

Chapter 48

Digital Narratives and the Genealogy of a Hybrid Genre

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ABSTRACT

From a simple list of links annotated and maintained by a small blog community of Internet groupies to elaborated content today, blogs have exploded into a rich gamut of subgenres. Most approaches that pioneered internet communication research are in fact non-empirical and non-linguistic. Two major blog types appear to have emerged, personal blogs and thematic blogs, with their corresponding already-established subgenres of filter blogs, k-logs, and corporate blogs as well as other emerging hybrid subgenres such as that of expat blogs. This chapter explores the language of high-impact blogs, testing a new methodology to establish blog genealogy in the context of online genre hybridity. Language data are collected using a major blog searching engine (Technorati) that currently indexes more than a million blogs. Individual language scores, which are used to calculate DICTION's sub variables, are concatenated to outline the overall tone and theme of the blog posts that can be classified accordingly. The findings are correlated with existing blog classifications to propose a Diction-based methodology for genre analysis.

YOU'VE GOT... BLOG!

Blogs represent one of the most pervasive global phenomena that caught on so quickly and so widely that anyone can recognize and easily find them today. According to a recent statistical report, nearly four out of ten Americans have already visited a blog and eight of ten Americans know today what a blog is. Awareness and usage of blogs is confirmed both online and offline, from mainstream journalists who quote them whenever they need topmost updated information on specific topics to internet newbies, regardless of

their native language, or to major corporations but also to lower-ranked companies that have already started their own blogs or are steadily entering the blogosphere to engage more customers.

Seminal studies on English language blogs overemphasized their confessional nature (Herring, 2004, 2005, 2006; Blood, 2002; Crystal, 2006 etc). The personal features were so prominent that they were highlighted in dictionary definitions as well. When Merriam-Webster dictionary publishers crowned "blog" word of the year in 2004, they did not overlook its personal character in defining "blog" as a Web site that contains an online

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personal journal with reflections, comments, and often hyperlinks provided by the writer. Prior to the Merriam Webster award in 2004, in March 2003, the Oxford English Dictionary was the first to add weblog (both noun and verb) as well as blog to its corpus. Personal hints are aimed in OED definition of the blog that refer to a frequently updated website consisting of personal observations, excerpts from other sources, etc. typically run by a single person, and usually with hyperlinks to other sites; an online journal or diary. The personal features in blogs were rightfully overstated since they link to the fact that in their blogging practices, individuals control language in a way that was quite new, not found elsewhere, as suggested by David Crystal in the most engaging and provocative large-scale study on the impact of the internet on language use: “[...] a variety of writing intended for public consumption which appears exactly as the author wrote it, which is not constrained by other genre conventions, and which privileges linguistic idiosyncrasy. I call it, on analogy with free verse, free prose.” (Crystal, 2006, p. 246)

Blogs include a wide variety of subgenres, from the already-established personal blog, journal or lifelog (Schaap, 2004) to the filter, the knowledge logs or k-logs (Herring et al., 2004, 2006) and to the recently-emerged corporate blogs (Puschmann, 2007a, 2007b) or to the hybrid subgenre of the expatriate blogs (Pacea, 2010).

On content criteria, blogs may be further classified into travel blogs, food blogs or book blogs. On auctorial criteria, blogs can be created and maintained by politicians (the political blog), by professional journalists (the journalist blog), or by researchers or experts (the academic blog, the educational blog or the personal development blog). Most blog definitions are trait-based in the fashion of the so-called recipe theory in that their boundaries are built on a convention of like-statements in conjunction with not-statements (cf. Freedman’s recipe theory).

Sometimes the distinction between traditional and electronic publishing is deliberately blurred with the emergence of blooks, which are actually blogs that take the conventional print form and are edited and published in book form.

Contests have already been launched to honour blooks: since 2005 the “Lulu Blooker Prize” has been awarded annually to exceptional blooks: the first literary prize for blooks which are viewed as the fastest growing new kind of books and the hottest new publishing and online trend [...] a new hybrid literary form, for a new publishing era. Three blook genres have surfaced: fiction, non-fiction and comic blooks. Indeed blooks are expected to become the new books. They are soon to be followed by flooks which are films based on blooks. Scores of blooks have already been published, half of which are produced by mainstream publishers.

In response to trade publishing, blogs represent a self-publishing resource that not even Edgar Allan Poe could have predicted a century and a half before the World Wide Web, when he pondered the possibilities of exploiting a chemical technique similar to etching, electrography, [and] lithography to reproduce his own neat and distinct style of handwriting and make his work available directly to the reader and not through the agency of mechanical or human mediators. Single- or multi-authored, blogs encourage individuals to control the text they publish in the most liberating way. And yet the question of multiple authorship might be raised in the case of those blog authors who would have their blog text written beforehand and have others typing the text for them, as was the case of a blog article from one of the most popular English language blogs, Dooce.

A SHORT HISTORY OF BLOGS

If blog practitioners and researchers agree on anything, it is by all means on the first use of the term weblog that goes back to 1997, when Jørn

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