

GÖTTINGER SCHRIFTEN ZUR INTERNETFORSCHUNG

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The corporate blog as an  
emerging genre of  
computer-mediated  
communication:  
features, constraints,  
discourse situation

Cornelius Puschmann



Universitätsverlag Göttingen

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

### 1.1 “Wait, what’s a corporate blog?”

Whenever someone asked me over the course of my doctoral studies about the topic of my dissertation, I usually replied that I was investigating corporate blogging, a new form of web-based publishing used by companies for a range of strategic reasons. I would say this carefully and slowly, in a somewhat reluctant way probably typical of PhD students when talking about their research with the non-initiated, as if enunciating each syllable could somehow make the novel concept magically clear to my communicative partner and prevent them from asking the next, inevitable (and of course perfectly plausible) question: “Wait, what’s a corporate blog?”



Figure 1.1: The GM Fastlane weblog

It may seem like a truism, but the emergence of digital media and the Internet have revolutionized the way we communicate, to the extent that a plethora

of new concepts have entered our daily lives and new words are only gradually finding their way into the lexicon to describe them. Sometimes the rapid development seems hard to keep up with, but the same phenomenon has undoubtedly been experienced countless times before in the history of human culture, whenever a technological revolution took place.

Easing the change somewhat, not everything is as truly novel as it may initially seem. Many supposedly new forms of discourse are closely modeled on pre-digital antecedents. Email has at least superficial parallels with paper-based mail and Internet chat has functional ties to face-to-face conversation. If we critically examine our specialized vocabulary to describe the Internet, it becomes apparent that it abounds with metaphors (*website*, *page*, *browser*). As with any unfamiliar thing or practice, we conceptualize what is new in terms of what we already know – but whether or not the link can always be formally justified is another issue.

## 1.2 Issues of definition

What, then, is a corporate blog? Consultant Debbie Weil defines corporate blogging as “the use of blogs [by business professionals] to further organizational goals” (Weil, 2006, p. 1). Along the same lines, Web entrepreneur David Sifry describes corporate bloggers as:

[...]people who blog in an official or semi-official capacity at a company, or are so affiliated with the company where they work that even though they are not officially spokespeople for the company, they are clearly affiliated. (Sifry, 2004, no pagination)

Sifry’s longer definition emphasizes that corporate blogs are written by the employees of a company, delineating them from self-employed or freelance writers who make their living by blogging and are thus also “business bloggers” in a sense. In spite of this, I have chosen to adopt Weil’s shorter definition, because it stresses that corporate blogs are created to pursue organizational goals.<sup>1</sup> When an individual writes a blog for his own ends, whether motivated by the desire to release emotional tension, for artistic expression, to communicate with friends and family, to gain popularity with a wider audience or to record information, I subsume all these activities under the term *private blogging*.<sup>2</sup> Private blogging, as the older and more prototypical category than corporate and organizational blogging, is discussed in detail in chapter 2.

Though this simple description clarifies the corporate in corporate blogging, it leaves the term blog for definition. Blogs (a clipped contraction of web logs) are described in the academic literature as “frequently modified web pages in which dated entries are listed in reverse chronological sequence” (Herring et al.,

<sup>1</sup>I use the terms *organizational goal* and *goal-orientation* to denote the objectives pursued by organizations when they communicate, in contrast to the broader concept of communicative purpose that also applies to individuals.

<sup>2</sup>In this thesis I will use the terms *private persons* and *private blogs/bloggers/blogging* exclusively to refer to individuals who blog non-professionally for reasons of personal enjoyment, civic involvement, to express their opinion, debate politics, etc. I chose to avoid the adjective *personal* in this context because it suggests something about the content of private blogs that can’t be generalized (that they are about the personal experiences of the blogger). To avoid confusion, I refrain from using private in its other sense of “not publicly accessible”.

2005, p. 142). While this seems a simple and clear explanation at first sight, it is of merit to turn to Wikipedia, in many ways the definite source of public wisdom on topics related to the Internet,<sup>3</sup> for a second, longer definition:

A blog (a contraction of the term “Web log”) is a Web site, usually maintained by an individual, with regular entries of commentary, descriptions of events, or other material such as graphics or video. Entries are commonly displayed in reverse-chronological order. “Blog” can also be used as a verb, meaning to maintain or add content to a blog. Many blogs provide commentary or news on a particular subject; others function as more personal online diaries. A typical blog combines text, images, and links to other blogs, Web pages, and other media related to its topic. The ability for readers to leave comments in an interactive format is an important part of many blogs. Most blogs are primarily textual, although some focus on art (artlog), photographs (photoblog), sketches (sketchblog), videos (vlog), music (MP3 blog), audio (podcasting), which are part of a wider network of social media. Micro-blogging is another type of blogging, one which consists of blogs with very short posts. [...] With the advent of video blogging, the word blog has taken on an even looser meaning — that of any bit of media wherein the subject expresses his opinion or simply talks about something. (Wikipedia, 2008, no pagination)<sup>4</sup>

The description in Wikipedia has been rewritten countless times, as new uses of blogs have sprung up and blog technology has become increasingly flexible. The encyclopedia’s editors have visibly struggled with the question of whether to define blogs primarily in terms of technology (“a web site”), structure (“entries”, “reverse-chronological order”), authorship (“usually maintained by an individual”), content (“descriptions of events”, “commentary or news on a particular subject”, “opinion”), interactivity (“the ability for readers to leave comments”) or genre (“personal diary”) and have opted for an amalgam of all of these aspects. Revisions to the entry have shifted focus from one constitutive feature to another and the page has gained significantly in length since its inception on 1 November 2001, when the definition simply read: “[a] web log (also known as a blog[.]) is a website that tracks headlines and articles from other websites[.] [t]hey are frequently maintained by volunteers and are typically devoted to a specific audience or topic.”<sup>5</sup>

The terminological difficulties have multiple origins, among them technological innovation, such as the proliferation of online video, and cultural innovation, such as the adoption of blogging by increasingly diverse communities of users for

<sup>3</sup>While Wikipedia’s authority varies from one subject area to the next, descriptions of technical topics are generally quite thorough. In the case of blogs, I am less interested in Wikipedia as an authoritative source than in how the article reflects problems of conceptualizing blogs encountered by the article’s authors.

<sup>4</sup>See the page history to trace the evolution of the text. Note that Wikipedia entries are updated and rewritten frequently and the entry on blogs is no exception.

<sup>5</sup>I have chosen to omit a detailed recapitulation of blog history in this thesis, both because much has already been written on the topic and because the functions and contexts of blog use have changed significantly since web logs first appeared on the scene. For a thorough and canonical description of the evolution of blogs, see Blood (2000).

an increasingly wide array of purposes. As with other practices that were initially the domain of private individuals, blogging is gradually being integrated into professional and institutional contexts<sup>6</sup>. Just as the 20th century saw the increasing professionalization and commercialization of journalism, blogging is rapidly progressing from a novel, even subversive practice to something quite mainstream. Another significant problem of definition is the mutable nature of blogs. The types of website that refer to themselves as blogs are generally maintained and updated with a specialized publishing tool (blog publishing software) which is either installed by the user or available for immediate use as part of a web-based blogging service (e.g. Blogger, Wordpress, LiveJournal). The choice in software conditions certain structural aspects of blogs such as serial publishing (posting one blog post entry after the other), but aims to give the user as much flexibility as possible. As a result of increasing technological flexibility and a diversification of user communities it has naturally become increasingly difficult to define what a blog is in nontechnical terms.

To use a comparison: the term *book* is generally understood to refer to a set of relatively unchangeable physical features (made of paper, printed, has a cover and pages). When a qualification regarding the purpose, content or usage community of a book is made, it can be described with another, more specialized term (sacred text, legal code, novel). The same is only gradually happening with blogs (via the emergence of law blogs or blawgs, photologs, music blogs, etc), with the additional caveat that there are no unchangeable physical features, only a few constraints imposed by the publishing software.



Figure 1.2: Live Journal

As the technology becomes increasingly flexible, both in terms of what content can be published and how blogs are created and read (mobile blogging,

<sup>6</sup>There are countless examples of blogs used in institutional contexts, such as the United Nations' UN Dispatch, subtitled 'posts on the UN' and reporting on the organization's current activities.

proliferation of audio and video content), it is likely that the term will become even more generic – a one-size-fits-all label for “personal serial publishing”. A 2008 report by the blog search engine company Technorati echoes this development:

But as the Blogosphere grows in size and influence, the lines between what is a blog and what is a mainstream media site become less clear. Larger blogs are taking on more characteristics of mainstream sites and mainstream sites are incorporating styles and formats from the Blogosphere. White and Winn (2009)

This is also reflected by other, generally technical definitions common in CMC research, such as that favored by Susan Herring (“frequently modified web-pages containing individual entries displayed in reverse chronological sequence” (Herring et al., 2004a, no pagination)), though her description crucially omits the serial nature of blogs. Seriality, global audience scope and availability to private individuals with no institutional backing are the features that characterize blogs independently of other criteria.

While the simple working definition of a corporate blog as a (*primarily textual*) blog used in an institutional context to further organizational goals is sufficient at this point, I will return to the question of how users conceptualize blogs at a later point (see chapter 2). The object of my research has been English-language corporate blogs, the majority of them maintained by major U.S. companies (described in the following section), and their linguistic form and pragmatic function as an emerging discourse genre.

### 1.3 Methods, data and approach

As this thesis examines the form and function of a new kind of institutional-public communication on the Internet, it was only plausible to base it on naturally occurring evidence. Consequently, I assembled a linguistic corpus to meet that need. The *Corporate Blogging Corpus* (CBC/Corporati) is a collection of blog entries that was assembled between September 2006 and September 2007, with individual sources added at later points in time.<sup>7</sup> The corpus was compiled by use of a web-based application (Corporati) written in PHP and using a MySQL relational database. Corporati made use of the semantic structuring of blog data, specifically of Web feeds based on the RSS and Atom protocols to automatically harvest entries from a fixed list of 137 company blogs that was in turn manually compiled, tagged and analyzed (see appendix A.1). Table 1.1 shows the core statistics that were calculated for CBC/Corporati based on the data that was retrieved from the selection of corporate blogs.

CBC/Corporati consisted of a tool for collecting, aggregating and tagging the language data and of facilities for the visualization and exporting of statistics derived from it. Although such a corpus is a promising basis for a microlinguistic, purely descriptive study of a text type, I came to realize that such a study was too specific before any theoretical model of blogs, corporate blogs and their respective communicative functions had been established.

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<sup>7</sup>The corpus is in the public domain and available for download and re-use at <http://ynada.com/cbc-corporati>.



<i>Unit</i>	<i>Value</i>
Blogs	137
Posts	25,476
Words	5,356,486
First Post to Last Post (FPLP)	2 April 2006 to 15 Dec 2007
Types / Tokens (Ratio)	3,077,439 / 5,356,486 (0.57)
Sentences (SC)	283,031
Average Word Length (AWL)	4.7
Average Sentence Length (ASL)	18.9
Average Words per Post (APpP)	210.3

Table 1.1: CBC/Corporati statistics

Three problems in particular presented themselves, all of which had to be addressed by adjusting the methodology:

1. A quantitative stylistic analysis is largely restricted to the lexical level, but blog posts form larger continued units of discourse that need to be examined in their entirety (but see section 3.9 for such an account).
2. A quantitative stylistic approach is descriptive but not explanatory, i.e. it does not engender a satisfactory explanation for the communicative practice associated with the text form, only its superficial attributes.
3. A quantitative stylistic approach can be contrastive, but in this study a comparison of several text types was not the objective.

The focus was therefore shifted to the description, classification and (primarily) qualitative analysis of blogs in general and of corporate blogs more specifically. Following the impression that there is no shortage of data or case studies on blogging, but instead a marked lack of communicative models able to capture blogging as a social practice with specific pragmatic parameters, I decided to instead focus on developing such a model.

The result is a description based on examples from CBC/Corporati as well as other sources, particularly studies of blogging practices that combined content analysis (Herring et al., 2005; Herring and Paolillo, 2006), ethnography (Gumbrecht, 2004; Nardi et al., 2004b) and large-scale surveys of bloggers (Lenhart and Fox, 2006; White and Winn, 2009), as well as market research studies of corporate blogging.<sup>8</sup>

I have sought to develop a model of blog communication and corporate blogging practices that centers on the practitioners themselves, drawing on the theoretical groundwork provided by Bühler (1982) and Jakobson (1960) in human communication; Goffman (1955) in social psychology; Austin (1962), Searle (1970), Grice (1989), Brown and Levinson (1987) and Sperber and Wilson (1986) in linguistic pragmatics; Herring (Herring et al., 2004b, 2005; Herring and Paolillo, 2006; Herring, 2007) specifically regarding pragmatic aspects of computer-mediated communication (CMC) and its classification; Schmidt (2007) and Döring (2002) regarding sociological and psychological aspects of

<sup>8</sup>See Puschmann (2006) for an overview of such studies.

Internet communication and Zerfaß (2005, 2006) regarding specific aspects of company blogs from the perspective of business communication studies. This model does not seek to be all-encompassing, but instead is intended to provide a starting point for further research.

## 1.4 Preliminary theoretical considerations

My initial interest in corporate blogs was born out of a series of relatively simple questions, set before the disciplinary background of linguistic register studies.<sup>9</sup> Who writes corporate blogs? How can their style and content be described? What communicative purposes, both on the personal and the organizational level can be deduced? A systematic investigation of their linguistic properties, as my reasoning went just two years ago, would yield answers to these questions. Or, more precisely: the first question could easily be answered with some basic research, the second with the above-mentioned investigation, and the answer to the third question would then present itself naturally. A systematic linguistic approach, I further decided, had to be based on an analysis of a sufficient amount of data – a natural language corpus – using computational means. My assumption at the time was that proceeding in this way would by itself lead me to instructive results. The explanation, according to my simple line of reasoning, was only a small step away from the data.

Between that initial plan and the composition of this thesis, however, lie two years of research and many discoveries about the complexity of human communication, as well as our inability to describe it adequately. My simple questions have led me to several tentative answers (see the parameters established in chapters 2 and 3), but much more importantly, they have led to further questions, questions that made a more general, more fundamental theory of blogs and their communicative role in different situations a necessary preliminary to a specialized stylistic study of corporate blogs. The resulting theory ties assumptions about the motives of corporate bloggers and the realization of these motifs in the practice of corporate blogging to a model of how blogs sociocognitively function. It is based on findings in a natural language corpus and on other sources of data, including interviews and metadiscourse about corporate blogging on the Internet.

Mark Twain is famous for remarking: “There is something fascinating about science. One gets such wholesale returns of conjecture out of such a trifling investment of fact.” His pithy comment may initially seem less than flattering, but I believe one can face it with confidence as long as one approaches the object of study with the understanding that a theory of the more general must precede a study of the more specific. In Twain’s imagery, scientific hypotheses seem to grow into bloated structures which stand, ill-supported, atop a narrow and unimpressive base of facts. Science is likened to economics – only a trifle of fact need be invested to obtain a bulk of theory in return, a plethora of explanations for what has been observed.

One needn’t be so pessimistic, especially not in computer-mediated communication, where the volume of case studies and largely descriptive accounts clearly outweighs the volume of generally accepted theory. Descriptive adequacy, in Chomsky’s (1965) words, is in the eye of the beholder, at least to the

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<sup>9</sup>In the sense of the framework developed by Biber and Finegan (1993, p. 31-56).

extent that one interpretation of a phenomenon does not necessarily rule out another, and when it does that shouldn't be a deterrent to the proponents of an alternative explanation.

My error two years ago was in assuming that a purely data-driven approach to an emerging type of writing would result in a satisfactory analysis. I have since found two things: firstly, data alone is not enough, and must be complemented by a concise theory of the object of study which can then be cautiously tested on different forms of data; a purely data-driven approach is simply not viable. Secondly, I discovered that the object of study is more elusive than I had previously thought.

Human language data, in the age of the Internet, comes conveniently packaged in digital form. This allows the easy application of computational methods, which has many merits both for applied and theoretical purposes. Much of what is done in natural language processing (NLP) hinges on solving practical problems related to data and text mining, search engine technology and similar issues. While these applications and theoretical issues connect to one another at many points, they differ profoundly in their objective: applications are successful if they work, theories are successful if they are considered descriptively adequate. I came to realize that since the aim of my research was to describe a text type in terms of its communicative function, no amount of data would stand in for a model supported by more general, pragmatically informed theories of communication, and that in turn such a model would not be unequivocally validated by the evidence no matter how long I looked. Language data comes with the added caveat that it captures only a minuscule fraction of what is communicated – it merely allows us to speculate about what the speaker intends and the listener understands.

Additionally, I found that a linguistic study of blogging, even one based on a pragmatic model of blog communication can translate into a number of very different things. A whole range of disciplines, among them both text linguistics and general (structuralist) linguistics, literary studies, anthropology and cultural studies, have long postulated a semiotic view of human communication. While differing significantly in detail, these approaches assume that speakers encode meaning into communicative signals (*signs*), which are then decoded by hearers. Some disciplines (structuralist linguistics, formal semantics) choose to largely ignore both ends of the process (speaker and hearer) and focus on the nature of signs and their (assumed) intrinsic meaning. Others take speaker, hearer and other externalities into consideration. But approaches in literary studies, text linguistics, stylistics and genre studies have to this date focused either on the textual product or on the meta-structure that supersedes it (*genre*). They have, explicitly or implicitly, postulated that texts have meanings – variable and shifting meanings, perhaps, but that they are themselves meaningful, and that therefore the code (if only in context) should be the main object of study.

This view can be challenged by a model that radically shifts the focus from the object of use to the users. Such a model is based on the principle of inference and rooted in psychology and the study of human cognition. It aims to discover what states the mind of the speaker and the mind of the hearer experience in communication. In its most radical form, such a view renders the nature of the text itself – the shape it takes, its origins, development and evolution – insignificant, because texts are merely stimuli produced by writers that trigger inferential processes in the minds of readers. From this perspective they have

no meaning in and of themselves, and their study is secondary to the study of the human mind.

It has been neither viable nor desirable for me to shift my focus in the direction of a psychological or psycholinguistic approach, but the realization that inference is key in human communication and that therefore any research into texts and their forms and effects is limited unless it goes beyond examining only the textual product has informed and extended the scope of this thesis. In particular, it has prevented me from making the genre ancestry of corporate blogs and their historical relationship to pre-Internet forms of corporate communications (e.g. advertisements, memos, mission statements) the central topic of this thesis. Instead, I have chosen to make the communicative situation in which blogs are written and the way in which bloggers approach it the core of this work.

Taking on an inferential view of communication also strongly qualifies corpus-linguistics approaches to genre: if the answers are not in data but in the minds of the practitioners, no corpus alone will suffice to find them. In addition to other sources of evidence, we may have to rely on subjective impressions and introspection, elicited from ourselves as more or less competent users of discourse genres.

To qualify these deliberations: my claim is of course not that modern genre studies, rhetorics and text linguistics do not take the cognitions of speakers and hearers into account. But they are arguably not the main object of study, either because finding an entrance into the minds of practitioners is seen as outside the scope of these disciplines, or because it is seen as ultimately impossible. The disciplines mentioned study the text, an entity that has become more and more mutable and flexible with the the advent of digital media. A recent student introduction to text linguistics claims that a key distinction between text linguistics and discourse analysis is that while the first studies monologue, the object of the second is dialogic in nature. Email, instant messaging, messaging inside of social networking sites and blogs are just a few examples where this distinction is fuzzy, to the extent of being useless. Blogs are also exceptionally difficult to classify. Are they interactive discourse (through their use of links, commenting, etc), or monologic texts in the traditional sense (in affording their authors virtually unlimited floor time)?

As outlined, my initial plan to describe the purely textual characteristics of corporate blogs grew into something more complex and ultimately much more concerned with function than form. A communicative model had to be developed to explain at least tentatively the processes at work when writing and reading blogs, and such a model had to be informed by existing theories of discourse in other environments. Furthermore, the specific characteristics of communication in the context of business had to be taken into account. What reasons do companies have to maintain blogs, which are often associated with exclusively personal thoughts and private feelings?

The issues I faced led me from my simple and specific initial questions to more complex and broader ones. A general theory of how blogs are conceptualized by their users became the precondition for a description of corporate blogs and therefore in this thesis I have focused on the development of such a theory.

## 1.5 Aims and scope

The result of my investigation is an assessment of the linguistic properties of corporate blogs in the larger context of their communicative function and their genetic relation to other discourse genres. My originally central concern of describing the purely linguistic aspects of corporate blogs shifted somewhat to the periphery in the course of my research. What use is a formal analysis without an account of the forces that have shaped the data? Consequently, my research is based on theoretical assumptions from multiple disciplines: genre and register studies, stylistics, pragmatics, text linguistics and corpus linguistics, and in a second tier, on the related fields of psycholinguistics, rhetorics and literary studies. While my observations are rooted in the linguistic dimension of corporate blogs, the study of a discourse genre is not complete unless it incorporates extra-linguistic factors. Computer-mediated communication and blogs can be assessed from a multitude of perspectives, informed by sociology, psychology, anthropology, cultural and media studies, computer sciences, literary studies, design and art. The fact that the emphasis of this work is largely placed on the linguistic dimension is purely a result of the disciplinary background of the author and in no way diminishes the relevance of other approaches.

In this thesis language is evaluated in two distinct roles: as a form of data and as a communicative tool. The following four statements describe my approach:

1. I have investigated an emerging, specialized genre of professional communication within the context of computer-mediated communication (CMC).
2. My investigation is not concerned with language as an abstract mental ability, but with concrete language use inside a fixed situational frame.
3. My assumption is that when regarding language as data, the shape of the linguistic expression gives some indication both of the communicative goals that the discourse participants aim to realize and of their conceptualization of the medium.
4. Consequently, the argument could be made that the object of my research proper is not language (neither as a faculty nor as a product or genre) but those who produce it – my approach to language is to use it as a diagnostic instrument.

The challenge faced by the researcher who undertakes an inquiry into style or register is that he must be aware of several levels of conditioning that shape the form of the linguistic expression. On the most fundamental level, discourse is shaped by what language as an abstract system permits, in other words by what is grammatically and semantically well-formed. Next, pragmatic factors come into play and govern the concrete shape that any expression takes in a given language use situation. Finally, certain expressions, constructions and approaches to interaction are typical of specific genres and are unlikely to occur in the same form outside of them.

## 1.6 Structure of this thesis

The structure of this work reflects its status as a theoretical account of blogging and corporate blogging as novel forms of publishing and communication and their respective situational parameters.

Chapter 2 lays out the theoretical basis of my study by exploring the parameters that influence bloggers in the stylistic decisions they make. After introductory remarks on the relationship between discourse community, communicative purpose and text (section 2.1) I apply the classification scheme developed by Herring (2007) to blogging (section 2.2) and discuss data on the uses and users of private blogs (section 2.3). The following sections constitute my own account of the cognitive and conceptual basis of blogging from the perspective of bloggers and blog readers, and an attempt to validate this account pragmatically via examples. I focus specifically on a characterization of the communicative situation in which blogs exist and on the consequences for how they are written.

Chapter 3 then approaches specifically corporate (as opposed to private) blogs and describes their specific attributes. In addition to providing a historical account of the evolution of corporate blogs (section 3.3) and a classification according to function and authorship (section 3.5), I relate their characteristics to those of personal blogs and make the argument that the subjective, non-threatening and non-suasive attributes associated with personal blogging are deliberately sought by corporate bloggers in an effort to counter a growing negative perception of corporate public-facing communication as deceptive, manipulative and impersonal. In addition to a description of the discursive and pragmatic dimension of corporate blogs via examples I also provide a brief quantitative snapshot of their microlinguistic (i.e. lexical) qualities by comparing my corpus with two others (section 3.9).

Chapter 4 presents two corporate blog case studies in detail to illustrate the observations made previously.

Chapter 5 contains a summary and discussion of my central findings.



## Chapter 2

# Formal, technical and pragmatic aspects of blogging

### 2.1 Proposing a hierarchy of community, purpose and text

Although still a relatively young phenomenon, blogs have attracted a notable degree of interest in academic research in the course of the last few years. Particularly their impact on politics and journalism and their role in the wider context of social media have brought blogs into the spotlight, an unlikely transformation considering their early status as either link lists or personal journals (Blood, 2000, 2002). Research has examined the role of blogs in political campaigns (Williams et al., 2005; Trammell, 2006) and political discussion (Adamic and Glance, 2005; Kerbel and Bloom, 2005), relationship management (Stefanone and Jang, 2007) and science (Wilkins, 2008), in the contexts of e-learning (Williams and Jacobs, 2004; Richardson, 2006) and organizational communication (Charman, 2006; Kelleher and Miller, 2006) as well as in many other areas. Specific blogging practices have also been examined, such as linking, quoting and commenting and their relation to networks (Efimova and de Moor, 2005; Ali-Hasan and Adamic, 2007; Adamic and Glance, 2005). Another approach to blogs is less interested in blog content or style as such, than in their use as a data source. Large-scale computational approaches have explored correlation of linguistic features with age and gender (Argamon et al., 2007; Schler et al., 2006), author personality (Nowson et al., 2005; Oberlander and Nowson, 2006) and mood (Mishne, 2005). Yet, while much effort has been invested in descriptions of blogs, accounts more geared towards explanation (i.e. attempting to answer the question “Why are blogs written in the way they are written?”) are rare.

How can we better understand blogs as a form of online communication? While previous studies of blogging have established criteria for the categorization of blogs according to their form and content, suggesting categories such as *filter blog* (Blood, 2002; Herring et al., 2005) and *campaign blog* (Trammell,



2006), or measuring the influence of blogs on politics via specific audiences (Drezner and Farrell, 2004), my goal is to direct the focus of this thesis in a slightly different direction.

It is possible to describe discourse genres as amalgams of discourse communities (e.g. air traffic controllers, college students, corporate lawyers), communicative purposes (e.g. informing, documenting, persuading) and formal traditions which manifest themselves in textual or medial products (e.g. the stylistic attributes of a type of poetry, the iconography of slasher movies, the conventions of legal language). These constellations shift, evolve and transform over time, but they are generally regarded as the basis for our understanding of genre. Individual discourse genres are componential entities that dynamically combine these aspects, and it is plausible to assume that practitioners recognize specific combinations and assign them different relative weights when forming their image of what constitutes a “good” or “typical” instantiation of a specific genre.

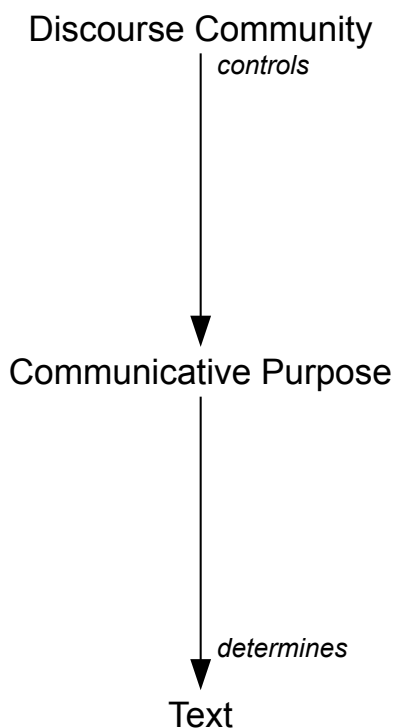


Figure 2.1: Discourse Model A

Varieties of computer-mediated communication are additionally pinpointed by a number of programmed traits which are consistent, regardless of purpose and community. As I will outline in the rest of this chapter, this undoubtedly applies to blogs, which are primarily identifiable through a set of stable, software-conditioned features, resulting in a relative uniformity of presentation. Blogs “in general” are therefore not well-suited for a classification in terms of

genre, because no single discourse community can be named that produces them, no single purpose is associated with their production and no fixed stylistic conventions have yet emerged for them, but we are still able to identify them via their presentation and structure.

Arguably, it is possible to describe the triade of discourse community, communicative purpose and text (subsuming style of writing and content) as a hierarchy (figures 2.1 and 2.2). The style and content of a blog entry is determined to a large extent by the purposes the blogger associates with the post. What is he or she trying to communicate? This “what” is in turn dependent on an another variable – who is the addressee of the message? Examining that question more closely reveals that knowing who writes a blog entry and with which readers in mind allows inferences about purpose and, consequently, style and content. From the opposite perspective, analysis of the style and content of blog entries provides valuable information about the intended addressees. I argue that each approach complements the other. Inferring communicative goals purely by means of a microlinguistic analysis is insufficient and potentially misleading, as is neglect of the microlinguistic level in favor of purely contextual information. Who writes blogs? What goals and audience do bloggers claim to have in mind? Only by combining available clues on all levels of the practice can a complete picture emerge.

Obviously I do not claim that there is mechanical and unambiguous relationship between the language of blog entries and minds of blog writers and readers. But the wider socio-pragmatic context of blogging must be examined before any narrower observations on corporate blogging or on microlinguistic phenomena can be made with good judgment.

While this chapter will investigate who blogs, and with what goals (conscious or not) in mind, it will place a special emphasis on the conceptualized audience of blogs, i.e. those whom I claim the blogger envisions as his readers. I will pay virtually no attention to the actual readership of blogs, both because it is dynamic and unstable and because it has no effect on the composition process.

In addition to audience, the situational parameters that blogging software creates will be the focus of this chapter, along with their influence on blog writing and reading. Following Herring, I will use the term *socio-technical format* or *STF* (Herring et al., 2005, p. 25) to refer to blogs “in general”, as it bypasses the more restrictive and specific demands made by genre as a label. Herring uses the term to describe forms of CMC whose genre status is either unclear or who appear to be constrained primarily by their software-conditioned characteristics. I will use it to describe blogging on a global level because it emphasizes the dimension of practice, but deemphasizes the dimension of tradition, which fits well with the situational specifics of blog communication<sup>1</sup>.

## 2.2 A classification of blogs following Herring

A close examination of blogs as an STF benefits from first establishing the characteristics that set blogs apart from other forms of computer-mediated commu-

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<sup>1</sup>By this I mean that many characteristic features of blogs are not the result of traditions that has been passed on systematically from one generation of users to the next, but practices that are taken up naturally and independently by users and are essentially a result of the communicative situation that blogs evoke.

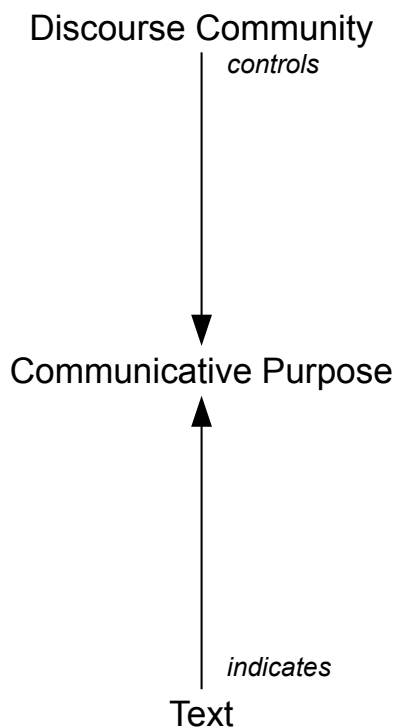


Figure 2.2: Discourse Model B

nication. I will do so in this section by applying Herring's faceted classification scheme (Herring, 2007) and subsequently use the results to describe the broader pragmatic aspects of blog communication, which in turn have significant impact on the specific pragmatics of corporate blogging. Herring's classification subsumes a range of earlier approaches and proposes a differentiation between *medium factors* and *situation factors*. In the following subsections, the individual facets are applied to blogs. Table 2.1 lists medium factors for blogs of all varieties, whereas table 2.2 lists situation factors separately for blogs on a global level and for corporate blogs.

### 2.2.1 Medium factors

Medium factors are stable in relation to blogs on a global level (whether applied to private blogs, institutional blogs or other variants), but for the same reason situation factors cannot be applied to blogs in their entirety.

<i>Factor</i>	<i>Name</i>	<i>Application to blogs</i>
M1	Synchronicity	Asynchronous. However micro-blogging formats are shifting towards synchronicity

M2	Message transmission	One-way. Readers have no indication that a message is being composed while the blogger is writing it
M3	Persistence of transcript	Persistent. Blog entries are permanently stored on the Web
M4	Size of message buffer	Unlimited. Like most web-based formats and in contrast to mobile applications, the message buffer is effectively unlimited in size
M5	Channels of communication	Hypertext. Conventional blogs <sup>2</sup> are based on HTML and therefore primarily visual, but a variety of media can be embedded via scripting languages
M6	Anonymous messaging	Pseudonymity. Blogs are frequently written under a pseudonym, but this seems less common than in other forms of CMC (e.g. IRC, online message boards)
M7	Private messaging	No private messaging. All blog-based communication is public; private messaging can only be carried out by switching to another type of communication such as email
M8	Filtering	Special (see comment)
M9	Quoting	Prevalent. Both quoting and linking to other blogs is a frequent practice in blogs
M10	Message format	Special (see comment). sequential format, presentation can be determined by reader (RSS), annotated with meta-data

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Table 2.1: Medium factors of blogs according to Herring (2007)

### M1: Synchronicity

While blogs can generally be described as asynchronous, synchronicity in CMC appears to be evolving from a binary distinction to a scalar variable. So-called *microblogging formats* (Java et al., 2007) allow users to broadcast short messages, often reporting on their current activities (the tag line used on the Twitter website is “What are you doing?”). The success of these formats has been driven significantly by the proliferation of mobile connectivity. Users can post on Twitter via their cell phones, pagers and other mobile devices, making them independent of desktop (or even laptop) computers, which in addition to being less portable take relatively long to start up and cannot be comfortably used in any given environment.

Although Herring states that “asynchronous systems do not require that users be logged on at the same time in order to send and receive messages; rather, messages are stored at the addressee’s site until they can be read” (2007, no pagination), this distinction is also shifting in several ways. Firstly, a growing

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<sup>2</sup>By this I mean blogs which are (hyper)text-based, as opposed to video blogging and podcasting. A broader definition of blogging subsumes under the term any activity that involves a person publishing digital information in a sequential format.



Figure 2.3: A Twitter user page

number of instant messaging systems (e.g. Skype) allow users to send text messages while the recipient is not logged in (similar to email).

Secondly, the notion of being logged in as the technical process of connecting to the Internet is rapidly losing in salience with the spread of high-speed flat rate packages and mobile computing. A growing percentage of users is essentially constantly logged in, at least in a purely technical sense. The question of whether or not a user is actively monitoring a given communications channel (email, microblog, social network profile page, instant messaging client etc) is instead becoming the relevant factor. With barriers to logging in being lowered further and further by ubiquitous connectivity, disconnecting is increasingly a conscious choice on the part of the user.

Blogs exemplify what I will refer to as variable, opaque and passive participation in that regard. While a blogger may have an indication of the approximate size of his audience (reported via tools that monitor access to the blog's web feed, such as Feedburner, he generally cannot tell who precisely is monitoring his blog, a fact that has a noticeable effect on how blogs are written. In contrast to synchronous STFs such as instant messaging and IRC, it is unclear not only whether a given user is paying attention to individual messages, but who exactly is lurking in the invisible audience. At the same time, blogger and reader can potentially interact via comments. This has interesting communicative implications for both parties – the relation between blogger and reader is 'pragmatically depressurized' in the sense that the expectations of the latter towards the former in terms of cooperation and relevance are much more limited than in unmediated interactive settings. The reader knows that the blogger is not addressing specifically her, and that therefore he cannot effectively exert power or influence; yet at the same time she can take part in the discourse and feel involved in it. I will return to this aspect in sections 2.10, 2.13 and in chapter 3 to argue that this lack of illocutionary force is perceived as non-threatening and is therefore

helpful for the compensation of power discrepancies between corporate bloggers and their readers.

### **M2: Message transmission**

Blogs use, as per Herring's definition, one-way transmission, meaning that readers have no indication that a blog entry is being written while the blogger is composing it. Furthermore, readers have no information at all on the time of writing – the time stamp provided in a blog entry does not indicate coding time (CT), but publication time (PT). This allows bloggers to plan, revise, edit and control the timing of their contribution.<sup>3</sup>

### **M3: Persistence of transcript**

Persistence of transcript is another factor postulated by Herring whose salience can be called into question when considering current technology trends. Text-based chat systems come to mind when integrating this facet, but even such systems increasingly allow the logging of chats on the client side.<sup>4</sup> Since the primary motive behind retaining only a current message buffer and 'throwing out' older messages has in the past been to conserve storage space, it can be assumed that in the near future virtually all digital communication will become permanent, since storage prices over the past decades have plummeted dramatically. That this affects not only private end-users, but on a much larger scale also computing companies, is reflected by the ever-growing disk space offerings of web-based email providers such as Google Mail and Yahoo! Mail. The advent of distributed data storage and cloud computing means that companies that handle huge amounts of user data have no real reason to ever delete it, as very little cost is associated with keeping it and conversely a profit is to be made by applying text mining technology to its analysis. Thus whether or not a CMC message is *permanent* or not is a question of semantics – to the user it may or may not seem permanent, but this says little about whether it is stored somewhere or not. Blogs are and essentially always have been permanent, a fact reflected by common blog terminology: a post is stored under a web address referred to as the permalink.

### **M4: Size of message buffer**

The size of the message buffer is another factor that can be expected to drop in significance rapidly. Currently it is most relevant in mobile text messaging (SMS), though not so much due to genuinely technical constraints, but primarily to allow service providers to charge a nominal fee per message. Size restrictions in other contexts (e.g. shout messages left on the "wall" of user profiles in services like Last.fm and Facebook) have a tendency to be loosened or removed

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<sup>3</sup>This becomes significant when taking into account the Gricean maxim of making conversational contributions when they are most appropriate. See section 2.17.

<sup>4</sup>Cf. the Pidgin instant messaging client which allows logging all chat sessions as text files. From a purely technical perspective logging keystrokes on a computer in any context is easily accomplished and since textual data takes up virtually no storage space in the era of cheap giga- or even terabyte hard drives, it can justifiably be assumed that in the future all digital data will be stored permanently.

entirely, as they serve no vital function, neither from the perspective of the service provider, nor from that of the user.<sup>5</sup>

## M5: Channels of communication

Since blogs are from a technical perspective nothing more than websites, they are based on hypertext (specifically HTML). While HTML itself is purely textual, it is possible to integrate a wide array of data (images, audio and video files) and applications (based either on browser plugins such as Adobe Flash and Microsoft Silverlight, or on interpreted code such as Javascript) into HTML pages. From this viewpoint it is possible to embed virtually any kind of digital data in a blog entry, provided it has been uploaded to a web server somewhere (see figure 2.4 for an example of embedded content).



Figure 2.4: Video content embedded in a blog

## M6: Anonymous messaging

While many blogs are written under a pseudonym, anonymous blogging per se (i.e. blogs or blog posts which are not credited to an individual by a name) is not possible.<sup>6</sup> Corporate blogs differ in this regard: while blogging under a pseudonym is not uncommon in private blogs, corporate blogs are virtually exclusively written by individuals who identify themselves by their real name. An interesting and important difference between blogs and non-blog websites (even personal ones) is the fact that an individual, whether referred to by real name or a pseudonym, is always identified as the owner and “speaker” of the

<sup>5</sup>This is the second feature of blogs that is relevant against the backdrop of Gricean pragmatics. Because blog communication is asynchronous and the blogger is afforded unlimited floor time, the maxim of quantity is nullified. See section 2.17.

<sup>6</sup>Lenhart and Fox (2006) report that 55% of the bloggers they interviewed wrote under a pseudonym.

blog and will consequently refer to himself in the first person in posts. The existence of “fake bloggers” is another indication of the salience of identity in blogs, not only of “real” vs. “fake” identity, but of the blog as a complex speech event that requires an individual’s voice in order to take place.<sup>7</sup>

### **M7: Private messaging**

The facet of private messaging does not apply to blogs, although it should be noted that comments made by blog readers are often initially only available to the blog owner, who has the ability to moderate (i.e. approve and publish or reject and discard) them. In that sense, comments are initially private messages to the blog owner, who may then chose to make them publicly available, modify, or discard them as he sees fit.

### **M8: Filtering**

Filtering as a medium factor needs special consideration in relation to blogs. Herring’s classification seems to be geared towards services which, while being available via the Internet, are not generally part of the fully accessible, search engine-indexed Web. While services such as ICQ, Skype and Second Life all have various interfaces with the World Wide Web, they are distinct from the Web itself. Although web message boards are part of the WWW, they still frequently require some sort of registration before users can post messages in them and sometimes registration is also required for read access. Blogs differ fundamentally in that respect. As websites, they are part of the WWW itself, and thus not only accessible to humans, but also to search engines, which index them thoroughly (see for example Technorati). As a consequence, readers become aware of blogs either via referral (whether from other Internet sites or by hearing or reading about them elsewhere) or via search, both of which presume an interest in the content on behalf of the reader. Because search engines index the content of web sites (including blogs) and match it with search queries, blogs exist in a unique communicative environment. Whereas in other contexts a speaker must to a greater or lesser extent tailor his contributions to suit the expectations of his listeners, a blog theoretically attracts an ad-hoc readership that is tailored to its content, however specific the content may be.<sup>8</sup> Variable, opaque and passive participation means that bloggers can make only very limited assumptions about the uptake of their message by readers.

### **M9: Quoting**

Quoting and linking to other blogs or websites is common in blogs, and some varieties (i.e. filter blogs) consist primarily of quoted or linked content (see figure 2.5).

<sup>7</sup>A prominent example of this kind of blog-based parody was The Secret Diary of Steve Jobs. The blog authored by Forbes Magazine editor Daniel Lyons became vastly popular as the tongue and cheek “secret diary” of Apple Inc founder and CEO Steve Jobs. The revelation of Lyons’ identity was a major event that received wide coverage in the tech media (Stone, 2007).

<sup>8</sup>Compare also with the concept of the *Long Tail* (Anderson, 2006). It postulates that the Internet creates an infinite number of microaudiences which are small but collectively larger than any mass audience. Also see section 2.17.



The image shows a screenshot of a Groklaw blog post. The header features the Groklaw logo and a decorative leaf graphic. The main content area is titled "OOXML Appeals Rejected" and dated "Friday, August 15 2008 @ 02:09 PM EDT". The text discusses the ISO/IEC's rejection of four appeals against OOXML, the implications for Office Open XML, and the status of the ISO/IEC DIS 29500. The left sidebar contains a navigation menu with links like "Home", "Groklaw Gear", "Archives", and "Law Dictionary". At the bottom of the sidebar, there is a PayPal "Donate" button and a small note about voluntary donations.

Figure 2.5: Quoted elements in a filter blog on legal issues

This can be assumed to fill a knowledge-management function for the blogger and to serve the purpose of bringing something on the Web, such as a news report or video clip, to the reader's attention. The blogger's authority is based in part on the material from external sources that she integrates, if authority and recognition is what she seeks via blogging. As I will outline in more detail later, different approaches to quoting and linking characterize a basic distinction in how and why people blog.

The typically "bloggy" strategies of reusing, quoting and pointing to external material are not without their critics, however. The news media industry in particular is understandably skeptical of filter blogs, regarding them as "parasitic" borrowers of original content (Niles, 2007).

## M10: Message format

The content published in a blog can be represented in variety of ways. It can be read traditionally (i.e. on the blog website), via a feed reader such as Google Reader or Bloglines or via email (using a service such as that offered by Feedburner), depending on the reader's preference (see figure 2.6).

There is no single representation of the information in a blog. Instead, it is can be presented in a variety of ways, depending on the preferences of the reader. What remains stable across different representations is the semantic content of the blog – the information as it is syndicated via the blog's web feed (see figure 2.7). This information consists of the post's title, the date of publication, the name of the author and any tags the blogger chooses to associate with the post, as well as user comments and full text.

It is significant that this information is required for a semantically well-formed post, because it results in millions of blogs around the globe providing identically structured information. From the viewpoint of pragmatics it is no-

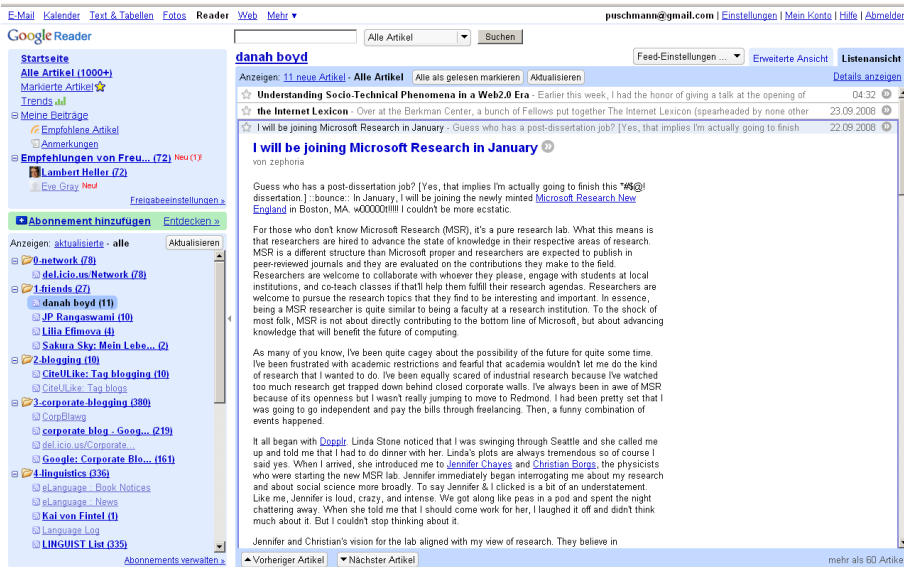


Figure 2.6: Blog entries in Google Reader

table that the contextual information provided allows the blogger to use deictic expressions in his writing in the same fashion they are used in face-to-face conversation, since the same situational data is available to the reader (see section 2.10).

Thus, it can be argued that the sequential packaging of information, as well as its prototypical function as a personal publishing tool used by private individuals, are the blog's constitutive attributes, more so than specific content, user community or medial channel. The fact that video blogs (figure 2.8) are referred to as blogs while presenting little or no textual information supports this: what is shared with conventional blogs is their status as a personal publishing tool and their serial output. Blogs are conceptualized as a communicative extension of the self into the Internet by different medial means.

The sequential, paradigmatic segmentation of information found in a blog mirrors the human perception of time as a sequence of events. While blogs can also be browsed in other ways, their most fundamental organizing principle is time. The information presented to the reader thus partially imitates the setting of spoken conversation: he can identify the speaker and the time of speaking (i.e. publication time), but there is a lack of synchronicity and no opportunity for conversational turns. Meanwhile, the blogger must contend with variable, opaque and passive participation (he cannot identify his communicative partner), but as a result of the audience's passivity is not forced to cede the floor and is under no restraints in terms of length and relevance of his contribution.

## 2.2.2 Situation factors

Herring's schema integrates eight situation factors to describe the non-technical parameters that shape an STF. Table 2.2 assesses these factors separately for blogs in general and for corporate blogs, since most of the facets listed only

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Source of: http://library.osu.edu/blogs/readaloud/feed/ - Mozilla Firefox
<?xml version="1.0" encoding="UTF-8"?>
<!-- generator=WordPress/WordPress-MU-1.2.5 -->
<rss version="2.0"
  xmlns:content="http://purl.org/rss/1.0/modules/content/"
  xmlns:wfw="http://wellformedweb.org/CommentAPI/"
  xmlns:dc="http://purl.org/dc/elements/1.1/"
  >
<channel>
  <title>ReadAloud</title>
  <link>http://library.osu.edu/blogs/readaloud</link>
  <description></description>
  <pubDate>Tue, 10 Jun 2008 16:36:23 +0000</pubDate>
  <generator>http://wordpress.org/?v=wordpress-mu-1.2.5</generator>
  <language>en</language>
  <item>
    <title>ReadAloud takes a summer vacation</title>
    <link>http://library.osu.edu/blogs/readaloud/2008/01/14/previous-2008-readalouds</link>
    <comments>http://library.osu.edu/blogs/readaloud/2008/01/14/previous-2008-readalouds/#comments</comments>
    <pubDate>Mon, 14 Jan 2008 16:44:42 +0000</pubDate>
    <dc:creator>dstel.1</dc:creator>
    <category><![CDATA[Announcements]]></category>
    <category><![CDATA[Uncategorized]]></category>
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    <description><![CDATA[Listen to ReadAloud while we are on hiatus this summer and hear some of the wonderful readings we have recorded from ou
ReadAloud invites the community to join us for our regular weekly programming which resumes [...] ]></description>
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<p><strong>ReadAloud</strong> invites the community to join us for our regular weekly programming which resumes the <strong>first Thursday in October</stron
<p><strong>If you are interested in participating as a reader for the upcoming academic year, please contact </strong><a href="mailto:">dstel.1@osu.edu</a
]]></content:encoded>
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  </item>
</channel>
</rss>

```

Figure 2.7: Source code of an RSS feed

apply to functional STF varieties and not the the umbrella category.

<i>Factor</i>	<i>Name</i>	<i>Private blogs</i>	<i>Corporate blogs</i>
S1	Participation structure	One-to-many (perspective of the blogger); Many-to-many (the blogosphere it its entirety)	Same
S2	Participant characteristics	Varied	Company employees
S3	Purpose	Varied	Furthering organizational goals
S4	Topic/theme	Varied	Issues related to the organization
S5	Tone	Varied, often characterized as <i>conversational</i>	Varied, but frequently modeled after the tone of private blogs
S6	Activity	Expression of opinions, thoughts, emotions; commentary, reflection; documentation of personal experience	Varied

S7	Norms	Varied	Implicit norms of social conduct, language, confidentiality; Codified in blogging policies (see chapter 3)
S8	Code	Varied	Following patterns found in private blogs; avoidance of jargon (see chapter 3)

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Table 2.2: Situation factors of blogs following Herring (2007)

### S1: Participation structure

Blogs can be understood as manifesting two separate participation structures, one that applies to the single blog, its author and readership, and another that applies to the blogosphere (the “world of blogs”) as a (virtual) whole.

From the perspective of the individual blogger, the communicative process of blog writing and reading is 1-to-N communication and not unlike broadcasting or mass publishing in pre-digital contexts. While readers can interact with the blogger by posting comments (when permitted), these may be moderated and (at least in theory) even edited by the blogger. The blogger controls the discourse structure to the extent that all messages found in his blog must be assumed to be endorsed by him, whether he is the author or (merely) the publisher of a contribution.<sup>9</sup> A blog is therefore a *self-directed discourse environment*: it may contain contributions from different speakers, but both his own contributions and those made by others can be assumed to follow his communicative intent, something that is markedly different in face-to-face conversation (see section 2.10). The distribution of power between blogger and readership is also asymmetrical. The blogger’s contributions occupy a privileged space (see figure 2.9) and are required, while the comments are shown below blog posts and are optional (meaning that where they are allowed they are not required for the blog to be considered operational). In a July 2006 report on blogging by the Pew Internet & American Life Project, 87% of the bloggers interviewed said they allowed comments (Lenhart and Fox, 2006).

At the same time, the blogosphere on a global level is conceptualized as an open, fundamentally democratic discourse environment, where anyone can voice their opinion.<sup>10</sup> While the relationship between blogger and reader can be described as asymmetrical as long as the reader is restricted to the role of commentator, it becomes symmetrical at once if the reader himself assumes the role of blogger. Though differences in popularity between individual blogs are stark, this is the result of non-technical differences – at least initially, all blogs are created equal. Their availability to anyone with a computer, Internet connection and a minimal time investment makes them accessible to potentially anyone.

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<sup>9</sup>This is also reflected in the legal status of website content. The site owner is generally held responsible for all messages appearing on his site, even if they are not his own.

<sup>10</sup>“A new medium for civic engagement” is the expression used by Kerbel and Bloom (2005, p. 3), who see political blogs as a new way of participating in politics.

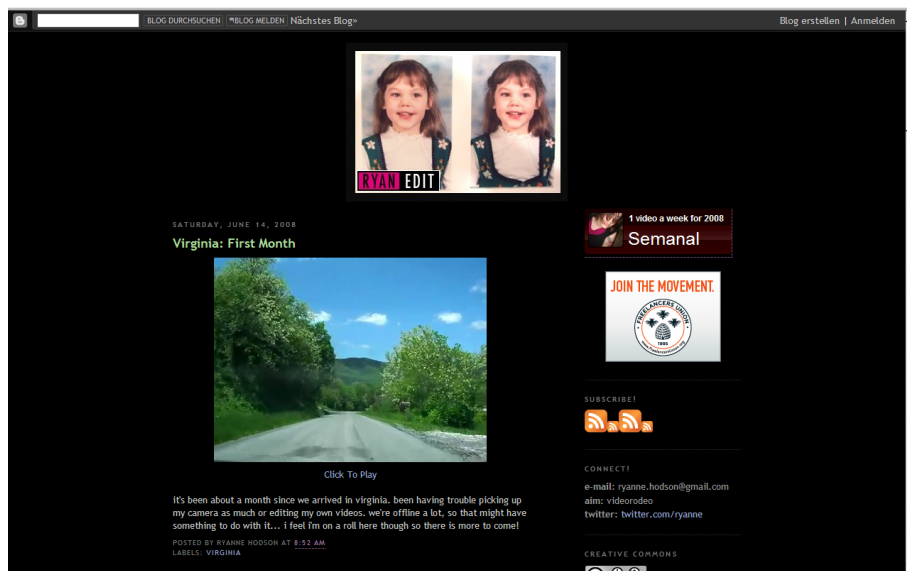


Figure 2.8: A video blog (*vlog*)

They are potentially interactive, but at the same time can be characterized as a personal space that is fully controlled by its owner (cf. Gumbrecht 2004, p. 1, who calls blogs “protected space”).

Corporate blogs initially seem not to differ from other types of blogs with regard to their participant structure, yet on closer inspection some differences are noticeable. While private blogs are frequently written under a pseudonym, or at least do not credit the author with his full name (i.e. the owner of the blog is identified as “Mike” or “Sally”, but last names are not provided), corporate blogs are virtually always attributed to their owners by name. This has obvious legal reasons: it must be possible to hold corporate employees acting on their employer’s behalf accountable for what they write. While this is in principle equally true of private citizens, a personal blog is more likely to be concerned with the blogger’s personal life and not with issues that are as likely to stir up legal disputes. By contrast, corporations and their employees are subject to a range of communicative constraints that influence their conduct. The need to identify oneself is one of these constraints.<sup>11</sup>

## S2: Participant characteristics

The characteristics of bloggers and blog readers in general are as varied as blogs themselves; therefore this facet does not apply to the blogosphere on a global level (but see sections 2.13 and 2.14). However, those involved in corporate blogging (both as writers and readers) can be assumed to meet certain unifying criteria. Firstly, those who write corporate blogs are company employees who have either launched a blog of their own accord (employee blogging), or have been charged with the task of publishing one by their superiors. Secondly, with the exception of hosted employee blogs open to all staff of a company (a

<sup>11</sup>See Sprague (2007) for legal issues of corporate blogging related to U.S. law.

**A taxonomy of corporate blog subtypes in map format**

Sometimes a picture says more than a thousand words - especially when the picture is rather fussy and complicated. I've created a [map of corporate blog subtypes](#), the functions they realize and the audiences they address. It's clearly idealized, but I think it captures the essentials reasonably well.

Have a look at [this](#). I couldn't fit it into a blog entry because, as you can see, it takes up quite a bit of screen space.

Thoughts?

Edit: don't miss [the comments](#).

Cornelius posted this article under [Corporate Blogging, Research, Visualization](#) on Monday, June 16th, 2008 at 12:54 am You can follow any responses to this entry through the [RSS 2.0 feed](#). Responses are currently closed, but you can [trackback](#) from your own site. [Edit this entry](#).

**This article has 2 comments so far!**

1. **Ralf Beuker says** –  
(on Jun 16th, 2008 at 12:29 pm | e...)  
Hi Cornelius,  
and thanks for assembling this chart! While you are certainly aware of Zerfass' early categorization of blog types you've accordingly developed his ideas further. That's great and from the perspective of an academic researcher this makes sense.

**Recent Comments**

- infosthetics: not sure why the link to Chris Harrison's work seems not to work for you, but it seems fine from...
- Ralf Beuker: Hi Cornelius, and thanks for assembling this chart! While you are certainly aware of Zerfass'...
- Martin Fenner: That was indeed an interesting evening BTW, my wife's name is Petra Dersch. Good luck with the...
- John Cass: A few years ago, I took a number of classes in geology, and became so interested in the subject I even...
- Columix: It was great meeting you, Cornelius. We'll stay in touch.

**Tags**

- About CorpBlawg (7)
- Academic Publishing (14)
- Adobe (2)
- Anjo Anjewerden (1)
- Apple (1)
- Bjoern Brembs (1)
- Blogging and Gender (1)

**Archives - Yearly**

- 2008
- 2007
- 2006

**Archives - Monthly**

- July 2008 (3)
- June 2008 (4)
- May 2008 (3)
- March 2008 (5)
- February 2008 (2)
- January 2008 (2)
- November 2007 (6)
- October 2007 (4)
- September 2007 (13)
- August 2007 (9)
- July 2007 (14)
- June 2007 (5)
- May 2007 (5)
- April 2007 (9)
- March 2007 (6)
- February 2007 (8)
- January 2007 (6)
- December 2006 (8)

Figure 2.9: Comments under a blog entry

blog hub), corporate bloggers are usually distinguished from their peers by their ranking in the corporate hierarchy (e.g. senior management), their expert status (e.g. software developers), or their function as communicators (e.g. departments such as marketing, public relations or customer relations).

### S3: Purpose

Purpose is a central point of distinction between blogs in general and corporate blogs. Non-corporate blogs are not only written for a range of purposes, they can also sometimes appear to be written without any explicit reader-directed goal in mind.

Corporate blogs markedly differ in this respect. The distinction between corporate and private blogs is once again based on the existence of organizationally mandated communicative goals, the nature of which is a frequent subject of discussion between company bloggers (“what do we want to achieve with our blog?”). Such goals are the impetus of all but self-initiated employee blogs, which may be created with either personal or organizational goals (or a melange of both) in mind. The contrast between the necessary goal-orientedness of organizational blogs and the lack of fixed, clearly articulated and external goals in personal blogs has important pragmatic implications.

### S4: Topic or theme

While blogs on a global level are concerned with a multitude of topics, corporate blogs are obviously concerned with issues that are of some relevance to the company. However, the relation may be explicit in the sense that the company or some aspect of it is directly mentioned in the blog (quarterly earnings, workplace situation, new product, environmental policy etc), or it may be implicit in that a topic indirectly relevant to the company is taken up.

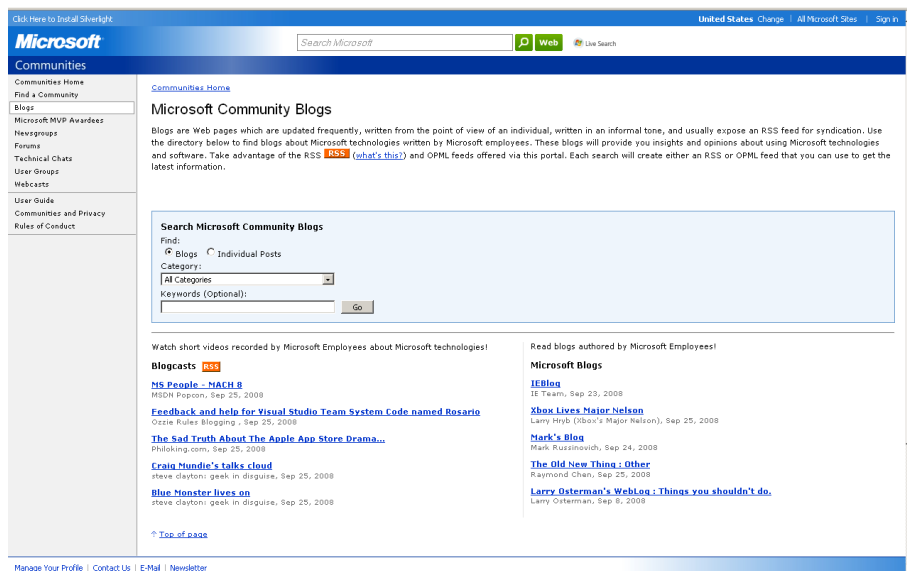


Figure 2.10: The Microsoft Community Blogs hub

Readers are intended to associate with the company a topicalized issue that has no immediate connection to it, or the issue itself is less relevant than the communicative behavior that is exhibited by the corporate blogger. As will be outlined in more detail in 2.10, the opportunity to voluntarily give ground to weaker communicative partners in the context of the self-directed discourse environment of the blog is a unique chance to prove socio-communicative competence.

## S5: Tone

The tone of both blogs and corporate blogs is characterized by an overall relative lack of specialized, domain-specific language or jargon, or at least the general perception that such a style is atypical for the STF.

Initially, the conscious attempt by corporate communicators to cast blogs (and corporate blogs) as stylistically more accessible, clear and concise than other corporate language is an act of penance and perceptual redressing. The democratic and conversational characteristics of blogs, paired with their qualities as speaker-controlled discourse, open up new avenues of self-presentation for institutions. However, they must also take the consequences of the situation into account: because of the open multiplicity of the Web and the communicative parity of the blogosphere, a code of verbal conduct is needed. Adhering to this implicit communicative code of conduct is especially vital in an environment like the Web, because of its aspatial nature. On the Web, actions are predominantly realized verbally, and social stance is indicated by a mix of linguistic and paralinguistic clues as well as medial performance, such as purely iconic actions (e.g. *poking* and *hugging* on social networks and in chatrooms) and actions such as quoting and linking.

Corporate blogs exhibit special features in regards to how they approach po-

liteness. The use of blogs is not purely an attempt to communicatively redress companies as individuals and associate them with idealized notions of interpersonal communication, but is also intended to communicate a degree of humility. Since communication between blogs (via quoting and linking) is communication among equals, a corporate blog is the ideal tool to demonstrate communicative parity between a corporation and its clients. The same is not true of other, pre-digital genres that (sometimes) perform similar functions: individuals cannot generally issue press releases or print brochures, even if they have communicative needs that would warrant using these genres. The use of blogs with the awareness that they can act as the common man's megaphone can therefore be regarded as a conscious politeness strategy.

The stylistic ideal propagated by bloggers, blog consultants and (self-proclaimed) blogging experts elevates the affective and social dimensions of self-expression, which have long been (and, in some cases, continue to be) regarded as anathema inside many forms of discourse, particularly in written genres, and recasts them as highly positive. There are several possible explanation for this idealization of a subjective, personal and individuated style. Firstly, a style that suggests objectivity and detachment by being deliberately free of social and affective information (e.g. use of first and second person pronouns, private verbs, tag questions, hedges) and by avoiding any reliance on context as a necessary source of information (via the avoidance of deictic expressions) is typical of institutionally-mandated communication as it takes place in academic and legal contexts. The opposite end of the scale – subjective, emotive and contextually-centered language typical of blogs – is therefore furthest away from these genres of objective discourse in which some abstract entity (facts, statistics, the text itself), not the writer, makes an argument and therefore the reader interacts not with the author, but with that abstract entity. Whether this perception is objectively verifiable is entirely another question, but blogging evangelists vehemently propagate the stylistic ideal of individuated writing because they realize that readers associate a particular style with a genre or a family of genres and that in this case the association with organizational genres is not desirable. If the reader's subconscious approach to genre recognition is at least fundamentally similar to that of the genre analyst, then the association of certain stylistic features with the specific purposes and communities is likely. If readers have an initially negative view of corporations and their motives, this association is hardly in the interest of corporate communicators. Of course, company blogs can generally be identified as organizationally mandated by being part of the corporate website and authored by those identified with their function in the corporate hierarchy. But what is suggested to the reader by the stylistic emulation of "normal" blogs is that companies are changing, that they are becoming more open and more empathic, and that they are generally acquiring the characteristics of a socially competent individual (in contrast to the frequent characterization of large companies as arrogant, aloof and out of touch).

### **S6: Activity**

Although both the range of activities (or purposes) in blogs as such and in corporate blogs varies, the scope is markedly narrower in corporate blogs. Corporate blogs may vary significantly in topic, language or target audience, but their central objective must always be to further organizational goals, whether



directly or indirectly.

## 2.3 Users and uses of private blogs

What kind of private persons write blogs and with what motivation? These two questions must be answered before turning to corporate blogs as they take on a central importance when considering the reasons companies have to start blogging. While individuals who publish a blog for an organization they are affiliated with can be assumed to do so with a set of fairly clearly defined organizational goals in mind, what are possible motives behind personal blogging and in what ways are the goals of individuals and organizations related?

It is important in this context to differentiate between professional (corporate) bloggers and business bloggers (who earn their living by blogging as freelancers) and private individuals to whom blogging is a hobby or pastime.<sup>12</sup> Especially blogging in conjunction with journalism (Lasica, 2003; Matheson, 2004; Baltatzis, 2006) has attracted much attention, both in research and in public perception, and it is easy to confuse the motivations at work in such professional mass media publications with those of private individuals.

While there is a growing body of research on many different aspects of blogging, the community and purpose of private blog-writing from the perspective of the blogger are still relatively unexplored themes. Lenhart and Fox (2006) interviewed a sample of 7,012 adults, 4,753 of which stated they were Internet users. Some 8% of this group identified themselves as bloggers and agreed to take part in a survey. The resulting study showed that private bloggers have quite a specific conceptualization of their blog as focused on personal thoughts and experiences:

The Pew Internet Project blogger survey finds that the American blogosphere is dominated by those who use their blogs as personal journals. Most bloggers do not think of what they do as journalism.

Most bloggers say they cover a lot of different topics, but when asked to choose one main topic, 37% of bloggers cite “my life and experiences” as a primary topic of their blog. Politics and government ran a very distant second with 11% of bloggers citing those issues of public life as the main subject of their blog.

Entertainment-related topics were the next most popular blog-type, with 7% of bloggers, followed by sports (6%), general news and current events (5%), business (5%), technology (4%), religion, spirituality or faith (2%), a specific hobby or a health problem or illness (each comprising 1% of bloggers). Other topics mentioned include opinions, volunteering, education, photography, causes and passions, and organizations. (Lenhart and Fox, 2006, p. ii)

Remarkably similar results come from Technorati’s 2008 State of the Blogosphere report (White and Winn, 2009). The category “Personal/Lifestyle” was

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<sup>12</sup>Of course there are intersections between the two groups. The Pew report (Lenhart and Fox, 2006) states that bloggers who considered their blog an important part of their life and spent considerable time updating it are also more likely to make money with blogging (via ads, donations, etc).

cited by 54% of all bloggers interviewed as playing a role in their blogs, with other areas lagging significantly behind (see figure 2.11). While the majority of participants named a number of topics covered (five being the average) the dominance of “personal” over other categories is notable.

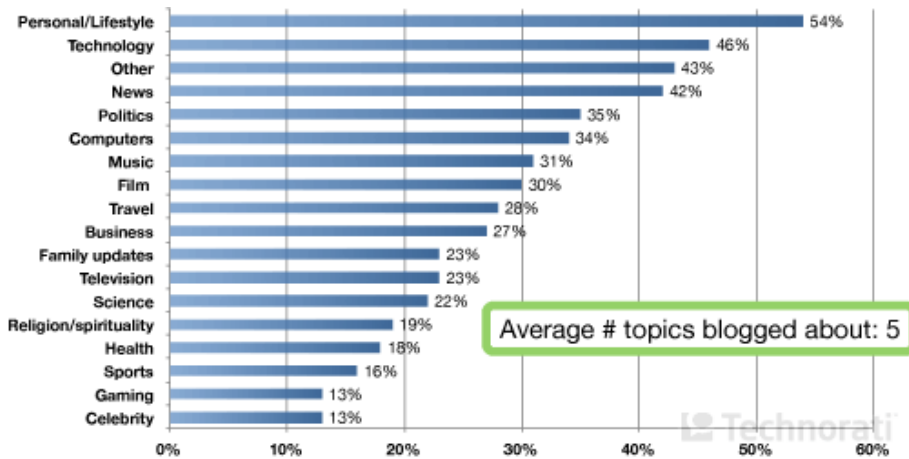


Figure 2.11: Technorati’s most blogged-about topics

Based on these findings, it is possible to postulate a basic dichotomy between private blogs concerned with “life and experiences” of the blogger, and those concerned with any other topic. While blogs concerned with entertainment, business or religion are sure to differ in many regards, they all center on something external to the blogger: a topic, issue or news item he may report, discuss, criticize or praise, but that is not identical with his life, experience and reflections. I will use this dichotomy extensively in this chapter and refer to these two approaches to blog-writing as *ego blogging* and *topic blogging* (see sections 2.13 and 2.14 for a detailed description and examples that support this categorization).

Facet	<i>Ego blogging</i>	<i>Topic blogging</i>
Text/Content	Focus on the internal world, i.e. the blogger’s:	Focus on the external world, e.g.:
	1. thoughts	1. politics
	2. emotions	2. entertainment
	3. experiences	3. business
	4. daily life	4. religion
		5. work
Conceptualized audience	Familiar and specific (self, family, friends)	Unfamiliar and generic (liberals, republicans, lawyers, movie buffs, students)
Audience scope	Narrow	Wide

Functions	Internal, e.g.:	External, e.g.:
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Record and reflect one's life</li> <li>2. Stabilize self</li> <li>3. Control and record own thought process</li> <li>4. Maintain and reinforce existing relationships</li> <li>5. Establish structure, causality, order and safety</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Inform others</li> <li>2. Indicate a stance to others</li> <li>3. Influence others</li> <li>4. Gain recognition</li> <li>5. Acquire expert status</li> </ol>
Anonymity	May be anonymous or pseudonymous	Generally attributable
Perspective	Internal	External
Metaphor	Diary	Megaphone
Approach	Recording	Broadcasting
Mode	Narration/stream of consciousness	Exposition/argumentation
Encoding/decoding	Easy to encode, hard to decode	Hard to encode, easy to decode
Hyperlinks, quotes, comments and tagging	Few or no hyperlinks, quotes, comments and use of tagging	Some or frequent hyperlinks, quotes, comments and use of tagging

Table 2.3: A model of two approaches to blogging: ego blogging vs. topic blogging

In addition to other differences, the two modes contrast significantly in their audience design and scope. Lenhart and Fox (2006) reported that 52% of the bloggers they interviewed stated that they wrote mostly for themselves, while 32% said they wrote mostly for others (Lenhart and Fox, 2006, p. iii). Figure 2.12 shows major, minor and non-reasons to blog, and here too the tendency towards an “ego component” of blogging is significant.

Following this picture, the first axiom, *blog focus* (ego blogging vs. topic blogging), can be paired with a second, *audience scope* (narrow vs. wide audience). Ego blogging correlates with a narrow scope (self, family, friends), while topic blogging correlates with a wide scope (all people interested in a certain issue or topic). Even with unusual or obscure themes, the unfamiliar Internet audience is n-sized, i.e. potentially infinite, while the concrete and familiar audience of family and friends is finite. As before, the Technorati study (White and Winn, 2009) comes to similar conclusions, naming self-expression as the dominant reason to blog. In conjunction with this, the most important measure of success for most bloggers is “personal satisfaction” (75%), ranked before frequency of comments or website hits (58% and 53%).

The findings of the Pew report seem to suggest that younger users are more

<b>More Blog to Share Experiences Than to Earn Money</b>			
<b>Please tell me if this is a reason you personally blog, or not:</b>	<b>Major reason</b>	<b>Minor reason</b>	<b>Not a reason</b>
To express yourself creatively	52%	25%	23%
To document your personal experiences or share them with others	50	26	24
To stay in touch with friends and family	37	22	40
To share practical knowledge or skills with others	34	30	35
To motivate other people to action	29	32	38
To entertain people	28	33	39
To store resources or information that is important to you	28	21	52
To influence the way other people think	27	24	49
To network or to meet new people	16	34	50
To make money	7	8	85

Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project Blogger Callback Survey, July 2005-February 2006. N=233. Margin of error is  $\pm 7\%$ .

Figure 2.12: Reasons given for blogging in Lenhart and Fox (2006)

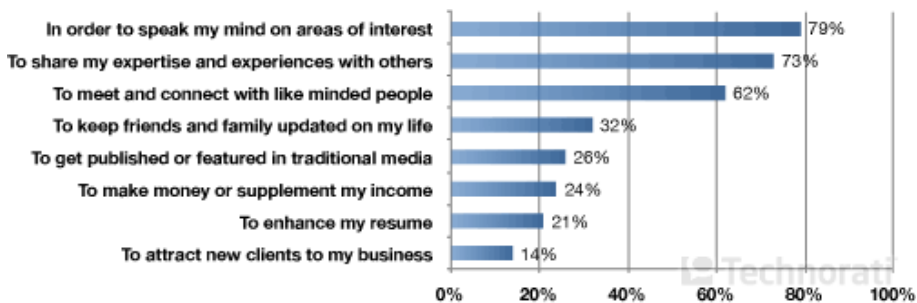


Figure 2.13: Motivation to blog given in White and Winn (2009)

likely to keep a blog to document their own lives and express themselves creatively (Lenhart and Fox, 2006, p. 7) a description that can be associated with ego blogging. Older users differed in this regard, focusing more on sharing knowledge and on storing information for their own use. Similar differences exist in regards to gender: women and younger users were more likely to blog about their life and experience than older users and males. This is also reflected in the Technorati study: personal blogging is associated with female users more strongly than with males. Interestingly, this observation has been made in other contexts as well. Schler, Koppel, Argamon, and Pennebaker conducted an automated computational analysis of blog language by gender and age, observing:

Male bloggers of all ages write more about politics, technology and money than do their female cohorts. Female bloggers discuss their personal lives – and use more personal writing style – much more than males do. Furthermore, for bloggers of each gender, a clear pattern of differences in content and style over age is apparent. Re-

ardless of gender, writing style grows increasingly “male” with age: pronouns and assent/negation become scarcer, while prepositions and determiners become more frequent. Blog words are a clear hallmark of youth, while the use hyperlinks increases with age. Content also evolves with age in ways that could have been anticipated. (Schler et al., 2006, p. 5)

The question of course remains whether there are differences in how men/women, older users/younger users conceptualize blogs, causing them to write differently, i.e. whether for example the publicness of information on the Internet is a more significant deterrent to older users when disclosing personal information than to younger ones, who may simply be less careful and less concerned with privacy.

The Pew report also showed that most bloggers are regular consumers of news from other sources (websites, but also television, radio and newspapers) and that they engage heavily in instant messaging (IM). It was not indicated by the report whether age, male gender and high news consumption can be linked to topic blogging while youth, female gender and high use of instant messaging correlates with ego blogging, but such a constellation is plausible in conjunction with the findings of Schler et al.. Another characteristic of bloggers is their affinity for user-generated content (UGC), i.e. the use of self made photos, video clips, poems etc in the blog. Being able to experiment with creative expression in an environment where the blogger has the freedom to define his own rules is a central incentive for many bloggers, who tend to have no prior experience with mass publishing.

The centrality of documentation and creative self-expression as forces motivating bloggers are striking (figures 2.12 and 2.13), as is the relative lack of interest in money, networking or influencing their readers. Overall, bloggers appear more concerned with themselves than with others, and with writing to write more than with writing to be read.

More insight can be gained by moving from the quantitative to the qualitative plane. In a an ethnographic study, Nardi, Schiano, and Gumbrecht assessed blogger motivation based mostly on interviews (Nardi et al., 2004a). They found that bloggers are motivated by a number of factors, among them awareness of audience and need for self-expression. The five reasons for keeping a blog most frequently identified by participants can be summarized as follows:

- Update others on activities and whereabouts
- Express opinions to influence others
- Seek others’ opinions and feedback
- “Think by writing”
- Release emotional tension

### **2.3.1 Update others on activities and whereabouts**

The ability of blogs to act as personal publishing platforms – a broadcast medium available to anyone – is what spurs initial interest in many new bloggers. However, as both Nardi et al.’s findings and a study by Gumbrecht (2004) seem to confirm, the global reach of blogs is not generally applied in full, i.e.

many bloggers write first and foremost with a local audience of friends and family in mind. Gumbrecht observes that bloggers “selectively filter their audience by tailoring their posts to them” (2004, p. 2) and cites several examples in which bloggers refer to events in a deliberately vague fashion, in order to assure that their friends will understand the message via their contextual knowledge while outsiders will not. This narrowing of audience scope as a consciously employed strategy is a significant indicator of audience design on the part of the blogger. The tendency of ego bloggers to communicate with a small and sometimes clearly defined readership that excludes strangers shows that blogs are not generally conceptualized similarly to organizationally-mandated broadcast media such as television, radio or newspapers, which address the general public. While there is clearly an understanding of the openness and accessibility of blogs, the (very plausible) reasoning appears to be that blogs as a pull-type STF must be consciously sought out – they cannot be found by accident<sup>13</sup> – and that therefore there must be some relationship between the blogger and his audience.

In particular, being able to relate social information regarding their whereabouts, activities and state (physical and emotional) was frequently mentioned by bloggers as a significant advantage of their blog:

As a format of frequent postings in reverse chronological order, blogs were a natural for use as travelogues and schedules to inform an audience of the authors’ whereabouts—where they’d been, where they were, and where they were going. Many in our study posted pictures from trips and family outings. They would also report on where they were headed, especially if they knew family and friends living in that area, in order to get together with them. In this way, blogs facilitated in-person social connections. (Nardi et al., 2004b, p. 226)

The advantage over other channels such as email was perceived by bloggers to be the openness and unobtrusive nature of the medium. Whereas email as a push-type STF places pressure on the recipient to at least acknowledge or even react to a message personally addressed to him, no such pressure exists with a blog (variable, opaque and passive participation). The act of sending an email message and its reading by the recipient can be compared to an adjacency pair in spoken discourse, such as the exchange of greetings or reacting to an offer by accepting or refusing it. Social pressure to react in a certain, predefined way is associated with these adjacency pairs and failure to react can be interpreted as deliberate snubbing or carelessness, even when other interpretations are possible (e.g. the recipient temporarily has no access to email etc). The communicator is often keenly aware of the pressure he exerts and may not always intend it. With these considerations in mind, the popularity of email in administrative, academic and business contexts is plausible: in areas where the sender intends to place interactional pressure on the recipient, email is ideally suited, whereas it is not where the sender merely wants to “offer” information to an audience. Two parameters influence this choice, firstly the basic 1-to-N design of blogs

<sup>13</sup>Despite the accessibility of blogs via search, finding a random blog is in fact reasonably difficult, since lists, selections, search engines etc all appear somewhat biased by popularity or exposure of the blog. Blogger.com’s next blog button is one of the few exceptions.

vs. the basic 1-to-1 design of email, and secondly the nature of the information contained in the message. Actionable items (the request for an appointment, the invitation to contribute to a publication etc) are generally directed at specific recipients and therefore email with its mechanical sequence of action (sending a message) and reaction (reading it and possibly composing a reply) is a plausible choice for such communications. By contrast, the social information mentioned by the bloggers interviewed by Nardi (whereabouts, activities, state) is offered to the readership. It is unlikely to fundamentally require any reaction from the reader, and is therefore more suitable to be “offered” than “pushed”. Since receiving an actionable message can to a degree be interpreted as coercion by the recipient, email can act to spell out a power difference between the two parties (the sender can plausibly exert pressure on the recipient to respond). By contrast, no such pressure exists in a pull STF like a blog.

Why does the social information described by Nardi et al. place such emphasis on the whereabouts and activities of the blogger? Travelogues (see figure 2.14) appear to be especially popular in conjunction with blogs, a phenomenon that again seems to point to the narrow audience scope of most blogs (friends and relatives). The contextual information that those close to the blogger normally have is delivered with the help of a travel blog, updated on a regular basis and enhanced with photos, videos and links that allow the blogger to paint a rich picture of their experience. Of course, travel literature (in a wider sense) is a popular genre of mass publishing, and travel blogging may be interesting and entertaining to a general audience beyond friends and family of the blogger. But it is valid to assume that to the blogger, the experience of traveling forms the core of the blog, more so than an accurate description of the places visited.

The screenshot shows a web browser displaying a blog post. At the top, the title "Sakura Sky: Mein Leben in Japan" is centered. Below the title are navigation links for "STARTSEITE" and "ABOUT". A large image of pink cherry blossoms is featured. Below the image, there are two links: "You were a... ahmm... 'special' audience!" and "Bon-odori". The main content area is titled "Reisburger und Trockeneis" with a sub-header "Jul 31, 2008 - Keine Kommentare". The text describes the author's experience in Yokohama, mentioning a "Mos Burger" and a "Trockeneis" (dry ice) experience. Below the text is a small image of a burger and a dry ice container. To the right, there are sections for "SUCHE STARTEN!" with a search bar, "NEUESTE BEITRÄGE" listing recent posts with titles and dates, and "LINKS".

Figure 2.14: A german-language travelog on life in Japan

### 2.3.2 Express opinions and influence others

The expressing of opinion and voicing of criticism are functions stereotypically associated with blogs, so much so that some critics have compared the blogosphere to a “digital lynch mob” (Cohen, 2006, p. A23) and asserted that bloggers tend to be more opinionated than informed (Calame, 2006). However, this function seems to be associated most strongly with topic blogs in which the author filters, discusses and comments on news and information concerned with a particular topic (e.g. German cinema, the subprime mortgage crisis on the U.S. housing market, computer-mediated communication), often using links to and quotes taken from major news sources. The results reported by Carter (2005), whose research focused on topic blogs concerned with intellectual property issues, show that topic bloggers are not only concerned with different themes than ego bloggers, but write with a different – and generally much wider – audience scope in mind:

Participants overwhelmingly commented that a good post is one that contributes new information or, to a lesser extent, extensive commentary about some issue on which the participant is an expert [...]

Seven participants reported struggling with writing their posts in such a way that both a topic savvy audience as well as a lay audience could get something out of their blog. Participants said that their goal was to make their posts as broadly understandable as possible, but that usually time constraints restricted them from doing so. Also, while most participant’s [sic] blog posts consistently addressed intellectual property in some way, three participants specifically commented that they often interjected more personal posts so that they were not “taken too seriously” by their readers. (Carter, 2005, p. 1257)

The basic difference between topic blogging and ego blogging seems to be supported by Carter’s findings, emphasizing the goal of topic bloggers to both inform and entertain readers. While ego bloggers provide information about themselves, either without a conceptualized readership or with the implicit assumption that their readers are close to them and will therefore find even personal details relevant, topic bloggers conceptualize their audience as shaped by their status as subject matter experts. While an audience of individuals interested in intellectual property issues or linguistic pragmatics may be regarded as small, this is a question of relation. It is hard to conceive a topic so specialized that it would draw less of an audience on the search-driven Internet than purely personal themes. The question of topic blogging vs. ego blogging is thus a question of how the blogger chooses to conceptualize his audience: as more or less specialized but essentially unknown to him, or as clearly delineated and familiar.<sup>14</sup> While it is technically possible for anyone to read a blog, the blogger may plausibly assume that the content will find its readers and that those to whom the content is irrelevant have themselves to blame. Without

<sup>14</sup>The alternative option noted above – that the blogger has no (fully) conceptualized audience at all – may seem implausible at first, but highly subjective, stream-of-consciousness or confessional writings such as example 3 suggest this.



pressure to be relevant to a fixed and predetermined audience, the blogger is free to determine her audience scope essentially as she sees fit, in stark contrast to face-to-face interactions.

### 2.3.3 Seek others' opinion and feedback

The interactive nature of blogs is a keenly perceived advantage of the medium. Gumbrecht cites the example of Rob, a Stanford professor who uses blogs for educational purposes.

In a note to his students, Rob writes:

Weblogs are like public interactive journals—interactive because they facilitate and encourage comments from readers and other bloggers. . . It seems to be considered bad form to make comments that rival the original post in either length or depth. In any case, commenting is certainly a form of dialogue, and I encourage you to engage in dialogue with other commenters as well as with the original blogger. (Gumbrecht, 2004, p. 4)

Applying blogs to the specialized aim of education, as in this case, significantly reconfigures the communicative functions associated with them, an issue also noted by Gumbrecht. Interestingly enough, Rob's statement about the length and depth of comments supports the notion of the blogger as the agenda-setter in a blog exchange,<sup>15</sup> regardless of the wider circumstances.

The possibility of using blogs for dialog is clearly seen by blog writers, but that does not automatically make such use mandatory. Especially when other voices threaten the self-directed discourse (intrude into what Gumbrecht calls "protected space"), ego bloggers regard them with mixed emotions. A student interviewed by Gumbrecht stated that she "didn't like having other people post commentaries on her site because she couldn't control what they would say" (Gumbrecht, 2004, p. 4). Frequently, ego blogging encourages little or no feedback from readers, whereas in topic blogs feedback is generally regarded as positive, since interaction is another opportunity for the blogger to prove his competence and the voices of others can serve to strengthen his argument. The universal attractiveness of blogs as open, yet controlled space, is recognized by Herring, who notes that:

The fact that blog authors maintain control over an online space which others can visit and interact with the author in on the author's terms would seem to be a big part of the appeal of blogging. (Herring et al., 2004a, no pagination)

As Gumbrecht observes, feedback and discussion is not restricted to blog comments and to quoting and linking between blogs, but can also move to other STF's such as email and instant messaging.

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<sup>15</sup>It is my impression that the use of blogs by private individuals without preconditions or topical restrictions is the reason behind their association with diaries and private journals. The pairing with full control over a 1-to-N, potentially interactive discourse environment is what makes blogs so attractive and versatile. The latter two factors contribute to comparisons of blogs to broadcast media, which run counter to the diary model.

### 2.3.4 Thinking by writing

Nardi et al. observe that a number of informants rely on blogs to “work through the writing process”, often tied to other contexts, such as academic writing:

While “thinking” might seem a solitary activity, or one not quite social, in blogging the presence of the audience and the writer’s consciousness of the audience clearly introduce the social into an individual’s thought process [...] “Thinking by writing” embeds cognition in a social matrix in which the blog is a bridge to others for getting explicit feedback, but also a means by which to regulate one’s own behavior (writing) through connecting with an audience. (Nardi et al., 2004a, p. 227)

These observations are somewhat problematic. Firstly, it is not “the presence of the audience” that has any influence on the production of a blog entry, since the audience is variable, opaque and passive. A blog reader may write a comment on a blog entry after it has been posted, but this logically has no influence on the text of the post. Blog entries are (sometimes) written as a response to news items or other blog entries, but in such cases the overall direction and shape of the post is still determined by the blogger alone. Thus it is the awareness of the audience – or, more precisely, the blogger’s conceptualization of an audience – that shapes his writing, not any factual audience itself, since it is spatially and temporally detached from the blogger. Furthermore, though it is simply a counter-claim to a claim, I dispute the assertion of Nardi et al. that bloggers necessarily regard their blog as “a bridge to others for getting explicit feedback”, because it contradicts how many bloggers (including those in the study conducted by Nardi et al.) characterize their own activity. Concrete readers cannot directly influence bloggers, but the perception of being observed and acknowledged by others appears to be an important source of motivation in relation to blogging.

My counter-claim can be substantiated at least somewhat with a very brief review of the psychological aspects of composition. In their extensive work on the subject, psychologists Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) introduce the concept of *discourse schemata*, which act as cognitive blueprints for different types of discourse (essentially the strictly psychological dimension of discourse genres). They assert that discourse schemata can be described as closed or open, depending on whether or not they require social input to be produced. Thus a conversation constitutes an open discourse schema – there is constant feedback that eases the communicative process for the participants, because they do not have to determine direction and structure alone. By contrast, a narrative constitutes a relatively closed discourse schema, because it requires the speaker to direct and organize his speech (or writing) by himself, without external input. Children, Bereiter and Scardamalia found, have difficulties producing longer uninterrupted pieces of coherent discourse even about familiar subjects. While there are various explanations for this (lack of experience with the practice, insufficient motivation) it can be hypothesized that the systematic organization of thoughts that takes place in writing over a longer stretch of time (hours, days, or in the case of academic theses or novels, months and even years) can in and of itself be a positive, grounding and even therapeutic experience (see below). The human ability to create structures of language-encoded thoughts

(permanent structures, in the case of writing) that can later be retrieved by the creator or by others is exceptionally powerful, and creating coherent structures may result in a feeling of empowerment and meaning for the creator, without any real need for others to validate him by reading his words.

### **2.3.5 Release emotional tension**

Nardi et al. bring the closely related aspect of blogging as a means of releasing emotional tension into play:

Don, a technology consultant, called blogs “be-logs” because he believed blogging was used to “log your being.” This “log of being” took a serious turn for Don when his wife became gravely ill and nearly died. During her illness, Don posted blogs to document her health condition through text and photos. He found blogging to be an important way to communicate with others: [Blogging is helpful] when people’s lives are compromised in some way. . . when [my wife] was sick, [I] was going through [the] hospital with the lens of how can I share this with others? (Nardi et al., 2004a, p. 226)

While the example cited hinges specifically on sharing information about a critical event, blogging about difficult emotional states can also be subsumed under this label.

While we cannot say with certainty that they afforded release of emotional tension, we can say that bloggers sometimes spoke of blogging in terms that suggested such release. Tammy blogged because, “I just needed to, like, get it out there.” Another said he blogged to “let off steam.” Some bloggers used the word “outlet” to describe blogging. Others said that blogging supported the working out of “issues” that they felt “obsessive” or “passionate” about. Vivian entitled her blog “Shout,” and noted that she needed a place to freely express herself. Lara said she could “get closure out of writing.” (Nardi et al., 2004a, p. 227)

It has been suggested by research in clinical psychology that writing can serve a means of releasing emotional tension (Pennebaker, 1997; Pennebaker and Seagal, 1999). In a similar article, authors Baikie and Wilhelm suggest that even physical health benefits may result from writing about traumatic and excessively stressful events under certain circumstances (2005). Interestingly, the “venting” of negative emotions alone does not seem to be the decisive advantage of expressive writing. Rather, the cognitive structuring associated with composition seems to allow better access to traumatic events than memory and appears to support the development of strategies to counter negative emotions associated with the event. Pennebaker’s observations on therapeutic expressive writing support this: “people who benefited from writing began with poorly organized descriptions and progressed to coherent stories by the last day of writing” (1997, p. 165). These findings are supported by additional evidence that suggests that specific patterns in language reflect the gradual sense-making that occurs in continued, self-directed writing, e.g. pronouns, positive and negative emotion words and “cognitive words” (Campbell and Pennebaker, 2003;

Chung and Pennebaker, 2007). Before this background it is not surprising that diary-writing and letter-writing have long been actively acknowledged as autotherapeutic measures in literary studies, a fact that is reflected by van Dijk's observation that "the genre [of the diary] has been defined as therapy or self-help" (2004, no pagination).

The dichotomy of topic blogging and ego blogging seemingly accommodates all private blogging under an umbrella, since further uses of blogs (in the classroom, as a research tool, for spamming, to raise brand awareness etc) are all institutionally mandated in some form. In other words, private blogs are either directly concerned with the blogger himself or with an issue or topic that he is interested in, and have a variable audience scope that is either close and stable or wide and dynamic.

## 2.4 Blogs and the organization of time

As the differences between ego and topic blogs suggest, blogs are far from being a single, homogeneous category of text. First and foremost, blogs are a publishing technology with countless applications, ranging from the general content management of websites (which may or may not look like prototypical blogs) to malicious uses such as spamming and phishing. However, blogs as a publishing technology can be associated with a way of writing – a stylistic dimension – that, while flexible and broad, can be seen as characteristic for the STF. Because the personal experiences of the writer often play a role in private blogging, it is necessary to examine elemental strategies of relating information about events, experiences and emotions in writing.

The term *mode*, as a category distinct from genre and hierarchically positioned above it (in Halliday's terms), is used to mark the distinction between different strategies for presenting information, the distinction between narrative and non-narrative discourse being a common differentiation.

The significance of mode is widely discussed by Georgakopoulou and Goutsos (2000), who point out the relative lack of research into non-narrative varieties. The authors also make several observations which are helpful for understanding the predominant mode of blogs. Firstly they contend that there is a primacy of narrative, i.e. that the narrative mode is a more fundamental strategy of conveying information to other human beings than expository, argumentative or hortatory discourse, a claim that is significant in light of the fact that bloggers are by and large novices to publishing.<sup>16</sup> Instances of narrative or narrative elements in concrete speech genres exist in virtually every human culture and while it is not possible to tell a story via an argument, the reverse is certainly possible. Georgakopoulou and Goutsos's explanation for this phenomenon, supported by a number of psychological studies, is that "[e]ngaging in narrating one's story is a process of apprehending our subjective reality, of integrating our lives in time and providing them with coherence and unity" (2000, p. 119). Rhetorically, narration is powerful because it encapsulates human experience (in the sense of interaction with the world) in language, fixed to a (potentially) remote point in time, allowing the narrator to construct his version of reality and locate himself in it. At a greater societal level, (grand) narratives are the foundation upon which the cohesion of a culture rests (Georgakopoulou, 2006).

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<sup>16</sup>Lenhart and Fox call them "the Internet's new storytellers" (2006, no pagination).

While narrative relies on shared experience, on the accessibility of the experiences of the storyteller to an empathic listener, non-narrative discourse generally detaches both parties from human subjectivity and from time. An argumentative text is ultimately concerned with extratextual matters that a reader may agree or disagree with. If a narrative has an interface with physical reality it can be described as “real” or non-fictional; if it is connected to an imagined world it is referred to as fiction.<sup>17</sup> Narratives are unique in that they can be characterized as “real” vs. “imagined”, something that is not true of argumentation, instruction or exposition, and in that they are often highly valued even when imagined.

On the linguistic level, narrative and non-narrative texts differ markedly in what cohesive elements they use. While narrative texts usually rely on time adverbials, tense shifts and a matrix of semantic actors whose actions are presented in a time sequence,<sup>18</sup> non-narrative texts must establish a logical and argumentative coherence and encode it accordingly, for example via meta-linguistic expressions (i.e. discourse deixis), coordination and paragraphing. The natural ordering of the narrative – structured by time – is syntagmatic and demands no interpretation as such from the reader. In contrast, the paradigmatic structuring of an argument or description must be more actively followed by the reader and is rational rather than experiential.

The mode in which blogs are written can be described as a hybrid that blends, mixes and switches between narrative and non-narrative modes, but in which a total absence of narration is rare. The choice of mode depends on the ad-hoc communicative goals of the blogger, which may change from one post to another and even within a single post, but the presentation of experiences (often in combination with reflection or introspection on them) is typical. It cannot be assumed that the linguistic properties of blog texts are primarily shaped by considerations on the part of the blogger of convention, tradition or a specific discourse community, because none of these have a stable and consistent basis in relation to blogging. While blog writing clearly has antecedents (diary writing, journalism, travel narrative), it is functionally too broad to be associated with a single predecessor and it is simply implausible to assume that the many young practitioners who write blogs are intimately familiar with the conventions of these non-digital antecedents. Likewise, no single recurring social or communicative purpose can be clearly associated with blogging, other than the urge to express oneself. Considering the difficulty of defining blogs in terms of genre, how can those linguistic properties that appear to be stable be accounted for? Apart from the nature of blogs as a personal discourse space, how can the predictable occurrence of a first person voice be explained?

In the following, I argue that the answer to this questions lies partly in the situational characteristics of blog production and reception and in how these characteristics are reflected in a blog’s micro- and macrostructure. I will contend that the macrostructure of a blog (the chronological sequence of posts) is conceptually interpreted as a narrative by both blogger and blog reader, even

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<sup>17</sup>Of course narratives are not blueprints of past events, but always constructions in that they represent the information the narrator choses to convey.

<sup>18</sup>I avoid the term *chronology* here to clarify that any relative temporal positioning qualifies as a time sequence, whether it is real or imaginary, experienced by the narrator or by the actors he describes, or presented in chronological (i.e oldest first, newest last) order.

when the microstructure (the mode inside individual posts) is predominantly non-narrative or switches between narrative and non-narrative modes. I will furthermore argue that the basis for this narrative macrostructure is also the foundation of the stable linguistic attributes of blogs and that both characteristics are the result of the self-focused and self-directed discourse situation that blogs create.

My analysis will begin with the technical underpinnings that form the substrate of the blogging mode and move upwards past micro- and macrostructure to bloggers' implicit conceptualization of the medium. I will conclude the chapter by outlining a set of discourse-pragmatic strategies employed by bloggers as a direct result of this conceptualization.

## 2.5 The blog as a virtual discourse situation

A helpful analytical starting point is to examine the concrete situation in which a blog entry is written and the circumstances under which it is read. Blogs are inextricably tied to the technology used to create and maintain them<sup>19</sup>: the World Wide Web and the personal computer in the broader sense, and publishing platforms and software such as Blogger.com and Wordpress in the narrower sense. Without the proliferation of digital communication technology blogs are not imaginable, just as the rise of the novel is associated with the proliferation of cheap printing technology. However, whereas the mass media that dominated much of the 20th century was based on a model of few senders and many (passive) receivers, the Internet has made bidirectional communication (interactivity) the norm, and blurred the line between writer and reader considerably.<sup>20</sup> While certainly not all Internet users contribute content themselves, the rise of social media is a broad phenomenon that is unlikely to reverse or slow down. The ability to make virtually any imaginable kind of content available, to give access to this content to a potentially infinite audience, unrestricted by time or geography, and to do so almost instantly and essentially free of cost has understandably opened the virtual floodgates, so much so that *information overload* is considered a serious problem. Blogs are merely one form of personal publishing, along with photo portals such as Flickr, video platforms such as YouTube and music networks like Last.fm.

The convergence between these channels is considerable – or, differently put, the restrictions on what content can be distributed via what channel are shrinking so quickly that there is reason to believe they may disappear altogether. Videos can be embedded in blog posts, as can audio files, presentations and statistical models, and sites such as Last.fm and MySpace double as social networks and blogging platforms. While theoretically a site such as YouTube can be described as a community, it is in some regards more accurate to refer to it as a service or web-based application that may be used collaboratively.<sup>21</sup> Though

<sup>19</sup>It is interesting to consider how closely blogs appear to be bound to the technology that is used to create and access them. This can in part be explained by the novelty of the medium, but I will argue that without the technology that frames the discourse situation of a blog, it cannot exist, regardless of purpose or user community.

<sup>20</sup>Writer and reader here referring to producers and consumers of digital content in the broadest conceivable way, including video, audio etc.

<sup>21</sup>I make this distinction mainly to point out that online communities differ in their nature from offline ones, being in some regards less stable, more dynamic and less tightly knit. See

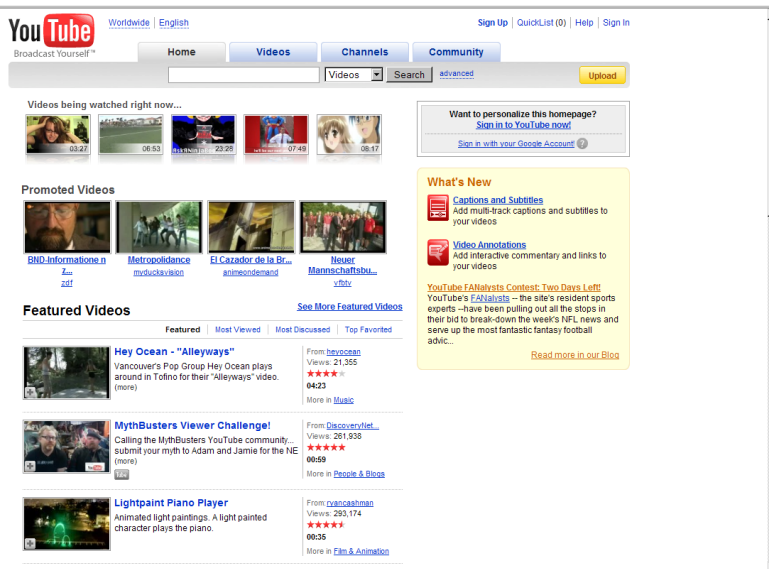


Figure 2.15: YouTube channels

on the surface they appear to differ, the same holds true for blogs. While they are realized by countless different software packages which are installed on an even larger number of Internet servers, certain popular features such as web feeds and use of XML data exchange protocols<sup>22</sup> are universal technical features of blogs and there is considerable standardization across platforms in terms of how they present, structure and store content. These canonical software features constitute what can be described as the physics of the blogging situation.

## 2.6 Canonical software features of blog publishing tools

Although blogs merged early in their development with the online diarist culture (Blood, 2000), they originally existed as lists of links, with very little original content.<sup>23</sup> The core means by which content is structured has changed very little since these early days, most likely because these principles are common in contexts other than blogging and connected to universal design considerations of software development.<sup>24</sup>

Tokar (2009) for a discussion of the constitutive features of online social networks.

<sup>22</sup>In more precision: the use of XML-RPC and later SOAP for data exchange between blogs. Such protocols are the technical basis for the idea of the “blogosphere”, or “blog space” as a single virtual network in which theoretically all of the world’s blogs are organized. The cultural and social basis of the blogosphere is the belief that bloggers share certain values, approaches or codes of conduct, but this is widely debated.

<sup>23</sup>In addition to Blood’s account also see Wikipedia (2009).

<sup>24</sup>Note that the uses of blogs (for business, academic research, art, political debate etc) have since then multiplied, but the constitutive software features have remained highly stable – another indication that the genre label is inapplicable to blogs.

Virtually all blogging packages, blogging services and individual blogs that use the terms “blog” or “web log” to characterize themselves share the following attributes in terms of software features:

- content is segmented into individual texts (posts)
- posts have a title and a main text body; they furthermore
  - are marked with a publication date (post date)
  - are attributed to an author (the blogger)
  - are frequently associated with keywords (categories/tags)
- the main page of a blog shows recent posts in reverse chronological order, with the newest post at the top of the page
- two types of feedback from readers can be associated with blog posts:
  - comments: texts which are displayed under the blog entry and which are likewise timestamped and attributed to their author
  - trackbacks: posts in other blogs which link to the original post will frequently be displayed alongside comments
- a blog’s archive provides a list of all posts by date
- the blog itself is generally identified by a title
- frequently there exists an about page providing more information about the blogger, such as name, age and location

These features appeal both to specific aspects of software design and to universal conceptual categories and are largely the result of choices made by software developers. In software development, a central paradigm is the separation of executable software code from both the user interface and the data. In the case of blogs, the executable code is generally written in a server-side scripting language such as PHP or Python, while the presentation is realized primarily via the markup languages (X)HTML and CSS. The data storage is generally handled by relational database management systems (RDBMSs) such as MySQL. Modern RDBMSs are based on the relational model of data presentation developed by Codd (1970), which allows the flexible association of data in non-hierarchical (relational) tables. Relational databases make it possible to associated any single data object in a database with an infinite number of other objects and to retrieve and sort data rows according to their attributes.

This potential is utilized in blogs, where posts as data objects have the attributes title, text, author, data etc. The question from the point of view of the software developer is what shape he wants to give the data, or, more precisely, how he wants to organize its input and output for the user.

Blogs follow very closely what could be called the natural ordering of elements in a relational database. While the original model developed by Codd is based on unordered tuples (sets of attributes), actual RDBMS implementations in products such as MySQL replace tuples with rows and columns (see figure 2.17).



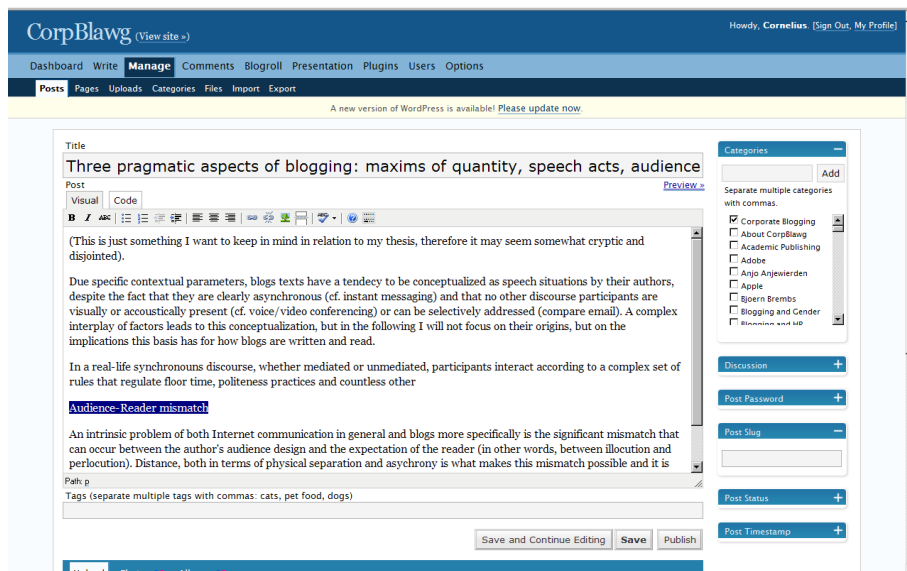


Figure 2.16: Creating a blog post with Wordpress

Rows and columns are ordered sequentially in a table, while tuples are typically unordered. To be able to retrieve any given row based on a unique attribute (meaning a value that may occur only once in a table of potentially infinite size), rows are usually given incrementally numbered keys, as those can only occur a single time (see the column *ID* in figure 2.17). When a blog homepage is shown in a web browser, the data of the most recent posts is presented in almost exactly the same form as it exists in the respective database table, with the exception that the chronology is reversed (“ORDER BY fieldname DESC”, formulated as a MySQL command).

The way in which relational databases structure information by default thus makes the way in which data is presented to blog readers plausible. It can be argued that most other forms of content management require a more complex information structure, with the possible exceptions of wikis, which make no use of the sequence meta-data (the order of items).

It is therefore plausible to argue that the way blogs structure information is based on more than just personal taste. It would be an overstatement to argue that the relational database model represents the most natural or best-formed way of storing information (it is one of several models, all of which have their advantages and drawbacks). But it obviously lends itself well to the way blogs work and points to a preference for semantically structured sequential information that is not simply a coincidence.

## 2.7 Chronology in data and discourse

Like rows in a database table, events in the physical world are also structured sequentially. Chronology in nature is the basis for chronology in discourse, both in the more immediate sense of discursive contributions following one another and in the broader sense of narrative as the retelling of past events. Grammatical

Server: custsql-pow05 Database: ynadablog\_db Table: wp\_posts

Showing rows 0 - 29 (151 total, Query took 0.0047 sec)

SQL query:  

```
SELECT *
FROM wp_posts
LIMIT 0, 30
```

Show 30 row(s) starting from record # 30 in horizontal mode and repeat headers after 100 cells Page number: 1

Sort by key: None

	ID	post_author	post_date	post_date_gmt	post_content	post_title	post_category
<input type="checkbox"/>	2	1	2006-08-03 07:40:27	2006-08-03 07:40:27	CorpBlawg is a web log on corporate blogging (talk...	About me	0
<input type="checkbox"/>	4	1	2006-08-07 00:30:28	2006-08-06 22:30:28	Well, here <a href="http://corpblawg.ynada.com/abo...	Welcome to CorpBlawg	0
<input type="checkbox"/>	3	1	2006-08-12 22:28:13	2006-08-12 20:28:13	<span class="body"><em>Why shouldn't an officer of...	The Silence of the Wolves	0
<input type="checkbox"/>	5	1	2006-08-14 15:26:29	2006-08-14 13:26:29	I have recently started to compile a database of c...	No syndication please, we're SAP	0
<input type="checkbox"/>	6	1	2006-08-16 14:39:26	2006-08-16 12:39:26	Although <a href="http://online.wsj.com/public/art...	Damaged Goods	0
<input type="checkbox"/>	7	1	2006-08-19 13:41:09	2006-08-19 11:41:09	As <a href="http://corpblawg.ynada.com/2006/08/07/...	A first attempt at a categorization	0
<input type="checkbox"/>	8	1	2006-08-28 12:54:23	2006-08-28 10:54:23	The beauty of taxonomies is that they will never f...	A first attempt at a	0

Figure 2.17: MySQL data table of blog posts

structures such as tense allow us to encode temporal information into language, and the flexibility of these structures make it possible to present information not only in chronological sequence, but also to encode temporal information in a variety of different ways:

1. We went to the zoo, then we had some ice cream.
2. We had some ice cream after having been to the zoo.
3. We went to the zoo. We had some ice cream.
4. We went to the zoo because we had some ice cream.<sup>25</sup>

While (1) orders events chronologically, the chronology is reversed in (2). In (3) there is no explicit temporal information provided regarding the relation of the two propositions, though it is plausible to argue that a relation can be inferred. Finally, (4) implies a causal relation between the two propositions. The simplistic examples on the sentence level can with some imagination be applied equally well to the discourse level; for example, to the macrostructure of a blog. They point to the fact that chronology is only one possible strategy for presenting information, highlighting the relevance of blogs' use of chronology in their post structure relevant. Wikis, another new form of web publishing sometimes compared with blogs, closely follow the strategies exemplified with (3) and (4).

It is important to note that the temporal sequencing of events in the physical world, the temporal sequencing of contributions in spoken discourse and the temporal sequencing of posts in a blog are all equally stable, with the important distinction being that the structure could be different in blogs (since we

<sup>25</sup>The example is obviously semantically anomalous, but nevertheless illustrates the point.

are examining software), but is not. While the relation of items in a wiki is causal and the temporal dimension does not shape the structure, the relation of posts in a blog is frequently not causal, but always temporal. In a chronological sequence, one point is defined by being preceded by another point and followed by a third. While this is sufficient to describe a sequence of events or the contents of a conversation, it is not suitable to describe the family tree of invertebrates, an abstract painting, or the geography of Western Europe. Certain types of information seem especially well-suited to interconnection via causal relationships (e.g. encyclopedic knowledge, as exemplified by Wikipedia), while others are visually-spatially represented (e.g. Google Maps). Human experience as progression through time can plausibly be structured as a chronological sequence, both because no causal (or spatial) relationship exists between one point in time and another and because the sequence alone creates a degree of cohesion. If we imagine a group of messages with no attached temporal information vs. a series of messages in a sequential order, it is easy to see that the lack of discernible structure in the unordered group prevents it from providing any reliable information. Thus, a sequential data structure enables, supports and suggests a chronology of events in discourse, an organization that frequently manifests itself in blogs.

## 2.8 Blog macrostructure

The content of a blog is packaged into individual contributions, with meta-information on who made them and when they were made attached to each entry. The reader is presented with a message buffer that shows the most recently made contribution first, with older texts shown further down the page.

Readers can either “turn pages” to retrieve older entries, or click on individual months in the blog’s archive to retrieve them. From the perspective of the reader this provides a bird’s eye-view of contributions made by the blogger diachronically. These contributions may be arguments, stories, reflections, commentary on current events, photos, poems, quoted material from other blogs or news sources, or a wide range of other content. But even if the entries in the blog consist purely of replicated material taken from other places, it is its selection and sequential organization that is meaningful and informative to the reader, in the sense that this reveals something about the blogger’s interests and personality.

From the blogger’s perspective, the sequential mechanism of the blogging software creates a space in which information can be stored and organized via the familiar organizing principle of chronology. The relation of macrostructure (the blog from the “bird’s eye” perspective) and microstructure (the individual post) is significant here: even if the mode of the microstructure is technically non-narrative (a comment on a news item, a poem, notes for an academic paper), the macrostructure evokes a personal narrative with whatever the blogger deems relevant in clear topical focus. Whatever he considered important or sought to express is recorded, timestamped and archived.

The fact that this automated narrative is created by the software in the sense that timestamping takes place by itself and requires no action on behalf of the blogger explains the potential of blogging in the context of *personal knowledge management* (PKM). The fact that the sequence of information can either be

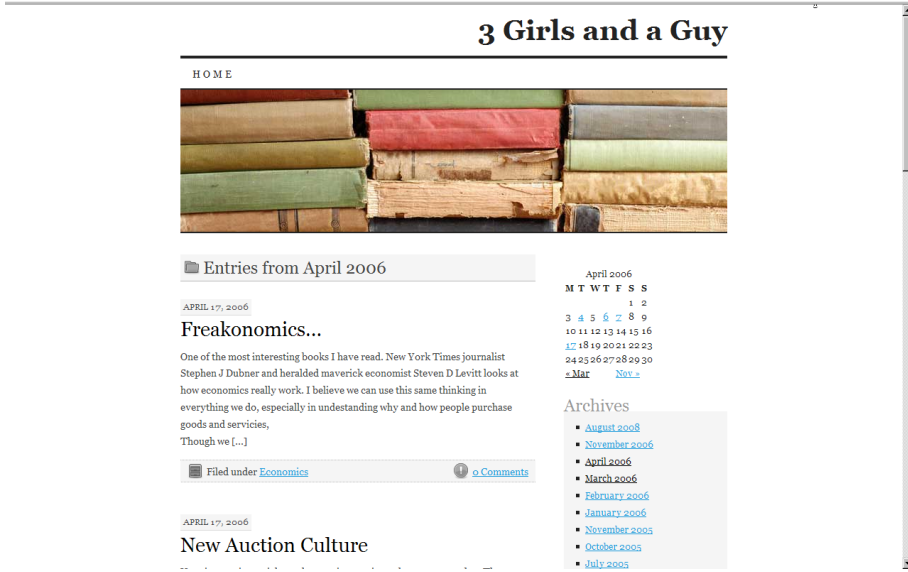


Figure 2.18: Archive of posts in a personal blog

integrated into the interpretation of the reader if it seems relevant, or ignored if not is another important characteristic of blogs in this context.

Lilia Efimova, a researcher investigating PKM and herself an avid blogger, describes her own conceptualization of her blog as a (virtual) desk:

Not being tied to specific tasks and bounded by expectations and format of a bigger document, my weblog allows including dormant information and capturing ideas under construction. Flexible categorisation provides a way to replicate the spatial arrangement of documents on a desk: chronological archives, tags and links allow “piling” entries together and indicating relations between parts of emergent mental structures. While contextual cues around a weblog post do not support returning to an interrupted task in a way as the layout of papers on a desk does, they play similar role helping to recover a state of mind at the moment of writing the post, which is useful when returning to an idea that has been “parked” for a while. (Efimova, 2008, no pagination)

Efimova’s passing comment on contextual clues and their role in “helping to recover a state of mind at the moment of writing the post” exemplify the narrative dimension of the macrostructure. Blog entries provide time of posting and name of the author along with an entry, aiding this recovery. There is indication that the chronological structure of blogs appeals to basic organizational principles of memory and cognition. In a study of student blogs used for educational purposes, Armstrong, Berry, and Lamshed note:

The chronology of the blog (the day-by-day linking of entries with dates) gave the students’ notes an internal logic: an easy way to organise their information. This was a definite benefit for those

students whose note-taking skills are not yet developed enough to a stage where they can manage and keep a useful set of paper notes. The students also spoke enthusiastically of the chance to track their learning progress through time. They liked the way they could watch their knowledge grow and looked forward to reviewing their learning record at the end of the year. (2004, no pagination)

The sequential organizational structure imposes an order onto contributions that is familiar and highly concrete. At the same time – and here blogs differ significantly from face-to-face discourse – all contributions are accessible and can be placed in time with precision. Where memory limitations would normally act as a constraint, the blog in its role of “digital memory” remembers everything. The blog is a transcript both of the blogger’s utterances and of the utterances of others that she has quoted or linked to. It can serve to record both external and personal events, and while the creation of the record itself is not automated, its annotation with meta-data is. Though the categories or tags that bloggers assign to their entries are a second means of retrieving content and keyword search is a third, the primary type of presentation is chronological (or, on the main page and in the blog’s web feed, reverse chronology).

While categories, keyword search, self-linking of the blogger or links coming from other sources and pointing to the blog all make a hypertextual reading approach possible, it is telling that the suggested reading mode is linear. Both readers and the blogger himself can sift through the content of the blog and access it horizontally, reading single entries with no regard for chronology and by following hyperlinks. Inside the blog itself the presentation is vertical: one entry follows another.

As has been pointed out, the choice to present the information in this way is not arbitrary, but mirrors the segmentation of data in the database used by the blogging application. More importantly, however, it is a representation of the blogger’s thought process through time. Whereas in an atemporal and apersonal channel like Wikipedia the information structure is paradigmatic and asserts no overall unity (in other words, no connection of each unit to another), blogs universally suggest a syntagmatic relationship between texts. Decisively, the chronology is that of the blogger and documents his transition through time. The structure is, in other words, concerned with the blogger, even though it can be reassembled in different ways by the reader.

The temporal sequence underlying a blog’s macrostructure is shared and accessible to others, yet subjective and dependent on the blogger; this is what gives it the quality of a narrative. This is at the outset a purely structural aspect: the content of posts itself may be only implicitly temporal.

## 2.9 Blog microstructure

On the level of the individual post, blogs show a wide degree of variation in terms of what topics they cover and how they are written. This applies not only to comparisons between blogs, but also to internal variation between posts in the same blog.

Figures 2.19 and 2.20 show *f-score* (Heylighen and Dewaele, 2002) values over time for two corporate blogs. The *f-score* is a formula that can be used

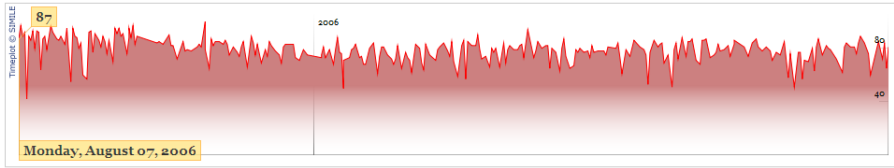


Figure 2.19: F-score over time in the Thomson Holidays Blog. Mean f-score: 78.06, standard deviation: 9.49.

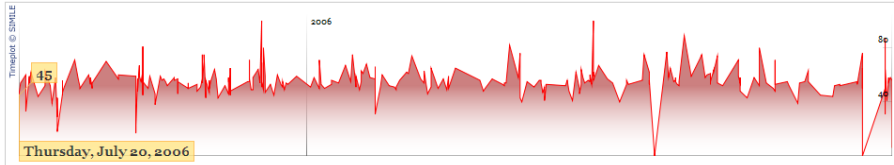


Figure 2.20: F-score over time in One Louder. Mean f-score: 55.20, standard deviation: 11.49.

to measure stylistic variation. The two plots show a total of approximately 300 posts published in the Thomson Holidays Blog and One Louder over the course of roughly one year.<sup>26</sup> The two company blogs, one written by a human resources expert at Microsoft and the other a promotional blog for the British tourism's business Thompson, show not only differences in their mean scores compared to one another, but also differences in their degree of internal variation (see scores and standard deviation in captions).

While there is considerable variation in the microstructure of blog entries, it can be observed that there is frequently some sort of thematic or temporal starting point to a post. That starting point may be a personal experience or a news event and often the post consists mostly of commentary on or discussion of that point.

**Example 1.** *I took the GRE on Saturday and got a 1420 (I almost typed 1240 which is decent, but not nearly as impressive). 690 verbal, 730 quantitative. I am pretty happy. With the one really good rec letter and two decent ones, I think I have a good shot at going to a really good school.*

*I'm really happy with how things are shaping up. Taking the GRE was a great idea because now everything feels real. My research into schools isn't frivolous or pointless. I actually have goals in mind and am on my way to achieving them.*

The event the blogger refers to (“the GRE on Saturday”) is retrievable via the contextual (temporal) information automatically added by the blogging software. The reader can deduce that a specific Saturday (the one preceding Monday, July 14th 2008, the date of publication of the post) is meant and the rest of the post is a comment on the results of the test. This basic schema of event (personal experience or news item) and comment is typical of blogs and found in many variations. Blog post microstructure is realized in different ways which may initially appear to vary significantly, but can be shown to be composed of the same recurring elements. Typical features are:

<sup>26</sup>For a demonstration and discussion of f-score variation, see Puschmann (2008).

- *self-centered expression*, i.e. there is explicit first person self-reference by the blogger,
- *self-centered temporality*, i.e. tense information generally relates to the entry's post date,
- *self-centered spatiality*, i.e. the origo of spatial adverbials is either the blogger's location at coding time or the blog in the role of a virtual place on the (spatially conceptualized) Internet,
- *self-centered topicality*, i.e. the blogger features in her own discourse and typically dominates in multiple semantic roles.

Blogs in which none of these features are present generally represent atypical uses of blogging software, for example to spread spam or republish texts from other sources.<sup>27</sup>

## 2.10 Self-directed discourse and the deictic center

To further illuminate the special discursive characteristics of blog macrostructure, a more detailed discussion of the term self-directed discourse is helpful. In most well-established discourse genres, patterned linguistic regularities that cannot be attributed to situation or mode are most frequently the result of users' recurring communicative demands towards the genre, which have eventually become fixed conventions. For example, it is a fixed convention that a court ruling is formulated in the third person, even though the creator of the text is also the entity passing the ruling while in other contexts first person reference would be the only acceptable strategy. The artificial grammatical separation of speaker and semantic agent is pragmatically motivated – it enhances the authority of the court. Formulaic and genre-specific language like this is strongly motivated by purpose and convention that has been negotiated by genre users and is based on shared *background knowledge* (BK).

Blogs differ from this significantly in that the agenda-setting in a blog is not tied to a fixed and clearly defined audience and thus not always shaped by clear assumptions about shared BK. Giltrow gives a concise definition of the concept:

Background Knowledge (BK) operates at two levels in the life of a genre. The first level is well known in genre study, although not necessarily identified as a matter of Background Knowledge: users of a genre share knowledge of the genre's conventions. Readers of, for example, real-estate advertisements in the classified sections of newspapers know how to use expressions of sizes, cost and age to construct the intent of those texts about human shelter. Writers assume this BK of their readers, and readers assume that writers have made these assumptions. At the second level of operation, writers assume on behalf of the reader some knowledge of the world which the reader can consult in order to interpret the utterance. (1994, p. 156)

<sup>27</sup>E.g. see Anonymous (2005) for an extract of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* republished in a blog.

Bloggers, especially in personal blogs, quite frequently assume shared second-level BK (“knowledge of the world”, in Giltrow’s words), but the degree of conventionalization is still low compared with professional genres. The frequent linking of blogs to conversation and a casual, uncontrived style can be regarded as a result of lacking codification, which can in turn be interpreted as a result of there being no fixed discourse community that could enforce the stylistic norms of the genre.

Instead, blogs are conceptually mapped onto conversation, because they situationally mirror conversations in that a) they are (at least potentially) interactive and b) four factors associated with interactivity (chronology of contributions, what was said, who said it and when it was said) are technologically reproduced in blogs (sequence of posts, post title and text, name of the blogger, timestamp). The relationship of ego blogs to diaries and personal journals, and the relationship of topic blogs to opinion pieces and essays is secondary to this situational metaphoric frame of the blog as a kind of mediated and persistent speech event.

While some of the physical elements of a speech situation are recreated in a blog, others are not, most significantly co-temporality and co-spatiality of speaker and hearer. Communicative partners in face-to-face discourse naturally share a time and place – they are co-temporal and co-spatial. This has a number of implications for the structure of the discourse: pauses, fillers (cognitive load of on-line production), the need to cede the floor to others, issues of politeness and acceptable communicative conduct, etc. What is said, how it is said, who says it and when it is said are all important factors. In various forms of mediated communication, these parameters change along with shifts in interactivity and the spatial and temporal setting: in a phone conversation the lack of co-spatiality complicates the use of spatial deixis and demonstrative expressions. In a letter, speaker and addressee are neither co-temporal nor co-spatial, resulting in further restrictions, but also removing the constraints of turn-taking as the exchange is not interactive. Finally, in a newspaper article speaker and listener are neither co-temporal nor co-spatial, while 1-to-N transmission means that the writer’s conceptualization is detached from the factual readership (the journalist can imagine her readership, but she does not know it). Genre constraints that are the result of a stable communicative purpose (to inform readers about current events) and a structured discourse community (journalists) make recurrent linguistic constructions predictable.

Blogs have a special and possibly unique place in relation to the examples described above in that they are not co-temporal and not co-spatial, while at the same time being interactive and functioning as 1-to-N, broadcast-type media. This creates a unique situation in terms of a blog’s potential audience scope and at the same time gives the blogger a unique degree of freedom in relation to the audience’s expectations. In her ethnographic study of bloggers, Gumbrecht describes different approaches taken by practitioners:

[.]our informants were able to selectively filter their audience by tailoring their posts to them. This general practice was applied by many of our informants. Lara, a former Stanford student now employed at Google, had a series of posts in which she referred to an ongoing personal situation that she needed to resolve, but she never detailed the specifics. Here is an excerpt from a recent post:



I'm an idiot sometimes, but I'm coming to terms with it, and I know that everything will work out in the end, because it always does. I may not think that the end is what I want right now, but I will be happy when I get there. The only frustrating thing is that I have a couple of conversations coming up that will probably just suck, and there's no way around them...but I don't know when they will happen yet, so for tonight at least, I am okay with that. Resolution needs to come soon, though—I hate not knowing, and I need some solutions and conclusions as soon as possible.

The sweeping generalizations (“I know that everything will work out in the end, because it always does”) and the undefined context of the situation illustrated that Lara believed that her intended audience (probably close friends) knew what she was referring to, she didn't want to bare all of the facts to the entire Internet audience, or both. The manner in which she framed her post is key to manipulating what is termed “common ground”—the way in which people achieve mutual understanding [2]. Common ground is used generally within the confines of immediate social interaction, but the terminology is applicable here as well. Through accumulation—the manner in which common ground is constructed—Lara and her close friends accrued a great deal of shared knowledge through their previous encounters [4]. By virtue of this knowledge, Lara's friends would be able to understand her posts without her going into excruciating detail. On the other hand, acquaintances and strangers are privy only to the surface information presented in the post. Without the benefit of shared knowledge and experiences with Lara, they do not have the inside track on her situation. In a paradoxical manner, Lara managed to maintain privacy within a public medium. (2004, p. 2)

Gumbrecht's definition of *common ground* is very close the concept of background knowledge as world knowledge that has already been introduced, however the specific kind of shared knowledge and the resulting assumptions are slightly different. Common ground points to neither general world knowledge nor genre knowledge, but to shared intimate personal information which is, as Gumbrecht points out, a requirement to decode the pronominally vague statements Lara makes. The conclusion – that blogs allow their writers to “maintain privacy within a public medium” – is a cornerstone of self-directed discourse. It also demonstrates that intended audience is a variable and essentially scalar value in blogs. From the perspective of the blogger, the audience extends outwards around her in concentric circles to include close friends and family, colleagues and acquaintances, people who share interests hobbies, political or religious beliefs and finally a general public.<sup>28</sup> This concept is echoed by Döring, who calls such target audiences *partial publics* (German “Teilöffentlichkeiten”,

<sup>28</sup>However, “everyone” is not a truly realistic audience on the Internet. This is not just a result of the Internet being too large (in terms of users), but due to the fact that it is a pull medium (users must make a conscious effort to retrieve information from it, whereas television as a push medium can be passively consumed). Anyone who reads a blog has made

2003, p. 79) and notes how they are selectively addressed on personal homepages (Döring, 2002, 2003).

The characterization of self-directed discourse as a mediated speech event is possible only because blog technology records contextual information automatically. This contextual information allows the retrieval of a *deictic center* or DC (Bühler, 1982). The DC encodes an origin (*origo*) of space, time and person as the point of orientation of all deictic expressions. In spoken discourse, the DC is clearly locatable by all discourse participants, but this is not generally the case in written genres where the reader must construct it from the text. While the DC may shift in third-person literary narratives,<sup>29</sup> blogs differ both from pre-digital and other digital forms of publishing in that they always provide a fixed set of contextual clues for the reader. The content of these clues ([WHERE] – WHEN – WHO) is essentially similar to Bühler's *origos*.<sup>30</sup> Only WHERE is omitted, but the frequent conceptualization of blogs as virtual places makes this relatively unproblematic.<sup>31</sup> The DC in blogs can be regarded as stable in terms of who the blogger is and when she posts a particular entry, and shifting in relation to the addressee. In addition to blog deixis, two other aspects support the conversation metaphor cognitively: blogs permit feedback via comments and trackbacks and they are perhaps the sole form of mass publishing media that can be maintained by an individual.

## 2.11 Audience design

What kind of audience do bloggers imagine when they produce a post? Blogging – as the summation of all activities that are combined when producing a blog entry – is for the most part a conversation without a discourse partner, or at least without immediate feedback during production. Readers may respond to posts by commenting (if comments are enabled) and other bloggers may react to the writings of a “neighbor” with a post of their own that links back to the initial entry, but at least while writing, the blogger is alone.

Composition takes considerable skill and learning and is generally considered an advanced cognitive ability given high priority in schooling and educational programs. It requires a significant amount of planning, paired with the ability to structure and segment information according to a series of pragmatically-mandated requirements. These implicit rules can be described as follows:

- *discourse structure*: a text is expected to be structured according to basic paradigms of discourse structure (topical consistency, cohesion) to make comprehension as easy as possible for the audience,
- *conversational well-formedness*: a text that serves communicative functions is expected to adhere to conversational maxims, that is, be concise,

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some conscious effort to find it, either by searching for the blog itself, or by finding content in it via a search engine.

<sup>29</sup>Spatially, temporally and in terms of actors – cf. Rapaport et al. (1994).

<sup>30</sup>And, of course, beyond that – cf. Levinson who states that “the traditional categories of deixis are person, place and time” (1983, p. 62).

<sup>31</sup>Note that the DC in terms of person is virtually always the blogger himself, the temporal DC is generally coding time (CT) and the spatial DC is either the place of coding (= location of the blogger at the time of writing) or the blog itself as a virtual place. The (older) genre of the personal homepage seems to differ in this respect (de Saint-Georges, 1998). Also see Tokar (2009) for a discussion of Internet spatial metaphors.

relevant, useful and written with a general consideration for the communicative needs of the audience,

- *context adjustment*: a text should adhere both to the conventions of the genre it belongs to and be adjusted to the medial environment it exists in.

It is plausible to assume that a specific approach to writing is taken according to the readership the blogger conceptualizes and the purpose of her post, and that this approach is further shaped by her experience as a writer, her familiarity with the conventions of the chosen genre, her age, gender and other factors.

In their research on written composition, Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) found that children can initially produce much longer written narratives than argumentative essays. The explanation offered by the authors for this phenomenon is that argumentation constitutes a more open discourse type than personal narrative, in the sense that it relies on input from a conversational partner. Since a turn structure is intuitively associated with the genre, children fail to produce longer essays in the absence of a discourse partner. This hypothesis can be further developed and extended in conjunction with ego blogging and topic blogging, and the different demands they make on the blogger. A complicating factor in Bereiter and Scardamalia's analysis is that communicative purpose and, more broadly, motivation are not taken into account: it is assumed that different genres of writing differ in terms of the cognitive demands they place on users, but not that there is simply little familiarity and thus less competence with a genre an individual has no plausible reason to use. It can be argued that narrative is an especially problematic example, as it plays a much more significant role in the daily lives of children than argumentation does and is experiential, not deductive in nature.

An implicit assumption is that when publishing on the Internet we are addressing the general public and that our contribution should look accordingly in terms of form and content. The basis for this assumption is a conceptualization of the Internet in terms of traditional broadcast media in which a sender unidirectionally conveys a message to a group of recipients. The Internet, particularly Web 2.0, has departed from this model not only by being interactive, but by fragmenting the single public audience that was previously assumed to exist into a universe of microaudiences. These microaudiences dynamically form around content and are composed of existing social networks of colleagues, friends, family, etc. The content and style of much that is published in blogs and social networking sites follows the familiar pattern of communication with friends and family, not the modes of publishing or broadcasting that are familiar only to a few highly specialized professionals (journalists, politicians, corporate communicators).

Using the Internet to communicate publicly with those who are close to us means letting the recipient make the relevance judgment for herself – while anyone can read anything on the Web, the overhearers of a semi-private blog conversation have only themselves to blame if they find what they overhear irrelevant or stylistically inadequate.

## 2.12 Audience scope

This understanding of audience scope as narrow is supported by self-reflexive statements made by bloggers in interviews. For example, Gumbrecht cites Harriet, a graduate student in Electrical Engineering who describes her sense of audience as follows:

“[I]t makes you feel good that people are reading it. You don’t really want too many people reading it, but it’s nice when somebody’s reading it. Especially the people you want to, like your friends. So when you meet up again they don’t have to say “what’s new” . . . “I can’t remember; I put it on the web!” (2004, p. 4)

Harriet’s observation that she doesn’t want “too many people reading” her blog seems to contradict the possible assumption that ego bloggers are exhibitionists who seek a public audience and assume that their personal issues are relevant to strangers. While there are individual examples where this may well be the case, the majority of ego bloggers do not structure their writing in ways that allows non-familiar readers to understand them. As example 2 illustrates, *non-cooperative behavior* (in the Gricean sense) contradicts the assumption that it is the goal of ego bloggers to be widely read.

**Example 2.** *Well, it was my first birthday away from the family. It was interesting....teasin! it wasnt as bad as i thought and i practiced for my mission. I woke up and texted sis because she was born on my b-day, for those of you who forgot. Teasin sis! Umm i talked to mom and dad and the rest of the family throughout the day. Thanks for the calls everyone. Uhh...i went to breakfast (the good ol Galley) with Lizzie and Kenzie and afterwards ran home to find a package sent from Mom and the famoly in cali. I went to a basketball game and we won. Then i went out to dinner with a bunch of friends and ate hecka food. Afterwards we came back to Lizzie’s and opened presents from Lizzie and Max. Max gave me a journal his mom gave him....that was special and i needed one so im thankful for it. Lizzie gave me the Spanish Book of Mormon. I was pretty excited cause now im gonna be fluent in Espanol! She also gave me an awesome CTR ring because I have been wearing Max’s old one for the last year. Umm it also spins so it is way tight. Then I came back to my dorm and Max and I opened the rest of my presents. The Abillas gave me some nice notes and hecka food which is gettin me fat. haha thanks! O and thanks Ang for the Head and Shoulder bottle. You’ll be gettin it back sometime haha! And then I opened the fam in Cali’s package. I got a sweet shirt that had my Mission on the back. Kaley gave me the hymn book in Spanish, its pocket sized. And then a CD and hecka more food. Grandma also sent a letter. Shes awesome! And that was my b-day! This might be boring sorry!*

The scope of the example is a narrow, familiar audience of family and friends. Another example (3) demonstrates how severely the audience scope can be narrowed when bloggers write to record immediate emotions and inner processes which are very difficult to understand in their entirety by any other person and clearly do not follow the implicit rules described in section 2.11. Ego blogging can function as a powerful means of releasing feelings of distress and anxiety,

especially for adolescents:<sup>32</sup>

**Example 3.** *time wont let anyone forget the past, nor the sorrows... one could only hide it deep within... n hope the pain will nv surface again... but it would never be possible... cus even if one manage to forget, someday somehow somet- ingy would just remind one abt tat someone... was tinkng the other day, if the person u love doesn't love in return... in future if u were to see tis person with another guy, in a relationship... how would u feel? happy for her? ... maybe, but i know i would be lying to myself... most probably i would just break down... just by tinkng abt tis would already make me wanna cry... just another day of tinkng too much...*

This example differs from the first in that its referentiality is not merely vague, but effectively opaque. While only close friends or family may be able to retrieve the exact referent of *the ol galley* or the blogger's mission, who *the Abillas* and *Lizzie and Kenzie* are etc, not even those close to this blogger may understand exactly to what sorrows he is referring to and who the person he was in love with is. The self-extracting quality of the writing is striking in example 3: the blogger refers to "anyone", "one" and "you" (all of which can be argued to be third-person pronouns in this context, since you is synonymous with one in this usage), while in fact he himself is the only plausible referent of these predications. "Someday", "somehow", "sometingy" and "someone" all serve to enhance this opaqueness. No first or second person are visible at the beginning of the post and use of the future subjunctive ("were to see") makes the feelings described even more remote from the blogger, in what must be interpreted as an attempt to distance himself from his painful emotions. The punctuation of the post is in accordance with its reflective, self-focused nature that is not a sequence of events or arguments, but an outpouring of feelings. No explicit reader is ever addressed and one can speculate that the conceptualized reader is a non-person, a blank listener, in essence comparable to a therapist.

Both examples, while radically different, share an orientation towards a familiar or intimate audience – they are not intended to be fully comprehensible to strangers or a general public, even though their authors are likely to realize that people who do not know them may theoretically read their blogs. While one could argue that the author of the second entry hopes for support or reconciliation from a sympathetic listener, this listener seems not to be a concrete person, as there is no indication that a response is expected. The listener, in a sense, is the recording device itself.

Both the personal narrative of the first entry and the stream of consciousness of the second are similar on two planes of conceptualization:

- the focal point of both is the blogger and his physical or emotional state,<sup>33</sup>
- the conceptualized readers know the blogger in both variants.

<sup>32</sup>Note that some of the unusual linguistic variations of this post are dialectal in nature. The blogger is a speaker of Singapore English and this is reflected in his orthography.

<sup>33</sup>I define focal point in two ways here: the blogger either features prominently in his own discourse, which is often framed as a narrative (i.e. the blog entry is concerned with his activities and experiences), or the blog is an immediate reflexion of his feelings and thoughts, making him implicitly central.

The following two sections describe two basic approaches to blogging that follow from the distinct communicative needs of bloggers and from the conceptualization of their audience. These approaches are not mutually exclusive, but represent the ends of a scale between which bloggers switch from one post to the next and even inside a single post.

## 2.13 Ego blogging

Example 2 gives an indication of one approach to blogging.<sup>34</sup> On the surface, certain stylistic properties of the post are likely to catch the reader's attention. The entry can be described as colloquial (spelling, punctuation, use of upper and lower case) and exhibits features of oral communication (use of discourse markers, emphatic expressions, fillers) that do not give the impression of being stylistic artifice (cf. chapter 4 for examples of scripted orality with a visible rhetorical motivation). It also weaves events and thoughts into a primarily temporal (but not necessarily logical) ad-hoc sequence, for example by using a coordinating conjunction to connect the description of an inner process with the account of a causally unrelated action ("it [the birthday] wasn't as bad as i thought and i practiced for my mission").

I will return to these stylistic aspects at a later point. In regards to what audience the author has in mind, another aspect is pivotal. The blogger uses a range of nouns which are not necessarily clear in their reference and often preceded by a definite article. This type of usage generally marks given information, i.e. information that the reader can either retrieve from the co-text or is assumed to have knowledge of prior to the discourse. A use of such terms without explanation in the co-text supports the assumption of shared knowledge on part of the blogger – he believes that his mission, *the good ol Galley* and *the Abillas* are known to his readers, ergo his conceptualized readers are those close to him (a narrow audience scope of family and friends).<sup>35</sup> Even more immediate evidence supports this assumption in the given example: he explicitly addresses his sister ("teasin sis!") and those who have congratulated him ("thanks for calling everyone!"), people who can be assumed to be his friends and family.<sup>36</sup> The uninitiated reader is in effect an overhearer – he may not find the events related clear or relevant, but this is purely because he is not supposed to read the entry in the first place.

## 2.14 Topic blogging

By contrast, topic bloggers rate the relevance of their own blogging via the relevance of an external topic (see the examples in section 2.3). Topic blogs are generally centered on a recurring theme that is the focal point of the blog,

<sup>34</sup>Note that my classification is based on a) the blogger's expressive or communicative objectives and b) the conceptualization of his audience. The content of a blog post is merely an indicator of these two factors, not the basis of the classification itself.

<sup>35</sup>In terms of Gricean pragmatics this means that the blogger seeks to avoid a violation of the maxim of quantity. If he were to provide information known to his familiar readership, this would be in violation of this maxim.

<sup>36</sup>Note that his family is both spoken to and about, hinting to a fuzziness of audience design that is in many way characteristic for blogs.

such as college basketball, romance novels, communism or copyright law. The sample post below is an example of a post in a topic blog.

**Example 4.** *When I teach trademark law classes, I always advise that students select strong protectable marks, and the class invariably balks because they want to select marks that suggest or connote something about the goods or services at issue. That, I tell them, is the touchstone of a weak mark, and for examples I look to the Internet space: Google, Yahoo!, Zillow, and so on are perfect trademarks because they say nothing about the goods or services with which they are associated.*

*And now along comes cuil.com (pronounced "cool"), the much-ballyhooed Google-killer. Great mark, right? "Cuil" says nothing about "Internet search engine," and is in fact apparently an old Irish or Gaelic word for "knowledge." But here's the rub: "Google" is becoming a verb in the lexicon very quickly, which is typically anathema to a trademark, but there's not much Google can do to stop everyone from saying, e.g., "Go Google that." But can you say, e.g., "I am going to 'cuil' it?" You could, but people would hear you say, "I am going to cool it," and the meaning is lost.*

*Moral – a great trademark has to be both non-descriptive AND sound cool (pun intended) and distinctive. Now let's just see if Google goes the way of "escalator" and becomes generic for Internet search services...*

The focal point of this topic blog is trademark law and the blogger has accordingly chosen a topic for this post that is relevant to that broader theme. Topic and conceptualized audience are interdependent: those who are assumed to read the blog are all individuals interested in trademarks law, whether they personally know the blogger or not. The blogger is keenly aware of this and unlikely to drastically shift his focal point into other directions (i.e. his personal feelings, his last vacation) without good reason, as this would alienate his topical audience. Incorporating personal thoughts and experiences in a topic blog can be used as a rhetorical strategy that realizes a positive politeness function – it creates solidarity and shared space between blogger and reader. By contrast, personal thoughts and experiences and their articulation in language are at the center of ego blogging. In visible contrast to topic blogging, non-cooperation abounds in ego blogging and reliably signals a narrowing of audience scope that is deliberate and motivated.

The different audience scope of topic blogs has consequences, as can be seen in the example. All entities introduced into the discourse are retrievable, i.e. it is clear what the text is concerned with and about whom statements are being made. A conscious effort is made to establish a clear argumentation structure, reflected in the segmentation of the text into paragraphs and the use of metalanguage ("When I teach...", "And now comes...", "Moral"). The text is structured to be both concise and accessible, and to be of maximum usefulness for its intended audience.

Note that structuring and explicitness as such are not automatically synonymous with topic blogging; they are merely a prerequisite for presenting a complex topic to an unfamiliar reader. A familiar reader is both more able and willing to make an effort to understand the speaker's intentions and he brings his prior knowledge about the blogger into the exchange, while an unfamiliar topical reader is less likely to make such an effort. A second example underscores this aspect of topic blogging.

**Example 5.** *Love it [hyperlink].*

A Tuesday fundraiser headlined by President Bush for U.S. Sen. John McCain's presidential campaign is being moved out of the Phoenix Convention Center.

Sources familiar with the situation said the Bush-McCain event was not selling enough tickets to fill the Convention Center space, and that there were concerns about more anti-war protesters showing up outside the venue than attending the fundraiser inside.

McCain wants Bush's fundraising prowess without, you know, having Bush (literally) in the picture. Too bad even Bush can't fill the seats anymore. Being the most unpopular president in American history must prove a real damper on such efforts.

(Via Beeton at MyDD [hyperlink].)

While on the surface the differences between examples 4 and 5 are significant, both are quite similar in terms of what motivation guides the choice of topic. Example 5 is taken from a political blog that discusses American politics from a decidedly liberal viewpoint. Its content is relevant in Sperber and Wilson (1986)'s sense of contributing the maximum amount of information with the minimum amount of decoding effort to a specific audience only, yet to that audience it is optimally relevant.

An examination of Grice's conversational maxims as applied to topic blogging reveals a series of interesting qualities, summarized in table 2.4.

<i>Maxim</i>	<i>Directive</i>	<i>Application</i>
Maxim of Quality	Do not say what you believe to be false. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.	This maxim is essentially unchanged, though another could be added that pertains specifically to blogs: Do not manipulate the contextual metadata provided in the blog, especially not the identity of the blogger (see the discussion of ghostblogging and flogging in section 3.8).
Maxim of Quantity	Make your contribution as informative as is required for the current purposes of the exchange. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.	Since the current purpose of the talk exchange is solely chosen by the blogger himself (self-directed discourse) this maxim is effectively nullified. The informativeness of the contribution is limited by a number of factors, including consideration for the readership, but there is considerable variation in the length of blog posts. Ego blogs tend to show more variation in length than topic blogs (as well as generally longer posts).



Maxim of Relation	Be relevant.	As noted above, this maxim is affected most drastically by the unique pull situation of the search-driven Internet, where information is offered rather than sent. In its most drastic form, nothing is irrelevant in a search-driven environment, assuming an ideal matching of information and recipient.
Maxim of Manner	Avoid obscurity of expression. Avoid ambiguity. Be brief. Be orderly.	A close examination of these maxims reveals a marked contrast between ego blogging and topic blogging. While all four are fully in effect in topic blogs (and the first – avoid jargon, be clear – is a highly popular prescription in corporate blogs), the same is not true in ego blogs. The relative disregard for these maxims that characterizes ego blogs is the direct result of a very narrow audience scope and the associated relative lack of cooperative behavior.

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Table 2.4: Conversational Maxims in Blogs

## 2.15 Differences in function and intended audience

An arc of subjectivity extends outwards from ego bloggers, whose immediate emotions are reflected in their writing, with limited consideration for the comprehension of readers, to bloggers who have a narrow and known audience scope and accordingly do not make significant amounts of background information available (resulting in tougher or even insoluble decoding work for the reader), and finally to those bloggers who put a significant amount of effort into making their writing as accessible as possible to outsiders.

The reasons for choosing ego blogging or topic blogging are varied and fundamentally depend on how users conceptualize their blogs and on what their communicative needs are. Ego blogging connects to the antecedent genres of the diary or personal journal, while topic blogging has distinct forerunners in journalism and publishing. Both are ends of a continuum that balances the communicative needs of the writer with the demands for clarity and relevance made by the projected readership. Bloggers alternate between the ego blogging mode and the topic blogging mode and there are instances where both modes

mix. Furthermore, self-directedness and a resulting self-focus are in a sense endemic to blogs, due to their nature as personal publishing. Therefore a complete absence of the writer (as it exists in many other forms of writing, such as encyclopedias and news reporting) is extremely atypical in blogs. An “ego component” is therefore virtually always present in blogs, whether topic or ego blogs.

Another issue is the relative ease or difficulty of producing one type of blog entry over the other. Writing for a wider and less familiar audience is arguably more difficult for the writer, as he attempts to make processing for his audience as easy as possible. Conversely, highly self-focused ego blogging is meant to “relieve” the blogger emotionally and therefore encoding is kept as simple as possible. The personal narrative exists at the crossroads of these types in terms of difficulty, as it structures segments chronologically rather than argumentatively. Furthermore, the personal narrative is a genre with a high degree of familiarity because of its roots in oral and interpersonal tradition. In contrast to other, formally mandated types of discourse, telling stories about ourselves is something we do from early childhood onwards. The observation made by Bereiter and Scardamalia regarding the relative inability of their young test subjects to produce other types of discourse than the personal narrative without external stimuli (a discourse partner prompting them to go on) is surprising in this regard, because the psychologists apparently had not anticipated genre proficiency as an important factor:

We are struck by how much more dependent novices are than experts on experimental support on particular genres (sic) – most particularly the personal experience narrative – and on the topic of writing. (1987, p. xv)

Feedback, i.e. input from blog readers via comments and linked blog responses, plays an important role in blogging, though many blog posts do not prompt any responses. The popular association of blogs with *conversation* and *dialog* is likely to be conceptually motivated primarily by the possibility of providing feedback on the content in a blog. However, at closer inspection the association is too general to make – some bloggers apparently anticipate feedback and write accordingly (or receive feedback because of how they write and what they write about, depending on the preferred line of reasoning), while others do not. Feedback in the blogosphere, as elsewhere, amounts to social capital and has concrete benefits such as improved search engine rankings, the Web measure of an individual’s reputation. Accordingly, those who seek these benefits are more explicit in their communicative goals, and these goals extend outwards, to unfamiliar and new audiences.

Taking into account the higher processing effort put into topical blogging, it is more likely for topic bloggers to expect feedback, and arguably their choice of a subject external to themselves can also be explained with this argument. By contrast, ego bloggers use their blog as a permanent record of their thoughts and feelings; a “history of themselves”. Outside voices are more likely to be perceived as intruding or threatening in a discourse that centers on the blogger himself than in a discussion of external issues, even where they serve to validate and reinforce the blogger.

This completes the model of ego and topic blogging first proposed in section 2.3 and described in table 2.3 via a set of dichotomous terms. Obviously the dis-

tion is not a binary opposition but a scalar value, with various intermediate states.

## 2.16 Audience mismatch

Audience mismatch phenomena occur when conceptualized audience and actual readership do not match. They are usually made apparent when the reader has insufficient background knowledge to successfully interpret a message. Inability to interpret a piece of discourse can be tied either to missing contextual information or to insufficient experience with the genre in stylistic terms.

It is possible to distinguish between several types of mismatch effects:

- *confession / intentional overhearer effect*: the blogger knows that actual readership is wider than the intended audience and seeks to filter his audience by relying on shared knowledge,
- *audience underfitting / unintentional overhearer effect*: the blogger does not realize that actual readership is wider than the conceptualized audience,
- *audience overfitting*: the blogger writes for a wide and generic conceptualized audience – likelihood of the blog not seeming “bloggy”,
- *fuzziness / mixed overhearer effect*: the blogger does not have a clearly defined conceptualized audience, therefore mismatch occurs.

Blogs are prone to mismatch effects because they reach very broad audiences, are often written by people who are not experienced with communication outside of familiar interpersonal contexts and because they are not associated with fixed purposes and stable discourse communities to begin with. Mismatch effects result in a negative perception of the blogger’s communicative competence and may lead to significant backlash.<sup>37</sup>

## 2.17 Conversational maxims, relevance and politeness in blogs

As has been previously pointed out when describing the medium and situation factors that shape blogging (see section 2.2), blogs are characterized by a specific constellation of blogger and readership (variable, opaque and passive participation) that pragmatically depressurizes the relationship between the two parties by isolating them from one another, while at the same time retaining the possibility of interaction. To emphasize the importance of this situation for evaluating blogs in pragmatic terms it is helpful to phrase it in the form of two propositions, one taking on the perspective of the reader, the other one that of the blogger.

1. The reader knows that the blogger cannot know that she is the reader.

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<sup>37</sup>See Puschmann (2007a) for an example.

2. The blogger is aware that his reader knows that he does not know that she is the reader.

This particular situation has a range of repercussions. Following Relevance Theory, inferential communication is characterized by the recipient's awareness of the sender's intent (at least to some degree) when receiving a message (Sperber and Wilson, 1986, p. 23). But sender intent is tied inextricably to the identity of the recipient – it is difficult to impossible to aim for a specific suasive effect unless there is some knowledge of who will be affected. Conative and informative communication is based on the premise that the communicative partners are aware of each other's presence and can rely on shared knowledge, or at least believe that some degree of shared knowledge exists. In traditional advertising the concept of the focus group is a conscious attempt to effectively inform and persuade communicative partners who are detached from and invisible to the sender and cannot interact with him.

In a blog, however, this is not possible, at least not in the sense that the sender is able to exert any pressure on the recipient. While in an email exchange failure to respond to a message on the part of the recipient will generally be noticed by the sender, the same is not true of a blog. Blogs act like mass publishing in this regard, but at the same time there is a potential for feedback that does not exist in the same form in newspapers, radio or television.

With this in mind, the two propositions about bloggers and blog-readers have the following consequences:

1. The reader can freely choose to interact with the blogger if he wishes, but may also refrain from doing so if he prefers without any penalty or threat to face (a practice known as *lurking*).
2. The blogger is under little or no pressure to be cooperative, relevant, brief or stylistically adjusted to any particular reader. She may seek to adjust the listed parameters to an envisioned audience, but her actual audience is out of reach and therefore has no effect on her approach.

Again returning to Grice's conversational maxims in this context, it is possible to make several observations in relation to blogs:

- contributions must not strictly adhere to the maxims of quantity and relation, and may at least partially violate the maxim of manner;
- only the maxim of quality is expected to be adhered to, both in terms of what is said and in regards to the accuracy of the meta-information (author, publication date) that is provided.

A number of factors shaping these implicit expectations. A blog post can be dually interpreted as a conversation with the self (a message with an audience scope that includes only the blogger himself in the role of reader) or a conversation with an implicit and shifting audience, that may expand and contract from one post to the next. Since (a) the blogger cannot anticipate that a specific person will read his text and consider her reaction to it and (b) the constraints of synchronous and co-spatial discourse are not in effect, the abovementioned maxims, save for quality, are largely deactivated. This lack of conversational rules to play by due to an audience that is out of the blogger's reach makes

blogs a prime example of self-directed discourse and explains the primacy of ego blogging.

The modification or deactivation of conversational maxims in the mediated environment of the Web is not restricted to blogs. With searching (in opposition to browsing) as the primary way of finding information on the Internet, an unusual and seemingly paradoxical situation emerges. When someone publishes texts, photos or videos on the Web, the contribution is made without any precise knowledge about who will look at this material. It is simply “offered” without that knowledge, but with the implicit assumption that someone will see it. While this is comparable to the journalist who doesn’t know his readership individually but must conceptualize it according to certain expectations, the next step in the communicative process is unique to the Web. An audience forms around the published material via search, which matches the communicative demand with the supply. While normally the speaker is required to adjust his contribution to context and audience, both “appear” virtually by themselves on the search-driven Net. In this context the notion of *information overload* is essentially a misconceptualization on the part of the reader. The matching of information and audience is undertaken by the audience via search, not by the contributor in a clearly delineated discourse space (a face-to-face conversation, a discourse genre in a specific community). This means that relevance as a governing principle of communication is largely ineffectual in digital, search-driven environments.

Examining accounts of how blogs are conceptualized in an interactional context appears to support this notion, as the following passage from Gumbrecht suggests:

In face-to-face conversation or IM, responses are expected immediately or close to it. As a result, conversational partners may feel ill at ease when trying to broach a sensitive issue in these media. Lara said she would never tell people, “I’m really sad” in IM, yet she would have no qualms about stating it in her blog. Why? In blogs, people can choose to respond to a post or not—it is up to the reader. Over IM, conversational partners might feel obligated to respond—especially when the subject matter is as heavy as a depressed emotional state. In this way, the lack of both cotemporality and simultaneity factor into a blogger’s choice of communicative medium. For other bloggers in our sample, like Max, blogs can act as “protection” from immediate social interaction:

“[T]here’s something that I want, you know, a specific person who’d be reading it to see like, you know, I feel like I can say something in the blog and then have it be sort of be like my safety net, you know? Whereas like in a more immediate and personal like form of impersonal digital communication . . . I would sort of have to face their reaction, you know? Metaphorically speaking, anyway. . . two bad things that blogging for me, anyway, endorses, you know, [are] laziness and cowardice.”

Avoiding the immediate retort of a friend or foe served as one motivation for our informants to blog about an event rather than to talk about it. (2004, p. 3)

A social penalty is at stake when risking a face-threatening reaction, such as an unempathic response to an intimate personal revelation by the communicative partner. This is anticipated by Lara, who prefers to articulate such feelings in her blog. Blogger and audience are not only temporally and spatially separated from one another in the blog, but the audience is also shifting and unspecified. Those of her friends who do not want to articulate a reaction to Lara's feelings can refrain from doing so without seeming insensitive. The blog reader can lurk without indicating that they have even received the message and the blogger can likewise claim not to have addressed anyone in particular with their thoughts. Consequently, the kind of conversational offering that happens in blogs successfully removes social pressure from the communicative partners that accumulates in a genuine push-type STF such as email.

The characteristic of blogs as a pull medium also has pragmatic consequences for how the blogger can express himself without violating politeness principles. For example, the concentric circles of narrower/wider audience represent classes of readers but not fixed sets of addresses (e.g. "all of my friends who want to read this" vs "Mike, Joe and Susie"). Because blogs are a pull medium, the blogger will usually not address the intended audience explicitly by name, as he has no knowledge of who will actually read a particular post. At the same time, the gray audience – that part of the readership that the blogger addresses neither explicitly nor implicitly, but that he assumes exists – is also passively present. This leads to a particular politeness situation in which the blogger will generally avoid naming individual addressees, as that would leave all those not addressed sidelined, instead bypassing both general (Gricean) principles of conversation and more specific issues of the "what-can-be-revealed-to-whom"-variety. An essayist article by journalist Emily Gould aptly describes issues of intimacy and public in relation to blogging motivation:

But is that really what's making people blog? After all, online, you're not even competing for 10 grand and a Kia. I think most people who maintain blogs are doing it for some of the same reasons I do: they like the idea that there's a place where a record of their existence is kept — a house with an always-open door where people who are looking for you can check on you, compare notes with you and tell you what they think of you. Sometimes that house is messy, sometimes horrifyingly so. In real life, we wouldn't invite any passing stranger into these situations, but the remove of the Internet makes it seem O.K. (Gould, 2008, no pagination)

Apart from the interesting spatial analogy of the house that Gould uses (which once again conceptualizes a blog as a physical location, seemingly to make up for the lack of that third deictic dimension) two ideas are raised in the quotation: blogs are a permanent record of thoughts and feelings created not exclusively for others, but also for the blogger, (a), and bloggers' tendency to expose personal details is tied to the realization that blogs are pull media and that the audience is thus actively seeking the information instead of being passively exposed to it, (b). Paired with the lack of cospatiality and cotemporality, this results in a sufficient distance between blogger and reader to divulge even intimate information.

The idea of relevance is reconfigured by the primacy of the blogger in relation to her audience. Assuming that whatever is contributed is relevant to someone

(even if the audience is limited to the blogger herself) and that this “sticky” audience forms around the content alters a fundamental pragmatic principle. Where before the speaker was under pressure to produce something that would resonate with his audience, that pressure at least partially disappears in an environment with sticky, dynamic audiences which are led to the content by a search.

The observations made above regarding considerations of bloggers such as Lara and Max gain further traction when considering the concepts of *face* Goffman (1955) and *politeness* Brown and Levinson (1987), i.e. our desire to construct, uphold and reinforce a positive image of ourselves in the perception of others, while at the same time being aware that our positive and negative face work (the construction of our sociocommunicative identity and our desire to freely express ourselves)<sup>38</sup> brings us into conflict with the face work of others, leading to *face-threatening acts* (FTAs). Politeness is our central strategy to minimize FTAs (Mills, 2003, p. 6) and thus demonstrate our awareness of and understanding for the need of others to socially construct themselves.

The blog as a self-directed discourse environment is interesting in its potential for face work because it allows both positive self-presentation and unrestrained self-expression, depending on the blogger’s audience design and resulting breadth or narrowness of audience scope. The assumption that a familiar audience of friends, family or colleagues reads the blogger’s posts inevitably leads to self-censoring, as the blogger seeks to preserve positive face. Whether the same holds true for the unfamiliar and invisible public audience of the wider Internet is fundamentally dependent on how relevant that audience is to the blogger: either she seeks to gain social capital with people unknown to her (a kind of public face work), or she seeks to be free of the need to please any external audience. The line between ego blogging and topic blogging is thus drawn by answering the question “Is acting sociocommunicatively competent perceived as an opportunity or a requirement, is it seen as rewarding or constraining?” That question can be answered differently from one post to another, depending both on the needs and the personality of the blogger. The frequent characterization of blogs as raw, unfiltered, honest, rude or unflattering is largely owed to the overall diminished significance of politeness in them. In an environment where my precise communicative partners are unknown to me, nobody can plausibly expect me to fully anticipate what might threaten their face, while at the same time, I can freely express myself before a potentially vast audience. The blog, from the perspective of the social actor, is thus a stage that combines optimal visibility with the safety of medial detachment.

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<sup>38</sup>Note that my application of face and face-preservation is (in deviation from the classical approach of Brown and Levinson (1987) largely centered on the blogger and his assumptions about the audience, not about the real audience as such. Whereas the feedback of an actual communicative partner shapes the interaction in face to face conversation, variable, opaque and passive participation makes face work largely a shot in the dark in blogs.

## Chapter 3

# The corporate blog as an emerging genre

### 3.1 Aspects of organizational communication

Institutional communication is characterized by the fact that strategic aims are pursued by a group of people and are generally stable and consistent over a long period of time. While individuals are equally goal-oriented when they communicate, their aims are more likely to be immediate and short-term, and less clearly articulated and reflected. Private interpersonal communication often revolves around the negotiation of social relationships and the expression of thoughts and emotions plays an equally central role. By contrast, in institutional contexts the goals of individuals are superseded by those of the organization (winning customers, increasing profits, cutting costs), all of which are long-term and require concerted action. From this vantage point, a series of assumptions can be made about organizational communication:

1. Organizational communication is markedly goal-oriented.
2. There is a tendency towards explicitness and structure that coincides with more explicit goal-orientation.
3. Meta-language is often used to talk about the communicative process itself.
4. Affective expressions are either positive or omitted entirely.
5. There is a repertoire of topics and which are common and others which are uncommon.
6. Specialized lexis (*jargon*) is often used, especially in internal communication.

Figure 3.1 shows a simplified model of corporate communications based on Horton (1995), divided at the most basic level into intra-organizational and extra-organizational discourse. Below the initial level, the model branches off into internal communication between colleagues, departments and employees of



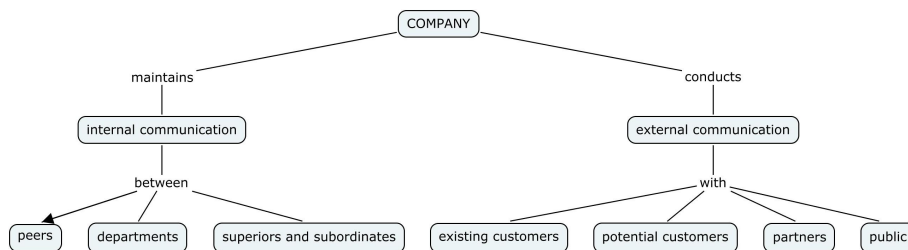


Figure 3.1: A simplified model of corporate communication following Horton (1995)

different influence, and external communication with customers (existing and potential), partners and the general public. The model does not claim to represent all aspects of a highly elaborate process that depends on a wide range of factors (size of the organization, area of business, etc) and could be extended almost at will. Yet it does capture the basic dichotomy of corporate-internal and corporate-external communication, which is significant in the context of blogging. Other salient factors include:

- Who communicates (e.g. CEO, sales manager, software engineer)?
- In what mode (e.g. spoken, written, computer-mediated)?
- Who is the intended audience (e.g. customers, investors, government regulators)?
- What is the genre (e.g. advertisement, mission statement)?

These factors shape and constrain organizational communication in specific ways and provide the backdrop before which corporate blogs should be evaluated.

## 3.2 Issues of corporate communications on the Internet

The emergence of the corporate blog can be regarded both as the natural appropriation of a personal mode of expression for organizational purposes and as a conscious reaction on the part of companies to the novel communicative setting of the Internet. A new communicative environment in which it is increasingly the norm for any participant to make a contribution (the *read-write Web*, or Web 2.0 vs the *read-only Web*, or Web 1.0) challenges the usefulness of existing public-facing genres of external corporate communications, which have in the past been communicatively unidirectional almost without exception (e.g. press releases, advertisements, static corporate websites). In this section I will very briefly point out some of the difficulties associated with moving to an interactive communicative environment, along with the perceived benefits.

Corporate-to-public communication is generally highly vetted, planned and shaped by organizational goals. The realization of such goals is not simply a side effect, but constitutes the core motivation behind communicating with external

stakeholders (customers, competitors, regulators, etc) under any circumstance. Following Horton (1995), discourse surrounding business transactions (marketing) is the most archetypical form of external corporate communication and has the simultaneous goals of providing customers with information about a product and persuading them to purchase it. In traditional mass media, such discourse lacks the interactional element of interpersonal communication, which is defined by participants' need to prove themselves as socially competent communicative actors. Jakobson (1960) argue that it also largely lacks the expressive, phatic and poetic dimensions of discourse unless these are used as consciously planned devices, both as a result of the restrictions imposed by the communicative channel and as a result of the narrow purpose of communication.<sup>1</sup> The conative, deceptive and unidirectional approach of companies to communication is frequently perceived as arrogant, out-of-touch and manipulative by stakeholders (cf. the criticism in Locke et al. (2001)). However, while the ways of providing feedback in mass media are significantly limited, and therefore the expectations regarding an organization's communicative competence are equally limited, the situation drastically changes in an environment where interaction is possible. Because communication on the Internet increasingly allows the same richness of social interaction that unmediated communication allows, the expectation implicitly exists on the part of stakeholders for organizations to act like socially competent individuals. Naturally, this poses a number of problems, because genres such as the advertisement, the mission statement or the press release are centered around collective, not individual goals, and do not reflect the motives of individuals, but collectives (something that is frequently linguistically reflected in the lack of an identifiable speaker in these types of discourse, except when taking on a spokesperson or witness status).

The solution to this dilemma in the case of corporate blogging is the appropriation of a genre of personal expression, a genre that is naturally concerned with individuals and their goals, for indirect collective purposes. Since the only way to meet the demands of interpersonal communication is to let individuals communicate on behalf of the organization, this is the route usually taken in corporate blogs. Yet this poses its own risks for companies, namely the individual blogger becoming too powerful in his role as spokesperson, or his goals running counter to that of the company. Corporate blogging guidelines and other codes of conduct are instituted to prevent such issues, and many company blogs are written by teams, not single authors, to prevent conflicts from arising.

To summarize, the need to individuate communication in an environment that demands uniformity is challenging because of the increased difficulty of goals that form the basis and *raison d'être* of external corporate communications.

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<sup>1</sup>It is noteworthy that Horton, in his influential book on corporate communications, differentiates between *informational* and *effective* communication, the former serving the purpose of "transmitting data", the latter existing to "send messages for a specific purpose" (Horton, 1995, p. 36). The dichotomy reflects Jakobson (1960)'s *referential/informative* and *conative* dimensions quite well.

### 3.3 Origins of corporate blogging

Historically, corporate blogging is clearly an offshot of private blogging in that it is younger and much smaller in terms of proliferation. Estimates of the total number of corporate blogs vary, but can be assumed not to exceed 10% of the global population of well over 100 million blogs (Halzack, 2008; White and Winn, 2009).

While exact figures cannot be provided, both due to variation in the exact definition of what constitutes a corporate blog and because many company blogs are non-public and therefore not indexed by search engines, it is clear that corporate blogging is a niche phenomenon when compared to private blogging, which constitutes a much broader trend.

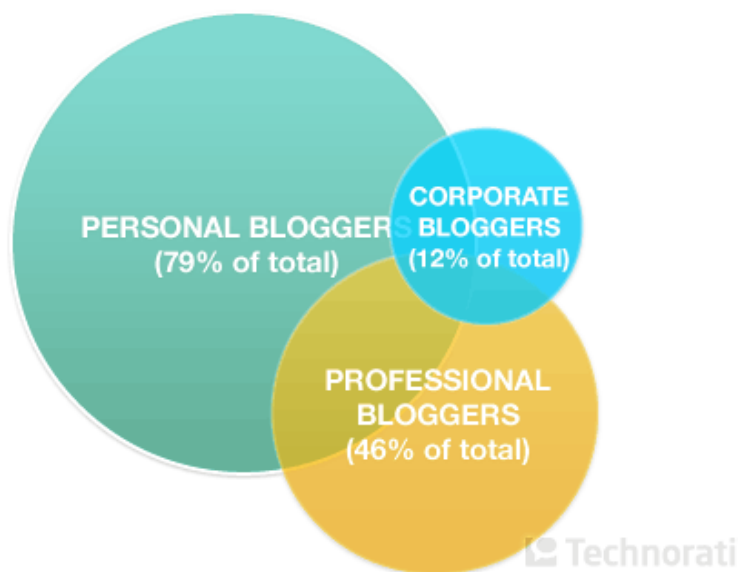


Figure 3.2: Quantitative relation of personal, professional and corporate blogging according to White and Winn (2009)

The impact of corporate blogging has been magnified by the fact that, much like the use of blogs in relation to politics, it receives a disproportional amount of attention in the mainstream media. For example, Farrell and Drezner point to “the relatively high readership of blogs among journalists and other political elites” (2008, p. 15). Initial enthusiasm for blogging in the context of business was quite high a few years ago, bordering on hype. An 2005 study by a market research firm estimated that by 2007, 89% of the companies surveyed would maintain a blog (Segal, 2005), a claim that seems significantly exaggerated from today’s perspective. Echoing this, a report from that period produced by Deutsche Bank Research bore the sensationalist title “Blogs: The new magic formula for corporate communications?” (Jüch and Stobbe, 2005, p. 1). Naturally, such high expectations have not been fulfilled across the corporate landscape: blog adoption rates seem to be on the decline in some business domains (Krol, 2008) and there is persistent warning of the risks associated with blogging and the dangers that lurk on the Web for companies that use

them inadequately: legal trouble, disgruntled customers, damage to the brand (Wolff, 2006; Martin, 2007; Brandel, 2007). A concise list of risks comes from Huysse, with issues ranging from “loss of control over the message” to “negative impact on stock price” (2007, no pagination). Despite deliberations especially pertaining to legal risks, blogging is evaluated relatively positively not only by consultants, who arguably have a vested interest in promoting this new form of corporate communication that they can explain and sell to their corporate customers, but also by businesses themselves. The evaluation depends on many factors, the most pivotal being the match up of goals with returns (the *return on investment*, or ROI of blogging). Blogs are clearly not a magic formula for boosting sales, improving reputation, conducting market research and managing knowledge, but many corporate practitioners believe that they can contribute to attaining these goals.

It is possible to approach the origins of corporate blogging from two different viewpoints: firstly in historical, and secondly in ontological terms. Historically, corporate blogging as it is defined here evolved from employee blogging, the latter being characterized by a grassroots quality that the former lacks. In their study of employee blogging at Microsoft, Efimova and Grudin noted that corporate blogging is a term “which suggests action that is authorized, acknowledged, or in a formal way associated with an organization” (2007, p. 2), a characteristic not universally applicable to employee blogging. The authors describe the genesis of blogs at Microsoft as follows:

The first Microsoft bloggers were students with externally hosted weblogs who were hired as interns or employees, starting in 2000 and 2001. Their weblogs attracted little attention. By mid-2002 employees were manually hosting weblogs on company machines and arguing for externally visible weblogs. An internal weblog server, maintained through voluntary efforts, hosted a few dozen weblogs by the end of the year. Late in 2002 a list of employee weblogs, including some hosted externally, was published by someone outside the organization (Mary Jo Foley in Microsoft Watch). This helped create a sense of a community engaged in externally visible blogging. The attention led to internal meetings and reflection. (Efimova and Grudin, 2007, p. 3)

While there is no historically precise account of who started the first employee blog in the sense described by Efimova and Grudin (2007), it is plausible to assume that such an evolutionary process – from scattered private blogs of junior staff to blogs jointly hosted on corporate servers – took place in a similar fashion at other software companies such as IBM, Sun, Adobe and Oracle, all of which today maintain large employee blog hubs (portal sites where employee blogs are hosted) that bundle the content from several thousand individual blogs.<sup>2</sup> The style and content of early employee blogs is therefore logically very close to that of private blogs, specifically the filter variety, which is exemplified by the post shown in figure 3.3. Koby Parnell, the owner of the early Microsoft blog shown, used his blog to post lists of links that he wanted to share with others (or book recommendations, in this case).<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup>See also the discussion in Puschmann (2007b) for an attempt to reconstruct the history of corporate blogging.

<sup>3</sup>Note also the blogger’s characterization of the blog as a *Wunderkammer* in the title.

In Efimova and Grudin’s description, sanctioned corporate blogging followed quietly on the heels of these early practices: “By mid-2003, a server hosting externally visible weblogs was operating. Because some managers perceived a benefit in using weblogs to communicate with customers, this server had formal budget support” (2007, p. 3).

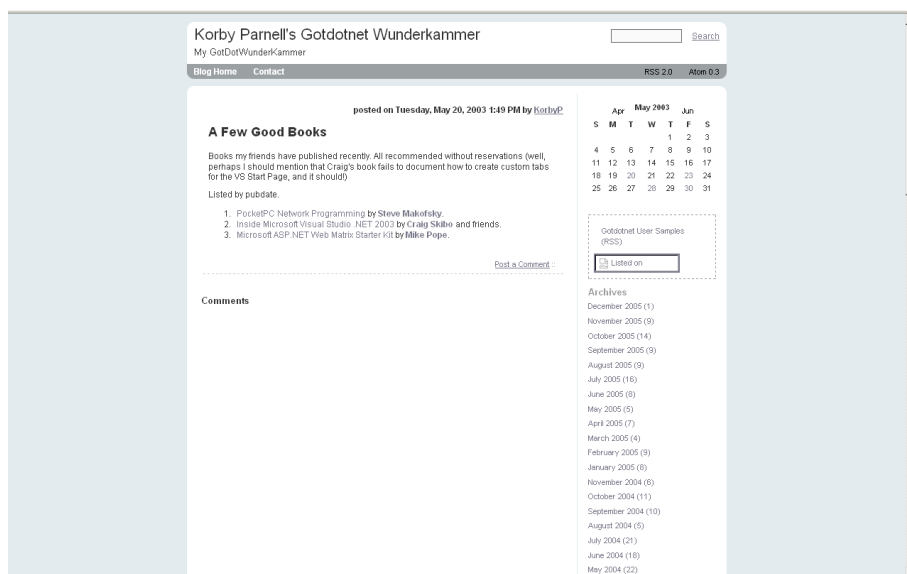


Figure 3.3: Early Microsoft corporate blog

The observation that the blogging activity voluntarily begun by employees who were mostly looking for a convenient place to host their private blogs could actually benefit the company was founded on the specific area of work of these early practitioners: software development. Because of its status as knowledge-intensive and highly specialized work, program development had a natural intersection with blogging: writing software and writing about writing software fit together well.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, the difficulties of merging an organic blog movement that had evolved from the bottom up with a top-down-structured communications hierarchy was keenly felt by the senior management, as blogging expanded into other sectors beyond coding:

We interviewed two vice presidents of product development. One, unabashedly enthusiastic, had hired a well-known blogger. He argued that the company had much to gain from being seen as open and transparent. The other vice president was skeptical. He had concerns about self-appointed spokespeople for a project or for the entire company. Although perceived to be antagonistic by bloggers with whom we spoke, during the course of our study he initiated a blog himself, with a focus on recruiting. (Efimova and Grudin, 2007, p. 4)

<sup>4</sup>See Efimova (2009) for a dissertation evaluating blogs as a tool for knowledge management (KM).

The limits of what was possible in an “official” company blog (intuitively interpreted by the community as any blog hosted on a company server) were also an issue. Numerous incidents of employee bloggers fired for disclosing confidential company information in their blog, a phenomenon that is part of the larger new theme of doocing – “to loose one’s job because of one’s website”<sup>5</sup> – associated with various forms of user-generated content on the Net have occurred. (Simonetti, 2004; Lorenz, 2005; Wallack, 2005) However, the enthusiasm for novel technology and the need to optimize both the internal knowledge flow and customer service led managers to be more supportive than hindering regarding the proliferation of blogs. Specifically the thought that employees would remain exclusively private bloggers with even less potential for control and none of the positive effects prompted corporate leadership in the software industry to adopt a strategy of “extend and embrace”: provide a technical infrastructure and a basic behavioral code (called blogging guidelines or blogging policies) for employees to follow and continually measure and review the perceived risks and benefits of employee blogging.

Two other processes spurred the popularity of blogs in a business context, namely a crisis in the perception of public-facing corporate discourse and a general trend towards personalization and democratization in the relationship between institutions and individuals. One impetus for the trend may have been “The Cluetrain manifesto” (Locke, Levine, Searls, and Weinberger, 2001), a dual book and open access Internet publication by marketing experts Christopher Locke, Rick Levine, Doc Searls and David Weinberger. Cluetrain’s core consisted of 95 theses challenging widely held practices and assumptions about mass marketing and the relationship between corporations and consumers in a tone reminiscent of political activism:

A powerful global conversation has begun. Through the Internet, people are discovering and inventing new ways to share relevant knowledge with blinding speed. As a direct result, markets are getting smarter—and getting smarter faster than most companies.

These markets are conversations. Their members communicate in language that is natural, open, honest, direct, funny and often shocking. Whether explaining or complaining, joking or serious, the human voice is unmistakably genuine. It can’t be faked.

Most corporations, on the other hand, only know how to talk in the soothing, humorless monotone of the mission statement, marketing brochure, and your-call-is-important-to-us busy signal. Same old tone, same old lies. No wonder networked markets have no respect for companies unable or unwilling to speak as they do.

But learning to speak in a human voice is not some trick, nor will corporations convince us they are human with lip service about “listening to customers.” They will only sound human when they empower real human beings to speak on their behalf. (Locke et al., 2001, no pagination)

Both the rhetorical style and content of this introduction to Cluetrain summarize what the entire work stresses repeatedly. Firstly, it is postulated that

<sup>5</sup>*Dooiced* (v.) is defined as noted above in the Urban Dictionary, an Internet source of colloquial terms.

there is a rift between consumers and traditional marketers who target them, a rift supposedly caused by companies being out of touch with a changed, networked world which is not comparable to pre-digital environments. Secondly, the concept of corporate identity as a unified and totalizing corset, constraining the way in which companies communicate with consumers is criticized. Corporations, the implicit reasoning of Locke et al. goes, are both manipulative and concerned with communicating in a fashion that will not offend, spark controversy or in any way risk putting off consumers. Corporate-to-public communication, in their view, is a Trojan Horse that aims to influence people while claiming to inform, entertain or support. The key criticism is the organization's duplicity in pragmatic terms – it communicates insincerely and covertly to achieve the goal of maximizing profit. The remedy propagated by the Cluetrainers, interestingly enough, is not any change in behavior (replacing the motivation to maximize profits with something more benign), but a change in communicative style (human voice vs. corporate monotone). Established discourse genres of corporate communication such as the mission statement are disavowed and cast in a decidedly negative light to emphasize how “out of touch” corporations are. Instead, the authors demand companies to let “real human beings speak on their behalf” – clearly a nod in the direction of blogging.

Of course, the manifesto borders on hyperbole with such statements. The authors of corporate memos and brochures are clearly human beings, and likening corporations to human actors with socio-communicative deficits is hardly appropriate, since institutions only communicate through their employees. But at the same time globalization, societal fragmentation and the spread of digital media have led to a loss of influence for institutions, who with the rise of Web search no longer control access to information as they previously did and who with the rise of user generated content no longer control mass publishing.

But on what basis other than personal opinion do the authors claim so forcefully that modern consumers have no respect for how companies communicate? In a study conducted by leading U.S. public relations company Edelman, among 2,000 so-called “opinion leaders”, 68% of the American respondents named “a person like me” as the person they would trust most as a source of information on a company, outranking corporate and political leaders, public institutions and academia as trusted sources, a significant shift from 2003 when only 20% nominated “a person like me” (Creevey, 2006). In the 2008 run of the poll, peers outranked experts and institutions in Brazil, Canada, Germany, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, and the United States, while financial experts ranked at the top in France, India, Ireland, Mexico, Poland, South Korea, and the United Kingdom, and academics were most trusted in Italy, Japan, Russia, and Spain (Edelman, 2008, p. 6).

The study points to the increased momentum of word of mouth communication via social networks:

Consider the five moms who got together to stem the abuse of cough medicine among teens for client CHPA (the Consumer Healthcare Products Association), and in just three months through Tell-a-Friend e-mails, reached 100,000 other mothers. Each of the five moms was passionate about spreading the word among schools, churches, governments, and friends and family. Their messages were strengthened by the participation of national organizations like the Commu-

nity Anti-Drug Coalitions of America, D.A.R.E America, and the national Parent-Teachers Association. (Edelman, 2008, p. 6)

The boom in digital interpersonal communication via the Internet, both within existing networks of friends and family and among strangers seems to go hand in hand with at least a partial erosion of trust in institutional sources of information. Based on the study, Edelman's founder and highly influential CEO, Richard Edelman, formulates the following advice for corporate communicators:

Share your content with your employees, passionate consumers, and bloggers, allowing them to co-create, repurpose, and improve their knowledge through dialogue. Change your tone from one that pronounces to one that invites participation, ceding some control in return for credibility.

Because this generation seeks its own information, it prefers first-person testimonials to statements by traditional business or government authority figures. Young opinion elites tend to trust people like themselves as well as academics, doctors, and financial analysts—in other words, specialized experts with professional credentials. (Edelman, 2008, p. 5)

The advice to “change your tone from one that pronounces to one that invites participation” and to “cede some control” seems to echo the pragmatic advice of Cluetrain and is based on the impression that only a communicative style that emphasizes parity and equality can succeed. While Edelman's focus is on public relations and not marketing, the message is similar: corporate actors should emulate the socio-communicative behavior of their customers to gain trust and be perceived as competent partners and not manipulators. The issue, however, is not seen primarily as ethical but as behavioral: communicate differently and you will be perceived differently, appears to be the tenet.

As the examples in the following chapters will show, company blogs are consciously used for the purpose of reinventing and redressing the interactions between corporations and their external stakeholders. Blogs, both from a purely technical perspective and because of the social practices they foster represent the ideal platform for achieving this goal. By blending characteristics of private blogs such as openness, information sharing/offering, subjectivity and lack of fixed external purpose with the advantages of a self-directed discourse environment and the ability to showcase politeness by ceding discourse space, corporate bloggers show socio-communicative competence while retaining ultimate editorial control. The inherent assumption in public-facing corporate blogging is that the crisis postulated by Cluetrain and reflected in the loss of trust in established corporate communicators and genres can be overcome by adapting to a new environment and its practices. Using an external blog to address a wide variety of stakeholders (potential and existing customers, potential employees, public officials, interest groups) means being on par with the perceived democratic nature of the blogosphere; however it also opens the door to a number of new challenges not present prior to the rise of blogs.



### 3.4 Perceived advantages of corporate blogging

To blog or not to blog? For a lot of senior executives these days, that is the question. The answer, simply enough, is to blog. No better opportunity exists to engage in an open dialogue and exchange of ideas with customers and potential customers.

– Bob Lutz of General Motors, *Information Week*

Why do individuals blog? The answers to this question presented in chapter 2 show that there is no single motivation for blogging, but that different groups of users bring very different conceptualizations of the practice to the table, some regarding their blog as a means of documenting their own lives (*ego blogging*), with others interpreting it as a megaphone, giving them an opportunity to present thoughts and opinions on external topics to a non-familiar audience (*topic blogging*). Because of the openness and immediacy of blogs and their universal conceptualization as a form of personal publishing, they are associated with a democratic and non-hierarchical approach to communication. The fact that blogs can be used for dialog and debate among individuals is a key incentive for institutions because it allows them to alleviate the detachment and distance that traditional genres of public-facing communication (company websites, press releases, mission statements, brochures, advertising, etc) are associated with.<sup>6</sup>

But beyond this general aim, what are the precise incentives for corporations to blog? While the goal of connecting more effectively with outside stakeholders (existing and potential customers and staff, investors, policymakers, activists, interest groups, etc) is apparent, the exact motivations are varied and depend crucially on the target audience, communicative goals and on how the individual company conceptualizes blogging.

One reason, at least initially, may be to simply follow a trend, with no clear knowledge of what blogging does to achieve organizational goals. In a study conducted among corporate bloggers by agencies Porter-Novelli and Cymfony, nearly two-thirds of respondents stated that their company began its first blog not to satisfy a specific need, but because of “pressure to participate in the medium” (Hirsch and Nail, 2006, p. 7). The advice given by consultants, which is often vague and based on blanket-label claims about the changing discourse environment, reflects this hype to join in without clear objectives. In “The Corporate Blogging Book”, Debbie Weil states:

We’re entering an age of more open, honest and authentic corporate communications. Blogs are a key enabler of this new way of talking with customers, employees, the media and other constituencies. Packaged, filtered, controlled conversations are out. Open, two-way, less-than-perfect communications with your customers and employees are in. (Weil, 2006, p. xvi)

The notion of a changed environment that demands adaptation from corporate actors is justification for the top-down proliferation and targeted use of blogs by companies rests, albeit it is not a notion primarily supported by hard

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<sup>6</sup>Along this line, Debbie Weil describes corporate blogging as “the co-opting by the big guys of a communications tool that has been successfully used by the little guys” (Weil, 2006, p. 1).

evidence, but rather by the advice of consultants like Weil.<sup>7</sup> However, it is clear that blogging and the move towards social software in general are broader phenomena that institutions need to pay attention to, lest they lose touch with their constituents. Demographic factors, increasing the risk of “missing out” on target markets and constituencies by not blogging also play a role:

Bloggers are overwhelmingly young adults who hail from urban and suburban areas. They are evenly divided between men and women. Bloggers are less likely than internet users to be white. (Lenhart and Fox, 2006, p. 2)

The characterization of private bloggers and blog readers as well-educated, young and affluent makes them both potential customers and potential employees to whose communicative habits companies need to adjust. In that sense, claims such as those made by Weil point to a real issue: failing to adjust to broader changes in the communicative landscape may have its price. What is new is the pressure on institutional communication to follow the paradigm of interpersonal communication. “Talking down”, as institutions have traditionally done, has a negative connotation in a world where individuals are empowered in terms of communication and access to information as never before.

A comprehensive strategic approach to planned corporate blogging is outlined by Zerfaß (2005). As Weil, Zerfaß emphasizes that a clear strategic objective is required for a company blog. Thus, while private ego blogs can be characterized by the lack of a fixed external purpose,<sup>8</sup> corporate blogs are not viable without explicit and stable communicative goals. Blogging cuts across the organized and structured processes of internal communication, market communication, network communication and public relations forming the framework inside which corporate communication takes place. This makes blogging difficult to plan and control, which is in turn a prerequisite of concerted organizational action. It must be clear who is communicating, who is addressed and how the communication is conducted, but the stability of these factors is undermined in blogging, since anyone can blog, anyone can potentially be the reader of a blog and the content and style of corporate blogs is largely in the hands of individual employees who may in no way be prepared to achieve strategic objectives through blogging. The degree of organizational purposefulness intrinsically required for corporate blogs is therefore extremely hard to combine with the prototypical characteristics of private ego blogs, therefore making a reconceptualization of corporate blogs along the lines of topic blogging and publishing necessary. Under such a topical (i.e. reader-focused) banner it is possible to subsume a range of activities and goals ranging from knowledge management to product promotion to crisis deescalation.

Figure 3.4 shows a typology developed by Zerfaß (2006) describing areas of use for corporate blogs specifically under the aspect of purpose. Before a

<sup>7</sup>As Zerfaß points out in regards to the “revolutionary” potential of corporate blogs propagated by media consultants: “Neue technische Möglichkeiten verändern nur bedingt die Regeln und Ressourcen, die das Zusammenleben und damit auch die Verständigungsprozesse in unserer Gesellschaft prägen.” (2005, p. 1)

<sup>8</sup>Note that the term is used here without claiming that self-focused ego blogging does not fulfill a vital function for those who practice it. Instead, I use it to point to a) a lack of explicit goals that the blogger is aware of, b) shifting and variable goals in regards to different audiences and c) goals which are subjective and focused on the blogger himself, such as knowledge management and venting.

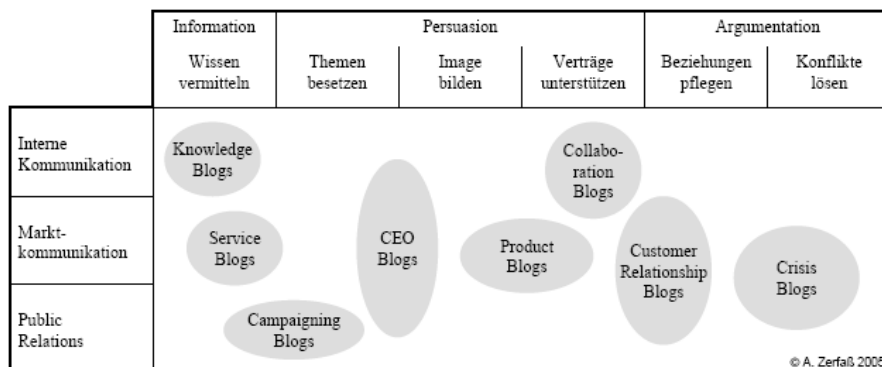


Figure 3.4: Functions of corporate blogs following Zerfaß (2005)

blog can be launched, five steps should be taken by practitioners, according to Zerfaß:

- practitioners should make themselves familiar with blogs and feeds to gain an understanding of the format
- a form of blog monitoring should be implemented to control the blog and measure its success
- opinion leaders and critics should be identified
- initial experiences should be gathered by launching a non-public blog on the company intranet
- if prior experiences are positive, a public-facing blog on the Internet can be launched

Such a measured and careful approach reflects organizational considerations for coherence and sustainability. Since they have much more to lose by unsuccessful ventures into the blogosphere than individuals, corporations must plan step by step how they want to implement blogs.

Similar suggestions for the successful implementation of planned corporate blogging into a company's corporate communications strategy are given by countless marketing and public relations experts, new media consultants and researchers with backgrounds in communication studies and economics. However, the two core recommendations offered by Zerfaß – implement a form of blog monitoring and identify (and address) opinion leaders and critics – are more problematic than they initially appear. Despite attempts to measure the impact of blogs (Li, 2006, 2007) questions remain regarding how well any metric, list of stakeholders or feedback sample captures the actual response.

Blog monitoring, in the sense of both exercising editorial control over a blog (e.g. by moderating comments, editing and updating posts) and assessing its readership with the use of analytical tools is possible and widely practiced in corporate contexts. Tools such as Feedburner enable blog owners to gain a precise picture of how many people read what entries in their blog, how they found the blog (search engine vs. direct referral or link from another site) and other

information. But beyond this, there is no reliable data to allowing corporate bloggers to monitor the success of their blogging – i.e. whether they in fact achieve the organizational goals they intend to achieve via blogging. The problem of being unable to capture and measure the success of corporate blogs with precision as no generally supported methodology for this end has yet emerged prevents companies from adopting Zerfaß' recommendations to conduct blog monitoring. Table 3.1 summarizes different forms of communicative actions and their respective parameters in corporate blogs on the levels of interaction, external effect and internal effect.

<i>No.</i>	<i>Action</i>	<i>External effect</i>	<i>Internal effect</i>
1	Inform	Show subject-matter competence	–
2	Make an argument	Influence opinion or behavior	–
3	Promote a product	Increase sales	–
4	Cede space (e.g. by posting negative comments)	Show deference/fairness	Learn about and react to issues
5	Engage in a dialog (e.g. by responding to comments)	Show communicative competence	Assess and evaluate own stance on issues

Table 3.1: Communicative actions and their parameters in corporate blogs

Secondly, while identifying vital stakeholders and opinion leaders is certainly possible from the perspective of a company, it is not possible to selectively address them. This is a result of the open environment in which blogs exist (with the exception of non-public blogs on the corporate intranet). As sections 2.11 and 2.12 on audience design and audience scope outline, mismatch phenomena occur when the conceptualized audience differs significantly from the actual readership. Corporate blogs are especially prone to underfitting effects. While corporate bloggers may intend to communicate with a clearly delineated audience to satisfy its needs, another (wider) readership is listening, a readership that will react negatively to being (if unintentionally) snubbed. Selectively addressing specific stakeholders alone may amount to (perceived) snubbing in such cases, a dilemma that poses a daunting challenge for corporate communicators.

Such impressions are especially undesirable for companies because they undermine the intended effect: instead of appearing more open and pluralistic, catering to one stakeholder group while ignoring another make a company look insensitive and calculating. This second dilemma is endemic to blogs and requires adaptation on the part of corporate communicators.

What perceived benefits remain without a clear way of measuring success and the relative inability to provide value to selected audiences without risking alienating others? This question is tied directly to the functions that different corporate blog subgenres realize (see section 3.5) and to the audiences they address. However, while many of these aspects are common objectives of market communication and public relations, and in a sense unique to blogs, one specific quality deserves separate discussion: the ability of a blog to function as a stage

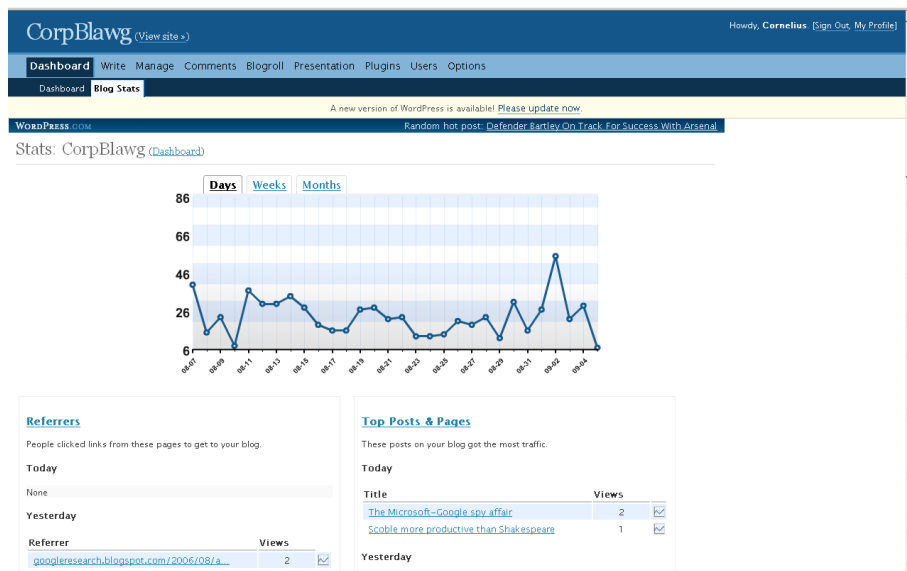


Figure 3.5: Weblog traffic statistics in Wordpress

on which the blogger can prove his quality as a competent socio-communicative actor.

The communicative actions shown in table 3.1 reflect this potential to demonstrate social competency. The list is neither intended to be exhaustive, nor are the actions listed conceived as clear and unambiguous labels. Rather, it is the requirement of interaction and the potential for feedback that sets off actions 1-3 from 4-5. While clearly there is a purpose to presenting information, making arguments and promoting products from the perspective of the corporate blogger, there is no real option for feedback – these ways of communicating are not interactional in that they do not allow the audience to respond. Presenting, arguing and promoting are viable in a linear mode of communication, while ceding space and engaging in dialog require an interactional mode of communication consisting of loops of messages and feedback to take place. Because blogs allow interactional communication, it is seen as a transgression if bloggers communicate in ways which are not interactional. The core of an interactional exchange is the theoretical ability of both sides to influence one another. While blogs which communicate in a unidirectional manner can be extremely successful, they fail to live up to the expectations of those readers who identify blogs with interactivity.

### 3.5 A typology of corporate blog subgenres

As has been previously pointed out, corporate and business blogs are always created with the objective of furthering organizational goals. However, since a variety of goals exist and a larger number of individuals from different departments and branches can potentially be involved, the corporate blog is far from being a single, clearly delineated genre. Instead, it branches out into different subtypes that address different communicative needs, are aimed at different

reader communities and written by different constituents inside an organization. In what follows, I will describe a taxonomy of corporate and business blogs based on function, authorship and suggested audience. This taxonomy is founded both on the description given in the blogs themselves and on functional properties.

Two other salient factors are author status and organization. Is the blog composed by a regular employee, a senior executive or by a group of individuals? Is it part of blog hub or does it stand by itself? Is it part of the company website or integrated into a separate site?

For taxonomical purposes I assess the following criteria:

- public-facing / internal
- single-authored / team-authored
- stand-alone / part of a fixed-size blog section / part of a variable-size blog hub

The following basic types of company blogs will be described in the rest of this section:

- product blogs
- image blogs
- executive blogs
- employee blogs

The typological map shown in 3.6 gives an overview of these types and their subcategories (which can be extended almost at will), along with their assumed function and target audience.

### **3.5.1 Product blogs**

Product blogs realize a familiar form of company-to-public communication: the marketing of products. Following the analogy of advertisements on television and in radio and print media, product blogs seek to showcase a product or service. Accordingly, the target audience for a product blog is formed by potential customers.

The goal of a product blog is to catch the interest of consumers, but the form of the blog makes adjustments to traditional forms of advertising necessary. Firstly, most traditional advertising must work with extreme time and space limitations, i.e. seconds in TV broadcasts and a few lines of text in most print ads. Blogs are under no such constraint, but can instead spread out large quantities of content. What may appear to be an advantage initially, however, is in certain ways a constraint. While unlimited “air time” theoretically exists in a blog, few product blogs can be continuously filled with novel information related to a brand or piece of merchandise without redundancies, unless extended and interactive functions associated with the product (customer service) are integrated. The sequential format and narrative macrostructure, two of the constitutive characteristics of blogs, are in that regard problematic, because they imply change, development and dynamism through time. Traditionally,



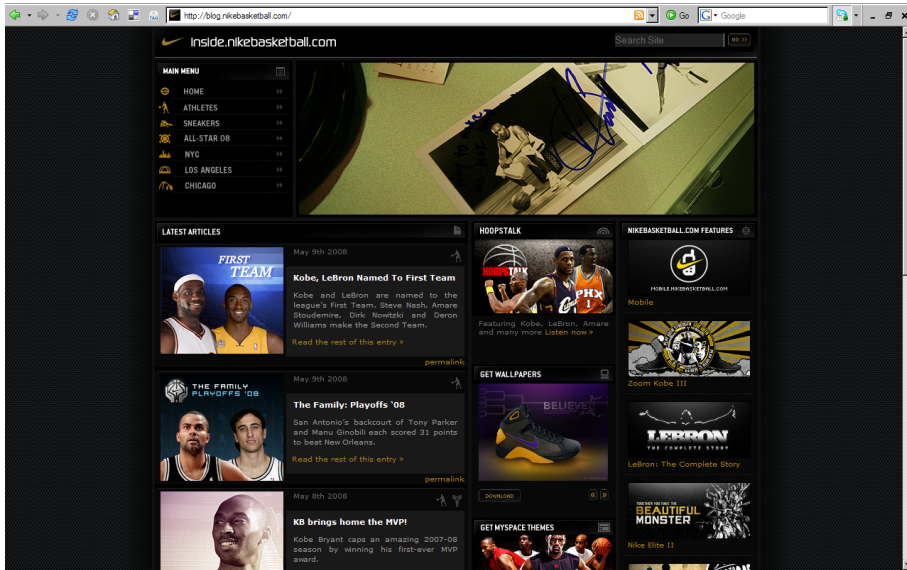


Figure 3.7: The Nike Basketball website and blog

however, advertisements in the mainstream media present products in an 'as is' fashion. Consequently, it is often not or not exclusively the product itself that is promoted, but a related activity or subject matter.

The Inside.NikeBasketball website of sports equipment manufacturer Nike is one example of this approach (figure 3.7). The main focus of the site is basketball, not Nike's products as such, but the opportunity to showcase shoes and other items is used extensively. This strategy of indirect marketing can be related to the characteristics expected of blogs: that they contain news, discussion, thoughts or feelings. Simply mentioning the product name or providing a description does not translate into enough substance and is therefore not viable. Instead, the focus is placed on an associated topic and ongoing commentary is provided by one or several bloggers.

The blog must be linked to a sequences of ongoing events, thoughts or experiences that are compatible with the narrative blog macrostructure, otherwise it is in danger of appearing contrived and out of place. Current events related to topics such as sports, technology or entertainment constitute effective hooks for company blogs that are associated with these domains and make the use of a serial format appealing.

The Student LoanDown, a blog maintained by insurance and banking company Wells Fargo, is another elaborate example of a product blog. It is aimed at college students and provides information on student loans and a wide variety of financial issues relevant to students. It is written by subject-matter experts who are identified with both a short a biographical text and a photo and who frequently integrate their personal college experiences into their posts. The idea of customer service is visibly integrated into the blog, which often answers questions on financial matters and actively engages its readership.

The following sample illustrates the individuated approach taken in The Student LoanDown.





Figure 3.8: Wells Fargo's The Student LoanDown blog

**Example 6.** *Over the past year, I've done a lot of growing up. Examples here, here and here [hyperlinks to posts concerned with adulthood and financial independence and responsibility]... and I think my parents are having a tough time with it. Five years ago, I left the nest and headed off to college. Since I'm the youngest of four daughters, my parents experienced a little empty nest syndrome [hyperlink to Wikipedia entry on 'empty nest syndrome']. But they did OK. I might have been out of the nest, but in college, at least I was still on the branch. My parents still had a big influence on what was going on in my life—and I depended on them to help me. For the past year, I've been spreading my wings a little more. I keep creeping farther and farther away from the nest—and now, as I'm purchasing a home, I'm ready to head to my own tree. My home search has taken a toll on me and the 'rents. I'm trying to be independent and grown up. They're trying to make sure nothing happens to their baby girl. We've been clashing a little bit in the form of some heated discussions: Dad (protectively): Aren't you rushing into this a little? This is a big commitment. Are you sure you know what you're doing? Me (sarcastically): No I haven't researched at all; I'm going into this completely blind. Why can't you trust that I'm able to be an adult? You get the picture ... Change is difficult, but inevitable. Parents — and children, too — really have to take a step back and ask how the other party will be affected by the change (and, perhaps more importantly, your response to it). During this transitional time of year, you might be going through changes as well. High school graduates are ready to leave the nest, and college graduates are slowly moving farther out on the branch. What part of the tree are you on, and how are you coping?*

Nowhere in the entry is there any explicit mention of financial products or offers by Wells Fargo. In what amounts to roughly two-thirds of the post there is no explicit address of the reader at all, but instead a reflection on the blogger's personal situation. This situation is not unlike the situation of projected readers

– college students learning to be financially independent – making it possible for readers to identify with the blogger. This in turn appears to lower the barrier to interact: entries in *The Student LoanDown* draw a disproportionately large number of comments and questions. This appears to reflect the strong audience-focus of the team blog. Whereas the majority of other product blogs surveyed drew comparably few comments, *The Student LoanDown* was highly interactive.

Complex products such as computer hardware and software and products associated with a strong demand for information such as financial solutions and pharmaceuticals are increasingly presented and supported via blogs. Marketing takes on a broader and more complex role in most product blogs than is the case in old-media advertising, because of the technological possibilities and usage conventions of blogs. While some product blogs flaunt the genre convention of individuation (there is no speaker), the more frequent approach is that a blogger identifies himself through the first person pronoun and often some sort of profile. Although this kind of self-presentation may run the risk of distracting readers from the product itself, it is apparently understood as vital to the socio-communicative integrity (the authenticity) of the blog.

### 3.5.2 Image blogs

While the above-mentioned blogs are in one way or another concerned with the products sold by a company (whether to promote them directly or indirectly, offer customer service, or provide background information on related topics), the second category I have identified is not primarily concerned with what the company sells, but with the corporate entity itself. Image blogs are concerned with how the public or specific communities part of the larger public but external to the company perceive the organization. This includes a wide range of functions, such as corporate social responsibility, recruiting and lobbying. The role of an image blog is to present the company, specifically its stance on specific issues (e.g. environmental policy, workplace safety standards, education). While usually aiming at presenting the company in a positive way, image blogs do not necessarily filter out all external criticism. McDonald's *Open for Discussion* company blog, focused on corporate social responsibility (CSR) and integrated into the company's broader CSR strategy, permits comments by readers who voice criticism of the company and its conduct. After posting a controversial piece about using a Hummer as part of a promotional campaign, CSR head Bob Langert reacted to the wave of criticism with this post on *Open for Discussion*:

It seems I've been roundly criticized for my posting on the topic. I hear you and your criticisms. I have opinions. We all do. The important thing is that we listen to—and respect—one another's viewpoints. That's the mission of this blog. To be frank, I've been hoping for more comments, more dialogue. This Hummer issue has definitely stirred things up. And I think that's good. So I hope you'll continue to tell me what you think, because it's so important to me—and to CSR as well. (Langert, 2006)

While the focus and communicative goal of McDonald's blog differ from those of *The Student LoanDown*, certain parallels can be observed. Firstly,

here too we find a strong drive towards individuation via explicit self-reference of the author. Rhetorical attempts are made to create parity between blogger and readership (“dialogue”) and consequently suggest solidarity between the two parties. The virtual situation of the blog itself evokes equality, firstly because blogs are prototypically written by individuals and secondly because real communicative interaction via the comment function is possible, despite the temporal and spatial separation of blogger and readership. Langert’s conceptualization of blogging and commenting as spoken discourse (by using verbs such as *hear*, *listen* and *tell*) is another parity-inducing device. Another interesting aspect is Langert’s characterization of “listening and respecting each other’s viewpoints” as the mission of the blog. It stresses interactivity and parity and indirectly claims that there is no fixed external purpose to the blog, namely presenting the company’s CSR efforts in a positive light. The manner in which the company acts and reacts on the communicative stage significantly contributes to this impression. Giving ground casts the company in the role of a socio-communicatively competent actor and forms the basis of a potential trust relationship between company and stakeholders.

A company’s message in relation to a specific issue does not necessarily have to be aimed primarily at consumers or the general public. The example below, taken from Cisco’s High Tech Policy blog, underscores the relevance of company blogs in the context of lobbying.

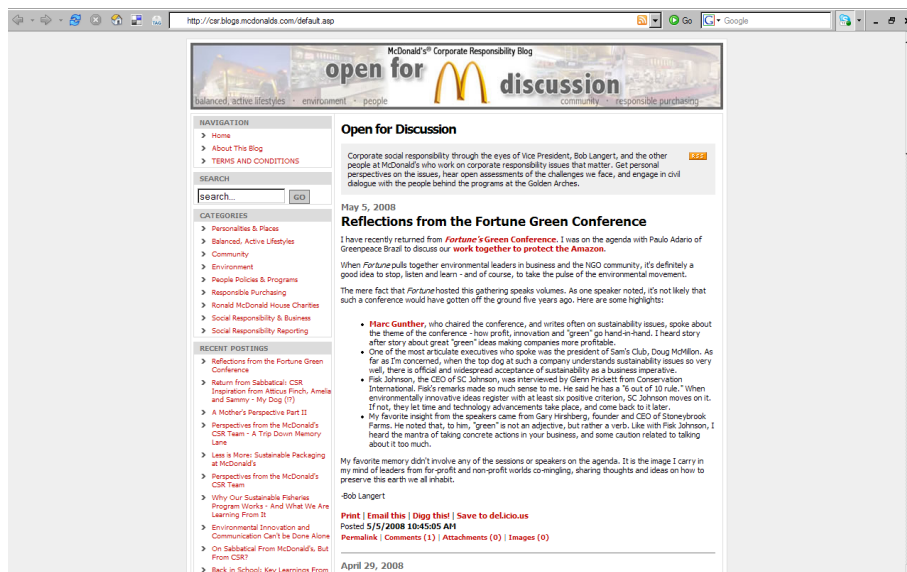


Figure 3.9: McDonald’s Open for Discussion CSR blog

**Example 7.** LONDON, UK - A substantial report called ‘Safer Children in a Digital World’ was published today by the Byron Review which set up by the British Government last autumn. The report looks at child safety in respect of video games and their use of the internet.

The report contains a number of recommendations for the technology industry to consider. The overall tone is very constructive and practical.

*It makes it clear that there are no simple regulatory solutions but that the best outcomes will be achieved where there are partnerships between government, industry and parents working together. It points out that there is no such thing as a risk-free environment so we must also help children to gain the resilience they will need to deal with problems when they occur.*

*When commenting on the report, its author, Dr Tanya Byron, has been complimentary about the internet industry's willingness to engage with her on these sensitive issues, and of the partnership work that is already taking place. As well as UK specific initiatives, there are some good global examples of industry supporting child safety such as the Family Online Safety Institute.*

While on the surface the post takes note of a piece of news on child safety on the Internet, it obviously judges the mentioned report (substantial, constructive and practical tone) which is sympathetic to media companies. The opportunity to set the agenda not only by articulating opinions but also by pointing to those of others (as long as they are favorable) is another obvious advantage of a company blog.

### 3.5.3 Executive blogs

An organization is represented, if to a varying extent, by its leadership. Those who can actively influence the strategic direction of a company are naturally in the spotlight and their decisions are relevant not only to consumers, but also to employees and investors. As a result, there is a natural pressure on executives to communicate with the public and to give an ongoing account of the company's situation and how they are steering the organization, ideally in a successful way.

For these reasons alone, a blog is an attractive communications channel for company executives, despite the fact that there are numerous constraints that any public voicing of opinion by a company's management falls under, some of them legal (Sprague, 2007).

Executives approach public-facing blogs with more reluctance than internal ones for these reasons, feeling that their main objective is to communicate inside the company (but see the case study in 4.2 for an example of a public-facing executive blog). The situation of open multiplicity in which public blogs live poses a key difficulty here. Different stakeholder groups evaluate the same text differently, demanding it be tailored to their informational needs. The more a blog is written with explicit communicative goals in mind, the more likely it is to target a specific audience and sideline others in favor of this group. Corporate blogs in general and executive blogs in particular are highly focused in their communicative intent (Sperber and Wilson, 1986), which is likely to lead to mismatch. While a typical employee blog realizes a dynamic combination of both personal and organizational goals, a CEO's blog will seek almost exclusively organizational ends. Positioning, persuading and motivating (very much doing things with words, in Austin's sense of constituting verbal actions) are all important activities for senior executives in relation to consumers, staff, investors and other stakeholders.

### 3.5.4 Employee blogs / blog hubs

Employee blogs are the fourth type of corporate weblogs and the oldest of the variants described here. The first employee blogs appeared when newly hired

staff at technology companies determined that they needed space for their blog on the company server. Once employee blogs were recognized for their potential to communicate with outside stakeholders, their adoption was usually supported or at least tolerated by senior management, especially at technology companies.

Employee blogs (figure 3.10) differ from other types of corporate blogs in that they are self-initiated and not started as part of a mandated company strategy. This is reflected by the fact that they always have a single author who sets the agenda independently of others. While what he or she can cover is restricted by company blogging policies and general legal preliminaries (non-disclosure of company secrets, refraining to discuss the products of competitors) it is usually not directed in other ways.

Employee blogs blend the motivations behind private ego and topic blogs with organizational objectives as they are found in mandated company blogs (see also the cases in 4).



Figure 3.10: Employee blog One Louder

### 3.6 A comparison of private and corporate blogs

This section contains a comparative snapshot of two private blogs and one corporate blog (NC,<sup>9</sup> Ponderstorm and Marriott on the Move). The three examples are intended to illustrate some of the characteristic differences between ego blogs and topic blogs and the relative similarities of topic and corporate blogs which adhere to the same pragmatic principles, based on an external, non-familiar audience.

NC is a pseudonymously written ego blog hosted on Google's Blogger service that began publishing content in 2004. At the original time of writing it con-

<sup>9</sup>The full name and URL of the blog are not used here to protect the privacy of the blogger.

tained a total of 484 entries, most of which describe the blogger's daily routine, work experiences, thoughts and feelings.

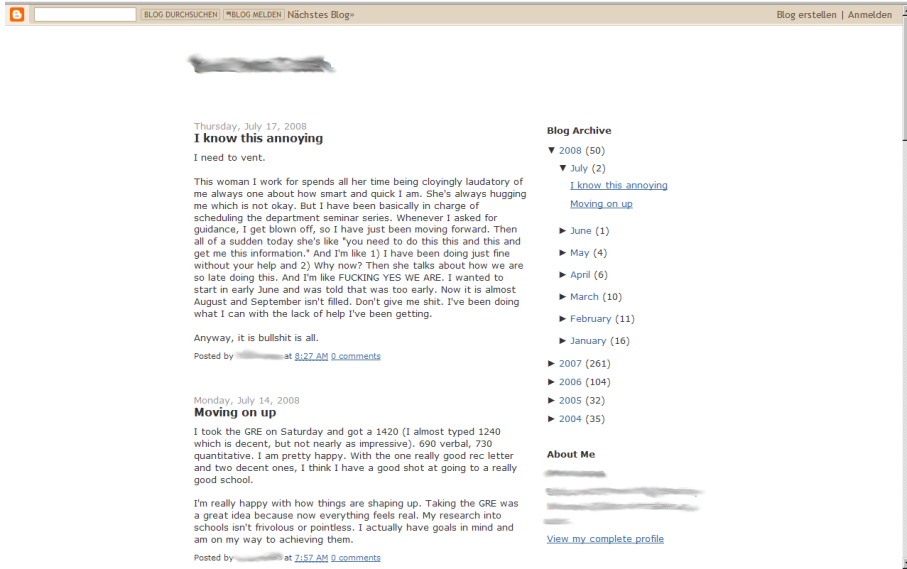


Figure 3.11: Private ego blog NC

The blog also contains comments, but very few in relation to the number of posts (a total of 7 comments in 2007 and 18 in 2006).

**Example 8.** *I need to vent.*

*This woman I work for spends all her time being cloyingly laudatory of me always one about how smart and quick I am. She's always hugging me which is not okay. But I have been basically in charge of scheduling the department seminar series. Whenever I asked for guidance, I get blown off, so I have just been moving forward. Then all of a sudden today she's like "you need to do this this and this and get me this information." And I'm like 1) I have been doing just fine without your help and 2) Why now? Then she talks about how we are so late doing this. And I'm like FUCKING YES WE ARE. I wanted to start in early June and was told that was too early. Now it is almost August and September isn't filled. Don't give me shit. I've been doing what I can with the lack of help I've been getting.*

*Anyway, it is bullshit is all.*

The example gives a sample of NC's approach to blogging. The blogger's style contains features of spoken language, such as the colloquial [NP] [be] like [direct speech] construction, what can be analyzed as an ellipsis in the final sentence ("it is bullshit, [that] is all") and use of the expletives shit, bullshit and fucking. She also makes use of capitals for emotive emphasis ("FUCKING YES WE ARE"). At the same time her writing contains no orthographic errors, she consistently writes in complete sentences and her vocabulary can partly be described as quite elaborate ("cloyingly laudatory") and consciously sophisticated. Her metalinguistic introduction ("I need to vent") clearly qualifies what follows as a 'rant', an account of her bosses' ineptness that can probably be

echoed in a similar fashion by many frustrated employees in middle management positions. While the rhetorical framing of the story (or, more specifically, the more general, condensed criticism that finally culminates in the story of 'the outrageous thing she did today') seems to be there to guide the reader, this guidance is fairly superficial. The reader, unless she is NC herself or close to her, has no way of knowing who "this woman I work for" refers to. Since no information on her work place is provided, the overall situation remains relatively opaque. This points to a paradox: the post is unlikely to interest someone who doesn't know the blogger and cannot deduce whom she is talking about. But at the same time, the degree of structure and rhetorical planning involved that cannot plausibly be described as the pure presentation of unfiltered feelings and thoughts to no one at all. Devices that mark contrast and turns of events ("But I have been basically in charge...", "Then all of a sudden...") are used to make her case – that her boss is inept, ignorant and unfair, and should be grateful to NC instead of harassing her. NC frames herself both as a victim and as the person doing the real work, while her boss is essentially incompetent and out of touch.

Why include this degree of rhetorical elaboration if nobody outside of her personal environment could possibly understand (in the sense of fully contextualize) her post and would at the same time be unlikely to care about her problems? While it is possible to claim that NC somehow hopes to reach a broader audience and garner its sympathies, this presupposes that she conceptualizes such an audience and seeks to write accordingly. But "This woman I work for" sounds much more like an introduction given to a friend or familiar person. While NC seeks to present herself in a positive light in her blog, it is arguably to those close to her (and possibly to herself) and not to an anonymous public.

The second private blog, Ponderstorm, leaves a different impression. It is written with a decidedly political focus, with the absolute bulk of the 90 entries tagged accordingly: categories used include *Barack Obama* (9), *Campaign* (8), *Foreign Policy* (5), *Iraq* (3), *Israel* (4), *John McCain* (3), *Politics* (20) and *Radical Islam* (5). Only three entries are marked with the *Life* tag and all of these still include reference to news events.<sup>10</sup> The blog comments thoroughly on other sources, especially video clips from news sources such as FoxNews and blogs such as DailyKos. Frequently a clip is used as a starting point for a commentary on a certain issue, such as the integrity of a politician or the quality of a speech.

**Example 9.** *Honestly, I'm still surprised that the champion of change Barack Obama would choose Washington-insider Joseph Biden as his running mate. It seems puzzling that Obama would go for another Senator with essentially nothing but Senate-learned experience. And to top that off, Biden was caught in the late 1980s plagiarizing an anti-American British MP. Furthermore, the "clean and articulate" Biden has recently said some very unflattering things of Obama and*

<sup>10</sup>In one entry tagged with *Life* about a business selling politically themed kippahs, the blogger states somewhat strangely: "My point of this post is to share some fluffy news on a more personal level. I hope it encourages people to pursue their innovations and aim to be upwardly mobile. Innovation, creativity and hard work can take you all the way to the top." The post that in fact reveals nothing remotely personal is keenly aware of the rhetorical power of 'being personal'. It is still highly purposeful despite its focus on "fluffy news".

insulted Indian American immigrants in his home state. Biden has a reputation of shooting from the hip and thinking later.

I think we're seeing the beginning of the end of Obama's image as the champion of change and freshness. He's lashed himself to the old guard in Washington and it will taint him.

While just like in NC there is an identifiable speaker, he is a presenter of information and a commentator, but not the topic of the post. Joe Biden and Barack Obama are referred to four and five times in the post, in contrast to only two uses of the first person pronoun – a marked contrast to NC. Lexical differences are also notable in Ponderstorm: nouns tend to be compounds or adjectivally modified (“champion of change”, “Washington-(sic)insider”, “Senate-learned experience” ...) and several metaphorical expressions are used (“shoot from the hip”, “lash oneself to the old guard”). While ostensibly the post merely expresses an opinion (and even “surprise” that is largely rhetorical) it clearly aims to garner the sympathies of those with similar views or persuade those with views that are different. The reader is actively involved via use of the second person plural pronoun at the beginning of the second paragraph (“I think we're seeing...”). While the construction is so popular in medial contexts (e.g. in the pieces of television commentators on network news shows) that it has almost become a fixed expression, the pronominal involvement of the reader (or viewer) clearly has a suasive effect: we are seeing the same objective reality with our eyes, therefore our conclusions must inevitably be similar.

The screenshot shows a web browser displaying a blog post on a site titled "Ponderstorm". The page has a green header with "Home" and "About" links. The main content area features a post titled "Key Principles of Government" dated 17 August 2008. The post text discusses the author's frustration with the lack of talk about core principles of government and outlines his views on federalism, separation of powers, and the limits of federal power. A quote from the Constitution is included: "The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people." The post concludes with a note that the author is drafting a "Key Principles of Government" document. On the right side of the page, there is an "About" section with a profile picture of Mike Allen, a "Search" box, and a "Meta" section with "Log In". Below these are "Recent Posts" and "Categories" lists. The "Recent Posts" list includes "Key Principles of Government", "The Only Place Democrats Want to Drill is Your Wallet", "Happy Ronnie Musgrave Day!", "Video on Barack Obama and Tony Reddo's Connection", "What Does Obama Really Believe About Iran?", and "60 Seconds". The "Categories" list includes "Barack Obama", "Environment", "Foreign Policy", "History", "Iraq", "Israel", "Life", and "Miscellaneous".

Figure 3.12: Private topic blog Ponderstorm

The corporate blog example, Marriott on the Move, superficially combines aspects of the two other types, but overall is decidedly a topic blog (figure 3.13). Its credited author is J.W. “Bill” Marriott, CEO of the hotel chain Marriot International. Marriot, age 76, has stated that he dictates his posts and then has an associate publish them. While obviously this cannot be confirmed, the tone of the blog is markedly oral, slightly reminiscent of a radio broadcast and



an audio version of each post is also available on the site. It contains a mix of posts on travel and tourism-related issues along with discussion of miscellaneous topics, such as whether or not presidential candidates should blog.

**Example 10.** *Now that the 29th Olympic Games have come to a close, I've been thinking back to all the memorable moments over the past few weeks. There were a lot of surprise victories, many upsets and many world records.*

*To me, and I'm sure to many of you, these Olympics will be remembered because of Michael Phelps and his eight gold medals in swimming, making his total career gold medal count 14 - more than any other Olympian.*

*I find Michael Phelps' journey very inspiring. Not only does he have a body built for swimming with large hands and size 14 feet - he has his own personal flippers - but he has an amazing ability to be disciplined and tremendous stamina. The discipline says that he swims every day of the year - 365 days - even on Christmas, Thanksgiving and his birthday. He completes at least two full workouts a day, when getting ready for a competition will workout up to four times a day and swims 40 - 50 miles a week.*

*But, boy, does he eat. He eats 12,000 calories a day to maintain his ideal body weight. A website says for breakfast he has "three fried-egg sandwiches loaded with cheese, lettuce, tomatoes, fried onions and mayonnaise. Two cups of coffee. One five-egg omelet. One bowl of grits. Three slices of French toast topped with powdered sugar. And three chocolate-chip pancakes." I wish there were a lot of Michael Phelps eating in our hotel restaurants!*

*What a great example he is of discipline, hard work, total commitment and the importance of training. I want to congratulate Michael on his amazing accomplishment, as well as all the other Olympians who made these Games so exciting to watch.*

*I'm Bill Marriott and thanks for helping me keep Marriott on the move.*

The topic of the post (as the title indicates) are the Beijing Olympic Games and the success of U.S. swimmer Michael Phelps. While Marriott's presence and viewpoint are clearly indicated, he is not himself the theme of the post: of 19 total sentences, only 6 contain explicit self-reference via the first person pronoun. By contrast, only three sentences in the example from NC are without self-reference.

Following an introduction in the first paragraph, Michael Phelps' career, Olympic success and eating habits are described in paragraphs 2-5. The final paragraph preceding the 'goodbye'-message constitutes the essence of the post: Phelps is congratulated for his spectacular achievement and lauded as an example of discipline and hard work – values that are culturally salient far beyond sports.

Why would the CEO of a hotel chain blog about the athletic success of a U.S. swimmer and discuss his diet? Firstly, the connection to the Olympics as a major tourism event is significant. Secondly, the post can be read as an entertaining or interesting aside between entries more visibly concerned with Marriott as a company. But most importantly, the post allows Bill Marriott as the figurehead of the company to articulate what its values are and what it stands for. Marriott on the Move allows the company to reach out to a range of different stakeholder audiences (staff, media, public officials, customers) and address them selectively and personally.

**Marriott**  
*on the move*

**Featured Post**

**One of the Best Marriott Deals Yet** Listen

Posted: September 9, 2008 6:32:41 AM

Life can be pretty hectic and, just like everybody else, I sometimes like to get away to relax and recharge my batteries. My wife Donna is a big advocate of making time to be with our family and time to recharge my engines. I sure think it helps make me a better manager and a better CEO.

I know it's getting harder now for people to get away with the current economic uncertainty, high gas prices and very high airfares. A lot of people who read my blog have asked me about deals at Marriott hotels. So, if you weren't able to get away this summer, or if you want to get away before the year ends, I'm excited to tell you about one of our very best offers yet.

We're offering 20 percent off weekend rates at more than 2,200 of our Marriott hotels now through December 21st. All you . . .

[ENLARGE](#)

[Continue reading "One of the Best Marriott Deals Yet"](#)

[Listen](#) [Comments \(5\)](#) | [Permalink](#)

**Recent Posts**

**Should John McCain Become a Blogger?** Listen

Posted: September 2, 2008 2:19:56 PM

The Internet and new media is playing a big role in the 2008 U.S. Presidential elections. Barack Obama has certainly taken it to new heights when he revealed his vice presidential running mate through text message.

John McCain has gotten some grief because he's not very comfortable using a computer, especially to communicate. I can certainly understand his reluctance as I'm a Neanderthal when it comes to technology.

But, based on my experience, I'd tell John McCain to become a blogger because launching a blog has proven to be very successful for me. I'm able to talk with . . .

[ENLARGE](#)

[Continue reading "Should John McCain Become a Blogger?"](#)

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**Profile**  
I'm Bill Marriott, Chairman & CEO of Marriott International

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To receive new posts, enter your email address

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are universally topic blogs, in that their focus is on the conceptualized audience and its communicative and informational needs, not on the blogger and his inner processes. While personal experiences and thoughts certainly influence the writing process of many corporate bloggers, they are meant to enhance a feeling of familiarity and trust between blogger and reader and are not themselves the reason for the blog's existence. Employee blogs may differ in this regard, depending very much on the individual case: since employee blogs are less effort-driven than team blogs, which focus on a specific issue, audience or area of business. Looking once more at the communicative process in blogs while applying Grice's conversational maxims reveals several observations:

1. The maxim of quality (*Do not say what you believe to be false; Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence*) in a corporate blog works not only in the usual way, but can also be extended to include situational meta-information. That the writer of a certain blog is really the purported author and that his claims about his motives are sincere is by far the most important cornerstone of authentic blogging (see, for example, discussions of ghost blogging – having a journalist or professional writer maintain the blog of a senior executive). Fake blogs (*flogs*; see section 3.8) are a notable phenomenon; their fakeness lies not so much in the posts themselves, but rather in the false identities of their authors.
2. The maxim of quantity (*Make your contribution as informative as is required for the current purpose of the exchange; Do not make your contribution more informative than is required*) is adhered to in the sense that posts in corporate blogs seek to inform and “provide value” to readers using the optimal amount of space. This is in notable contrast to entries in private ego blogs, which have longer posts and more variation in post length.
3. The maxims of relevance and manner (*Be relevant; Avoid obscurity*) are also a measure of audience focus, in that there is a clear motivation to blog about subjects that are relevant to stakeholders.

Numerous consultants and (self-proclaimed) experts give advice on how a corporate blog should be written, and what constitutes good or bad business blogging. Many of these prescriptions echo Gricean, including some of those reproduced below (Petrovic, 2008, no pagination):

1. Keep entries to one page or less - a blog entry should be short and to the point.
2. Blogs are intended as on-line logs or journals and are more informal than other marketing mediums so write accordingly.
3. Use simple terms - don't include jargon or abbreviations unless you are sure your audience will understand otherwise it will simply put them off.
4. Don't use your blog as a forum to attempt to promote or sell - its not appropriate.
5. It is generally accepted in the blogosphere that you can quote from another blog as long as you state your source and link back to it.

6. Remember to add value. Think about who your intended audience is and write posts that are informative - share useful links to cool sites and on-line services.
7. Emoticons may be okay for a personal blog but in a corporate one they look unprofessional. Unless your target audience is the under 20 consumer crowd then its best to avoid using emoticons at all.
8. Its good to include video clips, images and podcasts.
9. Don't use fonts that are too large or hard to read and be sparing with capitals (no need to yell!).
10. When you include links to other web pages, always remember to check that your links work before publishing your blog article (there's nothing worse than clicking on a link in anticipation only to find that it doesn't link take [sic] you where its supposed to).

The desire to hybridize the purposefulness of pre-existing forms of external business communication with interpersonal communication is clearly visible in these prescriptions, despite the fact that they frequently seem contradictory or based on no actual evidence.

### **3.8 Flogging**

Because a blog is generally interpreted to be its owner's personal publishing platform on the Net, its integrity and authenticity are extremely vital to how it is evaluated. Fake blogs (or flogs) are those blogs where the associated meta-information (time of writing, author) is manipulated in some form, usually by assuming a false identity. This is perceived as a form of deception by readers if it is revealed, unless the fake is an apparent parody.

The Secret Diary of Steve Jobs is an example of such a parody. Assuming the identity of Steve Jobs, Apple Inc's founder and CEO, Dan Lyons, an editor at Forbes Magazine, pseudonymously wrote humorous pieces about the tech industry and Apple for well over a year before being discovered. The blog and the revelation of Lyon's identity in 2007 received considerable press coverage, following intense speculation by journalists regarding the blog's authorship. Leading industry figures such as Bill Gates and Steve Jobs himself commented on the blog, Gates joking in front of developers that he was not, in fact, Fake Steve and the (real) Jobs calling the blog "pretty funny". The appeal of the blog stemmed partly from the assumed style of Jobs, who is known to be an eccentric, but possibly even more so from the candor and explicitness of Lyons' writing:

Thing is, nobody ever doubted that Facebook can do better. What's scary is the fact that they won't do better until people start to scream at them. It's the fact that it doesn't really seem to be in their nature to do the right thing. Their instinct, in fact, seems to be to do the wrong thing, and to keep doing it until they get caught. Even after they get caught, their instinct is to spin and fudge and brazen it out. No wonder the Borg has partnered with them. It's a



Figure 3.15: The Secret Diary of Steve Jobs flog

match made in heaven. These guys are like Google, only their slogan isn't "Don't be evil" – it's "Don't get caught."

Either that or they truly are a bunch of spoiled and scarily fucking clueless kids who honestly have no idea why people are upset about this, because they truly have no moral compass and they view this whole thing as just another pain in the ass hurdle to get over on the way to becoming rich. In which case, yeah, I'm, like, rilly rilly super glad that they're, like, gathering information on me? (Lyons, 2007)

The notability of flogs points to the identity of the blogger as a highly salient parameter of bloghood. Flogging is akin to putting words into someone's mouth, a deceptive and subversive act that reconfigures the meaning of a message via the misassociation with a purported speaker.

### 3.9 Linguistic aspects of corporate blogs

So far I have focused on the larger communicative dimension of blogging and corporate blogging, mostly neglecting microlinguistic aspects of the genre in favor of an analysis of the situational framing in which they occur. An investigation into the strictly microlinguistic dimension of corporate blogging obviously benefits from prior establishment of a baseline against which the emergent genre can be measured; without such a baseline, the term variation cannot be applied in earnest. In the case of company blogs, however, there is more than one plausible baseline. "Language as such" (in this case, a sufficiently large corpus of English), blogs as such (a sufficiently large corpus of private web logs) and finally the domain-specific variety of Business English are all relevant baselines to which corporate blogging can be compared. In the rest of this section, I will focus on a comparison of corporate blog language with Business English and

Standard English. I will restrict my brief comparison entirely to lexical aspects, as discursive qualities are more adequately illustrated with examples (full blog entries) than frequency counts. This quantitative data supports the broader claims made about the communicative qualities of corporate blogs, but is by no means unambiguous, which is why it does not occupy a more privileged space in this thesis.

<b>Business Lexis (positive key words)</b>	<b>Non-Business Lexis (negative keywords)</b>
1. <b>People:</b> from the business world: <i>customer, contractor, manager, seller, buyer</i>	1. <b>People:</b> family, royalty, domestic relations: <i>man, mum, wife, dad, baby, Queen</i>
2. <b>Institutions:</b> Companies and business institutions: <i>company, industry, airline, telecom</i>	2. <b>Institutions:</b> Societal: <i>church, army, hospital, council</i>
3. <b>Things:</b> business-related, concrete: <i>product, property, equipment</i>	3. <b>Things:</b> diverse: <i>horse, cat, diamond, glass, river</i> abstract: <i>expression, intelligence, preference</i>
4. <b>Places:</b> Business-related: <i>office, department, boardroom</i>	4. <b>Places:</b> House and home: <i>curtain, bedroom, bathroom, kitchen</i> Countryside: <i>bay, hill, sea, forest</i>
5. <b>Days of the week:</b> Not key	5. <b>Days of the week:</b> Saturday, Sunday
6. <b>States &amp; qualities:</b> business-related and positive: <i>growth, stability, leadership, competence</i>	6. <b>States &amp; qualities:</b> ethical questions / meaning of life <i>death, life, war, peace, truth, age, peace</i>
7. <b>Dynamic public verbs:</b> <i>sell, manage, manufacture, deliver, confirm</i>	7. <b>Personal and interpersonal private verbs:</b> <i>know, see, pray, feel, die, lie, marry</i>
8. <b>Positive impersonal adjectives:</b> <i>new, best, successful, available, relevant</i>	8. <b>Positive and negative personal adjectives:</b> <i>nice, lovely, beautiful</i> <i>bloody, dead, dark</i>
9. <b>Money:</b> focus on money/finance: <i>cashflow, VAT, GDP, capital, earnings</i>	9. <b>Money:</b> No/little mention of money/finance - only mentions: <i>quid and pound</i>
10. <b>Activities:</b> business-related: <i>investment, payment, development, production</i>	10. <b>Activities:</b> personal, family related: <i>birthday, Christmas, marriage, prayer</i>

Figure 3.16: Business and non-business lexis in the Business English Corpus (Nelson, 2006, p. 226)

Business English is a many-faceted entity (Pilegaard, 1997; Kirby and Harter, 2003; Smart, 2006). While a simple working definition of *language used by the employees of companies in the context of business* is employed here, this does not solve the problem entirely. Since corporations engage in a wide range of communicative activities in different media channels and involving different departments and employees, a similarly wide range of discourse genres is at their disposal. To claim that all these different genres (job advertisement, annual report, mission statement, business email, corporate website) share formal similarities is initially a broad assertion, especially if one goes on by claiming that it applies in the same way to different business sectors, as corporate practices are hardly the same in the fishing industry and the IT sector. Finally, English has established itself firmly as the lingua franca of business, making it the transactional language of choice in deals between Chinese manufacturers and French retailers, German automakers and Swedish telecommunication companies, and their communicative practices can be expected to be culturally conditioned in different ways (Bargiela-Chiappini and Harris, 1997; Bargiela-Chiappini et al., 2007).

In spite of this diversity, the concept of Business English can be utilized for a comparison when beginning with the assumption that different areas of use share certain functional qualities – in other words, that all genres of business communication are used for a fixed set of communicative purposes. Assuming that concrete genres such as meeting minutes, mission statements and advertisements can all be subsumed under the label of corporate discourse, it becomes possible to make general observations about the qualities of Business English in lexical terms and differences between corporate blogs and Business English.

My baseline in this case is the *Business English Corpus* (BEC) developed by linguist Mike Nelson (Nelson, 2000) as part of an investigation that aimed to improve the quality of Business English teaching materials and describe semantic association in the lexis of Business English (Nelson, 2006). Nelson focused specifically on the aspect of semantic prosody (Louw, 1993), i.e. the statistically significant frequency of specific collocation patterns based on semantic association. Statistical significance was determined by using the British National Corpus (BNC) as a baseline. Nelson's research appears to confirm assumptions about language use in corporate environments but also yielded new observations. He divided positive keywords (those tokens that occurred much higher frequently in the BEC than in the BNC) into five discrete semantic groups: "people in business", "business activities", "business actions", "business description" and "business events and entities", groups that stood out as major themes in business discourse. Beyond that, several other observations could be made:

- language in business settings tended to be action-oriented and non-emotive,
- human actors appear largely in their respective functions (customer, manager, partner), not as named individuals,
- of the verbs used, concrete and interpersonal verbs outnumber private verbs,
- positively connoted lexemes dominate strongly over negatively connoted ones,
- business language tends to be at least somewhat formulaic: "in the business environment words that are normally very open in their collocative potential become at least partially fixed" (Nelson, 2006, p. 226).

As Nelson's observations apply to a range of genres that realize a variety of functions for businesses, a comparison with the language found in corporate blogs was bound to yield differences. As figure 3.16 underlines, however, many of the negative keywords – tokens frequent in the BNC and therefore in discourse in general but infrequent in the BEC – are words that we can expect to find with high frequency in blogs: social institutions and roles; abstract and ethical concepts; human states and qualities; private emotive verbs; positive and negative personal adjectives.

The subjective human perspective that is markedly present in a prototypical ego blog manifests itself precisely through those linguistic qualities that business discourse as a whole lacks. The appropriation of blogs for business communication is therefore at least in part a piggybacking operation: the qualities associated with the genre are desirable qualities, therefore its adoption is



<i>Rank</i>	<i>Corporati</i>	<i>PoS</i>	<i>BNC</i>	<i>PoS</i>	<i>BEC</i>	<i>PoS</i>
1	the	DT	the	AT0	the	AT0
2	to	TO	of	PRF	be	VB
3	and	CC	and	CJC	to	TO0
4	of	IN	a	AT0	and	CJC
5	a	DT	in	PRP	of	PRF
6	in	IN	to	TO0	a	AT0
7	<b>I</b>	PP	is	VBZ	in	IN
8	is	VBZ	to	PRP	that	CJT
9	for	IN	was	VBD	have	VH
10	It	PP	it	PNP	for	PRP
11	<b>you</b>	PP	for	PRP	<b>you</b>	PNP
12	on	IN	with	PRP	it	PNP
13	with	IN	<b>he</b>	PNP	<b>I</b>	PNP
14	this	DT	be	VBI	on	PRP
15	that	IN	on	PRP	<b>we</b>	PNP
16	<b>we</b>	PP	<b>I</b>	PNP	with	PRP
17	are	VBP	that	CJT	this	AT0
18	be	VB	by	PRP	as	CJT
19	at	IN	at	PRP	do	VD
20	was	VBD	<b>you</b>	PNP	at	PRP

Table 3.2: Prounoun frequencies in CBC/Corporati, the British National Corpus (BNC) and the Business English Corpus (BEC)

a strategic choice. The relative lexical and semantic stability of BE stands in marked contrast to the high overall linguistic variability in corporate blogs. A number of factors contribute to this picture:

- blogs strongly reflect the thoughts, feelings, actions and experiences of their individual owners;
- corporate blogs can be conceptualized as conversations, which contributes to more interpersonal language;
- corporate blogs can be conceptualized as diaries, journals and collections of personal thoughts;
- corporate blogs can be conceptualized as a form of reporting, journalism, self-coverage and self-presentation;
- corporate blogs can be conceptualized as narratives of company activities;
- corporate blogs are interpreted by their creators as open and available to a broad audience by their creators;
- corporate blogs are explicitly recognized as a channel where the negative perception of corporate culture, reflected by the non-personal style of BE, can be countered by propagating a different, more personal style.

<i>Rank</i>	<i>Noun</i>	<i>Frequency</i>
1	time	9207
2	people	7405
3	way	4964
4	blog	4889
5	Microsoft	4872
6	business	4138
7	year	4128
8	Windows	4078
9	day	3849
10	today	3844
11	information	3798
12	week	3613
13	years	3580
14	things	3454
15	team	3429
16	system	3059
17	world	3042
18	Google	3018
19	something	3001
20	work	2997
21	site	2994
22	customers	2916
23	Web	2805
24	application	2781
25	lot	2754

Table 3.3: Frequent nouns in CBC/Corporati

Table 3.2 compares the most frequent tokens from CBC/Corporati, the written section of the BNC, and the BEC, and gives some indication of the linguistics differences between the three varieties. The significance of interpersonal pronouns (*I, we, you*) both in blogs and in business is immediately recognizable and appears relevant in conjunction with the BNC data. While *we* and *you* occupy almost identical slots in CBC/Corporati and the BEC, *I* is markedly more frequent in CBC/Corporati. *It* in its different functions occupies almost the same rank all three corpora, while third person *he* is markedly more prevalent in the BNC than CBC/Corporati and the BEC. It appears that self-reference is not only more prevalent in blogs than in business language and in “language as such”, but also much more frequent than on the Web in general (cf. Lenssen (2003), whose top 50 token list includes no first person pronouns).

Table 3.3 shows unnormalized frequencies for the 25 most common noun phrases in CBC/Corporati. Many frequently occurring NPs are non-specific, i.e. they appear with high frequency in virtually any corpus (*time, year* and *day* are good examples), but terms such as *business* and *customers* point to the particular domain orientation of corporate blogs. In addition, a strong technological slant is apparent: *blog, system, Windows* (the operating system) and *application* are unlikely to be found outside of IT and software development

circles. The high frequency of the company names *Microsoft* and *Google* is the result of Google's prolificness in generating news about new products and services that are immediately taken up by company tech bloggers and the fact that Microsoft's blog hub contributed a very large volume of posts to CBC/Corporati (see appendix A.1).

In sum it can be observed that corporate blogs share lexical similarities both with the domain-specific characteristics of Business English and with the parent STF of the private blog. In terms of topics corporate blog language unsurprisingly centers on business, but takes on the perspective of the individual blogger much more strongly than pre-digital corporate genres take on the subjective perspective of their authors. This reflects the firm establishment of blogs as a form of personal publishing – a grounding that is helpful to companies seeking to personalize their image in the eyes of external stakeholders.

## Chapter 4

# Corporate blogging case studies

The following two examples (4.1, 4.2) take a more scrutinizing look at two corporate blogs and apply the theoretical framework introduced in chapters 2 and 3.

### 4.1 One Louder (Microsoft)

From a developmental standpoint, the oldest subtype of corporate blog is the employee blog, which grew out of the activity of private bloggers who joined technology companies in the early 2000s. Employee blogs are distinguished from several other types by the fact that they are written and published by individuals (as opposed to teams) inside an organization, and that these individuals do not have a job function that revolves around stakeholder communication (in contrast to public relations or corporate communications experts, or to senior executives).

Purpose and audience design tend to be less clear in employee blogs than in other types, largely because the impetus for the creation of an employee blog is the desire of the blogger to express herself. While organizational goals may be involved as well (documentation and knowledge management, management of stakeholder relations, conducting market research), employee blogs share functional characteristics with private blogs and exhibit similarities with them. As examples show, the distinction between personal and organizational goals is scalar rather than binary.

Corporate blogs rarely perform only a single role, but mix and combine arrays of functions. One Louder, the blog of Microsoft staffing manager Heather Hamilton, is an example of an employee blog, albeit with qualifications. The blog was initiated with this post, written on March 16, 2004:

**Example 11.** *OK, technology has finally hit me over the head. I've been talking about blogging for long enough. Now it's time to do it! I've been inspired by my colleagues Gretchen and Zoe, who have just started blogging on technical recruiting at Microsoft. They have gotten quite a positive response. I wouldn't want the marketing community to feel left out ; )*

*So the marketing space at Microsoft is a bit different than the technical space...different skills, different people, different objectives. But passion for technology is an absolute requirement! The technical space at Microsoft has gotten a lot of coverage in the blogging community. WHAT ABOUT MARKETING? (Sorry, lost my cool there for a second!)*

*So let me introduce myself. Gretchen and Zoe got some gruff over being too formal in their initial posts, so I'll try not to do that. My name is Heather and I am a recruiter. Everyone say "Hello Heather;" [..]*

*I'll post some more details of my role here in my bio as I get things up and running. I'm really interested in hearing what people in the marketing community have on their minds, specifically with regard to employment and Microsoft. Want to know more about "Marketing at Microsoft"? Want to hear about some of the cool products we are working on? Interested in what it's really like to work here? What we look for on resumes? How to make yourself more visible on the Internet? How we define branding or business development? Ask me...please!*

*Here comes the disclaimer...*

*This posting is provided "AS IS" with no warranties, and confers no rights.*

There is a clearly visible conceptualization of the blog post as a speech event on the part of the writer: discourse markers, emotive expressions and pronoun use all suggest a real-life conversation as the conceptual blueprint for the post. This is also reflected in the statement about the blogger's colleagues who were chided for being "too formal" in their own blog introduction. Favoring a conceptualization of blogs as oral communication rather than writing has a multitude of reasons. Written communication in an institutional context can be associated with asymmetrical power relations. Written genres that serve official organizational functions may have qualities akin to speech acts which "do things" by communicating them. This requires a series of rules and regulations that govern what organizational conventions should look like, and these conventions are perceived both as constraining and as a tool for reinforcing asymmetry.

Despite the deliberate personal touch, the blogger's area of expertise – recruiting in the marketing sector – is clearly related to her blogging, it can even be regarded as the basis. But over time she integrates much more personal writing into her blog, as the sample below illustrates.

**Example 12.** *I'm not sure what has gotten into me other than the fact that I am happier than I have been for a VERY long time. It's funny how sometimes things can just fall into place. The changes that I wanted to have happen at work happened without me doing much about it (other than saying "this is what I want"). I have finally started to spend some weekend time relaxing (and hanging with friends). And I am starting to believe what Eckhart Tolle says about coincidences not happening; it's all for a reason (and with most of my life, I get the reasons for even some of the unpleasant things happening). Example: last week my manager and I were talking about me needing to travel to one of our dev centers. She recommended Ireland (oh yeah, I am totally doing that!) and I said "why don't we have a dev center in Amsterdam? I really want to go there." Then this week, I got an e-mail inviting me to speak at a conference in Amsterdam. How 'bout that? I've decided not to question what forces (if any) could be involved with things like that happening. I'm just going to enjoy it.*

Between the first example and the second lie several hundred posts in which Hamilton discusses a wide range of topics, ranging from technology and current events to decorating her house and enjoying college football in the fall. Entries in March 2004 pointed markedly not only to work issues, with titles such as “Marketing Resumes...what recruiters like to see” and “Recruiting MBA Alumni”, but also involved readers by asking questions and requesting feedback. These entries provide a clear contrast to the focus of the second example, which is decidedly more personal and inward-looking. In the second example, Hamilton describes inner processes and emotions and is herself the main topic of the post. Of the total words in both examples, 4.2% in the first are self-referential (*I* and *me*) vs. 7.4% in the second. There is more use of the progressive aspect in the second post than in the first, which is largely due to the description of inner states, and several expressions are vague in a way that does not allow the reader to understand specifically what is meant (“The changes that I wanted to have happen [sic] at work happened without me doing much about it”).

Hamilton's growing tendency to blog thoughts and feelings and to situate herself temporally and spatially is reflected in example 13, where this takes place in the post itself:

**Example 13.** *I'm spending my day posting jobs to MBA Alumni organizations. I was blessed with a HUGE window in my office (it's actually 2 windows) and am distracted by how unbelievably beautiful it is outside right now. For some reason, this winter seemed longer than usual, but it does seem odd to have such great weather so early...but I am not complaining.*

*So I am posting a bunch of jobs to the top MBA sites, so I can sit here by the windows and pretend I am in my backyard with a margarita in my hand. We do a lot of posting to MBA alumni sites – looking for folks a year or more out of b-school. Don't worry if you don't have an MBA because even if it's listed in the requirements of a position, we will absolutely consider folks without it. It's really about who can do the job, right? [..]*

Hamilton's shifting from a description of her immediate surroundings to a work-related subject (recruiting and the expectations of recruiters such as herself have of applicants) is characteristic of the synthesis of personal and organizational focus found in many employee blogs. As Table 7 shows, Hamilton features prominently in her own discourse and she frequently addresses her readers to involve them in the blog, something that is reflected in the high frequency of comments.

## 4.2 Jonathan's Blog (Sun Microsystems)

The second example presented here is situated on a different hierarchical level than the employee blog in terms of power relations. As the label implies, executive blogs are written by senior corporate executives and published on the corporate website, either publicly or on the intranet. Their functions vary, but addressing stakeholders close to the company, such as shareholders and employees, are central issues.

One highly visible public executive blog is Jonathan's Blog, maintained by Jonathan Schwartz, CEO of Sun Microsystems, a large U.S.-American IT com-

**Jonathan's Blog**

Select a Language  
English

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**SUNDAY SEP 14, 2008**

**Of Wine, Virtualization and xVM**

A few years back, I remember sitting with a group of customers talking about wine, and virtualization (a natural pairing, if ever one existed). Wine, because we were at an event Sun was hosting in Napa Valley, the heart of California's wine country - virtualization, because the attendees were data center professionals who'd come to talk about the future.

The customers in attendance all ran very high scale, high value data centers, who would deservedly respond to the accusation that they "hugged" their servers with "and what of it?" They were the individuals who kept some of the world's most valuable systems running with exceptional reliability.

But they were all starting to see and worry about the same thing, running applications in "virtualized" grids of networked infrastructure ("cloud computing" wasn't yet in vogue, or I'm sure someone would've used the term).

Now, virtualization is a simple concept with a fancy name (abbreviated to "v12n" by the cognoscenti - by that method, I am "j14z"). It's simply slicing up physical computers into many smaller "virtual" computers, each of which can be outfitted with its own OS and application stack.

That is, not only does a virtualized computer take on the task of running multiple OS's (running atop a hypervisor, described below), but the OS's themselves might change over time, responding to load or schedule. The traditional view of "computer A runs OS/Application B" can now give way to a more responsive, "these computers are available for high priority work," without regard to operating system or architecture. A spike in on-line shopping might reallocate more "virtual" machines to transaction processing during peak shopping hours, shifting to a different OS/app stack when the frenzy dies down. Capacity moves from fixed to fungible.

Although desktop virtualization wasn't the focus of these customers, most live in a world with multiple desktop OS's, too - it's not that they all (like me) run five different desktop OS's, most don't - it's that they have multiple generations of Windows, or no longer have the source code to legacy applications, a condition that dictates you keep old OS's (and hardware) around. Desktop virtualization enables users to run multiple OS's side by side on a single desktop, and divorces software upgrades from hardware upgrades (an innovation keeping CIO's and developers smiling).

Back to the datacenter, virtualization can enable extreme infrastructure consolidation - decoupling applications from hardware, thus more efficient capacity planning and custom purchases. And so

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Figure 4.1: The weblog of Sun Microsystems CEO Jonathan Schwartz

pany.<sup>1</sup> Schwartz, who has been at the helm of the business since 2006, explained his motivation in an interview with Fortune Magazine shortly after taking the top spot:

My No. 1 priority isn't spending time communicating; it's ensuring that my communications are broadly received. Blogging to me has become the most efficient form of communication. When I blog I'm talking to the world. I can write a blog in an hour and a half and share something substantive with everyone. But for me to get to São Paulo for a meeting with Brazilian customers is easily a two-day operation. (Schwartz, 2006, no pagination)

The reach, efficiency and speed of blogs – the purely technical characteristics – are thus what prompted Schwartz to take up blogging. He realized that he could communicate more effectively through his blog than via email and “share something substantive with everyone”. According to the interview, roughly 10% of all employees blog at blogs.sun.com, the company's aggregator site. Interestingly enough, the CEO's blog does not top the list in terms of popularity. According to the site, more than twice as many people clicked on a software developer's blog on “Identity Management, Federation and Single Malt Scotch” on September 15th, 2008. Another aspect of 'talking to everyone (about everything)' may be embodied by Schwartz's observation that

“There is no line between personal life and professional life, especially if you care a lot about what you do. I used to really resent that, and then it became really freeing.” (Schwartz, 2006, no pagination)

<sup>1</sup>Since the time of first drafting this thesis, Sun has been acquired by competitor Oracle and Schwartz is accordingly no longer CEO.

The desire to use the blog to communicate openly about issues relevant to company matters prompted Schwartz to support innovation in another area as well. Due to government disclosure regulations (the Regulations on Fair Disclosure, or RegFD), he was unable to discuss material transactions or company performance on the blog. Such information instead had to be published in a 'traditional' news source. Pointing out the deficiency of this regulation, Schwartz wrote in his blog:

**Example 14.** *Unfortunately, Reg FD doesn't recognize the internet, or a blog, as the exclusive vehicle through which the public can be fairly informed. In order to be deemed compliant, if we have material news to disclose, we have to hold an anachronistic telephonic conference call, or issue an equivalently anachronistic press release, so that the (not so anachronistic) Wall Street Journal can disseminate the news. I would argue that none of those routes are as accessible to the general public as a this blog, or Sun's web site. Our blogs don't require a subscription, or even registration, and are available to anyone, across the globe, with an internet connection.*

*Simultaneously.*

While it took roughly two years, Schwartz's call to reform RegFD was successful. In the summer of 2008, the US Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) approved making it possible to disclose previously barred information on company websites and blogs under specific conditions (Jones, 2008). The statement of SEC chairman Chris Cox points to the relevance and usefulness of electronically disseminated financial information for investors, while at the same time acknowledging risks:

Indeed, one of the key benefits of the Internet is that companies can make information available to investors quickly and in a cost-effective manner. The use of electronic media is arguably superior to providing company information the old way. It's a better way to provide information to most investors since today it can be presented in interactive format that allows each individual to click through or drill down to the level of detail that's appropriate to him or her. (Jones, 2008, no pagination)

The ability to address shareholders is obviously a central concern to the CEO of a company, and the ability to do so via an open blog rather than through more narrowly disseminated reports or at an annual shareholder meeting are obvious.

A blog's inevitably shifting and dynamic audience can be another advantage, if utilized optimally. The following example, in which Schwartz addresses both employees and external stakeholders, illustrates the full potential of his CEO blog in this regard.

**Example 15.** *Paraphrasing Henry Ford, "You think you can, or you think you can't - either way, you're right." That quote struck me as the perfect summary of our fiscal year 2007 performance. We did what we said we'd do a year ago. As you may have seen, we've announced our fourth quarter and full fiscal year results (our fiscal year ends with the school year, in June) . We exceeded the commitments made a year ago, to restore Sun to 4% operating profitability in*



*Q4, and did so by delivering our single best operational quarter since 2001. On an annual basis, we improved Sun's profitability by over a billion dollars. A billion. We grew revenue, expanded gross margins, streamlined our operating expenses - and closed the year with an 8% operating profit in Q4, more than double what some thought to be an aggressive target a year ago. We did this while driving significant product transitions, going after new markets and product areas, and best of all, while aggressively moving the whole company to open source software (leading me to hope we can officially put to rest the question, "how will you make money?"). And we're not done - not by any stretch of the imagination. We have more streamlining to do, more commitments to meet, more customers to serve and developers to attract. But it's evident we've got the right foundation for growing Sun - with real innovation the market values, as shown by Q4's 47% gross margins, the highest on record in five years. I'll be with a variety of external audiences most of this week - and I'll summarize their questions and comments in a few days. In the interim... to our customers, partners, and most of all, our amazing global employee base - thank you for thinking we could. You were right. Keep thinking that way. You ain't seen nothin' yet.*

Schwartz uses *we* and *us* with rhetorical extension to refer to all employees of the company, including himself. But use of the plural pronoun in this function does not prevent him from using the singular to present himself as distinct from everyone at Sun, nor to use the full noun Sun as denoting something other than *we*. Instead, an intricate interplay of discourse roles is developed:

- *we/us* used as subject with a range of dynamic verbs of action and movement and semantically as agent, denotes the employees of Sun Microsystems (or, in a more restrictive interpretation, the management team);
- *I/me* is used in contexts where agency of the institutional *we* would not result in a semantically well-formed proposition – e.g. Jonathan Schwartz will summarize what external audiences have to say, since this is something that the collective company is not literally capable of doing;
- *you* alternately denotes the single blog reader (and all readers collectively), any single employee of Sun (and all employees collectively) and *customers and partners* in those contexts where Schwartz is the speaker, while it reflects back to him and the company where he is paraphrasing the speech of others (*how will you make money?*);
- *Sun* is used only three times and always in object position (*restore Sun / grow Sun*) or as part of a noun phrase in object position (*Sun's profitability*), while first person plural use dominates in subject position;
- the indefinite pronoun *some* is used once to explicitly refer to a third party, as is *external audiences* to describe people who are not employees of the company.

The rhetorical significance of institutional *we* becomes clear when examining its verbal collocates, for example *say, do, announce, grow, improve* and *exceed*, all of which are used transitively. The company's annual earnings have not been announced by an indefinite collective of employees, but by the management team and *what we said we'd do a year ago* refers to a controversial plan to refocus

Sun that was formulated by Schwartz. But it is obviously of strategic value for the CEO to downplay his role and instead present the company's success as the result of a team effort (*we* instead of *I*). At the same time, *we* is preferable to any other conceivable reference (*you*, *Sun*, *the company*, etc) because a) it humbly includes Schwartz himself, b) it asserts a discourse situation that is made plausible via the blog and c) it allows him to position the collective *we* apart from *some* outsiders who have been skeptical about the restructuring plans. The duality of institutional *we* and blogger-reader-*we* works to support this: in the final sentence the reader (whether he is out or in) is cast in the role of witness as Schwartz thanks *our amazing global employee base*, though the reader could in theory himself be among those thanked.



## Chapter 5

# Discussion

This thesis has sought to demonstrate what communicative functions are realized in blogs by their individual and institutional users and how these functions relate to the conceptualized audience that bloggers rely on as replacement for a physically present audience when writing blog posts. I have described the particular communicative situation that blogs are written in and how blog technology reflects the natural sequential ordering of events in time, thus lending itself well to creating open-ended personal narratives. To a degree, blogs always function as “accounts of the self”, independent of whether they are used to construct, articulate and record the experiences, thoughts and feelings for the blogger herself and those close to her (*ego blogging*), or used to present information on external events along with the blogger’s thoughts, opinions or criticism of these externalities with a non-familiar audience in mind (*topic blogging*); this is because in both cases the reader gains an insight into what the blogger deems important enough to record or present. Whether a blogger tells a story or makes an argument in a post (emphblog microstructure), the reader can observe the process of expressive self-construction through time in the blog as a whole (*blog macrostructure*).

Blogs are mapped onto spoken conversation because they automatically make metainformation available that is required to anchor and retrieve the deictic center of discourse in a blog post (*blog deixis*). This conceptualization is independent from whether or not actual dialog (via comments or trackbacks) takes place in a blog or not – the potential to create a persistent, retrievable record that can use the same linguistic constructions which are typical of spoken language is sufficient.

When writing, bloggers make conscious and subconscious choices in relation to their readership that are reflected linguistically (*audience design*). Ego bloggers write either with friends or family in mind, for themselves (i.e. with themselves as the conceptualized reader), or to record and structure their thoughts and make permanent their identity in linguistically encoded form. Ego bloggers may well want their existence to be validated by the presence of others, but they don’t write for others. In contrast, topic bloggers are keenly aware of their role as experts on a particular subject that is the impetus of their blog (linguistics, copyright law, celebrity gossip, etc) and of the fact that their readership is interested in the topic, not in them as a person. Feedback (in the form of comments) strengthens this expert status, as does quoting and linking other

material. The topic blogger is a journalist, a commentator, a critic, an expert and a provider of relevant content who seeks to gain social capital with a broad, topical audience of strangers in mind.

The corporate blog, from the viewpoint of pragmatics, is an attempt to bring together two conflicting tendencies: goal-oriented, strategic and collectively planned external communication that has strong illocutionary force, and with subjective, spontaneous and personal thoughts and reflections that have weak or no illocutionary force, because they center on the self, not on others. The latter description characterizes the way in which personal blogs are frequently written, and corporate blogs consciously piggyback on this association, despite their *raison d'être* being the realization of very specific, reader-centric communicative goals (marketing, public relations, recruiting, etc). While the uniform outward appearance of blogs is already supportive of this association, the use of blog deixis and the deliberate and strategic inclusion of personal information (the blogger's location, recent events, shared experiences that create a bond with the reader) also contribute to the effect. Corporate bloggers, like topic bloggers, write with their readership in mind and use a personal touch as decoration of the actual topic, but not because they want to document their existence before witnesses.

The corporate blog is thus a wolf in sheep's clothing in the sense that there is a permanent lingering conflict of personal and organizational goals that underlies it. Organizational goals virtually always take precedence, as blogging policies and phenomena like doocing aptly demonstrate. This does not mean that corporate blogs are written to deceive, but that for a company blog to succeed at delivering value to its readers it must inevitably move away from the prototypical blog as a personal publishing tool to something more akin to a news outlet with identifiable voices and a feedback function. Corporate bloggers function as proxies for their company and the organization as a whole is dependent on them to deliver a message that does not contradict collective goals. The stable core that corporate blogs retain appears to be blog deixis, which forces individuals to become visible and accountable on behalf of the organization.

These findings have several implications. Firstly, the evolution of blogs reflects a broader trend towards a semantification of the Internet, i.e. the increasing tendency of information on the Web to be contextual. In the particular instance of blogging, the contextual data evokes the situation of spoken discourse, not in terms of its constraints (the requirement of participants to be co-temporal and co-spatial) but in how it relates one voice to another. Blogs are unthinkable without bloggers; without their authors they have no substance. Whereas older Web genres at least initially imitated pre-digital antecedents (email as an imitation of paper mail, electronic newsletters as an imitation of paper newsletters), newer digital genres appear to reach further back in the sense that they are mapped onto oral expression as the more primary model, sans constraints. The language of a topical blog may be well-planned and look very different from spoken language, but the interactional dynamic between blogger and blog reader is still there. And the trend towards microblogs also reflects this: frequent updates on the whereabouts, actions and thoughts of users are like physical interactions in that they provide the same kind of status information. Microblogs can be described more accurately as a form of sociocommunicative behavior than as a type of text.

Secondly, the attempts of companies to appropriate blogs for their commu-

nicative needs is no accident. Conversation takes place between people, but memos, press releases and advertisements are identified with their institutional users. The addressees of sales letters and mission statements are familiar with these genres and with the goals of those who write them. Corporate blogs represent a repackaging of these goals in a new form, except for one caveat: the parameters of blogs make a speaker - an actual individual - accountable for what is blogged. In that sense the piggybacking is dual: blogs and bloggers are both appropriated for organizational goals. However, corporate bloggers' ability to mix personal and organizational goals balances this, resulting in a kind of equilibrium. Organizations will have to adapt to this uneasy situation and find new ways of navigating in it.

The main implication for CMC research from a linguistic perspective is that there are more new insights to uncover regarding communicative behavior in the unique environment of the Internet than there is about language "as such" by studying digital genres. Language, seen as a tool for communication, adjusts to the situation it is used in, but it is unlikely to truly change structurally solely because it is used in a particular medium. As this thesis has sought to illustrate, we construct a situation digitally in absence of a physical one, save for the constraints, to communicate in ways we are already familiar with. The cognitive association with conversation is what makes blogs possible and corporate blogs attractive.



## Appendix A

# CBC/Corporati corpus statistics

The corpus is in the public domain and available for download and re-use at <http://ynada.com/cbc-corporati>.

<i>ID</i>	<i>Title</i>	<i>Category</i>	<i>Company</i>	<i>Posts</i>
139	A Thousand Words	product	Eastman Kodak	213
77	ACCAbuzz	general/mp	Air Conditioning Contractors of America	27
158	airhybridblog.com	general/mp	Scuderi Group	60
60	Alan Meckler	executive	Jupitermedia	158
142	All My Eye	general/mp	Ingenta	59
173	alliConnect	product	GlaxoSmithKline	29
17	Amazon Web Services Blog	info/hub	Amazon	251
67	Baby Babble	product	Stonyfield Farm Inc	198
109	Benra Blog: ZoomAlbum, Photos & Photo Sharing	product	ZoomAlbum Inc	11
58	Blog	executive	Microsoft	6
45	Blog	SMB	Nixon McInnes	81
40	Boeing Blog: Randy's Journal	executive	Boeing	42
70	bugBlog	product	Sterling International	41
129	Chevron Collectible Toy Cars	product	Chevron Corporation	63
6	ChristianLindholm	executive	Yahoo!	34
160	Christmas Tree Blog	general/mp	TannenBaum's Christmas Tree Company	11
175	Chrysler Blog	product	Chrysler LLC	74
18	Cisco High Tech Policy Blog	image	Cisco	107
112	Commentary from Cape Clear's CEO [...]	executive	Cape Clear Software	31
10	CTO Blog	executive	Capgemini	119
111	CTO Blog - TalkBMC	executive	BMC Software	20



97	cudgeland	SMB	Cudge.net	47
27	Dan Socci's Blog	executive	HP	5
99	DaveBlog	executive	Network Appliance	52
177	Delta Air Lines : Under the Wing	general/mp	Delta Air Lines	37
102	developerWorks blogs	info/hub	IBM	1
19	Digital Straight Talk	image	Cox Communications	130
20	Direct2Dell, Dell's Weblog	image	Dell	350
100	Earthling	general/mp	Earthlink	240
21	eBay Developers Program	info/hub	eBay	482
22	EDS' Next Big Thing Blog	general/mp	Electronic Data Systems	243
124	EIE FLUD	SMB	EIE FLUD	28
138	Emerson Process Experts	info/hub	Emerson Process Management	149
78	English Cut	SMB	Thomas Mahon	42
50	Entrepreneurial Marketing		Accenture	16
125	Eriska, Scottish Island	SMB	Isle of Eriska Hotel, Spa & Island	178
72	Exchanges	info/hub	NYSE	376
55	Forta Blog	info/hub	Macromedia	455
104	Forum Nokia Blogs	info/hub	Nokia	230
23	From Edison's Desk - GE Global Research Blog	image	GE	94
107	FYI Blog	product	General Motors	548
140	Glenfiddich Blog	product	Glenfiddich	73
25	GM Fastlane Blog	product	General Motors	179
26	Google Blog	general/mp	Google	501
41	Guided By History	product	Wells Fargo & Co	190
53	Guinness Blog	product	Guinness & Co	73
170	HostGator Blog	general/mp	HostGator	14
54	Hu Yoshida's Blog	executive	Hitachi	86
3	I Love Me, vol. I	executive	Marqui	194
65	Infrablog	info/hub	VeriSign Inc	37
29	ING Asia/Pacific's Blog	executive	ING	46
163	Intelius Blog	general/mp	Intelius	15
103	Irving Wladawsky-Berger	executive	IBM	96
141	IT@Intel Blog	general/mp	Intel	168
1	iUpload InSights	executive	iUpload	26
57	Jeff Jaffe's Blog	executive	Novell	47
172	JNJ BTW	image	Johnson & Johnson	61
73	Jonathan Bruce's WebLog	info/hub	DataDirect Technologies	45
37	Jonathan Schwartz's Weblog	executive	Sun Microsystems	114
28	Kara R	general/mp	Honeywell	39
46	Kate's Blog	product	U3	10
169	Keeping the World Safe	product	SentryLink	81
178	Kia BUZZ	product	Kia Motors	22

11	Lakattack	SMB	Spreadshirt Inc	65
80	Life at Wal-Mart	image	Wal-Mart	54
122	Lightning Labels Blog	SMB	Lightning Labels	119
161	LinkedIn Blog	general/mp	LinkedIn	86
9	Loic Le Meur Blog	executive	Six Apart Europe SA	370
12	Marcel Reichart Blog	executive	Hubert Burda Media	52
147	Marriott on the Move	executive	Marriott International	65
59	Mena's Corner	executive	Six Apart	46
48	Michael M's X10 Blog	product	X10 Wireless Technologies	119
145	Mobile Visions	product	Cisco	60
130	MSDN Blogs	info/hub	Microsoft	4684
144	News@Cisco Notes	general/mp	Cisco	185
33	NIKEBASKETBALL	product	Nike	374
105	Nokia N90 Blog	product	Nokia	17
49	Notes from MNR	info/hub	Adobe Systems Inc	98
56	Novell Open PR	general/mp	Novell	31
8	Occam's Razor		Occam Capital	21
32	One Louder	general/mp	Microsoft	294
31	Open for Discussion	image	McDonald's	65
146	Open standards, open source, open minds, open opportunities	executive	IBM	261
34	OraBlogs	info/hub	Oracle	3036
126	Outdoor Landscape Lighting	SMB	Residential Landscape Lighting & Design	94
98	Over the Horizon	executive	Intel	12
118	Park City Mountain Resort	SMB	Park City Mountain Resort	94
164	PC Media Snippets	SMB	PC Media	6
42	PlayOn		PARC	30
171	PlayStation.Blog	product	SCEA (?)	150
7	PR Thoughts		Edelman Paris	15
113	QuickBooks Online Edition The Team Blog	product	Intuit	11
24	Real Baking with Rose Levy Beranbaum	product	General Mills, Inc	184
121	Scenic Nursery Gardening Blog	SMB	Scenic Nursery Garden Supplies	77
166	Searchme Inc Blog	general/mp	Searchme, Inc.	1
174	SEL External News Blog	general/mp	Sony	25
76	Signs Never Sleep	SMB	Lincoln Sign Company	96
4	Simply Albert	executive	BubbleShare	74
108	Southwest Airlines Blog	product	Southwest Airlines	342
106	Sparkle Like The Stars	product	Ice.com	187
71	Speaking of Security	info/hub	RSA Security Inc	363
13	stefan	executive	21Publish	21
69	Stone Creek Coffee Blog	SMB	Stone Creek Coffee Roasters	201
128	Stormhoek Winery	SMB	Stormhoek	154

119	SunbeltBLOG	info/hub	Sunbelt Software	623
120	TaylorMade Blogs	product	Taylor Made Golf Company	71
136	Ted's Take	executive	AOL	566
38	Texas Instruments Video360 Blog	product	Texas Instruments	22
47	The Bocada Blog	general/mp	Bocada	4
68	The Bovine Bugle	image	Stonyfield Farm Inc	145
44	The CEO's Blog - John Mackey	executive	Whole Foods Inc	15
165	The Cleanest Line	general/mp	Patagonia	177
39	The Jason Calacanis Weblog		Weblogs Inc / Netscape	690
36	The Lobby from SPG	product	Starwood Hotels & Resorts	1016
115	The Mindjet Blog	product	Mindjet Corporation	60
75	The NCC Weblog	SMB	Northfield Construction Company	187
162	The Official Palm Blog	general/mp	Palm Inc.	51
117	The Official Salesforce Blog	general/mp	Salesforce.com	227
176	The PayPal Blog	general/mp	PayPal Inc	31
159	The Planet Blog	general/mp	The Planet	41
114	The QuickBooks Team Blog	product	Intuit	34
137	The Student LoanDown	product	Wells Fargo	184
74	The Tinbasher Sheet Metal Blog	SMB	Butler Sheetmetal	145
35	Things That Make You Go Wireless	image	Sprint	15
66	Thompson Holidays Blog	product	Thompson.co.uk	310
151	Thought Clusters	executive	Ivesia Solutions Inc	145
127	Thoughts of Beauty	SMB	OverallBeauty.com	70
2	Time Leadership	executive	SYNNEX Canada	207
30	TinyScreenfuls.com	info/hub	Intel	411
51	TiVo Blog	product	TiVo	11
135	Verizon - PoliBlog	executive	Verizon	86
116	Warehousing and Distribution	general/mp	Ozburn-Hessey Logistics	81
110	WeatherBug Corporate Blog	general/mp	AWS Convergence Technologies, Inc.	29
123	Wiggly Wigglers	SMB	Wiggly Wigglers Natural Gardening	186
168	Women's Initiative Blog	image	Deloitte & Touche USA LLP	25
43	Yahoo! Search Blog	general/mp	Yahoo!	171
167	Yamaha Sled Talk	product	Yamaha Motor Canada	40

Table A.1: Blogs indexed in CBC/Corporati

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**D**igital technology is increasingly impacting how we keep informed, how we communicate professionally and privately, and how we initiate and maintain relationships with others. The function and meaning of new forms of computer-mediated communication (CMC) is not always clear to users on the onset and must be negotiated by communities, institutions and individuals alike. Are chatrooms and virtual environments suitable for business communication? Is email increasingly a channel for work-related, formal communication and thus „for old people“, as especially young Internet users flock to Social Networking Sites (SNSs)?

**C**ornelius Puschmann examines the linguistic and rhetorical properties of the weblog, another relatively young genre of CMC, to determine its function in private and professional (business) communication. He approaches the question of what functions blogs realize for authors and readers and argues that corporate blogs, which, like blogs by private individuals, are a highly diverse in terms of their form, function and intended audience, essentially mimic key characteristics of private blogs in order to appear open, non-persuasive and personal, all essential qualities for companies that wish to make a positive impression on their constituents.