

Lies at Wal-Mart

Style and the subversion of genre in the *Life at Wal-Mart* blog

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1. (Ab)usability as an indicator of genre

When approaching a new form of digital communication with the assumption that one has encountered a new genre, the researcher is faced with a dual conundrum. As has been noted by many scholars, not only is the object of study elusive and unstable – what constitutes a “good” instantiation of a particular genre, where does a particular genre begin and end, what are constitutive features and how can they be measured? – but the term *genre* itself is ripe with ambiguity and broadness like few other descriptive labels.¹ It seems that genre means *something* to both researchers and non-academics; to film critics, journalists, scholars of literature, information retrieval experts and computer scientists alike. But, problematically, it appears to mean *something different* to all of these experts.

The academic outlook on the subject has also changed somewhat over time, mostly because entirely new disciplines have joined the effort to better understand genre as a phenomenon. A taxonomic and largely formal understanding of genre as a system for the categorization of art, especially literary works, according to traditional aesthetic criteria, has in parts given way to more dynamic approaches that take into account both form and function. A newer, more inclusive conception of genre which flourished in the late Eighties and Nineties was fully developed in the works of Miller (1984), Swales (1990), Bazerman (1994) and Berkenkotter & Huckin (1995) and meant a significant expansion and

¹ Note, for example, the discussion conducted by Heyd (this volume).

reconstruction of genre as a cognitive and social instead of a purely aesthetic category. Discourse genres were found to be constraint-inducing devices that mold concrete textual instantiations in specific, generic ways, according to the goals pursued by their authors. In them, formal features, the consensus was, are *mandated by function* and genres were seen as *doing* rather than merely *being* (cf. Miller's characterization of genre as *social action*). The idea that *communicative function* takes priority over the more mutable formal dimension remains central to this day, but undeniably *form* has never quite disappeared from the focus of genre research.

Partly, this is a result of technological innovation and the hope that expertise in genre recognition can be extended to machines. Practical applications of genre theory in computing (search-engine technology, data mining) are based solely on formal textual aspects, since only those can be effectively analyzed by a computer. To computer scientists and information retrieval engineers, hard, tangible formal aspects of new digital genres come before fuzzy and varied functional criteria, because only those features can be counted and measured, which leads to an understanding of genre that is naturally quite different from the view of functionally-oriented researchers. Combining different disciplinary approaches, however, can lead to a better understanding of the object of study and this paper follows that premise by closely taking into consideration both function and form of an emerging genre. Other recent studies work in a similar direction, redefining form as a more complex variable in a digital environment. Pointing to the important difference between form and formalisms and referring to Mikhail Bakhtin's work, Amy Devitt (this volume) notes:

Returning to these articles can help reveal the roles form might rightly take within genre study and illuminate why form has gotten lost along the way and needs to be reintegrated into genre study. The fluidity of form in genres on the Internet, particularly the case of blogs, especially challenges old notions of form and illustrates the need for dynamic and rhetorical views of form.

In particular, this paper seeks to demonstrate how the co-occurrence of selected formal features in terms of both visual presentation and linguistic expression *evokes* a certain genre, even in the absence of the evoked discourse community. I will postulate that the presence of these features leads to calculable assumptions on the part of the reader regarding the communicative goals and authorship of a text, and that these assumptions can be exploited by genre users with covert goals. Exploitation can be regarded as a proof for the existence of a genre, since the exploiter must assume that that his audience will recognize the genre he is imitating based on formal criteria if he wants his manipulation to succeed (in other words, genre salience is indicated by genre *abusability*).

It is noteworthy that the blog analyzed for this paper is a *company* web log that systematically replicates the characteristics of typical *personal* blogs in order to tie several formal and technical criteria to which it adheres to functional and communicative aspects that it flouts. If anything, this can be regarded as a powerful indicator for the convergence of form and function in a digital environment, both from the perspective of the researcher and from that of the genre (ab)user.

2. Personal blogs, corporate blogs and the blog prototype

Since their inception, web logs (or blogs) have matured into a popular publishing technology that is used in a range of different contexts. While in genre analysis they have sometimes been associated with pre-digital types such as the journal or personal diary (cf. McNeill 2005; this volume), their range of uses is much broader and their precise location in a digital *genre ecology* harder to pinpoint.²

While they appear relatively uniform in terms of visual presentation and are highly standardized in

² See Heyd (this volume) for a useful discussion for the concept of genre ecologies and other theoretical approaches to the issue of genre classification.

terms of publishing technology, blogs are difficult to characterize as a genuinely new genre using much of contemporary theory due to the very limited role that it assigns to formal criteria. The notion of novelty is derailed as soon as one applies the functional focus central to classical Swalesian genre theory to the candidate: blogs are neither written by or for homogeneous discourse communities, nor do they serve a limited supply of observable communicative functions. As Theresa Heyd (this volume) notes:

Since communicative functions can be expected to be few and fundamental and, as a consequence, highly stable elements of discourse, they should be relatively robust against medial change – there is no evidence that a new medial environment fosters new communicative purposes. In sum, it is problematical to establish, or even argue for, the emergence of new digital genres on the basis of current genre theory.

Furthermore, blogs and their uses and usage communities are difficult to assess separately. As Danah Boyd (2006) critically observes: “seeing blogs as a genre obfuscates the efficacy of the practice and the acts of the practitioners”. While it is not entirely true that a dynamic understanding of genre must impose such strict limitations, the fact that, conceptually, blogging at once encompasses a usage-based *ad-hoc community* (the so-called blogosphere), specific *technologies* (such as XML-RPC, the web protocol that makes tracing citations in blogs possible), a set of *common practices* (such as linking and tagging), aspects of *visual presentation* (such as reverse chronological order, the existence of a blogroll) and finally a *textual dimension* is noteworthy for several reasons. In contrast to pre-digital genres such as the novel or the academic research article, blogs combine the above-mentioned amalgam of aspects without having a physical form or a usage community delineated by purpose or profession. It is exceedingly hard not to think of physical items when using the terms *novel* and *article* and to not associate the occupational roles of writer and researcher with the two genres, yet blogs have

no physical form and very few bloggers are paid full-timers.³ The only thing tangible about a blog is its author and the constitutive attribute of blogs appears to be *attribution* – sometimes to a pseudonym, fictional character or impostor, but always to someone.⁴ Furthermore, the fact that blogging is a) a relatively new practice, b) an activity that is still generally understood as a hobby and not a profession and c) that it constitutes a fundamentally democratic means of publishing that is theoretically open to anyone with an Internet connection leads to the common perception of blogs as either 'the genre of the people' or, with less optimism, the genre of the *digital mob* (cf. Cohen 2006). Decisively, a blog belongs to its author⁵ and thus placing the focus on “the practitioners” (Boyd), instead of merely the text they produce, is a logical reaction and a key observation when seeking to assess the potential of blogs for use and abuse.

To date, research into blogs has been conducted with a focus on areas such as politics (Adamic & Glance 2005, Bruns 2007), organizational studies (Kelleher & Miller 2006), personal knowledge management (Efimova 2004), gender (Argamon et al. 2003, Herring & Paolillo 2006), geography (Lin & Halavais 2004), personality (Nowson et al. 2005) and many others. While the specific use of blogs in a corporate environment is still a novel phenomenon, its uptake and reach are already impressive. According to a 2005 study by Guidewire Group, 89% of the international corporations interviewed stated that they had either already launched a blog or were planning to do so in the future.⁶ While there

³ Though exceptions do exist. Cf. <http://www.oreillynet.com/pub/a/javascript/2002/08/12/megnut.html>.

⁴ A prominent case being 'Fake Steve Jobs', a blog parody of Apple founder Steve Jobs that was covertly written by a journalist (see Stone 2007). The existence of such imitations underlines how closely blogs are tied to the identity of their owners.

⁵ This general claim can be backed up with a brief comparison of established genres. Much of contemporary non-fictional text production is institutionally mandated (news writing, marketing, public relations) or serves a function in an institutional setting (memos, documentations, contracts). By contrast, individual writing has previously been restricted to direct interpersonal communication, with only few exceptions (one can argue that diaries have historically been used as personal publications with a public readership in mind). Whether or not they are actually used in that way, blogs give an individual the means to address a global audience. But it is this potential to empower the blogger that truly distinguishes blogs and triggers the association with diaries or journals, not the fact that their content is restricted to private thoughts or feelings (as blogs cover virtually any conceivable topic), or any other strictly formal criterion. The feature of extreme immediacy between writer, text and the practice of text production is constitutive for blogs, a notion frequently stressed by many bloggers. Cf. McNeill (this volume) for another perspective on diary-writing vs. blogging.

⁶ Guidewire Survey Executive Summary - Blogging in the Enterprise: <http://www.blogonevent.com/archives/Guidewire%20Survey%20Executive%20Summary%20-%20Bloggning%20in%20the%20Enterprise%20-%20Oct%202005.pdf>

is clearly a high level of interest in blogging in a corporate context, many decision-makers are uncertain about how to integrate blogs into their existing communications infrastructure. There are many different options: blogs can be used internally, for example for knowledge management (Efimova & Grudin 2007) and team communication (Charman 2006), or externally, in areas such as marketing or crisis prevention (Zerfass 2006). While advertising a product is often the starting point for company blogging, other activities are common, with a majority of corporate blogs being used for purposes other than marketing.⁷ There are a number of functions that a company blog can realize and oftentimes an organization will maintain not just a single blog, but an entire hub that is either personalized or grouped according to thematic aspects.⁸ In some cases, topic areas such as health care or public policy are identified as vital to the corporate interest and subsequently a blog is created to address a group of company-external stakeholders who play an important role in that area. Organic growth of employee blogs that aren't part of any concise communication strategy is also widespread and globally this group appears to make up the largest percentage of what can be considered corporate blogs.⁹

It is possible to accurately describe the relation between corporate blogs and personal blogs through application of a model of digital genre ecologies, such as the one developed by Heyd, with the caveat that the formal/functional relation suggested by her must be modified in order for the model to accommodate blogs. The supergenre of the personal blog,¹⁰ which can be regarded as the historical antecedent of subgenres such as campaign blogs, health blogs, law blogs, news blogs and countless others, shows a high degree of stability in regards to the technical means of publishing (standardized open-source software and hosted services) and the resulting visual presentation (all blogs have titled

⁷ According to my representative corpus sample of 160 English-language corporate blogs.

⁸ For example, see the "More Google Blogs" section in the sidebar of the official Google blog: <http://googleblog.blogspot.com/>

⁹ I define *corporate blogging* here as "the use of blogs by business professionals to further organizational goals" (Weil 2006).

¹⁰ 'Personal' being used in the sense of blogs maintained by private individuals that freely comment on news, events and topics of their own choosing including personal thoughts, feelings and experiences. While according to Blood (2000) the first blogs revolved around linking and commenting on web sites of interest, diary-like aspects became central to blogging at an early stage of its development.

and dated entries, reverse chronological order of entries on the main page and an archive function). Also, while certainly inviting variation, blogs of very different types show certain linguistic similarities which are the result of a single theme that can be considered universally relevant in both super- and subgenres: the blogger himself.¹¹ Thus, while virtually all formal-technical criteria and at least some formal-linguistic aspects are shared between the super- and subgenres, it is (ironically) function which differs among subgenres and remains unspecified in the supergenre. This is a logical result of the dual nature of blogs as both tools for producing content and containers in which the content itself is then stored. It is possible to climb down the ladder of classification to ever more specific purposes and communities, all the way down to combinations as specific as photo blogs for guinea pig enthusiasts. Defying such compartmentalism and instead resorting to broader definitions of purpose (e.g. 'biographical writing', 'expression of personal opinion') seems of little use: ultimately, communicative goals may vary not only from one blog to the next, but from one single blog post to another. Applying these considerations, Table 1 provides an overview of different types of corporate blogs according to function, authorship and target audience.

¹¹ This does not necessarily mean that blogs are exclusively about the private lives of their owners, but that the thoughts, opinions or comments of the blogger are very likely to surface in the blog in some shape or form, due to the nature of the technology as personal publishing. When the blogger is completely absent, the status of the blog as authentic may be called into questions.

corporate blog type	organizational association	target audience	functions
product blog	marketing, customer service	consumers	a) to promote a product directly b) to generate a discussion centered on the product c) to address issues closely related to the company's products d) to provide customer support
image/lobbying blog	public relations/ communications	consumers / focal group	a) to create a positive public perception of a company b) to actively shape the public discussion of a company and its products c) to advance company interests in regards to policy (lobbying) d) to preempt or react to criticism (crisis management)
recruitment blog	human resources	potential employees	a) to capture the interest of potential employees b) to communicate directly with potential employees and respond to their questions
strategy blog	management	consumers, investors, partners	a) discuss the position of the corporation and its products in the market b) evaluate competitors and their products c) legitimate management decisions such as layoffs, restructuring, expansion etc. d) outline future strategic goals
knowledge blog	subject-matter expert	other SMEs	a) to share specialized knowledge in a subject matter (e.g. engineering/software development/hardware r&d) with stakeholders inside or outside of the company b) to seek information and advice from other experts about such issues c) as a mnemonic instrument for the author
multipurpose blog	variable	variable	variable

Table 1: An organizational and functional classification of corporate blogs

A signature quality of blog use in corporate environments is the tension between the communicative goals of the individual and those of the organization and the reoccurring question of how the two can be clearly delineated and prioritized. The first example illustrates the kind of personal coloring that many employee blogs exhibit and that they share with non-corporate personal blogs.

(1)¹² Is anyone else reading Good to Great (Jim Collins)[hyperlink:
<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0066620996/bookstorenow57-20>]? I
just started it and granted, I am reading 2 other books at the same
time (Pledged and No Need for Speed...hey, I have diverse interests;
rationalizing my sorority membership and being the best darned slow
runner I can be), but it would be fun to get a little group discussion
going if anyone else was interested in reading it too.
Now nobody spoil it for the rest of us by telling us how it ends.
Everyone must discover the secret sauce for him/herself.

There is usually no clear line separating the blog as a platform of personal expression from the official point of view that is communicated by the organization and due to this there have been incidents where employees have been reprimanded or even fired because of something they had blogged.¹³ At the same time a blogger can acquire “spokesperson status”, with the views expressed in his blog being widely acknowledged while he does not officially possess the mandate for such a function.

Even in company blogs where a clearly defined organizational goal takes obvious precedent over the blogger's personal motives, the presence of the blogger can still be recognized. Exceptions occasionally occur in product blogs, in cases where the author chooses to follow the style of traditional advertising and forgo first person singular narration.¹⁴

(2) From 21st September to 1st October 2007, Marseille hosts its annual international fair in its exhibition centre at Parc Chanot. Over 300,000 visitors are expected to attend, where huge displays of pretty much everything from the latest technology to the best cuisine will be on display. Over 40 countries take part along with plenty of entertainment, so there's plenty to see and do for all the family. For

¹² All numbered examples are referenced in detail in the index.

¹³ For an early example, see http://seattlepi.nwsourc.com/business/146115_blogger30.html.

¹⁴ Use of the first person pronoun (1P) appears to be a constitutive element in blogs, making it a part of the prototype. See <http://corpblawg.ynada.com/2007/03/23/no-i-in-corporate-blogs> for a detailed discussion of 1P frequency, both in corporate and non-corporate blogs.

more information on visiting Marseille, visit our Thomson Cities guide.

Because blogs are generally understood as a means of *personal* publishing, it is conceivable why posts such as (2) are underrepresented in the corporate blog data – the lack of a discernible speaker is likely to be regarded as a source of dissonance by readers who have learned that where there is a blog there must also be a blogger. It is notable that strategies which overtly violate the conventions of the genre are still used, apparently because it is difficult for corporations to pursue strategic goals without falling back into established patterns of communication. Of course the visibility of the blogger does not make it impossible to pursue such goals, as this post by an employee of hardware maker X10 demonstrates:

(3) Someone once asked me “If you had to choose your top 5 favorite X10 products, what would they be?” Hmmm... interesting question, and the more I thought about it the more difficult it was to choose as there were so many. But in the end, I put together my Top 5 List. Yours I’m sure will probably be different, but here’s mine in descending order [...]

But while in conventional advertising the listener is addressed by what could be described as the voice of the company, in a blog he is addressed by the blogger, who may or may not *lend* his voice to his employer. In such an exchange the organization is essentially sidelined and loses control over the communication, something that is further highlighted by the dialogic structure of blogs. Because feedback in blogs is usually welcomed and anticipated, bloggers often seek to engage the readership by involving it in a discussion. This is achieved in significant parts by three standard blogging practices: linking to other sources, citing or quoting other sources and using prompts as in (1):

(1)’ Is anyone else reading [...]? [...] Now nobody spoil it for the rest of us by telling us how it ends.

Both the question and the request in this example are genuine interactional cues, seeking to elicit a response from the readers of the blog via the comment function. While the use of such devices in fictional texts aims to *simulate* actual communicative events to the reader, this is not the case here – a distinction that will prove relevant when examining *Life at Wal-Mart*.

In to-date research of blogging as a communicative practice, the personal and discursive nature of blogs is frequently highlighted.¹⁵ This characteristic seems to override other specific organizational roles assigned to 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. (Schmidt 2007)

Taking such expectation into account it can be argued that from a cognitive blogging can be conceptualized as an amalgam of formal, technical, stylistic and cultural aspects, which together form a recognizable conceptual category - the *blog prototype*.¹⁶ At the core of this prototype is the process of interpersonal communication in which a voice – that of the blogger – speaks to a community of readers, who may in turn themselves be bloggers. The readers are invited to respond and can usually do so via comments on the the blog itself, or by linking responses from their own blogs to the original post (so-called *trackbacks*). To someone visiting the blog website, what is presented is very often not the expression of a single author, but a mosaic of contributions by different individuals citing, quoting and linking to each other. In contrast to traditional means of publishing there is almost a symmetry of power

¹⁵ Important contributions to research on blogs and genre formation come from Miller & Sheperd (2004), Herring et al (2004, 2005) and Askehave & Nielsen (2005). Miller & Shepard in particular provide a detailed description of the development of blogs, something that I have chosen to forgo in this paper to focus specifically on one example of a corporate blog.

¹⁶ I make use of the canonical definition of the term *prototype* as the central member of a category with differently weighed constituting attributes (cf. Mervis & Rosch 1981).

between the different parties, with everyone being able to equally contribute to the discussion in a typical scenario. Table 2 illustrates some of the characteristics of the blog prototype in its presentational/technical, linguistic and contextual dimensions.¹⁷ While especially the presentational/technical characteristics tend to be 'hard', i.e. mandated by the blogging software,¹⁸ the contextual factors are 'soft', in other words dependent on the blogger's conscious choices and for the most part unverifiable to the blog's readers. While the linguistic properties are observable, they are partly subject to the blogger's stylistic preferences and partly conditioned by the environment (e.g. since blogs are expected to textually involve their owner, high frequency of the first person pronoun is only partly a personal decision, as involvement is difficult to realize by other means in English).

¹⁷ Note that this enumeration is by no means exhaustive and that certainly more features could be productively added – what is provided here is a basic checklist.

¹⁸ Obviously the functions and constraints of a software package are still the conscious choice of someone, namely the software developer(s), but in the context of this paper I focus solely on bloggers and blog readers whom I assume to have less of a technical background.

Formal aspect	Degree of variability	Features
presentational/technical	hard	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) segmentation of text into entries (<i>posts</i>) b) reverse chronological order of entries c) title, date, and author information is associated with entries d) archive e) blogroll f) comments g) use of hyperlinks h) use of a standard blogging software
linguistic ¹⁹	medium	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) first person pronoun in subject position and as agent or experiencer b) <i>It</i> and other dummy pronouns in subject position c) high frequency of deictic constructions, especially person deixis d) high frequency of stative verbs e) high frequency of modals f) present tense over past tense g) active over passive voice h) relatively short sentences i) use of meta-language that describes or refers to blogging
contextual	soft	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) the self-referenced 'voice' of the blog is at once its writer and publisher (= 'blogger') b) the blogger is identified by name or pseudonym; if he uses his real name his is in fact the person he claims to be c) the events and experiences retold in the blog are either non-fictional or overtly characterized as fictional d) opinions and thoughts voiced by the blogger are truly his

Table 2: Characteristics of the blog prototype

The third formal category (*contextual aspects*) contains a bundle of features that appear to be highly relevant when evaluating the question of whether a blog is 'real' or 'fake'. Blogs associated with corporate marketing are in rare cases written by company employees or paid professionals who claim to be regular consumers. These so-called *flogs* (fake blogs) are passionately rejected by the blogosphere and their use is seen as antisocial and deceptive.²⁰ Flogging as a strategy can be regarded as another indicator of the 'speech-like' quality of blogs, not so much because of their interactivity (many blogs garner few comments and are monologic in their language), but because of the immediate connection between utterance and speaker. In the terminology of classical linguistic pragmatics: if the speaker is

¹⁹ The tendencies given assume the median values of pre-digital written language such as scientific papers and newspaper editorials. The basis for this observation is my corpus data. To be relevant beyond a relatively small sample, such generalizations would obviously have to be backed with more empirical data and quantified accordingly.

²⁰ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fake_blog for a brief description of flogging.

not who he claims to be, the perlocution of his utterance changes and the blog entry as a speech act is no longer felicitous.

Because individuals, not companies communicate through blogs, the interests of the organization are constantly in danger of being relegated to a secondary position behind the communicative goals of the blogger. This poses a problem for obvious reasons: how can a blog serve organizational goals if it is a channel of personal expression that is controlled only by its individual owner? There are two immediate options: either the extremely individualized blog prototype is modified to somehow accommodate organizational objectives, or the objectives must be realized in other ways than they are in traditional media.

In *Life at Wal-Mart* an alternative and essentially covert strategy is chosen. Its creators seek to avoid both *conforming* with the requirements of the blog prototype and its obvious *flouting*, in order to preempt both the loss of control associated with the first choice and the loss of prestige and credibility associated with the second. Instead, they solve the problem by developing a drastically different approach – *subversion* of the prototype (i.e. *flogging*) - that will be discussed in detail in the following chapters. It is assumed that the main communicative goal of the blog is to positively influence the opinion of the reader, something which is best achieved by presenting him with a textual environment that is homogenized and free of external (and therefore possibly dissenting) voices. Only by controlling the communicative environment and by effectively simulating individual voices can a positive message about Wal-Mart Stores Inc. be transmitted without interferences. What is pivotal about the use of a blog for this task is the fact that blogs are so closely associated with the culture of individual participation described above. Subversion as the strategy of choice incurs the violation of prototype features in all three described categories: entries in *Life at Wal-Mart* make no use of hyperlinks and do not allow comments (presentational/technical aspect), are often written in past tense and contain no meta-

language (linguistic aspect) and are not written and published by the same individuals (contextual aspect).

The strategic goal is apparently to harvest the positive associations that the public audience has with the blog prototype as personal and discursive in absence of the actual qualities that have lead to such a view. If successful – that is, perceived as “the real thing” –, a *faux* blog can serve to reinforce the persuasiveness of the company message, which in the case examined is an unwaveringly positive depiction of the corporate entity Wal-Mart. In the remainder of this paper I aim to demonstrate how that goal is realized through the blog and why specifically the blog prototype lends itself so well to subversion in the context of public relations.²¹

3. *Life at Wal-Mart*: context and presentation

Life at Wal-Mart is part of the retailer's *Wal-Mart Facts* web site²² (see Illustration 1), a site that contains news and business information and is visibly geared towards public relations and creating a positive image of the otherwise controversial company. The caption for the link leading from the main page of the site to *Life at Wal-Mart* is “*Read our Associate Blog*”. However, the terms *blog* or *blogging* are not used anywhere else on the site, nor do they occur in any of the 52 entries that were reviewed for this study - a highly atypical distribution.²³

²¹ A collection of 52 blog posts from *Life at Wal-Mart*, collected between 21 June 2006 and 21 June 2007 forms the basis of this investigation. Said corpus is in turn part of a larger database of 133 company web logs that I will evaluate as part of my doctoral thesis.

²² http://web.archive.org/web/*/http://www.walmartfacts.com/default.aspx

²³ Out of 133 corporate blogs that were reviewed, 125 (= 93.9%) contain at least one occurrence of the word *blog* in at least one post. Notably, those sources with no occurrences of the term were marketing-related and advertised products in very brief entries, with the sole exception of *Life at Wal-Mart*. Furthermore, *blog* is the fourth most common noun in the corpus overall, an indicator for its salience as a genre marker.

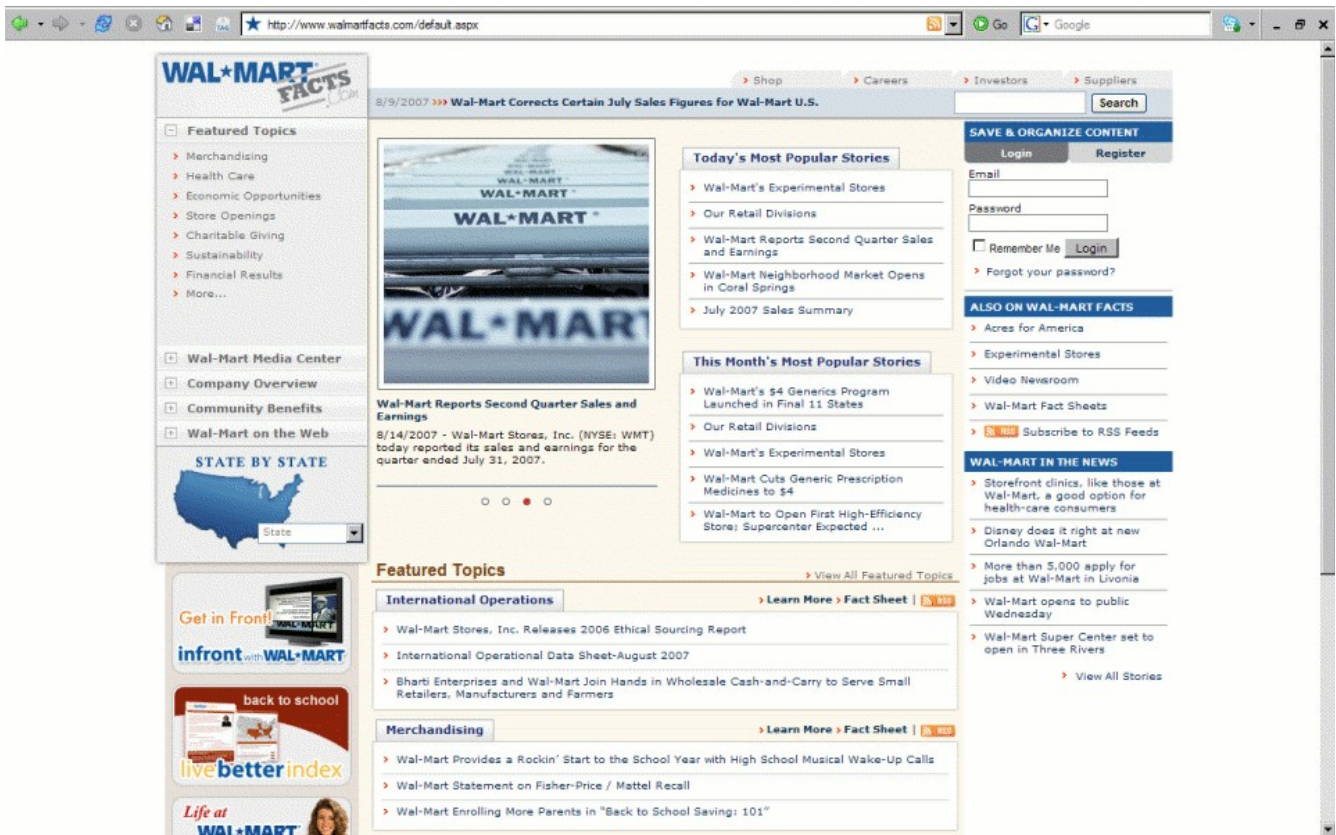


Illustration 1: Wal-Mart Facts: http://web.archive.org/web/*/http://www.walmartfacts.com/default.aspx. Retrieved 19 August 2007.

Life at Wal-Mart itself is seamlessly integrated into the design of *Wal-Mart Facts*, with individual entries superficially looking very much the same as the news items published in the press room section of the site (compare Illustrations 2 and 3). In strictly visual terms the blog does not distinguish itself from other sections of the site containing dynamically updated pieces of texts (news items, reports, figures et cetera), but certain structural characteristics that are usually associated with blogs are present.



Illustration 2: Wal-Mart Facts Pressroom Item: http://web.archive.org/web/*/http://www.walmartfacts.com/articles/5235.aspx. Retrieved 19 August 2007.



Illustration 3: Life at Wal-Mart Main Page: http://web.archive.org/web/*/http://www.walmartfacts.com/lifeatwalmart/. Retrieved 19 August 2007.

A textual hyperlink marked by the word *Permalink* connects individual entries with the blog main page. The term *permalink* is ubiquitous in blogs and is universally used to describe the permanent storage place of a post. On the right-hand side of *Life at Wal-Mart's* main page two boxes are displayed that contain the *Categories* and *Archives* navigations. Both of these terms are equally characteristic of blogs. Categories are labels that can be attached to posts to thematically classify them. Readers may use the blogger-assigned categories to filter the general list of entries for posts categorized (or *tagged*) as belonging to a particular topic. *Life at Wal-Mart* contains the following ten categories:

- Business
- Community Benefits
- Diversity
- Environment
- Health Care
- Helping Communities
- Helping Others
- Mr. Sam
- Opportunity
- Voter Registration

Since categories are created by the publisher of the blog, they can act as salient indicators of the

blogger's motivation. The tags used in *Life at Wal-Mart* point towards the goal of demonstrating the company's positive involvement in regards to services such as health care and community aid. Since categories can be freely assigned and there is no limit to how many you can assign, many bloggers use them liberally and develop highly descriptive personal ontologies. By comparison, *Life at Wal-Mart* uses few and fairly vague terms. Several abstract nouns are used (*diversity, opportunity*) and the verb *helping* occurs twice with markedly vague objects (*communities, others*). While in general bloggers make a sincere effort to descriptively label their writing with such tags, the overall impression here is that not the informative use of the categories is important, but the ontology itself and the positive prosocial qualities it conveys.

In blogs of all types, the archive is the generic way of accessing older posts that are no longer displayed on the main page. It contains links to all posts in the blog grouped according to the month they were published in. In general, monthly archives are automatically created, making this a 'hard' characteristic that is shared by all blogs published with a popular blogging software such as Wordpress²⁴ or Movable Type.²⁵

4. Author vs. publisher status

Blogs have historically been associated with personal diaries, partly because of the common topical focus on the daily life of the author, for structural reasons, and because blogs as a means of publishing are available to individuals, in contrast to pre-digital publishing technologies which are generally available only to institutions (cf. Blood 2000). For example, the popular blogging software Wordpress

²⁴ See <http://wordpress.org/>.

²⁵ See <http://www.movabletype.org/>.

is described as a “state-of-the-art semantic personal publishing platform” on the project website. As a result of both the heritage of early blogs as online diaries and the simplicity and cheapness of the technology, very many blogs are built around their authors and the presence of the the blogger is in most cases clearly visible in both the presentation and the language of a blog. It is exceedingly unusual for blogs – including corporate ones – to be published anonymously, a practice that separates them from neighboring genres such as press releases, which are generally not attributed to an individual author. Furthermore, because of the simplicity, cheapness and ease of deployment of blogs, there is no reason for author and publisher to be separate individuals. Publishing in blogs is generally achieved by clicking on a button, essentially similar to email, therefore separating the two functions is exceedingly uncommon.

In *Life at Wal-Mart* it however appears that not only are the roles separated, but that the writers are entirely unaware of the medium their contributions are published in. There are several indicators for this:

- none of the entries contain hyperlinks
- none of the entries cite other blogs, or any other sources
- none of the entries contain literal interactional cues²⁶
- none of the entries contain any metalanguage that refers to blogging or the Internet

While this alone can be regarded as a strong indicator that the roles of writer and publisher are indeed separated in *Life at Wal-Mart*, it is the layout of a single post that makes this atypicality even more apparent. Blog entries are normally 'signed' i.e. they contain an automatically generated signature that names the author and the time of writing. In most blogging applications the author is identified via his user name, which may or may not be identical with his real name. Illustrations 4 and 5 show such signatures from the researcher's own blog and from *Life at Wal-Mart*.

²⁶ I use the term here to describe discourse markers generally used in spoken language to signal turn opportunities to conversation partners.

Cornelius posted this article under [Blogosphere](#), [Opinion](#), [Media](#) on Tuesday, August 14th, 2007 at 9:18 am You can follow any responses to this entry through the [RSS 2.0](#) feed. You can [leave a response](#), or [trackback](#) from your own site. [Edit this entry](#).

Illustration 4: Signature below an entry in CorpBlawg:
<http://corpblawg.ynada.com/2007/08/14/old-media-semantics>.
Retrieved 19 August 2007.

Posted by admin on June 21, 2007 01:16 PM | [Permalink](#)

[« Previous Article](#) |

Illustration 5: Signature below an entry in
Life at Wal-Mart:

Despite the fact that all 52 entries in *Life at Wal-Mart* are allegedly from different authors, the single user who is identified as the publisher of all posts via the automatically generated signature is *Wal-Mart Facts* and *admin* respectively. What appears to be a signature line identifying the author at the very beginning of each piece is in fact a part of the full text that has been manually formatted to give the impression that it identifies the author.²⁷

Under the assumption that the publisher(s) of the blog are not identical with the writers (who are suggested by the site to be *bloggers*, which is highly misleading in the light of their very limited involvement) several other unusual characteristics of *Life at Wal-Mart* are explicable:

- authors are not identified by full name and cannot be contacted
- commenting on posts is not possible
- trackbacks to posts are not shown

This attempt to blur the line between author and publisher can be interpreted as an obfuscation strategy. The PR firm publishing the *Wal-Mart Facts* website possibly receives the testimonials directly from Wal-Mart, which are then published as blog entries. They may well be written by Wal-Mart employees, but they lack any of the characteristics of authentic blog entries (personal publishing, discursiveness) and their authors are apparently unaware of how they are used.

Life at Wal-Mart thus deviates significantly from the blog prototype in that the roles of author and

²⁷ See for example the line *Bonnie B., Assistant Manager, Glenmont, N.Y.* (http://web.archive.org/web/*/http://www.walmartfacts.com/LifeAtWalmart/2007/06/for_the_last_six_years_my_fami.a_spx). A look at the HTML source code confirms that the line has not been added by the blogging software but is the product of manual editing. All entries in *Life at Wal-Mart* have are thus extremely likely to have been published by someone other than the alleged authors.

publisher appear to be separated. It is noteworthy that the actual publisher, who closely controls what in a typical blog is a communicative mosaic, is not explicitly identified anywhere on the *Wal-Mart Facts* website.

5. Thematic and formal classification of posts

There is generally a high level of diversity in blogs in terms of what topics are explored and how an entry is structured. Authors are not limited to a fixed list of issues they can write about, unless they choose to impose such a limit themselves. While corporate bloggers tend to limit their entries to specific business-related topics, they very often sprinkle in personal information, for example about their families and friends. There are few conventions as to how to write or what to write about and accordingly, no two blog entries are ever entirely alike.

Life at Wal-Mart differs from this in the sense that there appear to be generic or at least reoccurring themes that are paired with certain stylistic patterns. What is remarkable is that these tropes exist in multiple instantiations by different authors, all with astounding degrees of similarity, which makes it exceedingly unlikely that there is no close editorial oversight. The post categories used in the blog (see Chapter 3) directly map to this generic structure.

5.1 The crisis/incident account (A)

A reoccurring theme in many blog entries found in *Life at Wal-Mart* is that of the personal crisis, a dramatic event involving sometimes the storyteller and more often a loved one that is retold in an

emphatic and emotive style. The most frequent type of incident reported is the medical emergency.

(4) Laurie W., Merchandising, Bentonville, Ark.

On June 5, I will celebrate my eight year anniversary with Wal-Mart. It bothers me when I hear people say that Wal-Mart does not care about their associates. In June 2004, my mother and I had to make the decision to have Hospice start coming to help take care of my father, who had been dealing with many health problems for quite some time. One month later, my father had another stroke and by the next day was not doing very well at all. When I found out that he had gotten worse, I told my supervisor that I needed to leave so that I could be with my family to help take care of my dad. My supervisor drove my car and our office manager followed, as they both wanted to make sure that I made it home safely. My father passed away three days later after fighting a battle with congestive heart failure, diabetes and bone cancer. I notified my manager and supervisor that I would be going out of town for the funeral. The call center associates and management really came through to help me in this time of need. Instead of flowers, they gave me a prepaid phone card and took a collection for me. I knew this would be very helpful to cover my gas expenses for the trip. So believe me, Wal-Mart does care about the associates and I will always be grateful for what my call center did for me and my family! God bless Wal-Mart and what they do to help us!

Often medical emergencies are narrated that are sudden and unexpected (heart attack, discovery of a tumor etc), but accounts where the outcome can be described as predictable, like (4) (the father passes away after a period of illness), are also numerous. This underscores an aspect specific to *Life at Wal-Mart* that is a deviation from the means of how a story is typically presented: while we can ordinarily expect the victim to assume a central role in the account of a personal crisis, the central role in these accounts is assigned to Wal-Mart and its associates and to a detailed description of how they supported the victim and comforted the storyteller in a time of uncertainty and fear. Narrative episodes are present in a large number of posts in *Life at Wal-Mart*, a fact that is significant because they are in turn quite

uncommon in other corporate blogs. Notably, they occur in personal (non-corporate blogs) with greater frequency than in corporate sources, but that they are nowhere as common as in *Life at Wal-Mart*.

The observable typicality of narrative episodes in the blog invites the application of a classical structural model such as that proposed by Labov and Waletzky (1967) and Labov (1972).

(5) Bonnie B., Assistant Manager, Glenmont, N. Y.

For the last six years my family and myself have had the privilege of working for Wal-Mart. Yes I said my family myself, my son, my daughter and daughter-in-law each in a different Wal-Mart. A few months ago my husband had a massive heart attack and his body went into septic shock it was touch and go but thankfully he made it. All the while each Wal-Mart was extremely kind and considerate . They allow us the time we needed be at the hositipal, without question. And each time I came into my Wal-Mart I was greeted with hugs ,and clear cut concern for my husband and myself. Each time I left to go back to the hositipal I felt not quite so overwhelmed, like the associates took away some of the stress, and I was able to get through another day. Everyday I thank my management and associates for allowing myself to having the privilege of working with them and let them know that I am successful because we have built a successful caring team.

Bonnie B's account lends itself well to the Labovian narrative model. The *orientation* (*For the last six years my family and myself have had the privilege of working for Wal-Mart*) is followed by what is basically a compression of *complicating action* and *resolution* in a single sentence (*A few months ago my husband had a massive heart attack and his body went into septic shock* [end complicating action] *it was touch and go but thankfully he made it* [resolution]). However, what can be considered the *evaluation* – the justification for telling the story, in Labov's terms – is provided after that summary; it is the enumeration of acts of affirmation and support experienced by Bonnie in reaction to her husband's illness. While most narratives in crisis accounts are more climactic than (5), this 'bottom line'

of the story is usually presented in much greater detail than those parts of the narrative that report the central sequence of events. The 'so what' question that according to Labov must crucially be preempted by the storyteller can thus still be asked, because what is initially assumed to be the 'point' of the story (that Bonnie's husband survived a heart attack) is backgrounded in favor of the role of Wal-Mart in the crisis.

This tendency is even more evident in the following example. The account of Christopher Mondy about his son's emergency surgery can be subdivided into four basic parts: a) an introduction (or *orientation*) that provides the *raison d'être* for the story, b) the account of events as pertaining to Ryan, the storyteller's son, c) those events not directly concerned with Ryan and his illness, but with the reaction of the storyteller's colleagues at Wal-Mart and d) the conclusion (or *coda*) of the story, which is less concerned with creating *chronological* harmony and coherence (bridging the narrated past and the present in which the story is told) than with creating a *logical* connection between the described events and the positive picture of Wal-Mart that the storyteller draws.

(6) Christopher Mondy, Replenishment, Bentonville, Ark.

[INTRO]I have been with Wal*Mart for almost 17 years. I have seen our company in the news with stories that have been untrue by people who "believe or feel" that Wal*Mart does little to help their associates and pays too little of a wage with very little to offer in Benefits. Let them explain to me how they can "believe or feel" when they have never worked with this company.[/INTRO]

[DRAMA]On November 3, my families life was and forever will be changed. My 6 year old son Ryan, had had a sinus infection and still had headaches. The Dr after having checked him 2 weeks earlier noticed a dramatic change. After some initial tests, he ordered a CT for a better understanding of what was causing the headaches. At 2:30pm, we were informed that there was a golf ball sized Tumor behind his right eye. We were then informed when the Dr came in to see us that he was going to be Air Lifted to Arkansas Children's Hospital in Little Rock, some

225 miles away. [/DRAMA]

[WM] Stunned, I called my family to give them the news and then called to tell my supervisor, Teresa Stewart. As we were trying to figure out what to do before the Helicopter landed, Teresa showed up at the Hospital to see if she could do any thing for me or my family. [/WM]

[DRAMA] On Saturday November 4, my son had to have an emergency surgery to remove the Tumor in a life or death situation. [/DRAMA]

[WM] I talked to Teresa to let her know what was going on, my family was with me and my Wal*Mart family needed to know also. On Monday, Teresa and Jean made the 3 1/2 hour trip to Little Rock to check on us. My Meat and Seafood Replenishment team that I worked with had gathered money, food, and other things that my family needed. At least 1 time per week, someone from My Meat and Seafood Replenishment team came to the Hospital to see if we needed anything and brought things with them for us to show they were there for our support. As word spread, it reached the local Wal*Mart that we were there and the Market Manager, Market Human Resource Manager, and Store Manager Bruce all came with items that we could use again to show support for us. [/WM]

[DRAMA] Ryan was released from the Hospital 43 days after he went in and is still receiving Chemo treatments and Radiation treatments. [/DRAMA]

[CONC] The care and support from My company is overwhelming. When people talk about why Wal*Mart is different, it is the People. Our stores are made of Bricks and Mortar but it is held together by the Associates that work there. It is held together by the kindness and care for our fellow associates. I hope that no one ever has to be faced with what my family has been faced with but if they have to face it, they will not be alone. They will not even be able to imagine the support that they will receive. If any of our critics would like to ask Me what I "believe or feel" I will be more than happy to explain it to them. [/CONC]

A calculation of the number of words in each section reveals how the content that is technically tangential to the story's outcome dominates over the account of the events as such.

a) introduction [INTRO][[/INTRO]	72	13.3%
b) dramatic events [DRAMA][[/DRAMA]	149	27.5%
c) role of Wal-Mart [WM][[/WM]	196	36.2%

d) conclusion [CONC][/CONC]	124	22.9%

total	541	99.9%

Strictly speaking, the only part not concerned with Wal-Mart is (b). However, even when we limit ourselves to comparing the number of words devoted to the story proper (b) with the role of Wal-Mart and its associates (c) we find that the the second section outweighs the first.

A recurring element of the crisis account is thus not only the crisis itself and its resolution, but the consistent support that both the victim and the storyteller experience on behalf of Wal-Mart's caring employees. Their care and support automatically imbue Wal-Mart the corporate entity with similar qualities.

For several reasons, accounts of traumatic personal experiences such as the death or maiming of a family member are ideally suited for this purpose. Firstly, such an event generally spurs interest in readers due to its existentially threatening nature. Secondly, it is universally tragic in that many people have experienced similar loss, or fear to experience it at some point in their lives. Thirdly, because of its nature as a both universal and at the same time highly personal experience, sharing such a tragedy marks a strong and significant bond between storyteller and listener. Because of the gravity that must be assigned to the account, the storyteller gains the trust of the listener – he is humanized and familiarized through the event and his account of it.²⁸ It is exactly this foundation of trust that then serves to support the account of Wal-Mart's associates and their empathy and the conclusion that this implies that *Wal-Mart does care about the associates* (4).

²⁸ Of course the closeness is in this case superficial: not only is the story not told but published on the Web, but it is also unclear who exactly the writer is (in contrast to a 'real' blog) and what audience he has in mind. The closeness between storyteller and listener is therefore largely superficial is the specific context of *Life at Wal-Mart*.

5.2 *The career/life story (B)*

Those posts not concerned with dramatic events and their resolution are often of the career/life story type. The following example shows elaborately how this type is structured in the majority of cases.

(7) Deana F. , Field Manager, Bentonville, Ark.

While recently doing my Open Enrollment it made me start reminiscing about my past 22 years with Wal-Mart and how fortunate I am to have such a great career. My story goes like this. Twenty-one years ago I was helping run a family dairy farm and times were hard, and our biggest payment was our family's health insurance. Our son had asthma, so this was not something we could do without. I decided to go to town and find a job so I could have insurance and Wal-Mart was where I wanted to work. Fortunately I got hired on the spot. The store manager came to the service desk and asked if I wanted to start tomorrow. I told him I only wanted to work so I could have insurance coverage, and I was hired as a 10 to 2 cashier. I started to move up in the company, becoming a CSM, department manager over different areas of the store, claims clerk, cash office. I then decided I would quit Wal-Mart and become a nurse, to have a career. When I gave my notice the store manager asked if I would like a career with Wal-Mart. I told him I felt I had already done everything I could do at Wal-Mart and he asked me if I would like to go into management. The district manager along with my husband convinced me that this was a career I would like to pursue. I was an assistant manager at several stores in Nebraska and Missouri and was then offered a position with Store Planning as a training supervisor. I came to Store Planning as a training supervisor and have now been promoted to a Field Manager. I started to work for Wal-Mart for insurance benefits and have found a career I love, have great benefits and a great work family.

In contrast to type A entries, posts of this variety can always be expected to be anti-climactic. The life story or, more often, the career at Wal-Mart as part of this story is presented chronologically, with no

dramatic turn of events or climax and a linear path that the reader can follow from the past to the present. Sometimes anecdotes are inserted into such an account, the most popular form being the encounter with Wal-Mart's founder, Sam Walton (referred to as *Mr. Sam*), who pays a surprise visit to the store where the storyteller works (see type D). The account generally ends with a reflection of the storyteller about his good experiences at Wal-Mart and a positive judgment regarding career opportunities and employee benefits at the company. Interestingly enough, the writers seem to unanimously assume that the reader initially has a negative impression of how Wal-Mart treats its employees. In (7) Deana F. does not consider a career at Wal-Mart an attractive option (except for the health care plan the company offers) and is then convinced otherwise. The underlying assumption is that the reader will follow Deana's deduction and change his view of Wal-Mart as a working place as a result of hearing her story. Alternately, Wal-Mart employees who read Deana's account may be encouraged to believe in the company's prosocial behavior.

5.3 The opinion piece (C)

Whereas the previously described types are heavily dependent on the writer's self-characterization via storytelling and on the trust he consequently gains, the third type seeks to gain the reader's support by presenting opinions that are likely to be similar to his own. Via these opinion pieces, which usually take on a decidedly conservative, pro-market and pro-corporate view, the blog publishers aims to conflate a set of blue-collar American values into a consistent ideology and make Wal-Mart the torch-bearer of this ideology. Issues raised in these posts include a variety of areas, such as Christian holidays, energy-efficient light bulbs and voting.

(8) Joe R., Market Fashion Merchandiser, Midland, Texas

With all the criticism that our company has taken these past few years I am very pleased with the decision our company has made to promote people to vote. I know we do not nor should we tell people how to vote, but making associates aware of those candidates who wish ill on this great company and on our associates will help loyal associates make informed decisions when entering the voting booth. In the light of recent scandals on both sides of the aisle, some Americans may decide to "sit this one out. " I encourage you not to do this, because by not voting you are voting. The person with the views opposite yours would love for you to stay home, however I encourage you to go out and vote for the best of the candidates, regardless of their weakness or failures to satisfy your political views. I personally would like to have more conservative candidates than we have had in many years, but if they are not in we need to vote for the next best one.

From the use of the nouns *people* and *associates* in conjunction with the second person pronoun (*people* -> *associates* -> *you*) it is plausible that the advice Joe R. gives is not solely directed at the general readership, but instead addresses Wal-Mart's employees. R. skilfully creates an ideological battleground, positing himself as the honest voice and warning readers about *the person with the views opposite yours*. His almost passing note that he would prefer more conservative candidates clearly locates him on the – at least in large parts fictional – map of ideologically clear-cut America, where corporate conservatism and blue-collar values are easily compatible. The fact that he notes his preference for conservative candidates and then closes the entry by stating *if they are not in we need to vote for the next best one* can be seen as a suggestion on what end of the political spectrum Wal-Mart employees should look for suitable political representation.

As with the other described types, the opinion piece's power lies in the closeness it creates between storyteller and reader. Whereas types A and B approach the reader through the established pattern of sharing experiences (and by appealing to shared experience) in narrative form, this third type appeals to

shared ideology instead. It is decisive that these bonds are created only superficially between the storyteller and the reader, because the storyteller merely acts as a conduit for Wal-Mart the company. Since everything published in *Life at Wal-Mart* is licensed by Wal-Mart, all opinions expressed there can be assumed to be endorsed by the corporate entity, even though it is theoretically possible for the the blog's maintainers to claim otherwise. Once again, the separation of blog writers and blog publisher creates a unique dynamic, where it can be assumed that one is effectively acting as the other's mouthpiece.

5.4 *The encounter with Mr. Sam (D)*

Finally, a third type of narrative post can be identified when looking at *Life at Wal-Mart's* repertoire: the encounter with *Mr. Sam* - Sam Walton, the company's iconic founder.

- (9) Brian C. , Network Engineering, Bentonville, AR
- My most memorable meeting with Sam Walton occurred in 1991 at Store 1 in Rogers. I had only been with the company a few months and had just completed register training on checking out customers. The store had only been open a couple of months since we had just moved from the old store 1 building into the new store 1 building. I was a floater for the store which is to say I worked where ever I was needed. I was stocking shelves in the candy department when I was called up front to help check out customers. This was my first time checking out customers by myself and I was a little nervous. I had checked out several customers with no problems and was getting the hang of it when Mr. Sam walked up to my register. As I was trained I greeted him with "Hello, how are you today" and then added "Did you not find what you were looking for?" I asked him this because all he had in his hand was a pack of chewing gum and a 50 dollar bill to pay for it. Mr. Sam replied "I'm doing great and this is all I needed, thank you". I checked him out and thankfully

I counted his change back because I found out later he was making sure the checkers were counting change back to the customers. I told him to have a nice day and as he left my register Mr. Sam handed me the pack of gum and said "Good job Brian and keep up the good work". I was taken off guard by his gesture and started to tell him I was not allowed to take the gum when a Customer Service Manager walked up and greeted him with "Hello Mr. Sam, how are you today? ". It was not until just then I realized whom I had just checked out. I nervously replied back "Thank you Mr. Sam for the gum" He just smiled at me and then sat down on a bench in front of the registers and began talking with the associates and customers. Needless to say after my encounter with Mr. Sam I was no longer nervous checking out customers. I'm so glad I decided to count the change back to Mr. Sam or I might not be telling this story 15 years later.

The reverence with which Brian C. describes Walton is reproduced in a similar fashion by other associates. Walton acts as the personification of the otherwise non-corporal corporation and its values. The combination of grandeur (as the founder of a multi-billion dollar enterprise) and down-to-earth charm evokes the idea of the paternal corporate leader who looks after his employees. The founder's power is matched by his fairness towards his employees, who assume the role of children in the corporate family, children who need parental support (see type A posts), guidance and sometimes supervision. Notably it is not the *biographical* Sam Walton who is in fact the subject of these entries, but the paternal authority of Wal-Mart the corporate entity.

6. Linguistic features and functions

Linguistically, *Life at Wal-Mart* seeks to embody the same attributes that are also reflected in the structure of posts, the dominant topics and the presentational context: simplicity, immediacy and

honesty. The average word length for the 52 entries published in the blog is only 3.9, whereas the corpus average is 4.4. Sentences are on average slightly longer and entries markedly longer than the corpus mean. The latter effect is at least partly the result of an abnormality in *Life at Wal-Mart*: there are no links. Generally, entries containing only a link to something the blogger deems interesting and very little text are common in blogs. Since there are no citations or links in *Life at Wal-Mart* and because of the large percentage of narrative entries (which effectively have a minimum length), entries are especially long in comparison with the rest of the corpus. In contrast to most corporate blogs, posts in the Wal-Mart subcorpus contain a relatively high number of spelling mistakes, colloquial expressions and expressions that are stylistically well below the standards of professional writing. Most likely only some of these issues are corrected by the blog editor, while the rest is deliberately left in place to preserve authenticity.

6.1 Pronoun use

All 52 posts have an explicit authorial presence that is foregrounded by frequent use of the first-person singular pronoun (1P). In contexts where actions or events are described that involve the author, avoidance of 1P, while possible, must be realized through marked linguistic strategies such as passification, existential *there* or inanimate agent constructions.²⁹ While such distancing strategies are common in registers such as academic writing and journalism, they are not characteristic for letters or blogs, where the relationship between speaker and referent is more immediate.

The average frequency of 1P in *Life at Wal-Mart* is significantly higher than in the comparison data. Of

²⁹ An popular alternative in corporate blogs is the use of 'institutional *we*' (1P-pl) which allows expressing sentiments, intentions and actions collectively. However, since so much of the writing in *Life at Wal-Mart* can be considered biographical and therefore takes on a narrative form, 1P-pl is not a viable option and consequently there are relatively few occurrences of *we* referring to Wal-Mart collectively.

52 posts, 33 have one or more instances of singular nominative or accusative 1P, or use of the first person singular possessive determiner (1PD) in the title, while 5 make use of first person plural pronouns (1P-pl) or possessive determiners (1PD-pl).

Post titles are interesting in other regards as well. Very frequently they are phrased as direct speech and often they are enclosed by quotes to signal orality. Note the use of quotation marks in the following titles:

- (10) "I still can not believe everything that the company has allowed me to achieve"
- (11) "I just wanted to share my thoughts on the new little stubby, squiggly fluorescent bulb."
- (12) "Thank you, Wal-Mart and Sam's Club, for having so many good associates"
- (13) "I don't have to tell you - Wal-Mart came to the rescue!"

Speech acts, such as thanking and praising (12), are extremely common, as are meta-discursive hedging devices such as *I just wanted to share* (11) which evoke oral communication and involve an implied reader with whom the story is shared. While the use of 1P sets the stage for a simulated conversational exchange in (10), (11) and (13) the speech act in (12) is similarly effective in inserting the speaker into the text. The listener, in turn, is grammatically visible in (13) via 2P reference, pragmatically visible through the speech act in (12) and grammatically implicated in (11) via use of the verb *share*, which is commonly accompanied by a prepositional phrase that refers to a human actor. Thus *share my thoughts* could be easily be interpreted as an ellipted form of *share my thoughts with you*. This is further supported by use of the hedging adverb *just* which in (11) functions as another orality marker and suggests a degree of politeness towards the addressee on the part of the speaker.

The use of the second-person pronoun (2P) poses slight difficulties for analysis because of its

versatility in English. *You* is not limited to deictically marking a communicative partner (or partners, as English lacks morphological marking of number on 2P-pl) but can also be used to refer to a generic third person (*one*) or to the speaker himself. The deictic ambiguity in *Life at Wal-Mart* is further increased by the fact that we encounter a scripted speech situation in which the speaker addresses the listener in the mode of an oral conversation, but in a technological frame that does not permit feedback. Furthermore – and this is the decisive contribution of the editor - the speech is redirected to address the readers of the blog. Its original referent is unclear, since we cannot tell whom the author was originally thinking of when writing the text.³⁰

(14) So next time someone says to you that our company does not make available to us health coverage, you can have that person talk to me.

In (14) none of the pronominal referents are clear beyond doubt.

- The speaker (*me*) is identified only as “Rick W”
- The group he identifies himself with via 1PD-pl (*our*) and 1P-pl.OBJ (*us*) can be assumed to be Wal-Mart, but the stylistic choice made is noteworthy
- The reader becomes the referent of 2P (*you*), but only when the blog editor publishes the text
- Finally, the assumed Wal-Mart critic (*someone, that person*) cannot be clearly identified

Obviously the reader can't actually tell someone who criticizes Wal-Mart to speak with Rick, since there has been not been any real sort of communication with him. Pronominal ambiguity is one way by which the alleged bloggers aim to gain the trust of the reader, who is supposed to believe that what he is engaged in a conversation - if a mediated one. Note that the specific presentational context of blogs to a degree obfuscates the ambiguity: because information about the author and links to external

³⁰ This ambiguity is further increased by the lack of plural marking on 2P-pl. Whereas in languages that morphologically indicate plural number the speaker would have to chose between addressing a collective audience or an individual, he is not required to specify this in English.

sources are usually part of a blog, the blogger can assume this information to be available to readers and rely on pro-forms and “link deixis”. But because this kind of information is omitted in *Life at Wal-Mart*, the pronominal pointers used do not point to any clear referent.

6.2 Tense, aspect and narrativity

As previously noted, *Life at Wal-Mart* differs from other company blogs in that its contributors are not identical with the blog's publishers, but merely act as the content providers. It seems very unlikely, given the overall conception of *Wal-Mart Facts*, that posts in *Life at Wal-Mart* are not carefully edited and tailored towards producing specific archetypal messages – messages that support the notion that Wal-Mart is a fair and caring employer. Taking this into account, certain linguistic anomalies of *Life at Wal-Mart* become explicable.

Life at Wal-Mart differs significantly from the corpus average in terms of verb tense and aspect distribution. Simple past, present perfect and past perfect are much more common in *Life at Wal-Mart* than they are in other sources, where non-past expression is preferred. Present tense in *Life at Wal-Mart* is generally more frequent at the beginning and the end of a post, when a series of reported events are framed by the present state of the speaker.

- (15) [NOW]With the anniversary of Hurricane Katrina upon us, I wanted to express my appreciation for what the company did for me during that time last year.³¹[/NOW]
[PAST]I was in Louisiana for the storm. Born and raised outside of New Orleans, I lost my home to Katrina. I was working at Distribution Center 6048 at the time and as traumatic as the whole catastrophe was, the good people at my DC supported me.[/PAST]

³¹ Though the opening sentence is grammatically past tense, expressions of the form (*just*) *wanted to say/express/let you know* do not refer to a past event, but seek to qualify what is said as a kind of pretext. Semantically there seems to be very little difference between present (*want to express*) and past tense (*wanted to express*) in the example.

[NOW]I don't know if I could have made it without them or Wal Mart. I am at DC 7045 now, and even though the memories of Katrina haunt me, I know I work for a company that stood by me and thousands of others just like me. This is one of the reasons I am proud to be an associate at Wal mart.[/NOW]

Past tense is not indiscriminately used to refer to all events preceding the fictional exchange between speaker and listener, however, but instead specific narrative episodes are frequently retold by the speakers inside of a story-contextual frame.

(16) I have been a Wal-Mart associate for 26 years. I opened Store 267 in Webb City, Mo. , in 1980. It was a small store and I worked at night while I was going to college. One Friday night I was working the service desk and we were very busy. [...]

This is realized by switching from present perfect to simple past to past continuous (*I have been an associate -> I opened Store 267 in Webb City -> I was working the service desk*). Such a sequence is common across sources and representative for the crisis/incident account post type (see type A, Chapter 4.1).

Especially the use of continuous and perfective juxtaposed with simple past in longer narrative episodes is significant, because it functions as an effective tool to draw the reader into a past event.

(9) Brian C. , Network Engineering, Bentonville, AR
[SP]My most memorable meeting with Sam Walton occurred in 1991 at Store 1 in Rogers.[/SP] [PERF]I had only been with the company a few months and had just completed register training on checking out customers. The store had only been open a couple of months since we had just moved from the old store 1 building into the new store 1 building.[/PERF]
[SP]I was a floater for the store which is to say I worked where ever I was needed.[/SP] [PROG]I was stocking shelves in the candy department when[/PROG] [SP]I was called up front to help check out customers. This was my first time checking out customers by myself and I was a little nervous.[/SP] [PERF]I had checked out several customers with no

problems[/PERF] [PROG]and was getting the hang of it[/PROG] [SP]when Mr. Sam walked up to my register. As I was trained I greeted him with[/SP] "Hello, how are you today" [SP]and then added[/SP] "Did you not find what you were looking for?" [SP]I asked him this because all he had in his hand was a pack of chewing gum and a 50 dollar bill to pay for it. Mr. Sam replied[/SP] "I'm doing great and this is all I needed, thank you". [SP]I checked him out and thankfully I counted his change back because I found out later[/SP] [PROG]he was making sure the checkers were counting change back to the customers.[/PROG] [SP]I told him to have a nice day and as he left my register Mr. Sam handed me the pack of gum and said[/SP] "Good job Brian and keep up the good work". [SP]I was taken off guard by his gesture and started to tell him I was not allowed to take the gum when a Customer Service Manager walked up and greeted him with[/SP] "Hello Mr. Sam, how are you today? ". [SP]It was not until just then I realized whom[/SP] [PERF]I had just checked out[/PERF]. [SP]I nervously replied back[/SP] "Thank you Mr. Sam for the gum" [SP]He just smiled at me and then sat down on a bench in front of the registers[/SP] [PROG]and began talking with the associates and customers.[/PROG] [SP]Needless to say after my encounter with Mr. Sam I was no longer nervous checking out customers. I'm so glad I decided to count the change back to Mr. Sam or[/SP] [PROG]I might not be telling this story 15 years later.[/PROG]

Examples such as *I had checked out several customers with no problems and was getting the hang of it when Mr. Sam walked up to my register* are typical of a narrative sequence. A certain procedure has been repeated several times (checking out customers), a process is taking place that is not yet completed (learning how to do this effectively) and a sudden, essentially climactic event then occurs (Mr. Sam walks up to the register).

What is striking is the systematic, highly structured and therefore predictable dimension of the storytelling: (9) begins and ends with an evaluation (*My most memorable meeting... / I might not be telling...*), reproduces spoken language in an idealized way and drives home a clear point about the central figure, Mr. Sam. The storyteller, Brian C., is essentially reduced to the role of giving witness to

the event. The following example, not taken from Life at Wal-Mart but the blog of Microsoft staffer Heather Hamilton, is a much more typical example of how personal experiences are related in blogs.

(17) I have recycler guilt. I check everything for recyclability (huh?) . I wash out the containers so my recycling bin doesn't get stinky. As we know, I hate "stinky". Unless it's pleasantly stinky (gasoline, magic markers) , then I love it in a lightheaded-I-don't-care-about-my-braincells-they'll-grow-back kind of way. Also, clean wet dog is kind of nice and some other things, but I don't want to scare you and that's beside the point. So anyway, I don't feel guilty enough for this. Let's see, can we weigh the value of making a dramatic (and valuable) point with the fact that you probably smell like the liquid that leaks out of the bottom of a trash dumpster, for 2 weeks? Two weeks of stink! Unbearable. On the flip side, I had to move some stuff around in my garage yesterday so I could get my new garage door installed and I'm a little peeved about the fact that I have been storing some old crap in my garage simply because it's difficult to dispose of. Namely, one computer monitor (that Goodwill won't take.... I know! I could give you a list of things they don't take) and an unused box spring that was rendered redundant. Plus some furniture and electronics (anyone want a 27 inch TV? A broken Tivo box?) . I can't bring myself to take this stuff to the dump, but I am POed every time I pull into my garage and try to get out with an armful of shopping bags and minimal lateral clearance. I see those people that actually, like, do stuff in their garage. You know, stuff with screw drivers and table saws. Yeah, that's not me. Lately, it's been a drop-it-and-go kind of a situation. But I guess it could be worse. I could be carrying around last weeks leftovers in a bag around my waist. Gross.

Even a cursory analysis makes stark differences between (9) and (17) apparent. Self-reference via 1P is abundant in (17), occurring 20 times in a post with only 306 words and 23 sentences.³² The reader is treated like a conversation partner via 2P, pragmatic implication (*that Goodwill wont take.... I know!*)

³² Notably, there are 20 occurrences of 1P.SUBJ and only a single occurrence of 1P.OBJ. Self-reference is usually clause-initial and frequently paired with stative verbs (*I hate/love/want/feel...*).

and because the everyday topic of the post is something you might plausibly chat about with a friend. Decisively, there is no sequence of events that leads up to a climactic event or conveys a 'point' of the telling – the end is merely to express a personal sentiment in an entertaining way. The perceived orality of the telling is a result of the marked involvement of the teller, lack of a strict chronological structure and the strong emphasis on the teller's subjectivity.

Storytelling following classical patterns is an exceedingly popular device in advertising and public relations. The sub-genre of the testimonial is especially powerful in this context, because the status of the storyteller as a) a real person and b) someone the reader can identify with makes the story credible and fosters a sense of community. In (15), the author places the moment of narration in the present (the anniversary of Hurricane Katrina), then moves backwards in time to retell his experiences and finally to arrive in the present again. But when contrasting his well-organized and thoroughly planned telling with the *small story*³³ told in (17) it becomes apparent that the scripted account in which the teller is merely a witness is uncharacteristically perfect. Both the sequence of events and the teller in (9) are props arrayed around a central argument, while in (17) the blogger herself is the sole true focus, theme and point of the text.

7. Conclusion

All of the described linguistic and presentational patterns are used in their specific roles for a clearly defined purpose: to build trust between the *Life at Wal-Mart* storytellers and the readership. By convincing readers of the authenticity of their accounts, Wal-Mart hopes to capitalize on the trust

³³ In the sense proposed by Georgakopoulou (2006).

gained and make itself appear in a more positive light.

The central function of *Life at Wal-Mart* is to use the positive associations of readers with the blog format in absence of the decidedly personal character that blogs normally have. Specifically, the use of personal pronouns is meant to suggest a real interpersonal exchange to the reader, while in fact no such thing takes place. In the same vein, the reproduction of established and idealized narrative structures with predictable tense shifts and orderly chronology is used to frame the positive message of the blog. It is the combination of technological obfuscation and linguistic strategy through which the reader is to be misled, and ironically it is its over-designedness that makes *Life at Wal-Mart* seem starkly unauthentic compared to actual blogs.

Reviewing the genre mimicry conducted by the creators of *Life at Wal-Mart* yields important realizations about the nature of blogs and beyond that, about digital genres in general. As Miller & Shepard (2004) have aptly pointed out “the blog-as-genre is a contemporary contribution to the art of the self”. The authenticity of the blogger is what gives a blog its authority, just as the identity of the speaker is central to the evaluation of spoken discourse. This parallel is not a result of similarities in the *situational* context – face-to-face synchronous speech production is spontaneous, while blogging is asynchronous and planned – but because, as in a conversation, *individuals are communicating* via blogs. Because the intentions, opinions and interests of individuals change over time, blogs are bound to exhibit significant variation in terms of both style and content. They are virtual extensions of their authors, not tangible artifacts, and they are shaped as much or more by the whim of their authors than by the conventions of neighboring texts.

The choice of the creators of *Life at Wal-Mart* to fake not any type of writing, but blogging, is explicable before the background of the blog prototype's contextual dimension. Blogs are assumed to be the raw, unfiltered and essentially ego-centric expression of individuals and as such revolve around

the blogger and his readership. Because the focal point of the blog is expected to be the blogger, his communicative goals are relatively overt and essentially predictable: presenting oneself in a positive way, preserving face and gaining recognition in the blogosphere are a few plausible aims. These obvious and - most importantly - *familiar* goals of any social interaction between individuals can be contrasted with the covert and impersonal goals of the corporation. Egocentricity is a central source of tension in corporate blogs in general, as deemphasis of the individual blogger means straying from the blog prototype (which is dangerous, as blogs are used in the first place to appear more human and authentic) while keeping a truly prototypical blog risks ejecting the company from the text as the blogger's personality takes over.

In the specific case of *Life at Wal-Mart* this extension of the self via a digital publishing platform is incompatible with the traditional Bernaysian approach to public relations³⁴ that the blog follows, which was developed for one-way communication between collective institutions and a collective public. It envisions communication as a controlled process and therefore *Life at Wal-Mart* resorts to simulating the process of blogging while in fact publishing canned texts.

In summary, this paper has put forth the argument that potential for abuse can be regarded as an indicator for the association of certain recurring formal and functional features with blogs as a publishing technology. This bundle of features (the blog prototype) has been suggested as the template on which the genre of the corporate blog is modeled, sharing some of the prototype's aspects while modifying others (e.g. seeking to accommodate personal communicative goals with those of the organization). In contrast to other representatives of the corporate blog genre, *Life at Wal-Mart* has been presented as a fake blog (or *flog*) that imitates some of the formal aspects of the prototype but functionally deviates from a 'real' blog (e.g. it has no unity of writer and publisher, no comments, no

³⁴ The term referring to Edward Bernays (1891 – 1995), who is often characterized as the father of modern public relations (along with Ivy Lee). Bernays interpreted PR as positive propaganda that organizations could utilize to influence the public sentiment. Mass opinion and its 'engineering' are the cornerstones of Bernays' original approach.

use of hyperlinks, no egocentricity). How this strategy is pursued has been demonstrated via presentational and linguistic criteria that exemplify the interplay between form and function in a dynamic genre setting.

If two central observations can be made as a result of this case study, they are that a) blogs (and possibly digital genres in general) are dynamic extensions of their individual users much more significantly than pre-digital artifact-genres and therefore may never adhere to fixed and unchanging functions of use or formal criteria (in a stylistic sense) and b) that form (in technological terms) means something entirely different in digital genres (where it is presupposed by software) than in pre-digital ones (where it must be consciously imitated).

Technology appears to at once facilitate and constrain the balkanization of genres, which is logical in light of the realization that it has usurped some of the functions previously held by a discourse community that passed on the knowledge of formal conventions associated with a genre from one generation of practitioners to the next. It remains to be seen where this individualization of genre will lead us next.

8. Index of cited blog entries

Note that all blog entries from *Life at Wal-Mart* are referenced via the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine (<http://www.archive.org/web/web.php>), as both *Life at Wal-Mart* and the *Wal-Mart Facts* website are no longer operational. In those instances where no URL is given, IA has not stored a copy of the page in question. All cited entries are additionally identified via their unique key in the CBC/Corporati corpus (CBC xxx).

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- (10) "'I still can not believe everything that the company has allowed me to achieve'". *Life at Wal-Mart*. CBC 20347.
- (11) "'I just wanted to share my thoughts on the new little stubby, squiggly fluorescent bulb'". *Life at Wal-Mart*. CBC 19255.

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