

The Ubiquity of the Blog: A Genre Analysis

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Carolyn R. Miller
Dawn Shepherd
North Carolina State University

NC STATE UNIVERSITY

Ubiquity of the blog

- ◆ Nunberg 2001: “‘blog’ is clearly a word whose time has come.”
- ◆ Lexis-Nexis: first mention 1998; over 500 by 2002
- ◆ Henning (2003): 600% increase 2000 to 2001
- ◆ Coverage in *New York Times*, *New Yorker*, elsewhere

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Ubiquity of the blog: Why?

What is it about the blog that has been so compelling to so many so quickly?

How do you answer a question like that?

Our approach is a genre analysis.

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Hunch ...

The intersection of public and private realms is relevant.

- ◆ One teenaged blogger “wanted his posts to be read, and feared that people would read them, and hoped that people would read them, and didn’t care if people read them” (Nussbaum 2004).
- ◆ The confessional nature of blogs has redrawn the line between the private and the public dimensions of our lives (Weinberger 2002).

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Hunch ...

Genre may help explain ...

- ambivalence about audience
- what holds together the peculiar relationship between public and private

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Preview

- ◆ Genre—operating assumptions
- ◆ Analytical approach and rationale
- ◆ Why did blogs appear when they did?
- ◆ What are the characteristics of the blog?
- ◆ What function does the blog serve?

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Rationale for genre analysis

- ◆ The question is about human motivation for symbolic action
 - Blogging is a rhetorical phenomenon
- ◆ The question is about recurrent, repeated rhetorical action
 - The phenomenon might therefore be characterized as a genre
- ◆ The question is about the evolution of generic rhetorical activity
 - The answer must therefore consider the rhetorical *kairos*, or cultural moment, and antecedent resources

Genre as social action

- ◆ Miller (1984): “typified rhetorical action based in recurrent situation”
 - typifications and recurrence are social constructions
- ◆ Situations center on exigences (Bitzer 1968).
 - exigence is a social construction of objectified social need
- ◆ As rhetorical action must “fit” a situation, so must generic rhetorical action.
 - “fittingness” (appropriateness, decorum) is a social construction

Genres as ideological

- ◆ Genres are “profoundly ideological” (Schryer 2002).
 - They provide subject-positions for both rhetor and audience.
 - They express space/time relationships.
 - They constrain intentions and strategies.
- ◆ Genres reflect their cultural moment, or *kairos*.

Genres as evolutionary

- ◆ Genres have “antecedents” (Jamieson 1975).
- ◆ Genres “change, evolve, and decay” (Miller 1984).
- ◆ Genres “come from somewhere and are transforming into something else” (Schryer 1993).
- ◆ As semiotic complexes in dynamic, adaptive relationship with cultural context, genres allow for **innovation**.
- ◆ Genres are “sites of contention between stability and change” (Berkenkotter and Huckin 1995).

Kairos of late 1990s

- ◆ Mediated voyeurism (Calvert 2000)
- ◆ Widely dispersed but relentless celebrity
 - Celebrity of ordinary people; ordinariness of celebrities
- ◆ Unsettled boundaries between public and private
- ◆ New technology that disseminates these challenges to individuals

Kairos of late 1990s

Psychology of self-disclosure (Calvert 2000)

- internal functions: self-clarification, self-validation
- external functions: relationship development, social control

Genre analysis

Interpretive

- Ethnomethodology
- Ideal type
- Genre = semiotic complex, what may recur
- Campbell & Jamieson (1978), Miller (1984)

Empirical

- Corpus or sample
- Statistical mean
- Genre = collection of artifacts, what has recurred
- Simons (1978), Herring et al. (2004)

Interpretive genre analysis

- ◆ Rely on participants' motivations, ideals
 - celebrity blogs, meta-talk
- ◆ Characterize agreements about semantic content, syntactic form, pragmatic action
- ◆ Examine antecedent genres for resources and constraints
- ◆ Characterize central exigence

Semantic content

- ◆ Multiple classification schemes by content
- ◆ "Filter" vs "personal" types
 - Sample of Herring et al. (2004) showed 70% personal
- ◆ Common expectations: personal expression, current information, nonfiction (ie, sincere)

Syntactic form

Consistent expectations across portals

- dated entries
- frequent entries
- brevity of posts
- external links

Pragmatic action

- ◆ Two common themes related to "typified social action"; both support psychology of self-disclosure (Calvert 2000)
- ◆ Self-expression
 - self-clarification
 - self-validation
- ◆ Community development
 - relationship development
 - social control

Antecedent genres

- ◆ ship's log, clipping service, commonplace book, Wunderkammer, edited anthology
- ◆ pamphlet, broadside, editorial, essay, opinion column
- ◆ journal, diary, home page

Blog as hybrid or mongrel.

What is the exigence?

- ◆ A widely shared, recurrent need for cultivation and validation of the self
- ◆ Located at the intersection of the private and public realms, where questions about identity are troubled
- ◆ A counter-movement to postmodern destabilization of self, an effort toward stable identity.

Caveats

- ◆ The blog continues to evolve: already there are multiple subgenres: the j-blog, work blog, tech support blog, political campaign blog.
- ◆ Our analysis covers only blogs in English, in the U.S.

Blogging as social action

- ◆ Intensification, mediation, and reflexive elaboration of the self.
- ◆ The blogging subject constitutes itself in and through its own mediation.
- ◆ A counter-movement to postmodern destabilization of self, an effort toward stability.
- ◆ An “aesthetic technology” by which one “composes and cultivates one’s being in the world” (Vivian 2000).

Full paper is available in the online collection *Into the Blogosphere*, ed. Gurak et al., available at <http://blog.lib.umn.edu/blogosphere/>