

Chapter 3

Past–Bloggling: Defining a Practice

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, the authors conceive past-blogging as a narrative practice which is based on a specific media format. The practice can be initially defined as an account of past events developed according to blogs' most common characteristic: the reverse chronological order of published posts, in which the most recent posts appear on top of the page. Past-blogging practices give rise to cultural products developed in various digital media platforms, especially in journalistic and educational contexts. In order to understand this phenomenon, the authors conducted an empirical and qualitative analysis of 34 cases in which content producers narrate past events by reenacting them or telling their history as if they were happening in the present. The sample – composed by different categories of events, platforms, narrative strategies, motivations for the content production and participation of audience – demonstrates how historical events have been represented within digital media.

INTRODUCTION

Media play a significant role when it comes to creating representations of historical events. News companies, radio stations, magazines and online news portals often produce special coverage during celebration periods, such as anniversaries of relevant historical events. This practice ranges from broadcasting documentaries, interviewing witnesses and historians to offering interactive features, like newsgames. In Ebbrecht's (2007) words: "When history becomes a current event, because of anniversaries or rising

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public interest in specific historic topics, media has the role of communicating and emphasizing the importance of remembrance.” (p. 223).

However, there are still practices and media formats that ought to be studied so that an understanding about contemporary representations of historical events can be reached. In this paper¹, we propose the study of what has been called “past-blogging”² practices, which will be empirically studied through specific media formats used by journalists, educators and bloggers in general. We aim to identify the characteristics associated with the practice of past-blogging, defined here as the act of live blogging past events, as if they were happening in the present. They are, at the same time, retrospectives and reenactments of historical events produced in digital media, especially on social networking sites and journalistic platforms. In other words, producers of historical content blog about the past using digital communication strategies to compose a narrative in the present. By appropriating the already established term “live blogging”, which is also related in many ways to the practice we analyze here, we elaborate on the idea of past-blogging.

The research questions guiding our investigation are: What elements define the practice of past-blogging? What do these media formats reveal about the way history is represented nowadays in the context of digital media? In order to address these questions, we have analyzed the content of 34 cases of past-blogging practices, aiming at identifying common elements among them.

In this paper we first contextualize the perspective from which we describe blogs and social media as environments where memory practices take place. Then we present the case studies we have undertaken in order to identify differences, similarities and patterns among past-blogging practices and respective platforms. Finally, we discuss the results and propose future developments for this research.

PLATFORMS, USES AND PRACTICES

The use of blogs to narrate events is directly linked to its origin as “web” navigation “logs” (Blood, 2000). Since these tools were initially created by hand using html, the most recent entry used to be added to the top, with all other messages being pushed down the page. That led to the emergence of one of the most classic features of the blog format: the reverse chronological order (new entries on the top, older entries on the bottom).

Initially, blogs were used for personal purposes, such as for navigation logs or personal diaries. But over the time they started to be recognized as a medium for news. Blogs started to be seen as spaces for news especially during the Iraq War, with warblogs being used to report what was happening on the scene (Recuero, 2003; Wall, 2005). This use is directly related to historians’ use to blog about contemporary history and current affairs (Cole, 2011). “Historians addressing current affairs can function journalistically, doing information-gathering, presenting analysis and synthesizing or aggregating large numbers of narrow articles” (Cole, 2011, p.669). These digital platforms started to be used because they allowed for agile, easy and flexible ways of publishing and sharing news and messages. Today one can find blogs focused on various topics and communities of interest, from cosmetics, fashion and health care to tourism, education and scientific popularization - just to cite a few examples. We are here concerned with the appropriation of blogging practices in regard to historical events.

News events are occurrences that take place in the everyday routine that are important and different enough to be transformed into news (Rodrigues, 1996). Using a blog-like structure to narrate news events as they happen is an appropriation of the format, a practice commonly referred as “live blogging”

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