

## [Into The Blogosphere](#)

Rhetoric, Community, and Culture of Weblogs

<http://blog.lib.umn.edu/blogosphere/>

[Home](#) >

[Back to default version](#) | [Jump to Comments](#)

# Blogging as Social Action: A Genre Analysis of the Weblog

Carolyn R. Miller and Dawn Shepherd, *North Carolina State University*

- The FBI has been reading my diary, claimed a high school student in Chapel Hill, North Carolina (Elliston, 2003). In fact, Chapel Hill police in training with an FBI task force had read the student's weblog. They were investigating a possible security breach in the school's computer system, and the student's blog had contained references to hacking. The student had told only a few friends about her blog and didn't intend for it to reach a wider audience. It was really personal, she said.
- A blogger from Utah harshly criticized her Mormon upbringing and her job and co-workers online, assuming that her technophobic parents and her boss would never find out. But they did, and All hell broke loose, as she put it. She alienated her parents and lost her job. It was shocking for everyone, she said; I was extremely naive. (St. John, 2003).
- Another blogger reports on her friends and her boyfriend, saying, There's not a lot I won't put on there because I love to be the center of attention. This 18-year-old also said that her mother was aware of her blog but did not know how to find it, adding that she relied on security by obscurity (St. John, 2003).
- In China an intimate blog written by a 25-year-old who also wrote a magazine sex column attracted 10 million daily visitors to the Sina.com server. Her blog initiated a raging debate on the internet, and the Chinese censors banned her forthcoming book (Yardley, 2003). Although she defended her right to write about her sex life, the blogger said that she never realized her blog would be read so widely or that it would create such controversy. She quit her job at the magazine and has shut down her blog.

The weblog phenomenon raises a number of rhetorical issues, and for us the incidents summarized above point to one of the more intriguing of these—the peculiar intersection of the public and private that weblogs seem to invite. As David Weinberger has observed, the confessional nature of blogs has redrawn the line between the private and the public dimensions of our lives (2002). Blogs can be both public and intensely personal in possibly contradictory ways. They are addressed to everyone and at the same time to no one. They seem to serve no immediate practical purpose, yet increasing numbers of both writers and readers are devoting increasing amounts of time to them. The blog is a new rhetorical opportunity, made possible by technology that is becoming more available and easier to use, but it was adopted so quickly and widely that it must be serving well established rhetorical needs. Why did blogging catch on so quickly and

so widely? What motivates someone to begin and continue a blog? What audience(s) do bloggers address? Who actually reads blogs and why? In short, what rhetorical work do blogs perform and for whom? And how do blogs perform this work? What features and elements make the blog recognizable and functional?

A genre analysis of the blog will begin to answer these questions. When a type of discourse or communicative action acquires a common name within a given context or community, that's a good sign that it's functioning as a genre (Miller, 1984). The weblog seems to have acquired this status very quickly, with an increasing amount of attention and commentary in the mainstream press reinforcing its status. As linguist Geoffrey Nunberg observed several years ago, "blog" is clearly a word whose time has come (2001). But what is it about our time that made this word so useful? Assuming that the blog is a new genre (and many commentators already assume this) how can we understand the *kairos* that makes this genre possible and compelling? And how does the blog in turn help construct the *kairos*? Is there some synergy between this new genre and this particular cultural moment? To answer these questions, we examine blogs available on major hosting sites, blogs that have been the subject of particular attention, and the evaluative criteria used within blogging communities. In our analysis, we characterize the cultural *kairos* in which blogs arose and developed rhetorical power. We attempt to establish the central tendencies and range of variation of discourse that is identified as blogs and examine their generically recognized substance, form, and rhetorical action. We explore the ancestral genres that offer rhetorical precedents and patterns for blogs. And we speculate about the recurrent rhetorical exigence that has brought together motivations, forms, and audiences to create and sustain the blog as genre.

Genre analysis has become important in understanding the discourse of the disciplines and the workplace, relatively structured arenas of social interaction in which, as Berkenkotter and Huckin note, "Genres are the intellectual scaffolds on which community-based knowledge is constructed" (1995, p. 24). More recently, genre analysis has been applied to the relatively unstructured rhetorical environment of the internet, where constructing knowledge and getting work done aren't necessarily the driving exigences (Agre, 1998; Bauman, 1999; Crowston and Williams 2000; Shepherd and Watters 1998; Zuccheromaglio & Talamo, 2003). detailed studies have examined as genres the home page (Disson and Grushowski 2000; CMC conversations (Erickson 2000), and the blog (Herring et al.) <sup>1</sup>. Our analysis will take a next step in this direction, offering an interpretive-rhetorical approach that supplements the quantitative research in these other studies. Our aim in this genre analysis of the blog is to explore the emergent culture of the early 21st century as revealed by the self-organized communities that support blogging, the recurrent rhetorical exigences that arise there, and the rhetorical roles (or "subject positions") they support and make possible.

## The *Kairos* of the Blog

Recent work on genres has emphasized their dynamic, evolutionary nature. Cases in point include Bazerman's history of the experimental article in the *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society* from 1665-1800, Yates and Orlikowski's discussion of the emergence and evolution of the memo genre in the 19th and 20th centuries, and Berkenkotter and Huckin's study of how readers search for "news value" has been accommodated in the changing structural conventions of scientific articles in the late 20th century (Bazerman, 1988; Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995; Yates & Orlikowski, 1992). Schryer's useful formulation, that genres are "stabilized-for-now or stabilized-enough sites of social and ideological

action, emphasizes that genres come from somewhere and are transforming into something else (1993, pp. 204, 208). In 1984, Miller emphasized that because they are rooted in social practices genres change, evolve, and decay (1984, p. 163), and as early as 1973, Jamieson argued that because genres are evolving phenomena, a Darwinian rather than Platonic perspective should be used in studying them (1973).

A Darwinian approach to genre requires an understanding of what makes a rhetorical action fitting within its cultural environment. In other words, we must see genre in relation to *kairos*, or socially perceived space-time. What Bitzer called a fitting response will survive to become recurrent and thus generic if the *kairos* also recurs, or persists (1978, p. 168). *Kairos* describes both the sense in which discourse is understood as fitting and timely the way it observes propriety or decorum and the way in which it can seize on the unique opportunity of a fleeting moment to create new rhetorical possibility (Miller, 2002). Genres certainly incorporate decorum, even helping to create the decorum of situations, but they are also complex enough and often flexible enough to offer resources for innovation. Schryer uses the Bakhtinian term *chronotope* to emphasize that every genre expresses space/time relations that reflect current social beliefs regarding the placement and action of human individuals in space and time. They are thus, she concludes profoundly ideological (2002, p. 84, 95). But in order to evolve, genres must also allow for the incorporation of novelty, the accommodation of changed constraints, the tweaking of ideology, which eventually leads to the redefinition of decorum, and the imposition of a new ideology.

If the blog is an evolutionary product, arising from a dynamic, adaptive relationship between discourse and *kairos*, then if we wish to understand the rhetorical qualities of the blog as genre, we should examine the late 1990s, when the blog originated, as a cultural moment. This cultural context will illuminate the evolutionary forces operating on existing genres, the opportunities available for innovation, the available social roles and relationships, and the possibilities for social action. Because the decade of the 1990s, like any decade, is globally complex and defies comprehensive summary, we necessarily focus our attention on a few salient issues that will help answer our questions about the rhetorical work of weblogs.

In a 1997 article, "Hits and Errors in Everyday Life," published in *Forbes Magazine*, the baseball analyst and statistician Bill James discussed the emerging trend of compiling and analyzing an ever-increasing number of baseball statistics. Significantly, James hypothesized that the interest in baseball statistics is generalizable, that people would track statistics on their neighbors if they were available, and those neighbors would be figures as compelling as Ken Griffey Jr. or Randy Johnson (2001, par. 20). James was right. Just five years before, in 1992, MTV had launched the first season of *The Real World*, a show in which seven young people moved into a SoHo apartment together. As the first show to take regular people, place them in an artificial living situation, and record their every move, *The Real World* broke the ground for what would eventually be known as reality television.

Also in 1992, MTV held a town hall debate featuring the Democrat and Republican candidates for president. During that debate, a young woman in the audience asked Arkansas Governor Bill Clinton if he wore boxers or briefs. That he answered the question is characteristic of the Clinton presidency and the 1990s. During the 1992 presidential campaign, Clinton contrasted himself to Washington political insiders and distinguished himself as the candidate who felt America's pain. From the beginning, he removed barriers between himself and the voting public. Both his family and the family of his running mate Al Gore toured the country on a bus, making scheduled and impromptu stops in hopes of meeting average

Americans and sparking grass roots campaign efforts. And in the course of this campaign, as he and his wife Hilary Rodham Clinton appeared on *60 Minutes* to address rumors of his infidelity, Clinton stated, 'I've told the American people more than any other candidate for president. The result of that has been everybody going to my state and spending more time trying to play 'gotcha.' (In *1992, Clinton Conceded Marital 'Wrongdoing'*, 1992) This theme would run throughout the Clinton years. While serving as arguably the most prominent public figure in the world, Clinton exposed his private life to scrutiny, eventually being forced to expose more than he wished. What started as a shrewd, but possibly naïve, campaign strategy ended in a scandal that irreparably damaged his presidential legacy, after the public exposure of his intimacies with White House intern Monica Lewinsky in 1997. Lewinsky herself would become an international celebrity overnight, eventually becoming a spokesperson for Jenny Craig weight loss centers and the host of a reality television show called *Mr. Personality*.

The Clinton-Lewinsky scandal can be seen as a representative anecdote for a significant cultural trend in the 1990's, the weakening boundary between the public and the private and the expansion of celebrity culture to politics and beyond. American culture became obsessed with both making celebrities into regular people (as with Clinton) and making regular people into celebrities (as with Lewinsky), a trend that has been called the 'democratization of celebrity' (Stark, 2003). This destabilization of public and private has been linked by Clay Calvert to our continual surrender of information: as people relinquish control over increasing amounts of personal information, they expect increasing access to information in return (2000). In other words, in a society in which surveillance cameras record every trip to an ATM and Amazon.com tracks the buying practices of its users, people seek to augment the quantity and variety of information available to them, creating a conflict between the rights to privacy and to information. One striking example of the mounting demand for access to the traditionally private lives of others was the death of Diana, Princess of Wales in 1997. It seemed that every facet of Diana's life, including her death during a high-speed attempt to retain some privacy, was public. After her death, what should have been intensely private moments in the Royal Family's grieving process—attending church services the day after her death, visiting spontaneous memorials—became public spectacle, leading one commentator to note that in certain social settings, 'there is a kind of 'privacy' which seems to draw its meaning only from being publicized' (Frazer, 2000, par. 94).

The documented desire to catch sight of the intensely private moments of others dates to at least the 11th century, when a man named Tom peeped as a naked Lady Godiva rode her horse through town to persuade her husband to retract a repressive tax. Peeping Tom was, depending on the version of the account, blinded or killed for his voyeurism (Calvert, 2000). Although often associated with sexual gratification, voyeurism more generally strikes us as an unseemly interest in others as curiosities, not as moral equals. More recently, however, the coupling of the pervasiveness of television as a means for news gathering with the insatiability of the public's desire for information has helped to rehabilitate voyeurism: it has become synonymous with information access and the public's right to know. Seeing is *knowing*, not just believing.

By the year 2000, 98% of American households owned a television, according to a Nielsen Media Research survey (cited in Woodard, 2000) and by 1999, over a third of all American households had a computer, and over half of those homes had Internet access. Within two years, half of all households had a computer, and Internet access had increased to 80% of those (Newburger, 2001). In *Voyeur Nation: Media, Privacy, and Peering in Modern Culture*, Calvert characterizes the effects of this media saturation on our relations with

information and with each other as mediated voyeurism. He defines mediated voyeurism as the consumption of revealing images of and information about others' apparently revealed and unguarded lives, often yet not always for purposes of entertainment, through the means of the mass media and the Internet (2000, p. 2). Mediated voyeurism traces its origins to the sensationalized tabloid journalism of the late 19th and early 20th century. By faking insanity to be committed to an insane asylum or strapping a camera to an ankle to capture photographs of the execution of a convicted murderer, early tabloid reporters offered their readers glimpses into the lives of others, glimpses that seem more real because they are secret. The conventions of film have been said to make voyeurs of the audience (2000, p.43). Mediated voyeurs are separated temporally and spatially from the object of their interest, connected virtually by a movie screen, a television, or a computer monitor. The potential for possibly dangerous interaction has given way to distanced spectating, to monitoring.

Calvert notes a number of contemporary social forces that promote mediated voyeurism, and three of them are especially meaningful for our purposes. First, there is the pursuit of truth in an increasingly media-saturated world; dissatisfaction with the increasing mediation of journalism leads to an interest in information that seem to provide a less mediated and thus more authentic reality. Next, there is the desire for excitement, to see others face a moment of reckoning in a talk-show confrontation or a pulse-pounding amazing home video; in these moments we may vicariously experience challenges that give meaning to life. Last, there is the need for involvement, the desire to be part of the world around us, even though voyeurism by its very nature can provide only the illusion of involvement. Sella's experience with Webcams illustrates Calvert's claims here: Part of the appeal of logging on to these sites, I began to realize, was that it fulfilled an innate human desire for shared experience. But the draw was more complex. Given the Net's vast number of unregulated feeds, there was always the chance that I'd see something illicit: sex, rage, unfiltered joy an accidental moment (2000, p. 102). There's both a hope for connection, for community, and at the same time a more traditional voyeuristic enjoyment of stealth and the possibility of a glimpse of unguarded authenticity.

Mediated voyeurism became so prevalent in the late 1990s that several varieties developed, including what Calvert identifies as video v<sub>e</sub>rit and the tell-all/show-all voyeurism of the talk show. With a focus on real-life, sometimes contrived, drama, video v<sub>e</sub>rit centers on live, unrehearsed, and unscripted events played out on camera. Caught on tape television has been around since *Candid Camera* in the 1950's, but it was not until the 1990s that reality TV became a major programming category. Today, Yahoo! TV's reality programming page lists nearly sixty series, from reality/talent show hybrids, like *American Idol*, to game/reality show hybrids in which the contestants compete for everything from cash prizes to true love. Regardless of the show's category, reality shows consistently win their timeslots. Game or talent shows have long been television staples, making ordinary, private people into public figures for the Warholian fifteen minutes, but the recent reality emphasis ups the ante. No longer limited to the scant and mundane details revealed to a host during a contestant interview in the traditional game and talent show, contemporary reality programming exposes every facet of these ordinary, private lives to our public gaze: The new obsession in TV (and on the Internet) is with capturing the rhythms of ordinary life or, at least, the kinds of intimate human interactions that have previously eluded the camera's gaze (Sella, 2000, p. 52).

This confusion of public and private permeated other media in the late 1990s as well. Cell phone ownership increased rapidly from 5.2 million in 1990 to 55 million in 1997 (Eng, 2002). As people sacrifice

privacy for the sake of convenience, one need but visit any public place to overhear the intensely personal conversations of total strangers on cell phones. And in the world of book publishing, the personal memoir, which one reviewer has called "reality literature" (Carvajal, 1997), became a growing trend in the mid-1990s, with 200 titles published in 1995 (Atlas, 1996). Four of fifteen top-selling hardbacks in 1997—*Angela's Ashes*, *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*, *Into Thin Air*, and *The Man Who Listens to Horses*—were personal memoirs by private people. A fifth—*The Perfect Storm*—told the story of regular people facing extraordinary circumstances (Bowker, 1998). All five stories inspired motion pictures. One of the most memorable personal memoirs of that year, Kathryn Harrison's *The Kiss* (Random House, 1997), about her sexual relationship with her father, tested the boundaries of personal revelations in public and led to reviews that were much more than mixed. Critics found Harrison's exposure of deeply personal information, as they did memoirs in general, either refreshing or distasteful—a newly dominant and more authentic literary form or a literature of solipsism by writers obsessed with themselves (Minzesheimer, 1997). James Atlas saw the memoir trend as part of general "culture of confession," consistent with talk shows and 12-step programs, trauma and therapy, but also part of an "historic American longing to discover who we are" (1996, p. 26). [2](#)

Voyeurism could not have become such a common preoccupation of our times without willing objects. Princess Diana cultivated her relationships with the press, as do most celebrities. Book publishers need a Kathryn Harrison willing to tell her story. Thus, Calvert also discusses the social forces that support mediated voyeurism's counterpart, mediated exhibitionism. Central to exhibitionism is the social psychology of self-disclosure, which serves four purposes, according to Calvert: self-clarification, social validation, relationship development, and social control, and we can see all of these at work in blogs. The two former purposes function intrinsically, providing heightened understanding of self through communicating with others and confirmation that personal beliefs fit with social norms. The latter two function extrinsically, turning personal information into a commodity and manipulating the opinions of others through calculated revelations. Any one, or all, of these functions, may be a factor in an individual's willingness to "overshare" (2000, p. 83). In a series of interviews of people who had appeared on television talk shows, Patricia Joyner Priest found multiple motivations for what she calls "television disclosure, the revelation of intimate information broadcast on television." The majority of the participants surveyed, generally marginalized members of society, offered extrinsic explanations, understanding their appearance on television as an opportunity to instruct and enlighten through the only forum available to them, or simply as a chance to appear on television. Others gave intrinsic reasons, finding therapy or relief in the chance to tell their stories. The culture of self-disclosure continues to spread, creating individuals increasingly comfortable with being put on display: "As TV and the Net enlist more and more people to reveal themselves, the formerly unsavory phenomenon known as exhibitionism is being redefined. It's being rehabilitated as an adventure. Perhaps the shifting definition of fame has been leading up to this. [B]eing placed on exhibition and coming through it intact has come to be seen as a perverse achievement" (Sella, 2000, p. 54).

Of course, the medium most indicative of the trends we have been documenting is the Internet. On personal home pages and message boards, in chat rooms and on listservs, and most especially on blogs, people are sharing unprecedented amounts of personal information with total strangers, potentially millions of them. The technology of the internet makes it easier than ever for anyone to be either a voyeur or an exhibitionist—or both. One does not have to seek out a publisher or compete for a slot on a game show. And the inexhaustible stream of enormously diverse and ever-changing information that comes

flooding out of the ISP connection can make constant monitoring seem necessary. Both voyeurism and exhibitionism have been morally neutralized and are on their ways to becoming ordinary modes of being, subject positions that are inscribed in our mediated discourse. The cultural moment in which the blog appeared is a *kairos* that has shifted the boundary between the public and the private and the relationship between mediated and unmediated experience. Sherry Turkle has noted that our immersion in a culture of simulation (which includes not only virtual environments but also mediated aspects of contemporary life such as Disneyland, shopping malls, and television) ultimately devalues direct experience, making it seem less compelling and ultimately less real (1997, pp. 235-38). The reality movement in the media has seemingly come to replace the reality IRL (In Real Life). As Calvert puts it, people and things are important or real only if they appear on television (2000, p. 85). Validation increasingly comes through mediation, that is, from the access and attention and intensification that media provide. The *kairos* of American popular culture in the late 1990s thus seems a fulfillment of Baudrillard's 1981 perception that the relations between the real and the simulated have reversed: that rather than representing the real, the simulation constitutes the real (1994).

## Defining the blog as genre

Although it is difficult to pinpoint the exact origin of the blog, most seem to agree that the term *weblog* was coined by weblog writer Jorn Barger in 1997 (Blood, 2000; Jerz, 2003; Safire, 2002; Turnbull, 2002; Wikipedia, 2003). A search of the Lexis-Nexis database shows the first press mention in 1998, and by 2002 over five hundred articles referencing blogs. It appears that blogs originated as a way to share information of interest. These early blogs had three primary features: they were chronologically organized, contained links to sites of interest on the web, and provided commentary on the links. The early bloggers were Web-savvy individuals, generally designers or programmers working in the technology industry. Not only did they have to be able to locate information on the Web before search engines became as accessible as they are today, but they had to be able to code their own HTML pages. In 1999, a number of blog portals were launched, all offering easy-to-use editing tools that require no coding experience. Since then, the number of blog portals and bloggers has increased dramatically: a 2003 survey found that new blogs on eight popular blog hosting sites increased by more than six hundred percent between 2000 and 2001, with over four million blogs by the time of the survey and 10 million projected by the end of 2004 (Henning, 2003). <sup>3</sup>

In order to identify the basic agreements that have coalesced around the blog, we have tried to honor the ethnomethodology of genres, relying to the greatest extent possible on the perceptions of bloggers themselves. We examined numerous individual blogs, of course, but we also paid attention to how bloggers talk about blogs. We noted the criteria they use to evaluate blogs and the ways that blog portals organize and present blogs. We read multiple accounts of the history of blogging and of the activity and purposes of blogging. Our selections from the profusion of material available have been guided by our initial questions about the intersection of the public and private spheres.

There is strong agreement on the central features that make a blog a blog. Most commentators define blogs on the basis of their reverse chronology, frequent updating, and combination of links with personal commentary.<sup>4</sup> We discuss these basic features of the blog as genre below in the semiotic terms used by Miller (1984), identifying their generic semantic content, their syntactic or formal features, and their pragmatic value as social action. Syntactic and formal features interact, of course, but there is quite strong agreement about them. It is when bloggers discuss the purpose of the blog, its function and value as social

action involving rhetors and audiences, that the nature of the generic blog becomes problematic.

### Semantic content or substance

Almost across the board, bloggers seem to agree that content is the most important feature of a blog (Rodzvilla, 2002; *The Weblog Review*, 2003). The *Weblog Review*, a blog reviewing site, evaluates three features on a 5-point scale: design, consistency, and content, with the lion's share of the rating's weight, 80-90%, dedicated to the blog's content. Although it is difficult to generalize about the content of blogs because they are so varied, there have been several attempts to classify blogs according to their content. The *Weblog Review* classifies blogs by grouping them into fourteen content-focused categories: adult, anime, camgirl, computer, entertainment, humor, movies, music, news/links, personal, photography, Spanish/Portugese, teen, and video games. Similarly, the Wikipedia provides a classification based on content, including personal, political, directory, and format-based types of blogs (Wikipedia, 2003). Another classification is offered by Jill Walker, in her contribution to appear in the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*: she notes that blogs can vary in their media content, with most blogs primarily textual but others classified into subgenres such as photoblogs, videoblogs, and audioblogs (2003). [5](#)

Rebecca Blood's widely cited blog entry on the history of weblogs offers a classification of blogs into two styles, based largely on content: an original filter-style, where the blogger is primarily an editor and annotator of links, and a later, more personal blog-style weblog, where bloggers engage in an outbreak of self-expression (2000). Other sources confirm this perception of two major types based primarily on a different substantive emphasis: an earlier type that emphasizes information access with links to other sites of interest, and a later type that emphasizes personal, diary-like writing. Herring et al. used these categories and several others to classify the 203 blogs in their random survey, confirming Blood's claim that the personal type is more common than the filter-type (2004). [6](#) However, some also point out that the boundary between the two types of site isn't that well defined (Coates, n.d.). And Joe Clark notes that because many leading blogs are by folks in the Internet biz, their entire lives are online, meaning that even sets of links are diaries because life is the Web (2002).

Walker points out the default expectation for content to be nonfiction, although some blogs are explicitly or implicitly fictional to varying degrees (2003). Moreover, the reverse chronological organization of the blog provides a sense of immediacy, according to Blood, a feature that reinforces the impression that the content is true, or real (2000). The strength of this expectation is shown by the outraged reaction to the Kaycee Nicole Cancer Hoax. During a two-year period, a number of bloggers became friends with Kaycee Nicole, an attractive young woman who was battling leukemia. When bloggers who had been following her blog learned that she had lost her battle with cancer but were unable to get information about the funeral arrangements, they became skeptical. Eventually they discovered that Kaycee Nicole was actually a middle-aged mother from the Midwest. In fact, she was the woman they had come to know as Kaycee Nicole's mother. Using a pseudonym, Debbie Swenson published a blog and created a virtual identity complete with the photograph of a local high school basketball player. The blogging community was outraged by the fictionalization, considering it an offensive deception. As one blogger writes, Most people believed that Kaycee was real because no one would attempt such a massive ongoing hoax (Geitgey, 2002). [7](#)

Content is important to bloggers because it represents their freedom of selection and presentation. What

many bloggers find most compelling about blogs is the ability to combine the immediately real and the genuinely personal, a combination that represents a refreshing contrast with the bland commercial point of view of so much internet content (Whatis.com, 2003). Blogs, as Andrew Sullivan emphasizes, are personal, imbued with the temper of their writer (2002). Evan Williams (co-founder of Pyra, the company that created Blogger) lists personality as one of the three characteristics that are the driving factors in weblogs' popularity as a publishing format (the other two are formal features, frequency and brevity) (Turnbull, 2002). Blood also emphasizes the importance of personal thoughts and self-expression, placing particular value on a tone of irreverence and sarcasm (2000). Cameron Barrett's self-styled rant about weblogs emphasizes this element of their substance: CamWorld [his blog] is about me. It's about who I am, what I know, and what I think. CamWorld is a peek into the subconsciousness that makes me tick (1999). The reality offered by blogs is thus a thoroughly perspectival reality, anchored in the personality of the blogger. And although this reality it may seem to be immediate, (that is, *un-mediated*), it is, of course, highly mediated. In fact, the blogosphere relies heavily on what Bolter and Grusin call the logic of transparent immediacy (1999, p.21), though in the case of the blog this logic relies less on the visual strategies they describe than on verbal or textual strategies that emphasize intimacy and spontaneity.

## Formal features

Blogs take many forms. On most blogging sites, bloggers can choose from a number of boilerplate formats or customize their own pages. But the basics of blogging are consistent across portals and individual blogs. As blogger Meg Hourihan puts it, If we look beneath the content of weblogs, we can observe the common ground all bloggers share the format. All blogs contain dated entries, starting with the most recent, and a majority include external links. Blogs are composed of posts, which include a date, a time stamp, and a permalink and often include a link for commentary and the author's name, especially if multiple authors contribute to a blog. The reverse chronology and time-stamping of posts create an expectation of updates. We should also note that the semantic immediacy noted above is represented formally by the use of the present tense in the dated entries, as in diaries. Hourihan finds that the combination of links and accompanying commentary is the distinguishing feature of the blog, creating connections that bind bloggers into a community (2002). Mortensen and Walker also identify frequent updating and reverse chronology as key formal features; they quote Williams, who claims that what [is] significant about blogs [is] the format not the content, and the formal features he points to are frequency and brevity (2002, p. 249).

Statistics support some but not all of these commonly held beliefs about blogs. For example, a survey by the Perseus Development Corporation of 3634 blogs on eight leading blog-hosting services concluded that of the estimated 1.4 million active blogs, about 80% include external links (Henning 2003). Herring et al. (2004) distinguish between a blog's home page and specific entries, finding most blog home pages (over 90%) contain at least some external links, but only one-third of blog entries themselves contain any links, with the mean number of links per entry 0.65. Though popular perception has bloggers linking frequently to news outlets, Perseus found fewer than 10% of external links were to such sites and Herring et al. found 8.2% of links in blog entries were to news sites. Interestingly, blogs are updated much less frequently than generally supposed. The Perseus survey found that active blogs were updated on average every 14 days, that fewer than 3% of the hosted blogs were updated at least once a week, and that fewer than 2% were updated daily (Henning, 2003), and Herring et al. found that the average interval between entries was 5

days (2004). This misconception is probably attributable to the fact that celebrity bloggers, people whose blogs are read by tens of thousands of visitors each day, almost without fail update their sites at least once a day and sometimes more frequently. The Perseus report concludes that these widely read and frequently updated blogs are the tip of a very deep iceberg and are not characteristic of the iceberg as a whole.

Thus, we must ask whether we should define a genre by an ideal or by the mean, by expectation or by experience. This question is related to the question of whether we can tell the difference between a successful and a less successful instantiation of a genre. That celebrity bloggers, or what Clark calls A-list bloggers, are widely read is one way of defining them as successful; another way is that everyone else wants to be like them, and everyone else wants to be noticed by (i.e., blogged by) them: getting blogged by a celebrity is the blog equivalent of having your book featured on Oprah (Clark, 2002; see also Mead, 2000). We should not define a genre by its failed examples, even if they are a majority, but at the same time we must be open to the possibility that there may be multiple forms of success. Perhaps the blog is already evolving into multiple genres, meeting different exigences for different rhetors: journalists, teenagers, the high-tech community, etc. [8](#)

## Pragmatic action

What typified social action do blogs perform? How do bloggers talk about their own purposes and audiences? When bloggers talk about blogging, two themes relevant to these questions are ubiquitous: self-expression and community development. These two themes match very well the intrinsic and extrinsic functions of self-disclosure discussed earlier. Disclosure, however, should not be understood as the simple unveiling of a pre-existent or perdurable self, but rather as a constitutive effort. The self that is disclosed is a construction, possibly an experimental one, which takes shape as a particular rhetorical subject-position. In a blog, that construction is an ongoing event, the self being disclosed a continual achievement.

Self-expression is a salient theme among some bloggers, who find the same opportunity that television talk shows afford their participants: the opportunity to tell their stories in a mediated forum to a potentially large, though distant and invisible, audience. Bloggers mark both their linking and their commentary as means of self-expression: as ways to foster a unique voice, a definite attitude, a clearer motivation (Graham, 2002), to explore old interests and discover new ones (Blood, 2000), to provide a forum for the voices in my head (Powazek, 2002) or to experiment [with] self expression (Barrett, 1999). Blood puts it this way:

As [the blogger] enunciates his [sic] opinions daily, this new awareness of his inner life may develop into a trust in his own perspective. His own reactions to a poem, to other people, and, yes, to the media will carry more weight with him. Accustomed to expressing his thoughts on his website, he will be able to more fully articulate his opinions to himself and to others. He will become impatient with waiting to see what others think before he decides, and will begin to act in accordance with his inner voice instead. Ideally, he will become less reflexive and more reflective, and find his own opinions and ideas worthy of serious consideration. (2000)

Conceived of this way, self expression serves the intrinsic self-disclosure functions of both self clarification

and self validation, enhancing self awareness and confirming already-held beliefs. The blogger is her own audience, her own public, her own beneficiary. These functions of self-disclosure are fundamental to what Peter Elbow calls "private writing," writing that is not intended to be read by others, writing that allows the writer to "value [her] own words and thoughts and not worry about the reactions to them by others" (1999, p. 157). As Blood notes of her early experience with blogging, "I carefully considered my own opinions and ideas, and I began to feel that my perspective was unique and important"; she hypothesizes that each new blogger "may begin a journey of self-discovery and intellectual self-reliance" (2000). Foucault noted that "taking care of the self" in and through writing is one of the oldest Western traditions, "well established and deeply rooted when Augustine started his *Confessions*" (1988, p. 27). Foucault traces several techniques for the care of the self in the ancient and early Christian traditions, including dialectic, letter-writing, meditation, and the interpretation of dreams, noting the evolving historical dynamics. Though techniques of verbalized self-disclosure were central to early Christian self-renunciation, starting in the eighteenth century, in a "decisive break," verbalization was turned to serve the modernist ends of constituting "positively, a new self" (1988, p. 49).

Relationship development and social control are primarily external, directed outward, functions that use self-disclosure to build connections with others or to manipulate their opinions. These second two dimensions of blog disclosure support the second omnipresent theme, community building. Even as they serve to clarify and validate the self, blogs are also intended to be read. Maintaining traffic and link statistics seems important to bloggers, and many provide readers the opportunity to provide feedback either by posting comments directly on the blog or through email. Some even invite readers to purchase items for them from their Amazon.com wishlists. Many are conscious of the fact that they have readers and, to varying degrees, consciously write for them. Bloggers, says Lectrice, "need to get noticed by other weblogs" (2002). "A community of 100 or 20 or 3 people may spring up around the public record of [a blogger's] thoughts," notes Blood (2000). Andrew Sullivan, a professional journalist, claims about his blog, "I'm now reaching almost a quarter million readers a month and making a profit" (2002), though most bloggers address what Henning calls "nanoaudiences" (2003). There's a frequently expressed tension between the desire to be noticed by large numbers of readers and the desire to be valued by a few loyal fans, as this somewhat conflicted statement illustrates:

Most of the best sites out there are under-read, under-rated or undiscovered. Use your 'poor standing' as motivation to KICK SOME ASS. Show those fuckers what they are missing out on. Post unique, original stuff and people will notice you. Until then, let spite be your best friend, your muse, your *raison d'etre*. Walk around with a big ol' chip on your shoulder 'cause you're doing a bang-up job, even if nobody has noticed. Be proud to be a hip, underground weblog, read only by a few in the know. I would not trade a handful of readers I respect and like for 10,000 hits a day from people just following the herd. (*Ten Tips for Building a Bionic Weblog*, 2002)

Many bloggers see blogging as a way of developing relationships, via linking back, with an online community: "the linking that happens through blogging creates the connections that bind us" (Hourihan, 2002). They also manage those relationships through both linking and commentary, which become forms of social control, signs of approval, acceptance, value. For example, LiveJournal's "friends" feature allows bloggers to link to other blogs and allow differential access to their own blog. Blood notes that bloggers "position themselves" in the community of bloggers, indicating through their links "the tribe to which

they wish to belong (2000). Both linking and commentary create the hierarchy that structures the social world of blogs, leading to the A-list celebrities and the thousands of others, as well as to multiple complexly linked micro-communities. Clark calls the blogosphere a "culture of upward mobility" based in the desire for recognition and approval (2002).

Some bloggers comment on the apparent contradiction of making private writing public, the combination of intrinsic and extrinsic purposes. Remarks one, "A Web journal is when you spill your guts onto a Web page on a regular basis for all to see. A strange practice, since most meatspace journals and diaries are protected with ferocious care. Why it's OK to have millions of strangers look at your journal, but not your Mom, is beyond me" (MisterBad, 1999). Barrett says both that his blog is "about me" and that that weblogs are "designed for an audience" (1999). Nussbaum's interviews with teen bloggers highlight this tension; she summarizes one interview this way: "he 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" (2004, p. 35). Indeed, this is the heart of the problem we began with: how do these public and private purposes co-exist and even enhance each other as they seem to? We can now expand this question. Is what is truly novel in the blog the ability to address simultaneously these dual yet mutually reinforcing purposes, to engage in self-expression *in order* to build community and to build community *in order* to cultivate the self? Does the normalization of the subject-positions of the voyeur and the exhibitionist catalyze this new form of rhetorical action?

## Ancestral genres: where did the blog come from?

Because blogs appeared so suddenly and so recently, and because evidence about them and those who use them is so available, we have an unusual opportunity to study the evolution of a genre. In this case we can examine what the evolutionary biologist would call speciation, the development of a new genre, rather than the process of adaptative transformation, as the studies of the scientific article and the memo mentioned earlier have done. Jamieson's work on early presidential oratory (1973, 1975) and Miller's study of the Environmental Impact Statement (1984) did examine the creation of new genres, the first as precedent-setting responses to unprecedented situations, the second as a rhetorically unsuccessful but legally mandated response to a situation defined by or brought into being by Congress. One important way to study the rhetorical innovation of a new genre, Jamieson argued, is to look for the "chromosomal imprint of ancestral genres" (Jamieson, 1973); for example, the presidential inaugural can be fully understood as a genre only by seeing in it the imprint of the sermon (Jamieson, 1973), and the State of the Union address can be understood only by seeing it as a successor to the King's Speech to Parliament (Jamieson, 1975). These ancestral genres should be considered part of the rhetorical situation to which the rhetor responds, constraining the perception and definition of the situation and its decorum for both the rhetor and the audience. And, within limits, by their incorporation into a response to a novel situation, ancestral genres help define the potentialities of the new genre: the subject-positions of the rhetor and audience(s), the nature of the recurrent exigence, the decorum (or "fittingness" in Bitzer's term) of response.

Genre studies are sometimes seen as limited by their interest in the recurrent, the stereotypical; as Judy Segal has noted, "research on genre is characteristically responsive not to the special features of individual cases so much as to the repeated gestures among them" (2002, p. 172). Certainly genre studies encourage us to focus less on innovation or on individual achievement than on social and ideological regularities. But by the same token, genres are precisely the sites where change must be contained and

controlled, where innovation must negotiate with decorum. As Berkenkotter and Huckin put it, genres are always sites of contention between stability and change (1995, p. 6). The appearance of a new genre is an event of great rhetorical interest because it means that the stabilized-enough, negotiated balance between innovation and decorum has broken down and a new one is under development. The imprints of ancestral genres can give us insight into what aspects of generic exigences are no longer addressed, how the new stability is negotiated, how rhetoric accommodates change and accommodates us to change.

Blogs have multiple ancestors. [10](#) It may not be possible to create a detailed family tree, but we can discern several major branches, based partly on similarity of rhetorical gestures (presumably in response to some perceived similarity of recurrent exigences) and partly on the connections that bloggers themselves make to prior discourse. The common features to be accounted for are the generally marked reverse-chronological structure, the frequent updating, the combination of links and commentary, and the simultaneous intrinsic and extrinsic purposes. An exploration of ancestral genres will help us understand how these features coalesced as a rhetorically satisfying, or fitting, response to a recurrent exigence rooted in the *kairos* of the late 1990s. We do not consider here the genres that characterize that *kairos*, such as reality TV and the memoir, which we might think of as sister genres, but the complexity of the family tree means that the distinctions between sisters and ancestors may not be all that clear.

One of the main branches of the blog family tree sprouts from the early use of blogs as filtering or directory services for the internet. And etymology is an obvious clue that the *log* is an ancestral genre. Originally, the weblog was an automatically generated record of web server activity. On the basis of his search of Usenet archives, Dennis Jerz concluded that before Jorn Barger's 1997 announcement that he was going to post an ongoing log of his own web-surfing experience, the term *weblog* invariably referred to server data (2003). More generally, a log is a detailed chronological record, updated periodically, with its origins in marine navigation (and its etymology based in the measurement of sailing speed with a log thrown overboard). [11](#) Logs are required for the voyage of a ship, the flight of an airplane, the duty of a lighthouse keeper, so use of the log as a record of either server or individual web surfer activity is consistent with the imagery of navigation as applied to the internet. The marked chronology and regularity of updating, mandatory features of the log, are bequeathed to the blog, along with the implication that the genre is the record of a journey whose details may be significant to others. The blog has been called a *log of our times* (Whatis.com, 2003).

Also on the filtering branch are several genres related to collecting and organizing information, genres such as the clipping service and the edited anthology that make information available to others, as well as genres that collect for more personal reasons, such as the *commonplace book* and the *Wunderkammer*, or curio collection. The *commonplace book* was a Renaissance teaching strategy: students were instructed to keep a notebook in which they could write down significant passages, epithets, phrases and aphorisms from their reading, organized into headings or places (*loci*). They were a way of sifting and categorising the matter of texts studied, and they were an information retrieval system. (Moss, 1993, p. 53). The point was not just to learn and remember this material but to have it available to assist with the student's own rhetorical invention, to make it, as Erasmus urged, a magnificent and impressive thing, surging along like a golden river, with thoughts and words pouring out in rich abundance (quoted in Moss, 1993, p. 53). The *commonplace book* served as a source of the desired abundance, or *copia*, and was thus also called a *copie-book* or a *treasury*. The *Wunderkammer*, or cabinet of wonders, was the 17th-century collector's

personal museum; like the commonplace book, it served as a source of ideas as objects were interpreted in relation to each other. At least one blogger has noted the resemblance of the collection of links to the Wunderkammer: "The genealogy of weblogs points not to the world of letters but to the early history of museums—a random collection of strange, compelling objects, typically compiled and owned by a learned, well-off gentleman—reflecting European civilization's dazed and wondering attempts to assimilate the glut of physical data that science and exploration were then unleashing" (Dibbell, 2002). Thus, the ancestral genres on this branch of the family tree bequeath to the blog the function of information management in a time when the availability and volume of new information and ideas stimulate but also threaten to overwhelm the possibility of invention.

The *clipping service* or *media monitoring service* is an information collection strategy designed around the periodical print media. Dating to the early 20th century, these services have now gone electronic, collecting news needed by a specific client with the aim of being comprehensive within the search parameters set by the client. The results would thus be like a blog with all links and no commentary, representing the perspective and interests of a single reader rather than of the blogger or editor. Other collections of information with reader interests in mind take the form of anthologies, close relatives of the commonplace book. The *anthology* derives in part from the medieval passion for collecting and commenting on texts when they of course had to be copied by hand, the word literally meaning a collection of "flowers." After the invention of printing, both anthologies and commonplace books could be created and disseminated for the edification of others, not just for personal self-cultivation, and Walter Ong notes the abundance of anthologies during the Renaissance (1971, pp. 66–81). Unlike the clipping service and more like the blog, the anthology acquires value for its audience from the sensibility of the editor, demonstrated through both selectivity and commentary. Indeed some bloggers refer to themselves as "editors" and talk about blogging as "publishing," not "posting" (Blood, 2000).

A related branch of the family tree is occupied by genres of political journalism, such as the *pamphlet* or *broadside*, the *editorial*, and the *opinion column*. Such genres highlight commentary. In the 17th and 18th centuries, political opinion was often expressed (sometimes anonymously) through independent and ephemeral publications called pamphlets or broadsides, which became known as vehicles for political protest and propaganda.<sup>12</sup> With the institutionalization of the newspaper and gradual lifting of royal censorship and other restrictions, the dissemination of political opinion was largely taken over by the journalistic press, which provided a regularity of publication and thus chronological updating, but lacks the cumulative record that a blog provides. These journalistic genres clearly require a public audience and usually seek as large an audience as possible, the rhetorical aim being to influence opinion or action. Some discussions highlight the importance of political commentary to the rhetorical value of blogs (see, for example, Wikipedia, 2003), and the potential of the internet for grass-roots political action has been of much interest. Moreover, the independence of bloggers from corporate media is seen as essential to their political value. Journalist and blogger Andrew Sullivan has called the blog as a "publishing revolution," in which writers "seize the means of production," becoming their own editors and publishers, gaining independence from corporate media and direct access to their audience (Sullivan, 2002; see also Hourihan, 2002). The j-blog is now a major subgenre, though there seem to be different degrees of journalistic independence with some j-blogs published by news organizations and others by journalists themselves. Cyberjournalist.net publishes a listing of j-blogs, with 86 published on professional news sites (such as the *Chicago Tribune* and *Fortune Magazine*), 116 published independently, and 62 on journalists' personal sites (Cyberjournalist, 2004). The participation of media corporations in sponsoring j-blogs can be seen,

however, as the co-optation of the blog and the end of the independence that j-bloggers like Sullivan celebrate. John Dvorak calls them faux blogs, predicting that the Big Media incursion marks the beginning of the end for blogging (2003).

Finally, on a separate branch of the blog family tree we find the *journal* and the *diary*, along with the newer electronic genres of the home page and the webcam. Traditional diaries, according to historians and critics, emerged as an identifiable genre in the late 16th century; <sup>13</sup> they are understood to be written in the present and about the present; to be written serially, in installments; and to refer to the actual experiences of the writer, whether external or intrinsic. And this last feature leads to two major types of diaries, those that appeal by providing a window on history and those that appeal by portraying a self (Steinitz, 1997); these two types are remarkably similar to the two types of blogs noted by Blood, those focused externally on information access and those focused internally on the revelation or development of character. The diary genre is elastic, allowing for different combinations of these two appeals: Thomas Mallon's exploration of diaries distinguishes several major types by content and style, among them chronicles, travel journals, pilgrimages (or spiritual-emotional journals), confessions, prison diaries. Though many apply the term *journal* to the externally focused and *diary* to the internally focused type, Mallon finds the terms hopelessly muddled and uses them synonymously (1984, p. 1).

The *home page* (sometimes enhanced by a *webcam*) is the immediate predecessor of the blog, with the major differences being that home pages are understood as essentially static rather than dynamic and the webcam does not provide external linking or commentary. The diary is the most frequently mentioned ancestral genre in the voluminous meta-talk about blogs by bloggers, and it is recognized in the names of two major blog hosting sites, Diaryland and LiveJournal. It is the diary's personal perspective that makes its relationship to the blog so recognizable (Walker, 2003; Whatis.com, 2003; Wikipedia, 2003). As we noted earlier, the blog provides a record of blogger's thoughts and can constitute a journey of self-discovery (Blood, 2000), descriptions that apply equally well to the diary. The diary also bequeaths to the blog an incremental chronological organization, the expectation of updating and commentary, and the impression of direct personal experience as Mallon puts it, what's in a diary doesn't seem written, it seems to happen (1984, p. xviii).

The diary raises the question about audience that has intrigued us from the beginning. Is the diary a personal or a public genre? does it have an audience beyond the writer? Mallon claims, on the basis of his reading of hundreds of diaries, that no one ever kept a diary for just himself. [A] hundred years from now an audience will turn up. Someone will be reading and you'll be talking (1984, pp. xvi-xvii). Steinitz agrees: the diary, she maintains, is an eminently communicative genre (1997, p. 43). She notes that throughout their history diaries have been shared with others and often published. Their appeal is not merely voyeuristic; it is based not only on the promise of exposure of the private and secret but also on the way diaries represent experience as an intersection between the individual and the outside world (Steinitz, 1997, p. 47), in other words, on their ability to combine the intrinsic and the extrinsic perspectives. Mallon goes further to make the general social-constructionist claim that Writing-for-self does not exist in any real sense. Ultimately all discourse is intended for an audience other than the self who is doing the writing (1984, p. 66). Elbow disagrees, maintaining that in several nontrivial senses writing can be private and the self can constitute a sufficient audience (1999). Like the diary, the blog is a phenomenon that illustrates this debate, without resolving it.

These multiple branches on the ancestral tree account for most of the major features of blogs, semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic. The diverse but seemingly *real* content with both intrinsic, or personal, and extrinsic, or political-historical, variants; the chronological and incremental form; the ambivalence about audience—all have antecedents in more familiar and well established genres. Blogs appeared, and then multiplied exponentially, when technology made it evolutionarily possible to combine features from a set of antecedent genres that in other circumstances might never have produced any common progeny: the diary, the clipping service, the broadside, the anthology, the commonplace book, the ship's log. We might see the blog as a complex rhetorical hybrid (or mongrel), with genetic imprints from all these prior genres.<sup>14</sup> But what made the blog evolutionarily *fitting*? What is the recurrent exigence that the blog addresses with such evident success?

## Exigence and the social action of the blog

Because the personal form of the blog is what seems to both motivate and satisfy the readers and writers of blogs and thus to have particular evolutionary survival value, we suspect that the generic exigence that motivates bloggers is related less to the need for information than to the self and the relations between selves. Understanding exigence as an *objectified social need* that functions as rhetorical motive (Miller, 1984, p. 157), then, we must characterize the generic exigence of the blog as some widely shared, recurrent need for cultivation and validation of the self; furthermore, in these particular times, we must locate that need at the intersection of the private and public realms, where questions about identity are most troubled.

The subject has a history, Bradford Vivian reminds us (2000, p. 303). Subjectivity is not a transhistorical phenomenon, and its expression has no universal methods or conventions; rather, they are products of a time and place, formed in interaction with a *kairos*. Foucault's discussion of technologies of the self points up their historicity, as well as emphasizing that the self is a result of *operations* by a subject *so as to transform [itself] in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality* (1988, p. 18)). The blog reveals something about the configuration of the subject in the *kairos* that we have described—a *kairos* of mediated voyeurism, widely dispersed but relentless celebrity, unsettled boundaries between public and private, and new technology that disseminates these challenges beyond capital and corporations to individuals. The blogging subject engages in self-disclosure, and as we noted earlier the blog works to bind together in a recognizable rhetorical form the four functions of self-disclosure: self-clarification, social validation, relationship development, and social control. Combined with its focused and repeated effort, the blog's public disclosure—its exhibitionism—yields an intensification of the self, a reflexive elaboration of identity. Mallon noted that some diaries seemed to provide the only world in which the diarist could fully live (1984, p. xvii); similarly, in a culture that finds its reality in the media, the blog may provide such a world for the blogger. This intensified, mediated identity is the rhetorical achievement of the blog. The subject selects, displays, and comments upon the mediated reality of the internet, becoming thereby a validated part of that reality and defining for itself and for others its own nature—or rather a rhetorical version of *its own nature*. Character is manifested in choice, as Aristotle had it (Aristotle, 1991, 1.8.vi)—in more postmodern terms, the blogging subject constitutes itself in and through its own mediation.

The blog is a rapidly moving target, however, and our analysis cannot presume to be complete or comprehensive. We have emphasized here one genetic theme in an evolutionary profusion, one strand on

the tangled bank, to use Darwin's image. Already blog software is being adapted to meet different exigences, and already it may no longer be accurate to think of the blog as a single genre. For example, the j-blog seems to have emerged as a distinct sub-genre, and the work team blog, the tech support blog, and the political campaign blog may be others; however, these versions do not raise the questions about the intersection between the public and the private that initially caught our interest. The earliest version of the blog, the information-access link collection, continues to thrive in well-known instances such as the Drudge Report and Slashdot.org. To the extent that such blogs purvey a point of view as well as a collection of links, they combine the personal and the public in ways that are distinctive to the blog as a rhetorical form, and they allow bloggers to cultivate the self in a public way.

Kenneth Burke noted, during a period of social unrest in the early 20th century, that motivation in an age of marked instability will be liquid, lacking the conventional social typifications of times when recurrent patterns of life are highly stabilized. Without intersubjectively constituted typifications, the matter of motive is unsettled (1965, pp. 32-33). Turkle's book explores the ways that the internet destabilizes our sense of identity, enabling experimentation with multiple identities or personae through MUDs and gaming, allowing people to experience the plasticity and multiplicity of the self that postmodernism posits (1997). Bloggers, however, seem less interested in role playing than in locating, or constructing, for themselves and for others, an identity that they can understand as unitary, as real. The blog thus seems to us to be a counter-movement to postmodern destabilization, a backward motion toward the source, as Robert Frost put it.<sup>15</sup> That is, to the extent that the blog has become a widely understood and shared rhetorical convention, it functions as a site of relative stability. Perhaps we should see all genres as such backward motions, as efforts at stabilization in the flux of continual change. But our point is that the blog might be understood as a particular reaction to the constant flux of subjectivity, as a generic effort of reflexivity within the subject that creates an eddy of relative stability. Infinite play, constant innovation, is not psychically sustainable on an indefinite basis. In a culture in which the real is both public and mediated, the blog makes real the reflexive effort to establish the self against the forces of fragmentation, through expression and connection, through disclosure. It is, as Vivian notes about rhetoric in general, a precious aesthetic technology by which one composes and cultivates one's being in the world (2000, p. 316).

We see the blog, then, as a genre that addresses a timeless rhetorical exigence in ways that are specific to its time. In the blog, the potentialities of technology, a set of cultural patterns, rhetorical conventions available in antecedent genres, and the history of the subject have combined to produce a recurrent rhetorical motive that has found a conventional mode of expression. Bloggers acknowledge that motive in each other and continue enacting it for themselves. The blog-as-genre is a contemporary contribution to the art of the self.

---

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>In fact, the Herring et al. study appeared in early 2004 just as we were finishing our work. It was not available to us until after we submitted this essay to the editors, but at the editors' invitation, we have taken this study into account. Its findings provide a useful counterpoint to ours, as we note in several places below.

2See also the more recent commentary on our culture of confession by Weber: Purifying oneself through soul-baring is not only a sanctioned spiritual enterprise but a literary tradition, nowhere more so than in this country (2004).

3Another estimate, from the National Institute for Technology in Liberal Education (NITLE) shows 1,650,198 blogs as of 30 December 2003 <http://www.blogcensus.net>.

4See, for example, the definitions in online user-produced encyclopedias, as well as other sources cited below (Lectrice, 2002; Whatis.com, 2003; Wikipedia, 2003).

5It's arguable whether this is a classification based on content or form, and we believe that such an argument shows the limitations of the distinction between them.

6 Herring et al. (2004) actually coded for overall purpose, which is a somewhat different conception from content. The categories they used were filter, personal journal, k-log, mixed purpose, and other.

7This outrage seems a bit naive for experienced internet users, given that deception is a well documented phenomenon on the internet. For example, see Sherry Turkle's discussion of gender deception (1997, p. 228-231).

8This is a good example of two distinct approaches to genre definition noted by Miller (1984): statistical induction from a large sample (advocated by Simons, 1978) and close reading of successful ideal types (advocated by Campbell and Jamieson, 1978) We might note now that characterization by statistical means represents a linguistic approach to genre, in contrast to a rhetorical approach, which is more interested in expectations, motivations, and terms of success.

9Although Yates and Orlikowski are interested in the appearance of email as a new element in organizational communication, they treat it primarily as an elaboration of the memo, not as an innovation (1992). They discuss variations that the technology makes possible, noting that email users draw selectively on the memo genre sometimes maintaining it and sometimes elaborating it (1992, p. 317). They also point to other antecedent genres such as the voicemail message and the informal note. Overall, their emphasis is evolutionary, with the role of innovation assigned almost exclusively to technology.

10Herring et al. (2004) make this same claim, supporting it with a brief discussion of genres with formal and functional similarities, including some that we discuss below (the diary, the editorial, and the home page) and a few that we do not (the photo album, the project journal, the email exchange).

11See, for example, (McEwen & Lewis, 1953). The ship's log covers sea and weather conditions, compass bearing, speed, distance covered, landmarks passed, names of crew members on certain duties, ships encountered, crew discipline, and other details. Specifications for naval logs are written into U. S. and British law.

12See the entries for broadside, newspaper, and pamphlet in (McArthur, 1992).

13In a wonderful historical circularity, the most famous diary in English literature, that of Samuel Pepys,

which covers the years from 1660 to 1669, is being re-published as a blog (Gyford, 2003). Thanks to Jason Swarts for bringing this to our attention.

14 See Jamieson and Campbell's discussion of rhetorical hybrids, which they conceive in somewhat different terms than we are here, basing them on transitory and only occasionally enduring combinations, or fusions of rhetorical forms from traditional Aristotelian genres (1982). Herring et al. also call the blog a hybrid of existing genres, rendered unique by the particular features of the source genres they adapt, and by their particular technological affordances (2004, p. 110).

15 West Running Brook, 1928.

## References

- Agre, P. E. (1998). *Designing Genres for New Media: Social, Economic, and Political Contexts*. In S. G. Jones (Ed.), *Cybersociety 2.0: Revisiting Computer-Mediated Communication and Community* (pp. 69-99). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Aristotle. (1991). *On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse* (G. A. Kennedy, Trans.). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Atlas, J. (1996, May 12). Confessing for Voyeurs: The Age of the Literary Memoir is Now. *New York Times Magazine*, p. 25-27.
- Barrett, C. (1999, May 11). *More About Weblogs*. Retrieved December 31, 2003, from <http://www.camworld.com/journal/rants/99/05/11.html>
- Baudrillard, J. (1994). *Simulacra and Simulation* (S. F. Glaser, Trans.). Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Bauman, M. L. (1999). The Evolution of Internet Genres. *Computers and Composition*, 16(2), 269-282.
- Bazerman, C. (1988). *Shaping Written Knowledge: The Genre and Activity of the Experimental Article in Science*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Berkenkotter, C., & Huckin, T. N. (1995). *Genre Knowledge in Disciplinary Communication: Cognition/Culture/Power*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Bitzer, L. (1978). Rhetoric and Public Knowledge. In D. M. Burks (Ed.), *Rhetoric, Philosophy, and Literature: An Exploration* (pp. 67-93). West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press.
- Blood, R. (2000, September 7). *Weblogs: A History and Perspective*. Retrieved December 31, 2003, from [http://www.rebeccablood.net/essays/weblog\\_history.html](http://www.rebeccablood.net/essays/weblog_history.html)
- The Bowker Annual Library and Book Trade Almanac*. (1998). New York: R. R. Bowker.
- Burke, K. (1965). *Permanence and Change: An Anatomy of Purpose* (Reprint ed.). Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill.

- Calvert, C. (2000). *Voyeur Nation: Media, Privacy, and Peering in Modern Culture*. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press.
- Carvajal, D. (1997, April 5). Book Publishers Eager For Tales of True Torment. *The New York Times*, p. 1.
- Clark, J. (2002, 28 December). *Deconstructing 'You've Got Blog'*. Retrieved January 4, 2004, from <http://fawny.org/decon-blog.html>
- Coates, T. (n.d.). *What the Hell Is This Site For?* Retrieved 4 January, 2004, from <http://www.plasticbag.org/about/faq/003164.shtml>
- Cyberjournalist. (2004, 3 January). *The Cyberjournalist List*. Retrieved January 3, 2004, from <http://www.cyberjournalist.net/cyberjournalists.html>
- Dibbell, J. (2002). Portrait of the Blogger as a Young Man. In J. Rodzvilla (Ed.), *We've Got Blog: How Weblogs Are Changing Our Culture* (pp. 69-77). Cambridge, MA: Perseus Publishing.
- Dillon, A., & Gushrowski, B. A. (2000). Genres and the Web: Is the Personal Home Page the First Uniquely Digital Genre? *Journal of the American Society for Information Science*, 51(2), 202-205.
- Dvorak, J. C. (2003, November 19). Co-opting the Future. *PC Magazine*. Retrieved January 4, 2004, from <http://www.pcmag.com/article2/0,4149,1382914,1382900.asp>.
- Elbow, P. (1999). In Defense of Private Writing: Consequences for Theory and Reserch. *Written Communication*, 16(2), 139-170.
- Elliston, J. (2003, 28 May). 'The FBI Has Been Reading My Diary'. *Independent Weekly*, p. 13.
- Eng, P. (Writer) (2002). Portable Phones Power Up [Newspaper article]: ABC News.
- Foucault, M. (1988). Technologies of the Self. In L. H. Martin, H. Gutman & P. H. Hutton (Eds.), *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault* (pp. 16-49). Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press.
- Frazer, E. (2000). *Probably the Most Public Occasion the World Has Ever Known: 'Public' and 'Private' in the Press Coverage of the Death and Funeral of Diana, Princess of Wales*. Retrieved November 7, 2003
- Geitgey, A. (2002). The Kaycee Nicole (Swenson) FAQ. In J. Rodzvilla (Ed.), *We've Got Blog: How Weblogs Are Changing Our Culture* (pp. 89-98). Cambridge, MA: Perseus Publishing.
- Graham, B. (2002). Why I Weblog. In J. Rodzvilla (Ed.), *We've Got Blog: How Weblogs Are Changing Our Culture* (pp. 34-40). Cambridge, MA: Perseus Publishing.
- Gyford, P. (2003, 29 April 2004). *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*. Retrieved April 30, 2004, from <http://www.pepysdiary.com>
- Henning, J. (2003, October 4). *The Blogging Iceberg*. Retrieved January 4, 2004, from <http://www.perseus.com/blogsurvey/thebloggingiceberg.html>

Herring, S., Scheidt, L.A., Bonus, S., & Wright, E. (2004). Bridging the gap: A genre analysis of weblogs. Retrieved October 9, 2004, from <http://www.blogninja.com/DDGDD04.doc>.

Hourihan, M. (2002, 13 June). *What We're Doing When We Blog*. Retrieved December 31, 2003, from <http://www.oreillynet.com/lpt/a/2474>

*In 1992, Clinton Conceded Marital 'Wrongdoing'*. (1992). Retrieved October 15, 2003, from <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/special/clinton/stories/flowers012792.htm>

James, B. (2001). *Hits and Errors in Everyday Life*. Retrieved October 17, 2003, from <http://www.forbes.com/asap/1997/1201/096.html>

Jamieson, K. H., & Campbell, K. K. (1982). Rhetorical Hybrids: Fusions of Generic Elements. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 69, 146-157.

Jamieson, K. M. (1975). Antecedent Genre as Rhetorical Constraint. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 61, 406-415.

Jamieson, K. M. H. (1973). Generic Constraints and the Rhetorical Situation. *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 6(3), 162-170.

Jerz, D. G. (2003, 17 February 2003). *On the Trail of the Memex: Vannevar Bush, Weblogs and the Google Galaxy*. Retrieved 31 December, 2003, from <http://www.dichtung-digital.org/2003/issue/1/jerz/index.htm>

Lectrice. (2002, 18 October). *Blogging about Blogging*. Retrieved January 1, 2004, from [http://www.everything2.com/index.pl?node\\_id=389001](http://www.everything2.com/index.pl?node_id=389001)

Mallon, T. (1984). *A Book of One's Own: People and Their Diaries*. New York: Ticknor & Fields.

McArthur, T. (Ed.). (1992). *The Oxford Companion to the English Language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

McEwen, W. A., & Lewis, A. H. (1953). *Encyclopedia of Nautical Knowledge*. Cambridge, MD: Cornell Maritime Press.

Mead, R. (2000, November 13). You've Got Blog: How to Put Your Business, Your Boyfriend, and Your Life Online. *The New Yorker*.

Miller, C. R. (1984). Genre as Social Action. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 70, 151-176.

Miller, C. R. (2002). Foreword. In P. Sipiora & J. S. Baumlin (Eds.), *Rhetoric and Kairos: Essays in History, Theory, and Praxis* (pp. xi-xiii). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Minzesheimer, B. (1997, April 16). Mad for Memoirs. *USA Today*, p. 1.

MisterBad. (1999, November 13). *Web journal*. Retrieved 8 January, 2004, from <http://www.everything2.com/index.pl?node=web%20journal>

- Mortensen, T., & Walker, J. (2002). Blogging Thoughts: Personal Publication as an Online Research Tool. In A. Morrison (Ed.), *Researching ICTs in Context* (pp. 249-279). Oslo: InterMedia, University of Oslo.
- Moss, A. (1993). Commonplace-Rhetoric and Thought-Patterns in Early Modern Culture. In R. H. Robert & J. M. M. Good (Eds.), *The Recovery of Rhetoric: Persuasive Discourse and Disciplinarity in the Human Sciences* (pp. 49-60). Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia.
- Newburger, E. C. (2001). *Home Computers and Internet Use in the United States: August 2000*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Census Bureau.
- Nunberg, G. (2001). *I Have Seen the Future, and It Blogs*. Retrieved 28 May, 2003, from <http://www-csli.stanford.edu/%7Enunberg/blog.html>
- Nussbaum, E. (2004, January 11). My So-Called Blog. *New York Times Magazine*, 33-37.
- Ong, W. J., S.J. (1971). *Rhetoric, Romance, and Technology: Studies in the Interaction of Expression and Culture*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Powazek, D. M. (2002). What the Hell Is a Weblog and Why Won't They Leave Me Alone? In J. Rodzvilla (Ed.), *We've Got Blog: How Weblogs Are Changing Our Culture* (pp. 3-6). Cambridge, MA: Perseus Publishing.
- Rodzvilla, J. (2002). *We've Got Blog: How Weblogs Are Changing Our Culture*. Cambridge, MA: Perseus Publishing.
- Safire, W. (2002, 28 July). Blog: Do a Million Hits Make a Word? *New York Times*, p. 17.
- Schryer, C. F. (1993). Records as Genre. *Written Communication*, 10, 200-234.
- Schryer, C. F. (2002). Genre and Power: A Chronotopic Analysis. In R. Coe, L. Lingard & T. Teslenko (Eds.), *The Rhetoric and Ideology of Genre: Strategies for Stability and Change* (pp. 73-102). Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.
- Segal, J. Z. (2002). Problems of Generalization/Genrelization: The Case of the Doctor-Patient Interview. In R. Coe, L. Lingard & T. Teslenko (Eds.), *The Rhetoric and Ideology of Genre: Strategies for Stability and Change* (pp. 171-184). Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.
- Sella, M. (2000, 21 May). The Electronic Fishbowl. *New York Times Magazine*, 149, 50-57, 68-72, 102-103.
- St. John, W. (2003, 18 May). Dating a Blogger, Reading All About It. *New York Times*, pp. 1, 11.
- Stark, M. (2003, 26 May). You, Me, Celebrity. *Brandweek*, 44, 17-19.
- Steinitz, R. (1997). Writing Diaries, Reading Diaries: The Mechanics of Memory. *The Communication Review*, 2(1), 43-58.
- Sullivan, A. (2002, May). *The Blogging Revolution*. Retrieved January 4, 2004, from [http://www.wired.com/archive/10.05/mustread\\_pr.html](http://www.wired.com/archive/10.05/mustread_pr.html)

*Ten Tips for Building a Bionic Weblog*. (2002). Retrieved January 4, 2004, from <http://www.metascene.net/bionic.html>

Turkle, S. (1997). *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*. New York: Touchstone.

Turnbull, G. (2002). The State of the Blog Part 2: Blogger Present. In J. Rodzvilla (Ed.), *We've Got Blog: How Weblogs Are Changing Our Culture* (pp. 81-85). Cambridge, MA: Perseus Publishing.

Vivian, B. (2000). The Threshold of the Self. *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 33(4), 303-318.

Walker, J. (2003, 22 August). *Final Version of Weblog Definition*. Retrieved 31 December, 2003, from [http://huminf.uib.no/~jill/archives/blog\\_theorising/final\\_version\\_of\\_weblog\\_definition.html](http://huminf.uib.no/~jill/archives/blog_theorising/final_version_of_weblog_definition.html)

*The Weblog Review*. (2003). from <http://www.theweblogreview.com>

Weinberger, D. (2002). *Small Pieces Loosely Joined (A Unified Theory of the Web)*. Cambridge, MA: Perseus Publishing.

Whatis.com. (2003, March 24). *Weblog*. Retrieved 30 December, 2003, from [http://searchWebServices.techtarget.com/sDefinition/0,,sid26\\_gci213547,00.html](http://searchWebServices.techtarget.com/sDefinition/0,,sid26_gci213547,00.html)

Wikipedia. (2003, December 19). *Weblog*. Retrieved 1 January, 2004

Woodard, I., Emory H. (2000). *Media in the Home: The Fifth Annual Survey of Parents and Children*. Retrieved January 5, 2004, from [http://www.appcpenn.org/05\\_media\\_developing\\_child/mediasurvey/survey7.pdf](http://www.appcpenn.org/05_media_developing_child/mediasurvey/survey7.pdf)

Yardley, J. (2003, 30 November). Internet Column on Sex Thrills, and Inflames, China. *New York Times*, p. 3.

Yates, J., & Orlikowski, W. (1992). Genres of Organizational Communication: A Structural Approach to Studying Communication and Media. *Academy of Management Review*, 17(2), 299-326.

Zuccheromaglio, C., & Talamo, A. (2003). The Development of a Virtual Community of Practices Using Electronic Mail and Communicative Genres. *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*, 17(3), 259-284.

[TrackBack](#)

---

## Comments

I wrote an entry in my blog that addresses many of the issues raised in this article, but the trackback function doesn't seem to be working, so consider this a clunky version of a trackback:

<http://chutry.wordherders.net/archives/002623.html>

Posted by: [chuck tryon](#) at September 25, 2004 03:17 PM

---

Post a comment

Name:

Remember personal info?

Yes  No

Email Address:

URL:

Comments:

Preview

Post

Comments and essays are the property of their authors. All other content  Into the Blogosphere 2004.