

Chapter 11

Engaging in Scientific Controversies in Science Blogs: The Expression of Allegiance and Ideological Commitment

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ABSTRACT

The weblog incorporates technical capabilities which facilitate interaction and make it easy to exchange information and engage in discussion about controversial issues. This chapter presents a methodological framework to study how both allegiance and conflict are expressed and constructed in scientific controversies in science blogs. The study is based on the exploration of three controversies, related with global warming, the effects of vaccination and the role of women in science. A corpus of weblog comments to six posts which triggered off a dispute over these controversial issues was searched for indicators both of social behaviour and of rude or verbally offensive behaviour. The study shows how blog comments are used by participants to signal their allegiance to a particular group within the disciplinary community, their ideological commitments, and their rejection of opposing standpoints and competing claims.

INTRODUCTION

Academic weblogs are becoming increasingly popular as tools to share information and opinions about science-related topics and as online discussion forums. The weblog incorporates technical capabilities (e.g. links, comment software, trackbacks) which facilitate interaction within and across weblogs and make it easier for

scholars and the interested public to engage in discussion about discipline-specific topics. The attributes of weblogs (open forum, asynchronous communication exchanges, linking, highly social nature) enable a type of interaction different from face-to-face interaction and from the communication in other conventional academic genres (Boyd, 2003; Mortensen & Walker, 2002; Walker, 2006). Weblogs are usually open forums, meaning that

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entries and comments can be read and answered by a large readership, thus offering scholars an open digital arena to interact with members of a discipline but also with academics in other research areas and non-academic interested public. Communication is asynchronous and messages are saved, so that the whole discussion can be accessed, and any comment can be selected to be answered back. Linking makes it possible to expand the conversation by joining two discussion threads on the same issue in different blogs. Finally, blogs are a good example of “social software,” i.e. software supportive of conversational interaction, social networks and social feedback (Boyd, 2003). They support the desire of individuals to affiliate in order to achieve their personal goals and allow for the creation of new social groupings, not necessarily overlapping with in-person communities, and for the emergence of new social conventions. These features explain why posts on socially controversial issues in science blogs trigger a large number of comments, giving rise to arguments in which collective opponents are involved.

This chapter will examine these socio-scientific controversies in science blogs written in English, focusing on discursive features used by participants (bloggers and commenters) to express their relational behaviour towards other participants in the blog and to construct and reaffirm their identity as members of an online group, that is, features used to signal participants’ allegiance to a particular group, their ideological commitments, and their rejection of opposing views and ideas. For this purpose, we will analyze the interaction that takes place through posts and comments, focusing on those features that act as markers of social and antisocial behaviour. Previous research on CMC has shown that both indicators of social behavior and of rude behaviour can be used to express allegiance to a group (Dennen & Pashnyak, 2008; Luzón, 2011; Upadhyay, 2010). Therefore, the specific questions that will be addressed are: (i) which are the indicators of social and rude or

verbally offensive behaviour in weblog scientific controversies? (ii) how do these indicators contribute to the construction of group identity?

BACKGROUND

Science Blogs as Platforms for Scientific Controversies

Researchers on the sociology of science distinguish between controversies over knowledge claims which take place mainly within the scientific community and scientific controversies with a social dimension because of their social, ethical, political or economic implications, e.g. controversies over climate change or abortion (Martin, 2011; Stewart, 2009). Stewart (2009) defines this last type of controversies as “extended argumentative engagements over socially significant issues” which comprise “communicative events and practices in and from both scientific and nonscientific spheres” (p. 125). Drawing on Fairclough (1992; 1995), Stewart underscores two important and related aspects to take into account in the discursive analysis of controversies. The first is that controversies are not single communicative events but chains of communicative events (Fairclough, 1995), and therefore their analysis requires attending to the links between these communicative events. The second is the importance of intertextuality and interdiscursivity in the context of controversies. Intertextuality refers to the “property texts have of being full of snatches of other texts, which may be explicitly demarcated or merged in, and which the text may assimilate, contradict, ironically echo, and so forth” (Fairclough, 1992, p. 84). Thus the texts that constitute controversies frequently incorporate references to and quotations from other texts. In addition, controversies are complex in terms of interdiscursivity, incorporating elements and discourse practices from different genres or types of discourse.

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