The Weblog Genre:
An Actor-Network Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This article aims at exploring the process of digital genre formation in general and weblogs in particular. While genre theory basically delimits genre features, it cannot handle their construction procedures. Approaching the weblog genre through the lens of Actor Network Theory (henceforth, ANT) provides practical tools for not only conducting a generic analysis of the blogging phenomenon but also following the network relations that shape the process of its construction. The results of a quantitative and qualitative analysis of a corpus of 497 blog entries by 39 A-list American political bloggers revealed that the key features of the weblog genre are relational effects of a process of interaction between a network of humans and non-human actors. Tracing all forms of negotiations and their effects shows how the actors involved in the formation of the weblog genre are assemblies or gatherings of myriad things brought together and linked through processes of translation. Therefore, foregrounding associations does not only deepen the exploration of the weblog genre but also furthers understanding of related, yet unexamined internet-based genre. It also draws attention to the affordances of the weblog technology and their effects in connection with a network of human and non-human entities.

1. INTRODUCTION

The striking evolution of cyberspaces and the current popularity of Information and Communication Technologies have remarkably been matched by a similar growth of web-mediated genres (Shepherd & Watters, 1998). This growth has raised interest in digital genres as emergent phenomena. However, identifying all practices as digital genres is not straightforward. In fact, web genres show various degrees of digitization. Crowston and Williams (2000) claim that some web-mediated genres have merely reproduced their print counterparts (e.g., online academic papers). Other types have adapted to the web medium (e.g., electronic dictionaries and encyclopedias). Yet, some others labeled as emergent are designed specifically to the web (e.g., wikis, social networking sites and weblogs).

The weblog genre is the main focus of the present study. It is selected mainly for two main reasons. First, they have a relatively longer history of development. According to Blood (2000), they dated back to the late 1990's compared with other types of online interactive media such as social networking sites, wikis and folksonomies. Second, with a history of archived data, weblogs provide

a natural environment for in-depth investigation of the way they take form. In an online mediated context, genre theory can identify the characteristics of web-mediated genres. These characteristics range from form and content (Yates & Orlikowski, 1992), to functionality (Shepherd & Watters, 1998). Yet, the theory cannot handle the process whereby online digital genres are constituted. Their dynamic quality makes them transgress all boundaries of regularities. Therefore, a more flexible paradigm to catch up on these newly emergent phenomena is, thus, needed.

Insights from Actor Network Theory (henceforth, ANT) in general and from Latour's moves (2005) in particular can interact with digital genre concepts to better understand the drivers shaping the process of formation of the weblog genre. For this purpose, two main related questions will provide a platform for building an understanding of the process by which weblogs are formed. While the first concerns the generic structure of the phenomenon under study, the second stipulates that such a structure is a network effect brought forth through connections, negotiations and translations of interests. Foregrounding the connections between the involved actors could be achieved by following the traces of actants rather than applying priori frameworks. Actants need to be allowed to use their own language in order to come out with a definition about themselves and their universe. Understanding the way a virtual community- as the community of bloggers is formed and organized- may enlighten the understanding of similar online communities as well as their practices.

The following section reviews the literature on the blogging practice and introduces the theoretical paradigm opted for. Section three describes the weblog sample, the selection criteria and the units of analysis. It further describes, and justifies, the methods employed for data collection and analysis. Section four presents the findings of ANT analysis of the corpus of the weblog genre. In ANT-ish terms, the weblog genre will be approached as a relational and performative practice held together through ongoing negotiations and interactions. Foregrounding interactivity, made possible by the weblog functionalities, puts forth the potentials ANT offers not only for digital communication but also for education.

2. WEBLOGS

Weblogs constitute one of the frequently cited cases of online interactive technologies. It must be noted that there is a difficulty in dealing with these technologies as they are flexible and dynamic. Beer argues (2008) that one of the key problems facing research into what are quite rapidly shifting contemporary online cultures concerns "…the types of definitions we use to understand what is happening and to classify different types of web applications…" (p. 4). Indeed, coming up with a clear view and, thus, a unique definition of weblogs remains a challenge due to their evolving designs.

Ever since their emergence, weblogs have evolved and overlapped with similar forms of online publishing. In their original form, weblogs were linked to internet users who offered personal reflections on external events or issues. Bausch et al. (2002) state that weblogs are web pages containing several posts that are usually organized in reverse chronology from the recent post at the top to the oldest one at the bottom. Drezner and Farrell (2004) add the commenting aspect to Bausch et al.'s (2002) conceptualization. In this sense, blogs become an online commentary, periodically updated, with hyperlinks to other online sources.

From a socio-pragmatic perspective, weblogs are an author-driven, asynchronous and informal genre of mediated communication (Lomborg, 2009). Such a view presupposes a degree of complexity in the configuration of communicative functions actualized in the various social uses. Weblogs are dynamic and constantly negotiated in the blogging practice. They are at once inscribed into the general dynamics of the blogosphere and, thus, adhere to socially-defined practices about blogging and a subjective interpretation produced by the blogger and his or her readers (Lomberg, 2009). Identifying the communicative functionalities of weblogs sheds lights on the social practices that shape the blogging activity. Weblogs make possible self-expression and community development as they match very well the intrinsic and extrinsic functions of self-disclosure. For Miller and Shepherd (2004),

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