



## 4. Blogging

Cornelius Puschmann

### 1. Origins and definitions

The *blog* (a contraction of *web log/weblog*) is a form of online publishing, communication, and expression that has gained significant popularity since its emergence in the late 1990s (Blood 2002; Rosenberg 2009; Winer 2001). The terms *blog* (n.) and *blogging* (v.) were first included in the *Oxford English Dictionary* in 2003, and *blog* (n.) was chosen as Merriam-Webster's word of the year in 2004 (Merriam-Webster 2004). Princeton's *WordNet* database defines a blog as "a shared on-line journal where people can post diary entries about their personal experiences and hobbies; (...) postings on a blog are usually in chronological order," and describes blogging as "reading, writing, or editing a shared on-line journal". Blogs are used to publish a wide array of content: In addition to textual blogs (the focus of this chapter), blogs are also used to share photos, audio clips, and video clips (Scheidt 2009). Although some degree of openness and sharing is usually associated with blogging, blogs with access restrictions exist in corporate and organizational spaces and where individuals wish for their blog to remain private. Associated terms such as *blogosphere* (n.) and *bloggy* (adj.) have also entered the vernacular in the course of the last decade, denoting blogs in their (implied) totality and the (implied) characteristics they share, respectively. Blogging is a global phenomenon, reaching across languages, communities, and organizational contexts (Bruns and Jacobs 2006; Russell and Echchaibi 2009; Schlobinski and Siever 2005).

Definitions of what constitutes a blog from scholars in different disciplines highlight different aspects of blogs, such as genre antecedence (Karlsson 2006; McNeill 2003, 2005), structure and content (Herring, Scheidt, Bonus, and Wright 2004), communicative function (Brake 2007), rhetorical practice (Miller and Shepherd 2004), and practitioner perspective (boyd 2006), or they attempt to establish theoretical frameworks which integrate several of these facets (Schmidt 2007). The divergent and at the same time overlapping scholarly approaches to blogs as text, discourse, social action, and cultural practice reflect both the perspectives of a range of academic disciplines and the shifting interpretation of the blog format by practitioners and non-practitioners. Simultaneously, there appears to be a gradual move away from definitions that tie blogs exclusively to a specific style or content closely resembling antecedent practices, such as diary-writing and journalism, to definitions that are more open and recognize what boyd refers to as "the efficacy of the practice" (2006: para 2). As blogs come of age and merge with





even newer forms of CMC, such as status updates on social networking sites like Facebook (boyd 2006; Joinson 2008) and microblogging services such as Twitter (boyd, Golder, and Lotan 2010; Honeycutt and Herring 2009; Java et al. 2007), they are increasingly defined in terms of themselves and without reference to precursors.

Blood (2000) traces the origins of blogs to the practice of link sharing on the early World Wide Web. She emphasizes that the earliest practitioner definitions of what constituted a blog were based on the presence of dated entries containing links, commentary, and thoughts on a personal website:

The original weblogs were link-driven sites. Each was a mixture in unique proportions of links, commentary, and personal thoughts and essays. Weblogs could only be created by people who already knew how to make a website. A weblog editor had either taught herself to code HTML for fun, or, after working all day creating commercial websites, spent several off-work hours every day surfing the web and posting to her site. These were web enthusiasts. (para 5)

The function of sharing links and publishing information in a Web feed, then-unique features likely to have spurred the popularity of blogs, are today integrated into virtually any component of the so-called Social Web. A variety of media content (photos, music, video clips, etc.) can easily be embedded in blog entries or other hypertext-based services, while at the same time portals and multimedia applications integrate blog-like functions. What remains unchanged is that blogs structure digital content sequentially and that they are more frequently maintained by individuals than institutions or companies (McLean 2009).

Definitions based on the structural characteristics of blogs are popular among researchers; for example, blogs are described as “frequently updated webpages with a series of archived posts, typically in reverse-chronological order” (Nardi, Schiano and Gumbrecht 2004: 222) and “modified web pages in which dated entries are listed in reverse chronological sequence” (Herring, Scheidt, et al. 2004: 1). This approach to definition can be interpreted in light of the extreme topical, functional, and participatory variance of blogs, i.e., the fact that subject matter, purpose, and community are highly variable from one blog to another and, internally, from a single post to the next. Researchers from linguistics, rhetoric, and literary studies, but also from a variety of other disciplines, frequently apply the term *genre* to blogs, relating it to forms, such as the personal diary, which they propose as plausible ancestors (e.g., Karlsson 2006: 1, who calls the paper diary the blog’s “evident offline antecedent”). This approach is not without its conceptual difficulties, because while technical constraints and certain stylistic patterns can be considered somewhat stable (Puschmann 2010a: 109–114), the purpose and community of a blog are not, a problem that poses a challenge to contemporary genre theory (see Askehave and Nielsen [2005] and Giltrow [this volume] for a discussion of the complex relationship of medium and genre, and Lomborg [2009], Scheidt [2009], and Miller and Shepherd [2009] for analyses of blogs from the per-



spective of genre theory). Blogs share characteristics with genres that are author-centric in terms of mode and sequential in terms of text organization, such as the diary and the personal letter, and these common characteristics are sometimes suggested to have been inherited by the blog in a genealogical sense. However, this assertion seems questionable in light of the historical development of blogs. In those instances where they share traits with pre-digital antecedents, this may partly be a result of conscious imitation or genre migration and partly the symptom of a psychological desire for mediated self-expression that predates the implied antecedents (see Gurak and Antonijevic [2008] and Nowson, Oberlander, and Gill [2005] for psychological approaches to blogging).

## 2. Interdisciplinary research and intersections with pragmatics

Blogs and blogging have attracted a growing body of scholarship since the popularization of the form in the late 1990s and early 2000s. While the use of blogs has spread to a variety of contexts, such as academic research (Ewins 2005; Suzuki 2004), business (Puschmann 2010b; Sprague 2007), and education (Armstrong, Berry and Lamshed 2004), studies suggest that the prototypical use of blogs as a medium for personal publishing by private non-professionals still dominates over other scenarios (McLean 2009; White and Winn 2009). Blogging has been studied with a range of methodologies and from a variety of disciplinary perspectives, among them ethnography (boyd 2006; Brake 2007; Gumbrecht 2004; Nardi, Schiano, and Gumbrecht 2004; Schiano, Nardi, Gumbrecht, and Swartz 2004), mass communication (Kelleher and Miller 2006; Schmidt 2007; Stefanone and Jang 2007), political science (Adamic and Glance 2005; Drezner and Farrell 2004; Trammell 2006), sociology (Ali-Hasan and Adamic 2007; Efimova, Hendrick, and Anjewierden 2005), geography (Gopal 2007), computational linguistics (Argamon, Koppel, Pennebaker, and Schler 2007; Mishne 2005; Schler, Koppel, Argamon, and Pennebaker 2006), linguistics (Herring, Scheidt, Bonus, and Wright 2005; Puschmann 2009), rhetoric (McNeill 2005; Miller and Shepherd 2004; Myers 2010), psychology (Gurak and Antonijevic 2008; Nowson, Oberlander and Gill 2005), and organizational studies (Efimova and Fiedler, 2004; Efimova and Grudin, 2007; Jackson, Yates, and Orlikowski 2007). Figure 1 shows an array of methodologies used by scholars from a variety of fields. Dependent on the field, different questions are formulated and different data are used to answer them.

Studies from disciplines such as communication, sociology, and ethnography regard blogging as a *practice and process*; accordingly, they tend to focus on the relations and motivations of bloggers, how they characterize their activity, and on their interaction with others in sociocommunicative networks, investigating these aspects by either quantitative or qualitative means. In contrast, studies from content-centric and technical fields tend to focus on the analysis and classification of



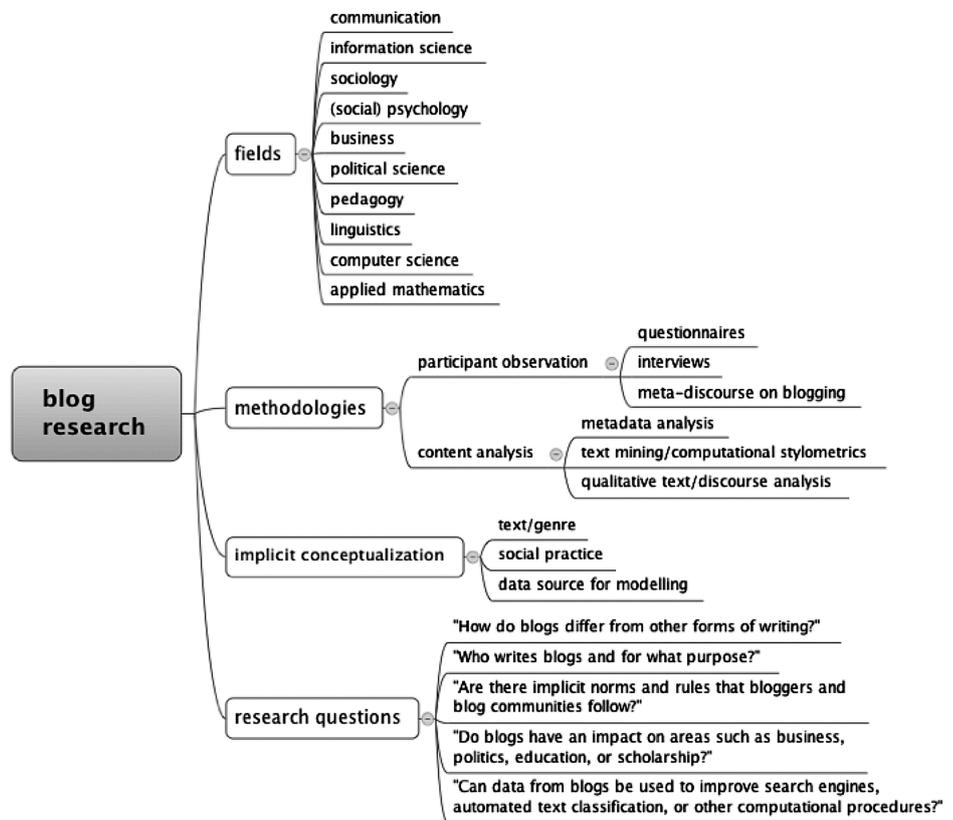


Figure 1. Approaches to blog research

*user-produced data* (language or metadata such as links, tags, post frequency, lengths of posts), sometimes in relative isolation from the social dynamics of blogging that produce the content. An increasing number of studies seek to integrate both approaches, but building a bridge between “deep” sociocultural practice and “shallow” textual product presents a challenge. The following quote from Schmidt points to the usefulness of careful language analysis when approaching blogs:

(...) speaking in one’s own personal voice and being open for dialogue rather than engaging in one-way-communication are core elements readers have come to expect from blog communication, be it in private online journals, corporate blogs, or political blogs. (2007: para 14)

What defines a “personal voice”, and how is “being open for dialogue” stylistically signaled? Is it even legitimate to associate the use of certain linguistic features with being conversational? (See Peterson 2011 for a critical discussion of this question in relation to blogs.) Linguistic research can contribute to the study of Internet



communication by examining those characteristics that Schmidt notes are important for how blogging is interpreted, but that he describes only in very general terms. To date, it has primarily been the ease of obtaining language data from blogs for the purpose of corpus-based studies in traditional linguistic research areas that has attracted language scholars to them, but approaches beyond this limited scope are potentially even more rewarding and could contribute crucially to a broader interdisciplinary research agenda. Linguistic research can provide insight into implicit conceptualizations shaping the discourse that is produced and contribute to new techniques of analysis based on language data. What Schmidt refers to as “core elements” (how blogs are written) is a decidedly linguistic phenomenon and therefore relevant to linguistic analysis and pragmatics. Beyond putting to use language-based research in concert with sociological approaches, pragmatically relevant areas of study related to blogs include deixis, addressivity, politeness, and different stylistic approaches of bloggers (author-centric vs. topic-centric blogging). These are covered in the remainder of this chapter.

At the same time, it is important to recognize that the understandings gained through careful language analysis do not extend to the intentions of practitioners, to why they consciously communicate in the way they do, or to what the activity of blogging means to them. Linguists studying blogs should understand the inherent limitations of content-based approaches. The motivation to blog, the role blogging plays for a community, and the reflection of practitioners on their practice are all outside of the scope of an exclusively linguistic description and call for the addition of ethnographic, sociological, and psychological research approaches.

### 3. Usage, style, and classification

In the course of the last decade, blogging has changed from a new practice into something mainstream, in many regards becoming the first mass instantiation of *user-generated content* (UGC) on the Web (Schiano et al. 2004; White and Winn 2009). A variety of blogging services such as Blogger, Wordpress, and LiveJournal make it possible for anyone to run a blog without the need for a personal website. In addition, companies, schools, universities, and other organizations increasingly offer blog hosting to their constituents, while the mainstream news media also make extensive use of blogs integrated into conventional websites. Precise statistics on the number of blogs worldwide are difficult to assemble, and their relevance should not be overstated, given that many blogs are abandoned after a short time. Services such as Technorati tracked more than 70 million individual sources in Spring 2007, and as of 2009, estimates for the number of blogs in the United States and globally varied between 100 and 180 million (Kutchera 2008). The number of Internet users reporting having read a blog at least once or doing so on a regular basis also appears to be on the rise (Project for Excellence in Journalism 2008).





Technorati's 2009 State of the Blogosphere report (McLean 2009) found that the majority of the 2,828 U.S. bloggers surveyed were male, between 18 and 44 years old, and had a relatively high level of income and educational qualifications. However, user demographics vary considerably by country, region, language, and individual usage community, making it essential to investigate blogging practices within their respective cultural contexts (see Schlobinski and Siever [2005], as well as Russell and Echchaibi [2009], for publications on blogging from an international perspective). While blogging can be a source of revenue, and bloggers may be hired as ghostwriters, the most commonly cited reason for blogging given by those surveyed by Technorati was "personal satisfaction" (76 % of the respondents), and the most popular self-description of the blog's content was "personal musings" (53 %). An even higher percentage (83 %) described the content of their blog as "personal musings" in a smaller study by Viégas (2005). Self-expression thus historically appears to be a core motivation for the majority of bloggers, not withstanding phenomena such as "A-list" blogging and professional journalism via blogs (see also Lenhart and Fox 2006). A possible shift in user demographics that may also impact how blogs are written was observed in a recent Pew Internet and American Life study: Fewer teenagers and an increasing number of adults are readings and writing blogs (Lenhart et al. 2010).

The discourse on blogging and bloggers in the mass media is ambivalent. It highlights both the perceived value and potential of blogs as sources of free expression and public discussion and their dependence on secondary sources and lack of accountability (Baltatzis 2006; Niles 2007). Personal blogging is also often mischaracterized as vain or egocentric when critics apply expectations from perceived antecedents such as print journalism to blogs in an undifferentiated fashion. Furthermore, the public discourse often implicitly takes highly visible topical blogs and casts them as typical or model instantiations, effectively imposing prescriptive norms for how to write a "good" blog and creating a skewed perception of the mainstream, a problem emphasized by Herring, Kouper, Scheidt, and Wright (2004).

Stylistically, blogs are a highly variable form of self-expression. Depending on a blogger's conceptualization of the format, a blog entry can be speech-like or written-like, colloquial or formal, and can relate private or public (in the sense of addressing established topical areas of the mainstream media, such as politics, sports, entertainment, or technology) issues. It can target a wide audience or a small, select readership and be written for personal or professional reasons. The virtual context in which posts are presented and the metadata that is associated with them (title, author, time of writing, tags, categories) allow for a situatedness that makes blogs compelling to a wide range of users. This is in part because the metadata facilitates the use of first-person perspective and deictic expressions, making writing a blog relatively easy even for an inexperienced author. A range of stylistic and topical options are at the blogger's disposal, whereas established and



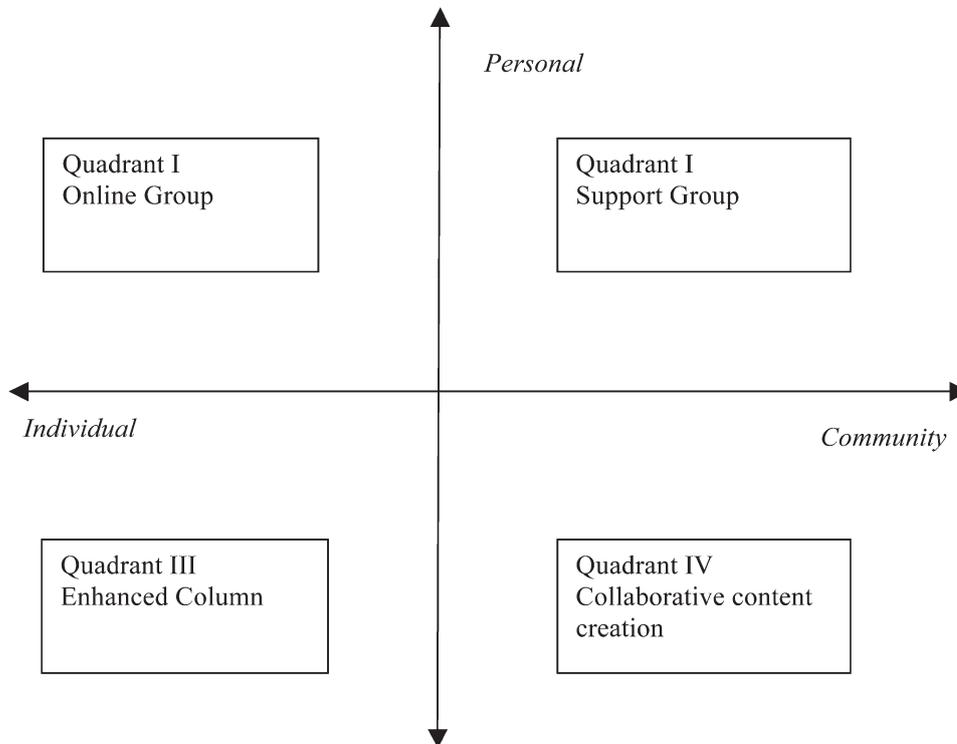


Figure 2. Form and function-based classification, reproduced from Krishnamurthy (2002)

institutionalized forms of publishing are often more restrictive in terms of style and content. The flexible communicative situation of blogs (Who is assumed to be among the readers? Who, if anyone, is addressed? Who might be eavesdropping?) also shapes their style and influences their authors' rhetorical choices.

Content-based approaches to blogs have often focused on the question of how to categorize them on the basis of language and the use of specific features such as linking, quoting, frequency of comments, or other structural criteria of analysis. In an attempt to combine the facets of forms and function, Krishnamurthy (2002) suggests such a categorization along the scales *personal – topical* and *individual – community* for his analysis of blog discourse (Figure 2). His approach implicitly uses basic categories from genre analysis (communicative purpose and discourse community; cf. Swales [1990]), which are descriptively inclusive but also difficult to operationalize.

Herring et al. (2005) extend the categories suggested by Blood (2002), who refers to the types *filters*, *personal journals*, and *notebooks*, and propose a categorization of blogs into the following types:



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1. *diaries/personal journals*, which record the personal experiences and thoughts of the blogger from a subjective viewpoint;
2. *filters*, which filter, quote, link, and/or comment on information from other sources;
3. *k-logs*, which store, tag, and/or classify information from other sources on a single topic;
4. *mixed*, which combine at least two of the primary three types; or
5. *other*, which cannot be associated with any of the primary types.

This classification is based on purpose inferred from content (Herring et al. 2005: 147) via manual coding. The categories are defined a priori, and then the studied blogs are classified according to which category they are seen as fitting in best. This approach to categorization can be criticized on the grounds that the array of purposes is limited and based on Blood's somewhat prescriptive categories, which take her personal view of blogging as a starting point.

Another language-based approach is taken by Argamon et al. (2007), who investigate the relationship of style and content to age and gender of bloggers, based on stylometric analysis. Via a process they label as *meaning extraction* (Chung and Pennebaker 2007), the authors isolate 20 thematic lexical factors that are then related to the dimensions of age and gender (see Argamon et al. table 3 for details). They summarize the findings of their large-scale textual analysis of 140 million words of running text by remarking:

We find that older bloggers tend to write about externally – focused topics, while younger bloggers tend to write about more personally – focused topics; changes in writing style with age are closely related. Perhaps surprisingly, similar patterns also characterize gender – linked differences in language style. In fact, the linguistic factors that increase in use with age are just those used more by males of any age, and conversely, those that decrease in use with age are those used more by females of any age. (Argamon et al. 2007: para 4)

Argamon et al. approach blogs inductively and based on automation, while the approaches used by Herring et al. (2004, 2005) classify the content according to functionally-derived categories and manual classification. Both approaches are based on the style and content of blog entries and make inferences regarding the purposes associated with blogging on the basis of the data.

However, Argamon et al.'s strong claims regarding the influence of age and gender on style are problematic in several ways. Firstly, they fail to take blog type into account. In an automated analysis of a corpus of blog entries balanced by gender (male and female bloggers) and blog type (filter and personal journal), Herring and Paolillo (2006: 453–455) found that blog type trumps gender as an influencing factor. Their analysis suggests that the gender differences observed by Argamon et al. are a result of failing to differentiate between different types of blogs based on purpose and audience design. Herring, Kouper, et al. (2004)'s finding that





teen bloggers are more likely to write personal journals and adults are more likely to write filter blogs similarly problematizes Argomon et al.'s age results. There appears to be a broad consensus that in blogs there is a dynamic relationship between style, genre, age and gender of the blogger, and behaviors such as linking and quoting, but clear and unambiguous causal relations between these dimensions have not been established. Males, females, and bloggers of different age groups may all be motivated by different perceived benefits of blogging. It seems likely that the purpose a blogger associates with his or her blog will have a strong impact on how it is written, and that at the same time purpose depends partly on age and gender, rather than there being an immediate relationship between these criteria and language use.

#### 4. Deixis and givenness

Despite the overall variability of blog style and content, some linguistic properties of blogs are highly stable. The core cohesive element of a blog is time. In contrast to the syntagmatic structure of wikis (elements are linked by relation), blog entries are paradigmatically linked by chronology. This chronology can be omitted, for example when looking at entries on the basis of categories or tags, or when an individual post is found via a web search, but it acts as the governing organizational principle for information in blogs.

According to Winer (2001), blog posts canonically encode the following information:

1. Title
2. Text
3. Tags/Categories
4. Author
5. Time of publication
6. URL

Author, time of publication, and the URL of the post differ from the other fields by constituting extra-textual information that is automatically associated with the situation and not manually assigned by the blogger. This information makes deictic language possible, i.e., use of the first person pronoun (always referring to the blogger-publisher credited with the post) and use of temporal adverbs (relating to post publication date as the point of reference) and spatial adverbs (either relating to the blogger's location at the time of publishing or conceptualizing the blog or the Internet as a whole as a space). Furthermore, older blog entries function as cotext for newer ones, allowing certain information to be presented as given to the (hypothetical) consistent reader.

Example 1, taken from the blog of Robert Scoble (<http://scobleizer.com>), a technology expert and former Microsoft employee, illustrates the rhetorical poten-



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tial of blogs. Despite being relatively informal in style, it is also clearly well planned and informative. It employs standard spelling, proper capitalization, and no use of emoticons or abbreviations typically found in synchronous CMC, although technical acronyms abound (e.g., *HDTV*, *PVR*, *OPML*).<sup>1</sup>

Example 1

**Trial of Origin (band first linked here) beats 600 others**

*This is cool, (hyperlink)Trial of Origin(/hyperlink) just won a BBC contest where they beat 600 other bands. I was one of the first blogs to link to this band and hope they go all the way!*

*Speaking of music, last night Maryam and I watched American Idol on our new soopeerr-doopeer 60-inch Sony HDTV screen.*

*Damn.*

*That's all I can think while watching that screen. We have to rip ourselves away from the TV to go to sleep.*

*Blogging? Forget it. HDTV wins. It is just so stunning.*

*Oh, funny aside. Remember my post about visiting Yellowstone National Park? So, what was on my PVR when I got home? That's right. Sunrise show of Yellowstone's Geysers. They look better on HDTV than they do in real life! They don't smell, though.*

*Question: I wanna watch the World Cup. Turns out most of the games are on ESPN2. That's not in HD on Comcast. So, what's the best way to get ESPN2?*

*Since we're talking about media, I like (hyperlink)the Podcast Readout of Share Your OPML site(/hyperlink). Is your favorite Podcast there?*

Example 1 can be characterized as a relatively typical blog post as regards the use of short paragraphs, sentence fragments, interjections, deictic expressions, and first person point of view. The reader is addressed multiple times, a strategy regularly used by Scoble for involvement.

Two items referred to in Example 1 are set off by the use of hyperlinks (*Trial of Origin*, *the Podcast Readout of Share Your OPML site*). A referenced point in time (*last night*) is retrievable via the contextual (temporal) information automatically added by the blogging software, while some information (for example, *Maryam*, the name of the blogger's wife) is treated as given based on an assumed familiarity of the reader with either the cotext (older blog entries in which she is introduced) or situational context (for those readers personally acquainted with the Scobles). The availability of deixis, hyperlinks, and a retrievable cotext partly combines the situatedness of speech with the permanence and stability of writing. The encoding of author and time of publication as metadata with each blog entry is the basis for the frequent analogy of blogging with interactive discourse (Puschmann 2010a – but cf. Peterson 2011 for a different characterization). The meta-information fixes a deictic center that allows reference to time and speaker/addressee relative to the point specified by the blog post.





## 5. Audience design and adressivity

The previous section argued for the importance of metadata in relation to the composition and reception of blogs. While the blogger's identity and the reference of spatial and temporal expressions are retrievable to the reader through this metadata, the identity of the intended recipients of a blog post is frequently much less clear. Bloggers are likely to conceptualize blog entries on a continuum between monologue and dialogue, as they can project their writing onto a variable audience. This fuzzy communicative setting is discussed in an ethnographic study by Brake (2007), who observes:

To refer to 'a-communicative' practices built around a communications medium seems counter-intuitive, but the interviews clearly revealed a wide variety of motivations to start and to continue weblogging that had only a tenuous connection to communication. (15)

The term *audience* in this context does not, as Brake's remark underlines, imply a specific, large, or external readership; functions such as using a blog to store information for personal use (*personal knowledge management* or PKM) or to record personal thoughts in the style of a diary are two uses where the blogger may have a generic, sympathetic listener, or even herself in mind. Qian and Scott (2007) and Viégas (2005) studied how bloggers conceptualize their readership and resolve potential conflicts related to the Internet's opaque participative setting via surveys. Qian and Scott argue:

The target audience is related to how much anonymity bloggers perceive themselves to have. Specifically, the bloggers in our study feel more identifiable if the audience includes people they know offline. At the same time, target audience also influences the way posts are written and what information is made available (Schiano et al 2004: 1144). When a blog is for people one knows offline (e.g., family/friends), the goal may be to identify oneself for them and to gain recognition for one's ideas from others whose opinions matter to the blogger. (2007: para 37)

In discussing the results of her survey of practitioners, Viégas observes:

Respondents' open-ended essay answers reveal that a significant portion of the people who replied that they felt they knew their audience "fairly well" actually meant they knew their "core" audience well, that is, they knew those few people who are frequent readers and who, in many cases, leave comments on their blogs. They also noted that, for the most part, they did not know who the rest (i.e., most) of their audiences were. Although respondents were well aware that their "core" audience comprised a minor segment of their entire readership, they tended to think about their entire audience in terms of this small group of people. (2005: para)

Both studies agree that bloggers plan their writing with a specific (if potentially very small) audience in mind and that they consider the impact of their writing. In addition to this *conceptualized audience* (what Viégas calls the the "core"), a





broader *actual audience* exists, that includes overhearers not anticipated by the blogger. As the conceptualized audience is what the blogger relies on when writing, problems can occur when a conflict of interest exists between conceptualized and intended audience (see Puschmann 2010a: 74 for an example). An alternative approach is to rely on the topic in order to get an idea of the audience, since knowledge of and interest in certain topics constrains a blog's potential readership. This approach is used in example 1. A filter-style, topical focus makes sense because it acts as a domain-specific anchoring point for the reader, whereas an author-centric approach assumes that readers are at least somewhat familiar with the blogger.

Nonetheless, bloggers' expectations towards their audience frequently go beyond a mutual interest in similar topics. In her study of adolescent bloggers, Scheidt (2006) maps the style of blog entries onto projected readers in different roles:

1. A witness testifying to the experience
2. A therapist unconditionally supporting emotions
3. A cultural theorist assessing the contestation of meanings, values, and identities in the performance
4. A narrative analyst examining genre, truth, or strategy
5. A critic appraising the display of performance knowledge and skill

Scheidt claims that there are gender differences in the extent to which each type of audience is addressed by teen writers, noting that the female adolescent bloggers she studied showed "a tendency toward seeking support for their individual struggles with appeals to the envisioned audience" (2006: 18), whereas boys show a tendency toward asking the audience to witness the event and notice their skill in performance.

From these studies, it can be observed that audience design plays an important role in blogging and that bloggers integrate their conceptualization of the readership into their style. It is a widely held assumption that most bloggers address mass audiences, yet the findings of Brake, Qian and Scott, Viégas, and Scheidt all appear to suggest otherwise. Brake's description of blogs as "a-communicative" and Qian and Scott's characterization of diary blogs as secret or "near-secret" writings, aimed at very small audiences or even the self, particularly serve to emphasize this discrepancy between popular perception and everyday use.

In less personal and more goal-oriented blogs, audience design and addressivity may be part of an elaborate rhetorical strategy. The use of explicit second-person address, for example, allows bloggers to negotiate complex relationships by shifting pronominal focus, in extreme cases from one clause to the next. Jonathan Schwartz, former CEO of Sun Microsystems, addresses both employees and external stakeholders in his blog in Example 2, illustrating this potential (personal pronouns and references to the company *Sun* are in bold print to highlight their prevalence).





## Example 2

## We Think We Can

*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.*

Example 2 is clearly “more written” in style than Example 1. Sentences and paragraphs are longer and more complex, and there are fewer interjections, less ellipsis, and limited, strategic use of orality markers (*You ain’t seen nothin’ yet*). As in Example 1, first person point of view and deictic expressions (*a year ago, next week*) are used, but in contrast to Scoble, Schwartz addresses his readers more directly via second person pronouns.

Schwartz uses *we* with rhetorical extension to refer to all employees of the company, including himself. But use of *we* in this function does not prevent him from using *I* to present himself as distinct from *everyone at Sun* or to use the full noun *Sun* as denoting something other than *we*. Instead, an intricate interplay of discourse roles is developed (see also Puschmann 2010b):

- We, 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 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





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- what external audiences have to say, since this is something that the collective company is not literally capable of doing.
- *You* can denote 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 paraphrases the speech of others (*how will you make money?*)
  - *Sun*, the company name, 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 *we* dominates in subject position.
  - The indefinite pronoun *some* is used once to refer explicitly to a third party, as is the expression *external audiences* to describe people who are not employees of the company.

The rhetorical significance of institutional *we* becomes clear when one examines 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 (using *we* instead of *I*). At the same time, the use of *we* is preferable to any other conceivable reference (*you, Sun, the company, etc.*), because it includes Schwartz himself, asserting an interactive discourse between bloggers and blog readers, and because it allows him to position the collective *we* as distinct from *some* outsiders who have been skeptical about the restructuring plans.

While the rhetorical approach in Example 2 is not unique to blogs, the communicative setting of the blog allows almost any reader to feel addressed and adds personal credibility to Schwartz as the blog author. Although this is superficially true of many forms of mainstream media, blogs allow faster and more immediate feedback than newspapers or brochures, resulting in their frequent characterization as more democratic and direct (e.g., Trammel 2006), qualities that are of obvious benefit in organizational communication.

## 6. Politeness

The observations made above about how bloggers conceptualize their audience and negotiate their relationship with it gain additional traction in relation to the concepts of *face* (Goffman 1955) and *politeness* (Brown and Levinson 1987), i.e., the desire to construct, uphold, and reinforce a positive image of the self, while at the same time being aware that our positive and negative face work brings us into





conflict with the face work of others, leading to *face-threatening acts* (FTAs). Politeness is a central strategy for minimizing FTAs (Mills 2003: 6) and thus for demonstrating awareness of and understanding for the need of others to construct themselves socially. The role of politeness in blogs has been investigated by Garcia-Gomez (2009), who studied the conceptualization of gender roles as expressed in the blogs of British and Spanish teenage girls, and by Kouper (2010), who explored the pragmatics of advice-giving, which she characterized as an FTA, in a LiveJournal community.

While a blog can serve as an effective tool for active face work from the perspective of the blogger, the capacity for FTAs is somewhat constrained by the fact that blogger and audience are relatively removed from each other. Inside the space of her own post, the blogger is in charge – she cannot be interrupted, pressured, threatened or interrogated except via comments, over which she has a high degree of control. Likewise, no one person can be assumed with absolute certainty to be among the readers, therefore no reader can plausibly be interrupted, pressured, threatened, or interrogated by the blogger (but see example 4 for a case where assumed readers are addressed directly). Thus face threat understood in a way that presumes parties who are aware of each other's presence does not really apply to blog posts, which may serve to explain their popularity as a personal space that is both visible to others and at the same time protected from undesired intervention. While bloggers quote and link each other and engage in other activities that make FTAs possible, one's own blog offers a certain degree of safety compared to forms of CMC that mandate interaction.

As a result of what Brake (2007) refers to as the "a-communicative" approach to blogging, authors have the opportunity to express what could otherwise be interpreted as face threatening. Accounts of how blogs are conceptualized in an interactional context support this notion, as a 2004 study of bloggers' expectations by 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. (2004: 3)

The risk of a social penalty still looms when reacting in a way that can be interpreted as face-threatening, but the relative temporal and spatial distance between blogger and reader (in the virtual sense of not perceiving who else is "present") makes certain types of FTAs implausible. In Gumbrecht's study, this is anticipated by Lara, who prefers to articulate personal feelings in her blog rather than chat. Those of her friends who do not want to articulate a reaction to Lara's feelings can





refrain from doing so without seeming insensitive. Blog readers can lurk without indicating that they have even received a message, and the blogger can likewise claim not to have addressed anyone in particular with her thoughts. Consequently, the kind of conversational offering that happens in blogs effectively removes the social pressure from the communicative partners that accumulates in a push-type mode of CMC such as email, where sending a message places pressure on the recipient to respond.

## 7. Topic-centric vs. author-centric blogging styles

As has been argued in the previous sections, blogs combine a number of medial characteristics previously associated with distinct forms of public and private discourse. Findings such as those of Argamon et al. (2007) regarding the stylistic properties of blogs are suggestive of changes over the lifespan, as bloggers' needs for different forms of expression change and expectations towards readers shift. With relatively few exceptions, a blog is a controlled discourse environment belonging to an individual and shaped largely by his or her personal tastes and needs; therefore, the needs a blog fulfills are more individually shaped than in most other genres of public expression. While readers can participate via comments and trackbacks, this occurs only if the blogger allows it. What is recorded in a blog is permanent and (again, with few exceptions) public, while at the same time being directed entirely by the blogger. These situational characteristics can be considered in concert with stylistic properties to make an argument for two distinct approaches to blogging: a topic-centric style and an author-centric style. These styles follow the basic distinction between diary-style and filter style content proposed by Herring et al. (2005), but they attempt to capture purpose via the relationship between blogger and reader that is implicit in the text, rather than directly via content. A discussion of two examples illustrates this.

Example 3 (topic-centric blogging style)

### **“Cuil it?” I Don’t Think So.**

*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 ...*

Example 4 (author-centric blogging style)

### **My birthday**

*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 Jane and Mike 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 Jane’s and opened presents from Jane and Paul. Paul gave me a journal his mom gave him ... that was special and i needed one so im thankful for it. Jane 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 Paul’s old one for the last year. Umm it also spins so it is way tight.*

*Then I came back to my dorm and Paul and I opened the rest of my presents. The Johnsons gave me some nice notes and hecka food which is gettin me fat. haha thanks! O and thanks Sue 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. Linda 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!*

Examples 3 and 4, both taken from personal blogs with small audiences (rather than “pro” blogs), share certain properties: first-person voice and deictic expressions are used in both posts, in combination with particles and connectives (discourse markers) typically used in spoken language or in writing that consciously imitates speech. Both involve the reader directly via use of direct address (Example 3: *let’s, you*; Example 4: *you, everyone*) and indirectly by using oral style markers. Example 3 is more conservative and follows stylistic norms for written language more closely, while Example 4 is more progressive in its use of expressions typically found in online speech production, such as fillers, reductions, and phatic exclamatives (*uhh, umm, hecka, teasin, gettin, b-day, haha*). The use of fillers in Example 4 runs counter to the claim that blog entries are spontaneous and unplanned (Crystal 2006: 15), as there is no cognitive need in a blog entry to buy time while formulating an utterance. Rather, the fillers in this example make the text appear more speechlike and authentic, which can be assumed to conform with the blogger’s intentions and allows inferences regarding his conceptualized audience.





The examples differ from one another in that Example 3 is written in the style of an exposition: It presents an argument from the point of view of the blogger and offers his informed opinion on an aspect of trademark law. Example 4, by contrast, is written in the style of a personal oral narrative, relating a series of events to the reader. Crucially, the names and events in Example 4 are not readily interpretable to a random reader, but only to those who are at least somewhat familiar with the author. The author of Example 3 consciously provides contextual information in order to make his writing more accessible to a non-familiar audience – for example, by beginning his post with the relative clause *When I teach trademark law classes* instead of the main clause *I always advise that students select strong protectable marks*. His intended audience is therefore likely to extend beyond his students (to whom he refers in the third person) to a general readership interested in trademark law, while the conceptualized readership in Example 4 seems more specific, including the blogger's sister (*Teasin sis!*) and those people who called to congratulate him for his birthday (*Thanks for the calls everyone*). While the opinions articulated in Example 3 are personally associated with the blogger, they are relatively independent of any single event, making them useful to a generic reader (assuming the reader is interested in the subject matter) regardless of when exactly the post is read or whether blogger and reader are personally acquainted. In contrast, the event related in Example 4 is more specified not only in terms of audience, but also in terms of the time of its anticipated reception. It is important to note that the relevance of both examples depends entirely on the identity of the reader – Example 4 is without doubt important to the intended audience of family and friends, which could well be larger than the readership of the trademark blog.

Examples 3 and 4 represent two individual styles among countless possible approaches to blogging. Not only do the styles vary considerably across authors, but the style of a single blogger can vary over longer periods of time, from one post to the next, and even within a single entry. An author-centric blog post might conform to standard orthography and be stylistically in line with writing prescriptions, while a topic-centric blog one does not. The choice of topic and degree of cooperation with the reader (in terms of propositional explicitness; cf. Grice 1989) indicates the tendencies of topic-centric and author-centric blogging, but this is far from a black and white distinction. Table 1 summarizes the prototypical characteristics of the two styles.

Fluidity of purpose (and, resulting from this, fluidity of style and content) is endemic to blogs, and therefore a wide area of intermediate forms of use lies between the two extremes. The distinction between topic-centric and author-centric styles is not intended as a clear-cut system of categorization, but rather as a way of systematizing the different audiences and intentions that bloggers associate with their activity. The distinction can be seen as an extension of the categories proposed by Blood (2002) and Herring et al. (2005), but with emphasis on the relationship of blogger, assumed reader, and purpose, rather than on developing a system of con-





Table 1. Topic-centric vs. author-centric blogging styles

Dimension	Topic-centric style	Author-centric style
Style	more formal and conceptually written	less formal and conceptually closer to speech
Favored topics	focus on the external world, e.g., politics, entertainment, business, religion, work	focus on the internal world, i.e., the blogger's: experiences, daily life, thoughts, emotions
Self-editing	information is first presented to the reader and then evaluated and commented on; planned	information is presented in close relation to the blogger's own thought process; spontaneous
Conceptualized audience	more distant, unfamiliar, and generic (liberals, republicans, lawyers, movie buffs, students)	closer, more familiar, and specific (self, family, friends)
Functions	inform others, indicate a stance or opinion to others, gain recognition, acquire expert status	make sense of and reflect one's life, stabilize self, control and record own thought process or other information, establish structure, causality, and order
Anonymity	generally attributable	may be anonymous or pseudonymous
Analogy	publishing	recording
Mode	exposition/argumentation	narration/stream of consciousness
Linguistic encoding/decoding	hard to encode, easy to decode	easy to encode, hard to decode
Frequent linguistic features (cf. Herring and Paolillo 2006)	articles, demonstratives, complex noun phrases;	personal pronouns
Hyperlinks, quotes, comments, and tagging	more frequent hyperlinks, quotes, comments, and use of tagging	fewer hyperlinks, quotes, comments, and use of tagging





tent classification. Findings on gender and age (Herring, Kouper, et al. 2004; Huffaker and Calvert 2005) can be associated with the distinction: older males tend to blog more topic-centrally, while females and teenagers of both genders more frequently choose an author-centric style. Rather than concluding that age and gender simplistically impact language use, it instead seems sensible to argue that users of different genders and age groups pick styles appropriate to their envisioned target audience (ranging from the self to a broad public), and their communicative goals (ranging from self-expression to the accumulation of social capital), and then write accordingly.

## 8. Outlook

Weblogs have moved from a niche format to a well-known and thoroughly international genre of computer-mediated communication in less than a decade. They continue to thrive as personal publishing platforms, while newer, even more rapid forms of “lifelogging”, such as Facebook status messages, and microblogging services such as Twitter, may be overtaking them as tools for self-documentation. Multimedia blogging on platforms such as YouTube continues to thrive, showing that a need for mediated self-expression extends well beyond writing. Blogs are written in an ever-increasing number of languages, calling for more research on blogs in languages other than English (cf. Russell and Echchaibi 2009; Schlobinski and Siever 2005). Linguistic analysis of blogs reveals a wide variety of uses and contexts, with potential for research that, while using language as the diagnostic, is able to address questions that go beyond structural linguistics. A challenge for researchers investigating blogs continues to be striking the right balance between text and practice, especially since large-scale analyses based on content are ever easier to conduct in the age of cheap and ubiquitous computational resources. Such imbalances can be avoided by incorporating findings from neighboring disciplines such as communication, ethnography, sociology, and social psychology, using them to contextualize language-based approaches.

This chapter has sought to characterize blogs as a form of mediated language use that affords its users a range of communicative options. Blogs dynamically combine characteristics of speech and writing due to their format, mode of production, and the communicative situation they create via the encoding of metadata. This makes them a versatile tool for expression and communication that is likely to continue to interest scholars from a variety of disciplines in the future.



**Note**

1. *HD* = High Definition, *HDTV* = High Definition Television, *PVR* = Personal Video Recorder, *OPML* = Outline Processor Markup Language. *BBC* and *ESPN2* are British and American TV stations.

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