO — search engine optimization, we'll discuss it later — in mind. I wanted to provide real value for my readers, and not just treat them as potential ad-clickers. It was never my goal to make a living out of my blog, which is one of the reasons I think it grew as popular as it is today.

A couple of notes before starting

Before diving into this little book, there are a couple of things I'd like to tell about how it came to be and how you should read it.

Origins

This book started as a blog post, a whole series, actually. That series gained some traction over the the past years and people enjoyed reading it. This book will be a complete revision of that series. We're two years later and I've got some more lessons to share. If you've read the original series, you might recognise some parts, but there are a bunch of new chapters, and every existing chapter has been updated as well.

You might notice one thing: the charts in this book seem to be "stuck in the past": they end around October 2020. I actually moved away from Google Analytics at the beginning of 2021. Where to? You'll find out in this book! However, that means I can't show an aggregated set of data combining both my legacy and current analytics.

Because the "legacy data set" is still the largest one to date, I've decided to stick with it for now. It's still as relevant as it was two years ago, and so I think it's best to keep it for now.

This isn't a tutorial

You won't find a step-by-step guide in this book on how to set up a WordPress website, nor will you find a technical explanation on how to build your own blog from scratch. Instead, this book will teach you about the mindset of blogging, the do's and don'ts when it comes to writing, how to engage with your audience, etc. This is not a technical book, but you will learn tons from it, even if you're not a programmer (as am I).

Discussions

Finally: this is an interactive book. I'd love to engage with you, the reader! There's a discussions forum on GitHub where you can ask questions, share feedback and interact with me, as well as all other readers of this book. You can check it out here: https://github.com/brendt/start-to-blog/discussions.

With all of that being said, let's dive in, enjoy!

Part 1: Tenets

*It might sound a little over-dramatic —
"Tenets", but I think its a fitting title
for the first part of this book.*

*We'll look at the mindset of writing
meaningful content on the internet. We'll
deliberately ignore money-making and
performance-improving practices.*

We'll start with a proper foundation.

Chapter 03

Content is king

I got serious with blogging in 2017. Up until that point, I had written a handful of blogposts on Medium, but it had always been this "random thing" I didn't spend much time on. Slowly but surely though, I discovered that I really liked writing, sharing my ideas and getting valuable feedback on them. So in 2017 I decided to explore whether I really wanted to pursue this hobby and take it up a notch.

One of the first things I did was moving away from Medium, mainly because I wanted my *own* content on my *own* blog and my *own* server. During this process of "building my *own* thing", I also wondered about "the identity" of my blog. What should I write about? How much should I write? How would I interact with people reading my content?

I have to admit I knew very little about managing a real blog or how to reach potential audiences at that point in time. I felt motivation to do something more, but that was about it.

I came up with one rule though. One rule that I'd always follow, no matter what. Setting this rule helped me get a clearer picture: I'd always keep content at the center of what I'm doing. "Content is King" — I called it. I would never write just because I'd want to attract new readers, I'd only write about stuff I myself am passionate about. In practice, that one rule grew in a handful and I've noticed that those personal blogging rules have been invaluable to me over the years. I'd even say that most of my blog's popularity today is thanks to following these rules.

So, let's clarify what "Content is King" is all about.

1. Don't write for the sake of writing

I only write when I'm inspired and want to. There's never any pressure of meeting deadlines or writing about topics I'm not really passionate about. Many blogging forums and gurus advice to write 40 to 80 posts before even considering promoting your blog. The only thing that advice will give you is a burn-out after 20 posts or so.

Personally I've gone with a month or two of not writing at all. Finally, when inspiration hit, I could write two or three posts in a single week. You'll probably get away with a consistent writing schedule for a while, but in the end you'll feel burned out and your content won't be for the better.

What you can do (and should do) is to be on the lookout for new topics to write about. You can keep a backlog of ideas which you refer to once that wave of writing energy hits. It gives a feeling of insurance that you won't forget about any future topics.

By only writing when you want to, you'll write about things you're actually passionate about. It's also the best way to learn whether blogging is your thing or not. If you're only inspired to write once every two years, there are probably better things for you to do.

2. Don't bother with a fancy design

Rule number two, the one that I've personally held high from the first day I created my blog. People come to your blog to read, so that should be your primary motive when designing it. Don't bother with fancy bells and whistles: a white sheet of paper with black text is all that really matters. Choose a font that's readable on all devices and don't go too fancy with it.

You can still add a personal touch by playing around with a highlight color or maybe a more fancy title font; but keep it as simple as possible. Optimise for your audience's reading experience, instead of trying to make an art work out of it. Content is what matters, everything else is secondary.

There's a good reason why browsers these days come with a "reading mode", why RSS readers show only text. Nothing should stand in the way of a pleasant reading experience.

With *nothing* that I actually mean *nothing*; that includes ads.

Don't have ads or other kinds of call to actions obtrude your content. *Never* bother with popups or modals, keep ads at a minimum and make sure they fit in with your design. Sure it might take longer to make a few bucks at the start, but you'll build a reputation of writing qualitative content. That's way more important in the long run.

3. Optimise performance

No one likes to wait. Make sure to keep your blog's performance a number one priority. Ideally you want all your readers to be able to start reading in less than a second. The best approach for doing so is to use a static site generator or rely on proper caching. If you decide to include images in your posts, make sure they are optimised. Prevent scripts from blocking the main render thread, and use tools like Google's Lighthouse to analyse what can be improved.

Once again it's all about the reading experience. Everything else is second priority. Now don't get me wrong: I don't want you to think you're not allowed to build a beautiful blog, just make sure not to pay with performance — we'll take a closer look at this topic in a future chapter by the way.

4. Write plain English

I'm no native English speaker and I know that my writing isn't of the highest quality. However, not being the most eloquent person on Earth shouldn't prevent you from building a great blog. I'd advice to stick to the Plain English guidelines (http://www.plainenglish.co.uk/how-to-write-in-plain-english.html). They teach you how to write in a simple, yet understandable way.

If you want to improve your writing skills, there's only one thing you can do: practice. And what better way to practice than starting a blog? Ask English speaking people to review your content, be open for their feedback.

5. Connect the dots

I think of my blog as more than a collection of individual posts. When I write, I usually refer to at least a couple of other posts as I'm always thinking about connections between them. I want most of my posts to have a subtle storyline that runs throughout my blog. To me this comes natural because I only write about things I'm passionate about, which are typically connected anyway.

I often revisit my older posts. I'll update them when I gained new insights on their specific topic, I list references to new posts, or to external resources. I try to keep my posts alive and connected. Sure, I don't do this for *all* of them, but I have a pretty good feeling about which ones are worth polishing, and which are not; but that's a topic for an upcoming chapter.

For more than five years, I've kept to this one simple rule: content above all else. It's not only my guiding rule when writing, but it'll also be the primary thought throughout this series. Of course you'll need ways to promote and monetise your blog. And that's entirely possible all while keeping your content king.

In summary

- Good content is priority number 1
- Don't write when you're not inspired, you'll burn out in the long run
- Keep a backlog of ideas
- Have a design that puts focus on your content and make your blog performant to ensure a pleasant reading experience
- You don't need to be a master writer. Simple and plain English is fine
- Connect the dots when possible: each post is part of a larger whole

Part 2: The other side

With our proper foundation in place, now it's time to look at how to grow our blog from a practical point of view. We'll discuss SEO, a data-driven approach to growing your blog, different social channels and monetization.

These techniques are often misused to produce worthless content, with the only purpose of making money. But with the right mindset, they can be powerful tools that help you grow, and provide more value to your audience.

Chapter 09

Analytics

An important aspect in managing your blog is to know what's going on. Being able to analyse which posts are popular and which are not, where your audience is coming from, etc. is an invaluable asset if you want your blog to grow. It's only by having insights into your visitors' behaviour that your blog will truly flourish.
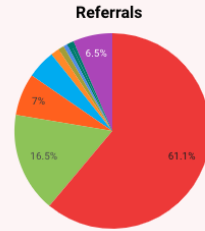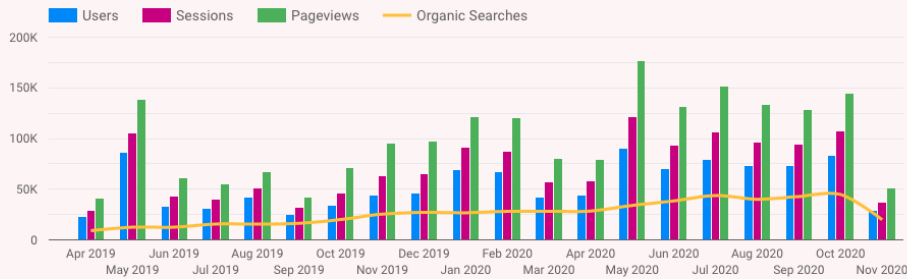
You can choose whatever form of analytics or tracking tools you want. I used to use Google Analytics, but have stepped away from it last year. Still, everything in this chapter will be written with Google Analytics in mind. In the next chapter we'll look at alternatives, and I'll discuss why I stepped away from Google Analytics in the first place. But let's first discuss the art of analytics itself first.

First things first: I never used Google Analytics directly. I used Google Data Studio which can access data from Google Analytics. Data Studio gives you a blank canvas to work with. It's an easy-to-use (and free) graph builder. I prefer Data Studio because it allows you to build the graphs that actually matter to you on a single page, instead of having to click around in Google Analytics.

On the next page, I'll share part of my Data Studio dashboard, but you can also check out the real one via this link: https://datastudio.google.com/reporting/0ByMfT7-llEqUc3hQLVZxVmFISGs. Keep in mind that I've stopped using Google Analytics, so the data you'll see here stops being relevant at one point.

Stitcher.io: summary

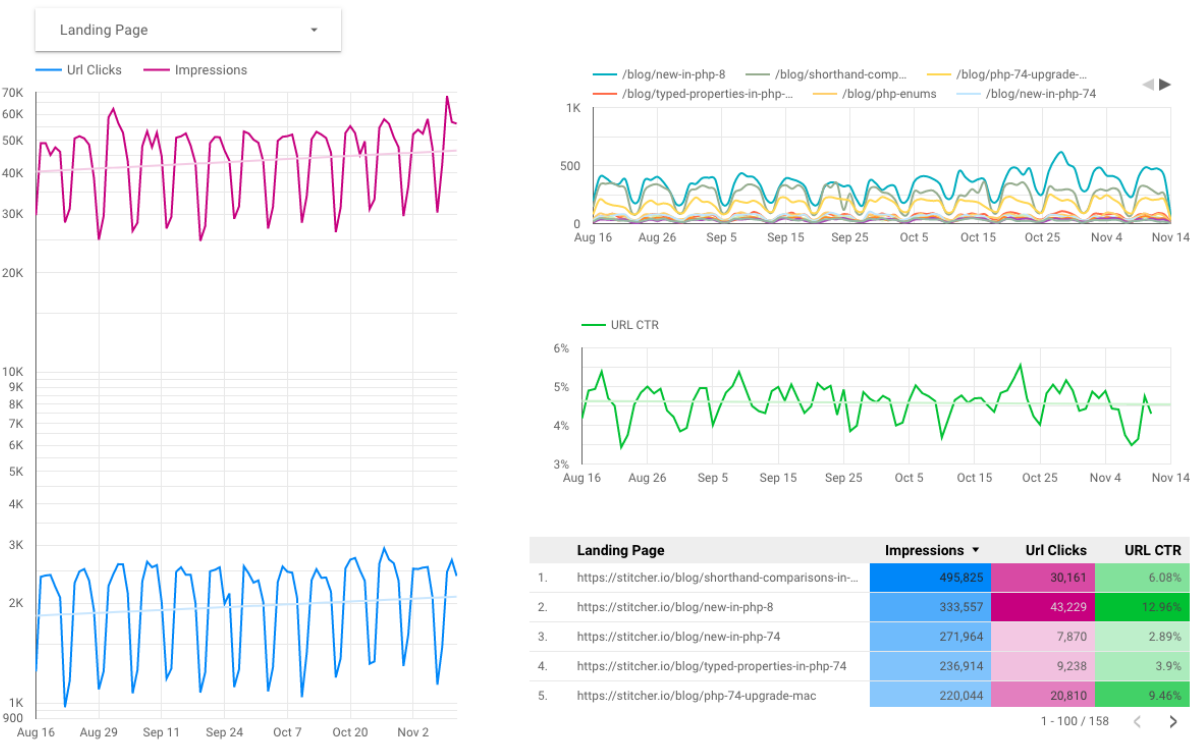Aug 16, 2020 - Nov 14, 2020

Legend: Users | Sessions | Pageviews | — Organic Searches

Referrals

(Pie chart) 61.1%, 16.5%, 7%, 6.5%

Users today	Yesterday 2,496	Sessions today	Yesterday 2,737	Pageviews today	Yesterday 3,757	SEO today	Yesterday 1,620
284	7 day average 2,345	297	7 day average 2,803	408	7 day average 3,814	196	7 day average 1,466

SEO

Landing Page

Url Clicks | Impressions

Legend: /blog/new-in-php-8 | /blog/shorthand-comp... | /blog/php-74-upgrade-... | /blog/typed-properties-in-php-... | /blog/php-enums | /blog/new-in-php-74

URL CTR

|	Landing Page	Impressions ▼	Url Clicks	URL CTR
1.	https://stitcher.io/blog/shorthand-comparisons-in-...	495,825	30,161	6.08%
2.	https://stitcher.io/blog/new-in-php-8	333,557	43,229	12.96%
3.	https://stitcher.io/blog/new-in-php-74	271,964	7,870	2.89%
4.	https://stitcher.io/blog/typed-properties-in-php-74	236,914	9,238	3.9%
5.	https://stitcher.io/blog/php-74-upgrade-mac	220,044	20,810	9.46%

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You definitely don't have to start with Data Studio though. It's an amazing tool if you want specific questions to be answered with graphs, but starting with a standard website analytics tool is probably the best idea if you don't have any specific questions yet.

Regardless of which platform you use, let's talk about how to use and interpret data in a way that's actually valuable.

Working with data

While it's nice to see how many people visited your blog over the course of the previous month, it's a metric that isn't very actionable. Sure: the goal is to make your blog grow, but simply looking at a graph that shows the amount of visitors won't help with that. On the other hand, I understand that you want to know if and how your blog is growing. Here's how I visualize blog growth in Data Studio:
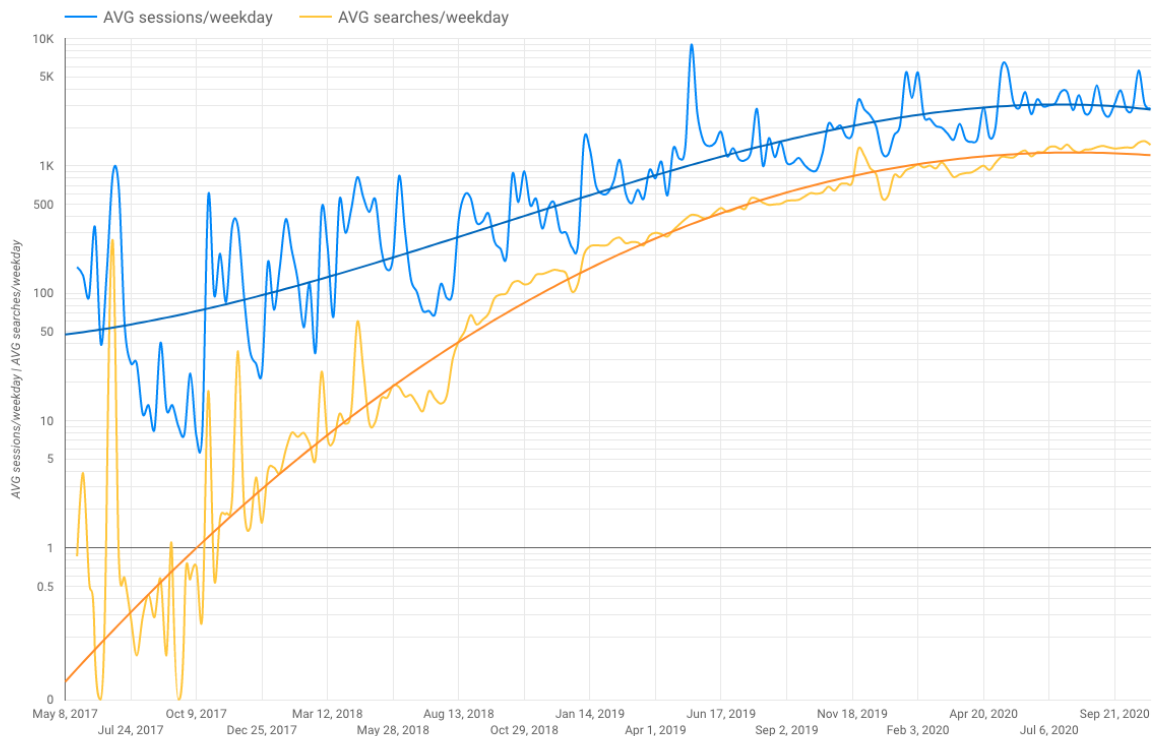
This graph might seem complex, so let's go through it step by step:

- It shows both sessions and organic searches, I like to see how they related to each other

- I use a logarithmic scale for this graph. Such a scale is especially useful to visualize exponential growth

- Instead of showing sessions and searches per day or per month, I use the daily average for each week. This means that extreme lows like weekends or extreme highs like a viral post won't affect the curve as much. The official name for this technique is called "moving average" — you can read about it on Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moving_average.

- Finally, I show a polynomial trend line which is the one I'd like to see go up as steep as possible

Now, it might seem like my blog's growth has reached a plateau based on this graph. That's not entirely true though: it has stopped growing at the same rate it did before, but it is still growing. Here's the same graph without the logarithmic scale, which shows what I mean:
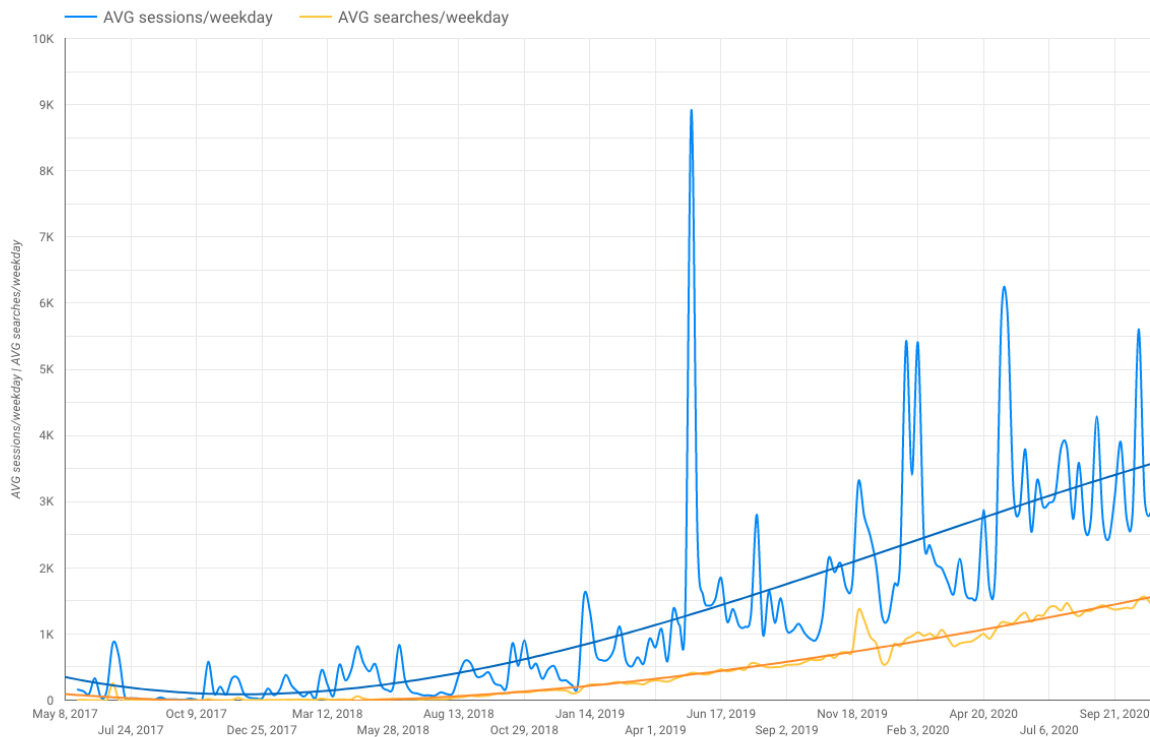

That brings me to an important piece of advice: you can make graphs say whatever you want, don't fool yourself by doing this! The reason I prefer the logarithmic scale is that it reminds me to stay humble and encourages me to further improve. It leaves me unsatisfied, which is a great incentive to keep writing and growing.

So let's discuss my top five favourite metrics to visualize how my blog is doing.

1. Growth

This is the graph I showed previously: it shows the growth of my blog over its whole lifespan with a logarithmic. This graph doesn't give me anything actionable right now, but it is a great way to visualize my blog's performance in the long run.
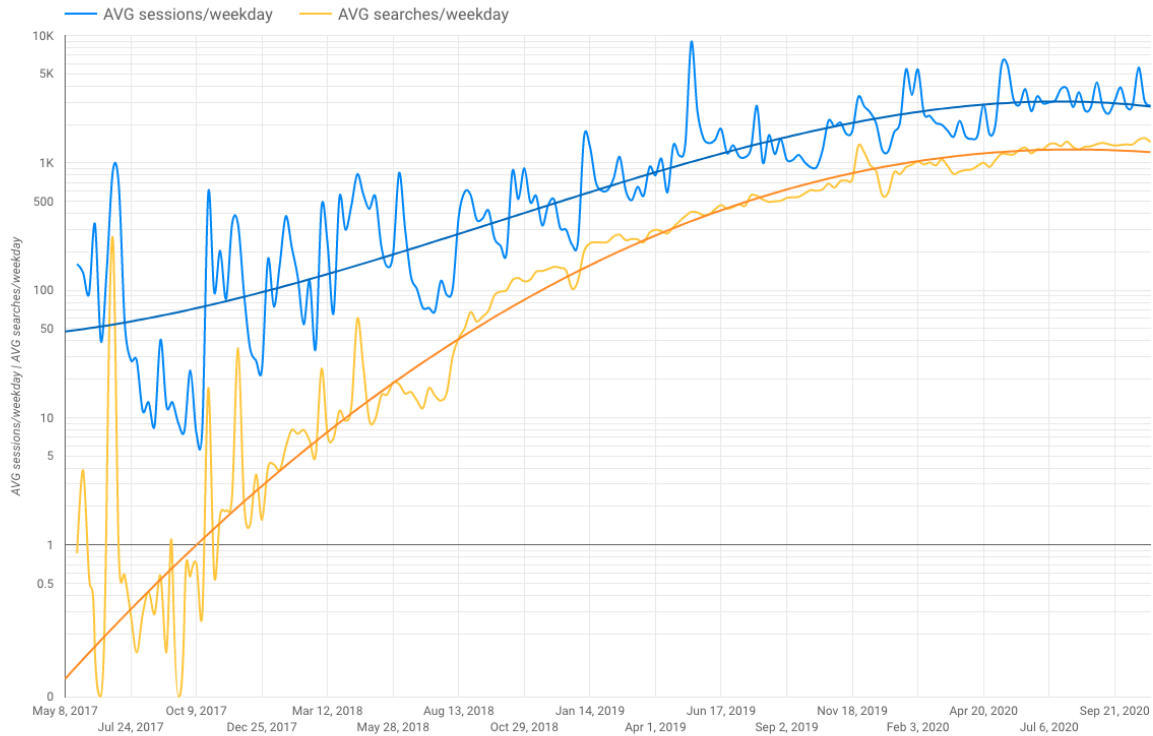
2. SEO performance and click-through rate

This one is very actionable: which posts are doing the best in Google, and what's their average click-through rate — CTR for short. The CTR measures how many people clicked on a link, versus how many saw it.

These graphs give me insights on whether there might a post that's higher than mine, whether there's room for SEO improvements like better titles, meta descriptions, etc. or maybe there's room for better internal linking.
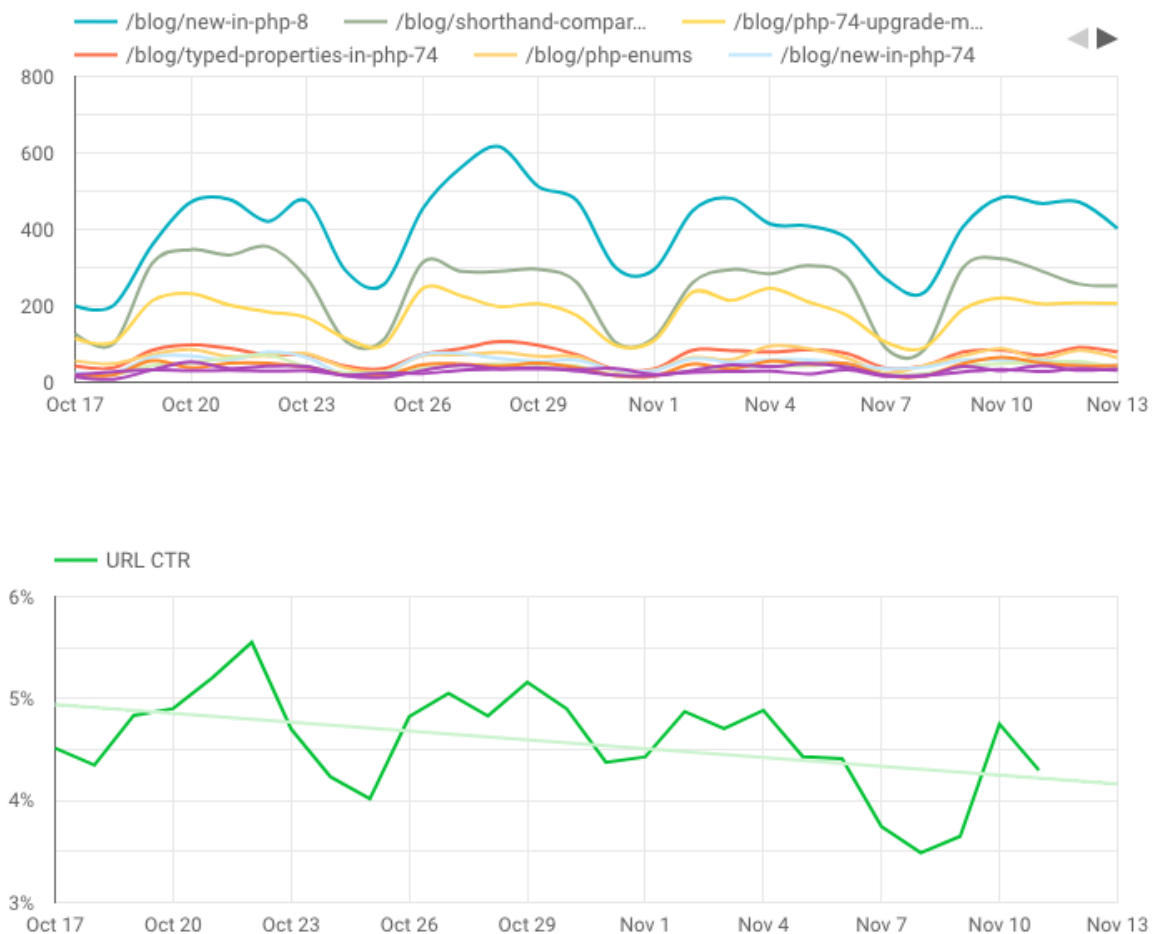
Note that this data is pulled into Data Studio from Google Search Console, which monitors your blog's SEO performance. You can access this data within Search Console as well, I just prefer to keep all of it in the same place in Data Studio.

3. Top posts

Which posts are the most popular in a given period of time? This table tells me what my audience is most interested in, and sometimes influences what I write about.

	Sanitised URL	Sessions ▼	Organic Searches	Avg. Time on Page	Bounce Rate	% Exit	Pages / Sessi...
1.	/blog/php-8-before-and-after	23,323	96	00:03:48	89.81%	88.74%	1.08
2.	/blog/new-in-php-8	19,288	11,234	00:03:36	79.08%	75.2%	1.22
3.	/blog/shorthand-comparisons-in-php	9,422	6,756	00:04:27	92.97%	89.78%	1.13
4.	/blog/php-74-upgrade-mac	6,542	4,996	00:07:20	85%	83.93%	1.16
5.	/blog/typed-properties-in-php-74	2,988	1,967	00:04:20	85.48%	82.33%	1.17
6.	/blog/new-in-php-74	2,519	1,433	00:02:49	71.26%	62.44%	1.53
7.	/	2,413	140	00:00:39	52.05%	31.04%	2.62
8.	/blog/php-enums	2,327	1,762	00:05:59	89%	88.7%	1.09
9.	/blog/short-closures-in-php	1,774	1,089	00:03:57	89.18%	82.67%	1.24
10.	/blog/array-destructuring-with-list-in-php	1,757	1,086	00:04:57	89.58%	84.72%	1.19
11	/blog/attributes-in-php-8	1,756	726	00:04:36	78.53%	67.19%	1.82

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I've also categorized my content into several topics, to gain insights in what my audience is generally most interested in. This doesn't mean I only write about these topics, but it's good to at least know about the topics that are most likely to be popular.
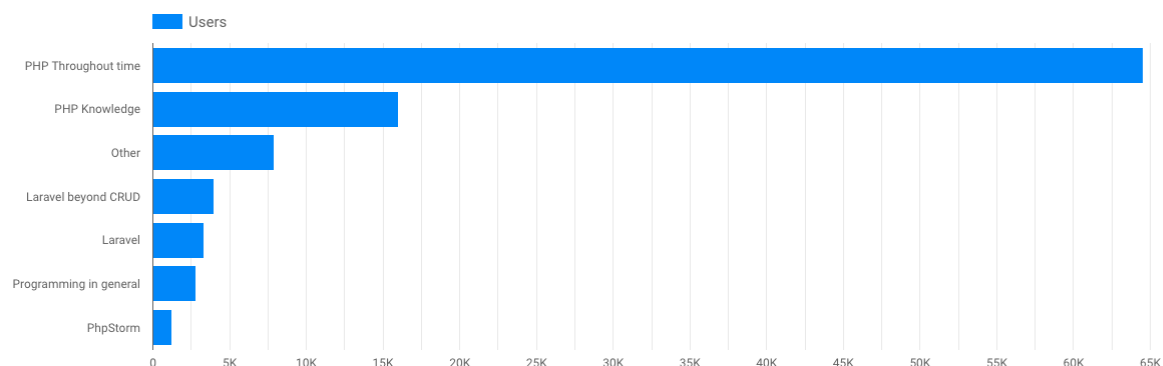
4. Top referrals

It's important to know where your audience is coming from. Maybe other popular blogs regularly share your content, maybe other people share your content on social media; these are places you can go to interact with a new audience and other content creators.

	Source	Sessions ▼	Avg. Time on Page	Bounce Rate	% Exit	Pages / S...
1.	google	57,474	00:03:22	83.47%	74.46%	1.34
2.	(direct)	16,804	00:02:35	84.74%	74.03%	1.35
3.	news.ycombinator.com	9,631	00:02:41	90.83%	85.34%	1.17
4.	t.co	3,469	00:02:23	82.16%	70.98%	1.41
5.	reddit.com	1,568	00:02:23	83.99%	68.68%	1.46
6.	habr.com	1,123	00:02:19	64.2%	63.05%	1.59
7.	m.facebook.com	997	00:02:30	93.78%	90.64%	1.1
8.	linkedin.com	712	00:02:58	85.67%	82.31%	1.21
9.	duckduckgo	546	00:02:25	79.49%	69.91%	1.43
10.	blog.jetbrains.com	418	00:03:12	69.86%	60.58%	1.65

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One interesting conclusion is that people tend to stay much longer on my blog (lower bounce rate and a higher pages/session) when they come from specific channels like Reddit or Facebook. Even though these channels don't result in as much traffic compared to Google, they often result in a more dedicated audience. Based on this data I could, for example, reach out to the content manager of the JetBrains blog, and discuss whether there are future collaboration opportunities. It's those kinds of connections that allow you to build a dedicated audience.

Fun side note: I originally wrote this section two years ago, by now I actually *am* one the content managers of the JetBrains blog. I got in touch with one of the other content managers back then because I saw they often referred to my blog posts, and we kept in touch. JetBrains liked my blog a lot, and they offered me a job last year because of it.

It's funny how my blog actually helped me find my previous *and* current job, and how I've been enjoying both jobs over time. It's one of my achievements that I'm most proud of, and it's all thanks to my blog and having analysed my traffic.

5. Site performance

We've already covered the importance of site performance, which Google Analytics shows some good aggregated data on:

This table indicates whether there's a page with performance problems, and helps me to quickly fix those. There could, for example, be an unoptimized image, a third party dependency that adds unforeseen latency, etc. It's the little things like these that help your blog stay performant over the course of years.

In summary

- Data-driven insights are the best way to grow your blog consistently
- Don't fool yourself with graphs, know how to interpret data correctly
- Try to answer specific questions with data: which of my posts are the most popular? Is my blog growing? Who else is referring to my blog?
- Start simple, and grow your analytical platform over time