

## Genres in the Internet

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### **Volume 188**

Genres in the Internet. Issues in the theory of genre  
Edited by Janet Giltrow and Dieter Stein

# Genres in the Internet

Issues in the theory of genre

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## Preface

This book would not have seen the light of day without the tireless work of Susanne Erhardt, research assistant in Düsseldorf, Germany. With unflagging energy she attended to everything that happened behind the scenes including correspondence, keeping records and inspiring Janet and Dieter with art and lots of strong coffee.



# Genres in the Internet

## Innovation, evolution, and genre theory

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*Genre* is a term of analysis in many of the disciplines which comprise discourse studies. It appears in linguistic pragmatics, in Critical Discourse Analysis and Functional Linguistics, in rhetorical studies, in literary studies, in Applied Linguistics and text-linguistics. While its uses in these disciplines may be seen, from certain perspectives, to share some common ground, from other perspectives they can at first glance seem incommensurable.

At the very least, *genre* works as a common intuitive concept – a sense that features of language aggregate in recognizable patterns, and that these aggregations indicate something important in the uses of language in context. But even in this shared intuition we already encounter potential ruptures, not only in the account of function – what kind of work do these patterns do? how do they do it? – but also in the recognition itself: is it the language user's recognition that counts in identifying a genre, or the analyst's?

In this volume we bring together theorists and researchers from several disciplines in discourse studies to begin a cross-disciplinary discussion of genre and its conceptualisation not only as a discourse phenomenon but also as an object of disciplined inquiry. At the same time, we locate the discussion in the field of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC). Thereby we may help to organize or clarify the abundant commentary in this field, identifying some core issues or some crucial gaps in the account of this use of language which attracts so much scholarly attention and popular speculation. But the volume is not incidentally or haphazardly – or opportunistically – about CMC. In its newness, its rather sudden and compelling appearance in the life of language, CMC is peculiarly inviting to discussions of *genre*. It both overturns and reinstates those aggregations of discourse features which indicate function; it both defies and confirms the familiarity which sparks recognition of discourse types. CMC is, in short, an ideal field for the testing, comparing, and revising of concepts of genre – an ideal arena to initiate cross-disciplinary discussion of genre.

The question of genre, then, is really an old one, but the advent of new media has highlighted the issue with new full force. Seemingly, there are new genres on the

Internet, but in some cases it is a matter of contention whether the genre is new, or an old one in new medial garb. The new genres and/or old genres on the Internet catalyse the debate in and amongst theories of genre.

It is also clear that the notion of genre, to the extent that it comes with language, will touch on the issue of the “text” (Stein forthcoming) and its “context” as a bone of contention from linguistic to literary theory. Copying, pasting and hyper-linking, the CMC “text” with its new “fluidity” (Nentwich 2003) trespasses its own borders, creating vectors on which genres can travel into one another’s territories. In turn, the notion of “context” can range from context defined by the narrowest co-presence heuristics operative in focused interaction to context defined by wider historical measures or by the broadest critical-theoretical analyses.

This volume and this introductory article try to highlight the theoretical issues surrounding theories of genre, as catalysed by Internet genres. Before talking about the effect of the Internet on genre and genres, it is appropriate to discuss the notion of genre (Part I). The second part (Part II) will then try to identify potential systematic and notional effects that may be particular to genres on the Internet. The aim of this article is to provide a set of theoretical parameters which may be taken up in the analysis of Internet genres.

## 1. Issues in defining genre

1.1 Biber (1988) has drawn a distinction between genre and text type: the former is a situational category, the latter a linguistic one, more precisely, a systematic agglomeration of linguistic features. Traditionally, text-type theory has considered both sides in their interlockedness (Virtanen 1997): the relationship between genre and bundles of linguistic features has been seen as “functional”, in the sense that function determines form. But function also underdetermines form insofar as form/function is conventional or ritualized, traditional-historical and cultural. Only the “functional” determination would make for cross-cultural and cross-lingual similarity of genres, say of a “scientific article”, or the “narrative”: at this level of analysis, similarity in function could not be discovered by the recurrence of bundles of linguistic features, for cross-lingual situations would obviously differ in the linguistic resources available for executing the function, and even in cross-cultural situations socio-historical contingencies would dispose language users towards some features rather than others to execute function. (As we will see below, some theories of genre insist on the fusion of features and function, and would therefore not recognise as equivalent—that is, as the same genre—functions rendered in different forms: the socio-historical, i.e. cultural, contingencies which select and conventionalise some forms over others are part-and-parcel of definitions of function.)



Following Biber's distinction, the text type (form) also underdetermines genre. The linguistic side of genres, the text type, is often referred to as "style", i.e. recurrent linguistic regularities classified in markers (unique to a genre) and features (characterizing more than one genre, but still characteristic of a small set of genres). If you make mistakes in choosing linguistic form, it will register with the audience as an infringement of regularities or norms (not rules)—an awareness of infringement which could not occur if form were not latched in some way to awareness of function. Insofar as language users develop this sensitivity to form, form and function may be characterised as "fused"—a condition going beyond "interlockedness" and also recognised in some of the earliest proposals from new-rhetorical genre theory (e.g. Campbell & Jamieson 1979), and claimed for speech genres by Bakhtin as "features of language [knitting] together with the intentional aim" (DI288). This form/function fusion can be observed in a developmental sense of evolution – over time functions are realised in an increasingly stable cluster of forms – and in a sense of synchronic togetherness and expectedness pertaining to communicative competence. Over time language users come to both anticipate agglomerations of form in functional contexts and also produce them in response to these mutual expectations: in a scientific article we are not likely to find "get" – passives (which in turn may well be explained functionally). In Functional Linguistics, "register" has assumed some of the work done by the categories "style", "marker", "feature". In new-rhetorical theories of genre, the effort to disavow formalism has tended to deflect attention from particular features of language, while the looser term "discourse" (as in "bio-medical discourse", or "legal-judicial discourse") has accounted for form underdetermining genre (regularities of form alone will not tell you the genre), and for features characterising a set of related genres. Whereas in linguistic and pragmatic study of genre, quantitative study of corpora has contributed to establishing bases for identifying style, feature, and type, in rhetorical study of genre and in some CDA studies, genres and discourses have been discovered intuitively, or by reference to a broad conception of function. In rhetorical studies of genre, where claims for the fusion of form and function have been repeated but study of form has not been quantitative, ethnographic and qualitative methods have inquired, to a certain degree, into the phenomenology of the "expectedness" of features.

1.2 Genres have increasingly been defined also by pragmatic categories, in particular rules of cooperation (Stein 1992). In particular, genres may be defined as specific adjustments to the maxims. A conception of genre as "activity type" (Levinson 1992) is characteristic for a more modern approach that would proceed from the function in a specific social and/or institutional context and consider rules of cooperation and inferencing, as well as linguistic form (constellation of markers

and features) as epiphenomenal. Bakhtin also noticed “apperceptive background” (basis for inferencing) as changing according to genre (PSG 95–96). Thus, associated with genres, and essentially defining them in our communicative competence are “activity-specific rules of inference”.

New-rhetorical theories of genre have also described themselves as developing a pragmatic perspective. Taking “pragmatic” in a broad sense, they define genre as “social action”, a formulation proposed by Miller (1984) and taken up by nearly every rhetorical theorist of genre since then. Rhetorical theories find these actions in recurring socio-historical situation, rather than abstract categories. Accordingly, from the rhetorical view of the historical contingency of genres, genres expire when the situations expire.

1.3 A major issue concerns the classification of genres and the issue of generality. If genres are seen as intimately tied to social and societal situations and functions (“bottom-up” approach), then this would make for a multitude of genres, as there is a vast multitude of such functions, although the multitude would be in practice contained by the actual number of typical activities hosted by a socio-historical formation at any time. Approaches such as Levinson’s and Yates’s take such a stance, especially the “workplace”-based approach, as do new-rhetorical theories of genre.

If an “abstractive” or top-down approach is taken and only a small number of “basic” genres is distinguished, the number of genres will be small and the issue will be one of establishing hierarchical pedigree. This is the case with Longacre’s (1983) four “basic” types of discourse (persuasion, argument, exposition and narration), classifications based on speech act types and paralleling the “modes” assumed by traditional American composition pedagogy, or the five types distinguished by Werlich (1979), the “modes of discourse” (Smith 2003) or the small number of types observed by Functional Linguistics. Traditional and neo-classical rhetoric holds to the small set attributed to Aristotle: after the division which separates poetic, dialectic, and rhetorical uses of language, the rhetorical uses are divided into the three genres of deliberative, epideictic, forensic.

The issue is manifested in the question of generality and openness. When the set of genres is *open*, the level of generality at which genres are named is lower than it would be for a *closed* set. For example, if it were held that the number of genres were a closed set of four – say, Longacre’s types mentioned above – these four would prevail for all times and places, arguably universally. The level of generality would be very high, detached from the ground-level contingencies of time and place, and oblivious to the experience of working groups of language users. In contrast to the traditional “modes” and to neo-classical rhetorical theory, new-rhetorical genre theory – with its open set and lower level of generality – would not

count “narration”, for example, as a genre. Instead, it would count the *workplace-incident report* or the *medical case-history* as genres: habits of speech, techniques of narrating known to some language users at some times and places. In other words, the bottom-up approach amounts to an open set and a low level of generality. The open set was a crucial step onto heavily defended ground for new-rhetorical theories of genre.

1.4 When the set is closed, the onus for identifying genre is on the theorist positing one or another small, universal set and describing how the analyst is to classify instances. When the set is open, the onus for identifying genre shifts to ordinary language users responding to situations with appropriate speech or recognising others’ speech as fitting or indicative of the situation (or not). Accordingly, theorists’ interest shifts to the everyday, working recognizability of genres. On the linguistic side, how do users know they are “in” a particular genre? To begin with, some genres have to be negotiated for, e.g. a “ticket” has to be negotiated, such as with a conversational story. It is then quite clear in which type of interaction one is engaged in. Recent theory suggests that, beyond these negotiated instances, only in the rarest cases will the participants have to use linguistic cues to work out in which genre they are engaged. Participants know by way of “pre-signals” which type of activity they are letting themselves in for, such as when you open a newspaper on a certain page you will know that you are up for reading, say, evaluative, subjective and directive comment—that is, “opinion” or “advice” genres. Pre-signals serve as contextualizers: they instruct the reader to switch on a range of processing strategies and knowledge types, as part of communicative competence, such as Levinson’s inferencing rules. This knowledge is normally not verbalized and pertains to the issue of autonomy (Nystrand 1986), the degree to which a text can “live” from the interpretation of the signs alone. Written discourse was held to be more autonomous, since it lacks contextual and deictically available information. However, all discourse has associated with it, as part of its identity as a member of genre type, such “switched-on” knowledge: in effect, genre packages contextual information, information cueing processing responses.

Genre is the optimal and most efficient solution to both Plato’s and Orwell’s problems (if these are interpreted with a pinch of salt). Plato’s problem is: how can we know so much given that we have so little evidence? In the case at hand it refers to the fact that a lot of procedural genre knowledge is switched on and is functioning in discourse processing and production with very little linguistic information or explicit instruction given in the form of morphemes. It is common knowledge that the information necessary to “make sense” from a “text” (cf. Stein forthcoming) comes from strictly linguistic, i.e. morphemic, information only to the tune of 10 % or less, even in the case of the most autonomous discourse. Orwell’s problem

is how we can know so little, given that we have so much evidence. Applied to the case of genre, this means that we select only a tiny fraction of our encyclopaedic knowledge to function in a given instantiation of a genre. What is more, we behave as if sufficient agreement existed about all these types of knowledge to understand each other. This “as if” behaviour is referred to as the “ad hoc” assumption in conversation analysis. From this perspective, genres provide standardized and ‘pre-paid’ packages to solve both Orwell’s and Plato’s problems. The effect of genre in terms of knowledge management is well recognized in psycholinguistic, real-time speech production theory. Genres are essential in enabling the speaker to construct a “structured interpretation of what happened in the conversation” (Levelt 1989: 111) and steer the speaker’s decisions in both “macro-” and “micro-planning” (Levelt 1989, §4.2.1, “The Type of Discourse” and further).

Bakhtin’s theories of speech genres have been a stand-by for new-rhetorical theories of genre, and Bakhtin was the one to note that “when hearing other’s speech, we guess its genre from the first words” (1986: 79), emphasising thereby the linguistic contribution to genres’ efficiency. But rhetorical theories of genre have tended nevertheless to emphasise context, rather than linguistic cues, even for written genres. Still productively if now only implicitly influenced by Bitzer’s (1968/1980) concepts of “rhetorical situation” and “exigence” (the felt need to speak, in a certain way, to address a situation mutually recognised by language users), and entertaining Burke’s concept of rhetorical “motive”, rhetorical theories of genre have directed attention to the social scenes which both host and define themselves by certain kinds of speech. These scenes may be equivalent to “pre-signals” in linguistic-pragmatic theories of genre.

1.5 The autonomy of genres—the calling-up on the pre-signal of a specific configuration of processing strategies, of types of schematic knowledge and inferencing strategies, but also of linguistic norms (“style”)—is the reason why genre is a very powerful means of complexity reduction and, by enabling cognitive focusing strategies, makes language processable in the first place. If a piece of discourse receives its identity through belonging to a certain genre, this highlights the achievement of genres in reducing complexity and making comprehension and communication feasible in the first place. Recent conceptualisations of the rhetoric of genre (e.g. the overview in Coe et al. 2002) have continued to emphasise the functional benefit of genre, its efficiency, as have some applications (e.g. Yates & Orlikowski)

From these accounts of genres’ indispensable contribution to efficiency it could follow that any discourse is part of a genre. There can be no discourse without its being classed or classifiable as an instance and an instantiation of a genre. In rhetorical theories of genre, when the problem of identifying the genre membership of every utterance has seemed too imposing, theorists have resorted

to Bakhtin's distinction between primary genres (roughly, conversational genres) and secondary speech genres (everything from birthday cards to after-dinner speeches to scientific articles). And it may still be possible to see an utterance as functional but as failing to spark recognition amongst speech participants as belonging to a class of utterance types: in this case, the utterance may do its job, but be neither an instantiation of a genre nor a contributor to the mutual awareness in linguistic consciousness of a typical fusion of language and situation.

The autonomy of genre—that is, its efficiency—also implies that genre knowledge, as an issue of communicative competence, is part of every discoursant's reciprocal mutual expectation (technically speaking, of “mutual knowledge”), just as is grammatical competence. Indeed, Bakhtin describes the “normative forms the utterance acquires in practice” (PSG 81) as parallel to the “mandatory forms of the national language (lexical composition and grammatical structure)” (PSG 80), acquisition “in practice” being language users' variable and contingent experience in social, professional, and interest groups. Just as there are language communities, there are discourse communities, although the two do not necessarily overlap.

Very much like the notion of “grammar”, the notion of “genre” is an abstraction over instantiations. Regularities across instances are recognised as functional means of acting *on* or *in* a situation. New-rhetorical theories of genre emphasise how genres reproduce – or instances reproduce and in their fertility bring genres to light – in the intersubjectivity of language users. Language users mutually remember and expect types of speech. People absorb and reinstantiate the types from their experience of doing things together. So “discourse community” is a key term – not all language users know the same genres, and language users are known by the genres they know. At the same time, community is the source of genre: one person cannot make a genre by herself. Rather, a genre evolves as a grammar evolves, although more quickly, the speed of evolution also making genre's ‘mandate’ less forceful than grammar's.

For rhetorical theories of genre, “discourse community” has been a particularly crucial term, with Swales (1990) generally regarded as the one to establish it as indispensable to any study of genre. With “discourse community” came the concept of community membership—and non-membership. Many rhetorical studies have focussed on novices' language behaviour: their difficulties (or success) in entering the circle of mutual knowledge by which competent users of a genre know the “interlockedness” of style and situation, form and function. Such studies have highlighted the tacitness of genre knowledge— its gradual experiential acquisition, and the difficulty of its explicit expression. This appreciation of tacitness may be one reason (in addition to concerns about formalism) for rhetorical theory's unwillingness to say what a genre looks like, i.e. to do what linguistic and pragmatic analyses strive for.

Rhetorical studies of genres and their acquisition have also highlighted questions of authority and hegemony in the operation of genres—questions possibly less prominent in linguistic theories of genre. CDA, the application of Functional-Linguistic terms in a critical-theoretical context, also detects potentially hegemonic implications for genre.

Finally, literary theories of genre, once arguably formalist and still so in contributions to a recent genre-devoted issue of literary criticism's flagship journal, *PMLA*, have tended to favour the small, closed set of sanctioned and time-honoured types. Some areas of literary study, however, have developed promising approaches to genres as historical players in larger manifestations of discourse, ideology, and social formation. We might see these as "socio-formalist" approaches: the study of genres' careers as they pass from one sector to another, acquiring reputations or losing them in the process (e.g. Cohen 1986; Siskin 1998). It is perhaps noteworthy that these approaches are particularly productive in study of the "long" 18th century: a period of new technologies of writing and vast new recruitments to writing itself (through burgeoning publication, periodicals in their fertility and diversification, corresponding societies, subscription)—a period, that is, resembling the one which CMC has ushered in.

## **2. How are Internet genres different from written and spoken genres?**

**2.1** The topic of genre change is not new. There has been ample discussion in linguistics about change in the nature and individual properties of genres (Fritz & Jucker 2000; Hess-Lüttich 1996; Gruber & Muntigl 2005; Dimock & Robbins 2007). Biber and Finegan (1989) and Virtanen (1997: 10f) have produced important evidence for the change of the linguistic side and the character of genres. Other studies focus on the perceived character of genres in terms of their medial and conceptual make-up (Koch & Österreicher 1984) and in their presuppositional base (Giltrow 1995). Rhetorical theories have been interested in change to a lesser extent; Campbell and Jamieson on antecedent genres is one example; also Bazerman (1988) and Swales (1990) have studied the appearance and evolution of the scientific article; Yates & Orlikowski have described the historical development of the memorandum. In CDA, Fairclough (1993, 1995) and Chouliaraki & Fairclough (1999) propose "intertextuality" as a corridor of change: genres migrate through intertextual routes, colonising situations and producing "hybrids".

The present context of discussion opens up a new focus, by taking into account one major determinant of the external, pragmatic conditions of genres – both as affecting the nature of existing genres, and as creator of new genres.

The Internet enables a new communication setting which reconfigures the conditions to which pragmatic features of language respond. The main components of this new communication setting are the vast and variable range, new pull and push mechanisms, new distance-synchronic forms of communication, new combinations of N-to-N—the number of people speaking and the number of people receiving the communication—and the high speed as well as the archiving of interaction, to name only a few. These components have created new types of communicational settings that have an effect in the area of genres. There are secondary consequences of the communicative setting, such as new copresence perceptions, or new measures and images of audience, or a different set of perceptions arising out of the intervening technicity of the medium.

With respect to genre theory, there appear to be the following main issues:

- Does a new medium automatically make for a new genre? Is it possible for a traditional genre in the spoken or written media to migrate into the Internet without loss of identity? How much can be lost or changed for a genre to retain its identity? Is it possible to have stability of genre across the medium change?
- Do genres on the Internet systematically possess properties that the traditional spoken and written genres do not have? Are there systematic changes to genres in cases where genres are held to have felicitously migrated into the Internet?
- If “new” genres are to be found, what is their relationship to previous genres? Do all genres have some sort of ancestry? How is such ancestry to be conceptualized?

2.2 As regards the openness of the genre set and the level of generality at which genres are best named, possible parameters seem to be affected by the volatility and chameleon-like properties of Internet genres. The general characteristic of Internet genres appears to be a greater fluidity and pragmatic openness. There is a constant and fast proliferation of genres—or of forms of communication that are candidates for being a genre. This proliferation arguably challenges the theoretical discussion of the issue of generality and openness (cf. Giltrow, cf. above). Existing genres quickly differentiate into sub-species. A notorious case in point is the chat, where it has been argued that there is really a set of chat scenarios which are so diverse that calling all of them a chat may hardly make sense anymore (Beißwenger 2001). In order to avoid having to call each “genre-let” a full-fledged genre (on a theoretical par with firmly established traditional genres), it may be more satisfying to go for a more closed set with higher generality, and pay the theoretical price of having to establish communalities at an abstract level. Another case is email: it is unlikely that anyone would now claim that email is a genre. It is probably more correct to



say that it enables several genres, but is there a superordinate category? A “hyper-genre”? The problem, then, is to find the bracketings, or establish types and their boundaries, and it may well be that bracketings taken over from traditional spoken and written genres will not do any more, and new abstractions have to be found.

Or is it necessary to name a superordinate genre? Email and even chat may show us cases where technologically-induced form is dispersed amongst several or many genres, recruited to very diverse functions or “social actions”. Many genres may be both enabled and constrained by, for example, photocopying (as many genres are constrained or enabled by emailing), but we feel no need to name a superordinate where photocopying is done (although someone may have at one time felt this need).

Study of internet genres may encourage theory to establish what would count as mid-levels for study, between superordinate and genre-let—to tackle what Bakhtin called “the *problem* of speech genres” (emphasis added): the difficulty posed by genres’ wide “functional heterogeneity” (‘PSG’ 61). Involved in mutually recognised and typified social contexts, genres serve those contexts in a variety of ways, and are more or less recognisable as belonging to a functional class according to this functional versatility: some may be easily identifiable as belonging to a class of speech genres, their functional performance resembling other types of performance, whereas others may not. Moreover, from a theoretical perspective, genres are notable not only for their irrepressible capacity for reproducing themselves but also for their capacity to arrive on the scene—to answer newly defined exigence—and also to disappear with the scene. A high level of generality expressed in a closed set would not be tuned to recognise these arrivals and departures.

2.3 There may be two reasons for the relative fluidity of the Internet genre scenario. One reason goes back to what Jucker (2003: 137) has referred to as “audience targeting” and “customization”. Internet genres, despite the global reach of the Internet, are less “focused” and less general in the sense that their norms are of a more “local” and of a less global nature with regard to Internet communities (“local” here not being physically “local”), whereas traditional, especially written genres tend to have a wide range of applicability, or, at least, they have been regarded as having this wide range. Legal genres or the bio-medical ones, which are notorious for circumscribing the discourse community, are counterexamples. The point here is that some of these concepts need to be tested, and, in testing them in Internet domains, we may find that the parameters for community formation are in some way new. The “scientific article” is the same all over the world, a result not least of stylistic gatekeeping powers of paper journals. It is possible that ‘scientific article’ is more like than unlike the customised internet genres, in its coaxing into existence



a globally distributed but restricted community. At the same time, it appears that the conditions of community formation hosting the scientific article have made it easier to give “rules” and establish “norms”, including rules of linguistic decorum, than has been the case with Internet genres. Internet genres appear not to have the same obligatoriness and ritualized expectedness as non-Internet genres: this is meant by saying they are less “focussed”. At the same time Netiquette guides and vigilante policing of for example chat room decorum suggests that some sense of obligation is felt—or, on the other hand, the very presence of Netiquette and informal policing may point to the lower level of felt propriety.

2.4 The lesser degree of focus also applies on the more narrowly linguistic level. A tenet of most theories of genre (but with varying degrees of emphasis) is that there is a “fusion” of linguistic form (i.e. markers and features) and the notional category, where linguistic form is part of the identity of a genre. Traditional genre theory has set great store by linguistic features or markers, while new-rhetorical genre theory has been less concerned about linguistic form, or has tended to take it for granted while focussing on exigence and on the inter-subjective recognitions which compose discourse communities. Internet genres appear even more functionally defined than genres as they have been construed by rhetorical theorists. The functions of internet genres change often, and define themselves at a low level: that is, they emerge over a series of interactions as internet users orient to one another’s moves and then transfer the newly-emergent norms to other CMC settings which in turn modify these norms. The low degree of conventionalization of form-function relationships is a consequence of these communicative behaviours. This makes genres amenable more to pragmatic-functional than to linguistic description. Arguably, Internet genres would never have given rise to a notion of a “text type” in the Biberian sense. It comes as no surprise that studies of the linguistic markers of Internet genres are few and far between. It is possible that no one would argue, as is certainly not true for traditional genres, that Internet genres could be “recognized” by their linguistic characteristics. Features like emoticons ☺ and turn-taking strategies in chat may spread across many internet genres and simply indicate ‘internet’ rather than anything specific enough to infer genre, – if the genre identity were not already established by pre-signals.

2.5 Another facet of this shortfall in formal regularity is a higher degree of technical determination and cross-cultural convergence of Internet genres, where traditional genres, especially spoken genres but also written ones, have tended to be more culture-specific. This is part and parcel of an issue addressed by e.g. Goodman

and Graddol (1996). Given the technical bias of Internet communication to be in English (all meta-terminology is in English, the effect of the founder principle), most of the genres are English-based. Will it be the case that, by virtue of this fact, new Internet genres will be based on, and will be IN English? Will it be the case that the individual genres, being English-based, will show a degree of focussing, i.e. ritualization and invariance, as has been the case with publishing under the dominance of major international academic publishing companies? Or is international academic publishing a special case, with the force of the disciplines in effect “disciplining” the use of English? If scholarly publishing is however not a special case, the blanket effect of English could imply an unprecedented amount of genre convergence. Discussing linguistic ecology has been a standard topic in discussing the linguistic effect of the Internet. Less so has been the question of what the effect of the Internet will be in the area of genres. If convergence is the prior condition in CMC, what would this imply for the definition of discourse communities through the shared use of genres?

2.6 There has, of course, been extensive debate as to the notion of “text” involved. The setting (in terms of the technological possibilities) has given rise to new technical possibilities of whatever is the “text” in the new medium. The term “hypertext” is ambiguous in this context: it refers to meta-text linking text chunks, and, at the same time, to new ways of constructing individualized and modularized text chunks. In addition, CMC technologies enable text-producers to copy and paste from a wide variety of sources, these sources possibly importing traces of their original genre profile into the destination text. So the issue is not only, does the new setting “generate” new texts, but does the new notion of “text” generated by the setting generate new genres? This may indeed be a case where new parameters of discussion are called for, which at the same time recontextualize the traditional debate.

It is clear that the linguistic shape of the chunks themselves is changed by their new mode of non-linear existence. Areas affected are all forms of linear cohesion and coherence, such as anaphors and cataphors, and all aspects of macrostructure and its linguistic signalling.

More importantly, do the qualities of interactivity, constructivity, modularity make a difference to the persistence of genres? They appear to be a major factor in giving rise to new genres. If “function” is the prime determinant of genre, do the new possibilities of creating text, or of re-shaping text, actually provide the means to create new functions, or new ways to execute established function, or is that only possible through the potential residing in the new setting? The more interesting issue is whether old genres will survive in the new medial and textual garb: do functions – and thereby genres – survive even a change in the ontic status of the “text”? Can genres be of such a resilient nature that they survive both changes in

setting and concomitant changes in the nature of the text? Such survival would be a challenge to the longstanding conception of the fusion of language and situation, features and intention.

Given the diversity of functions and definitional make-ups of genres, a good hypothesis may well be that it depends on the nature of the definitional parameters of an individual genre if it can migrate into the new medial environment or not. For instance, the scientific article may well survive if both the argumentative superstructure (state of research, methodology, data, interpretation, argumentation, conclusion, references) is preserved, as well as the nature of the specific type of representative speech act, and if the uptake of the speech act essentially resembles the uptake of the print form of the scientific article: the same kinds of activities of reception and response occur. It then does not matter if new discourse elements like, for example, a site for comment in an ejournal, are added. Such changes would be of the same order as the incremental evolution of any genre in any medium.

In any case, it is clear that the genre as a social and cognitive “institution” will have to continue to exist, given its nature as the solution to Plato’s and Orwell’s problems – whatever the notion of “text”, whichever changes the individual genre will have to make in migrating into the new medium, and whatever the de-focussing effect of the hypertext characteristics may be. It is likely that there may be more systematicity and underlying difference to the traditional genres.

2.7 We will take as departure the point raised at the end of §1, i.e. that new parameters, new conceptualizations and descriptive categories may have to be defined. Apart from the setting itself, there are perceptions of the communicative situation, as epiphenomena of the technical and communicative setting, that may be responsible for a systematically different character of Internet genres, particularly with respect to psycho-emotional dimensions which intersect the plane on which genre consciousness develops. The effect of the intercalated technicity may provide a metaphorical and technical sense of distance, allowing for more freedom than in directly monitored face-to-face communication, and general uncertainty about uptake and ratification that may only be insufficiently described by such notions as closeness and distance. There may be a lesser sense of “domination”, either in terms of topic or in terms of social relationships, or in terms of the kinds of parameters which have traditionally given rise to discourse communities. All these effects, including qualifications of and changes to the maxims, while probably not defining new genres by themselves, may or may not trigger changes in the perception of certain genres. This is an empirical question. It seems certain that new genres owe part of their perceived and much commented-on characteristics (“libertinage”, “free-for-all”, “no norms”), and part of their attractiveness, apart

from the novelty value, to these psycho-emotional effects. Theories of genre have always had to answer for authority: is genre to be conceptualised as a force to be complied with (or, as such a force, defied)? Is it complicit with systems of domination? Or, as Bakhtin suggests, is genre an endlessly diversifying effect in language, disruptive to the authority of central norms? Study of language on the internet will at least add a chapter to the discussion of genre and authority.

### 3. This collection

In our conception of this collection, we did not anticipate its concentration on blogging. While the concentration has been most apt and fruitful, by the time the volume reaches its audience, blogging may have been extinguished as a cynosure in the public firmament—or it may have dispersed into commonplaces, so rapid are revolutions and evolutions of the Internet world. In either case, its prominence in this collection will remain thoroughly appropriate, for blogging sparks questions central to genre theories: not only *how* do people know about these speech activities and *what* do they know—that is, what signal forms have aggregated and how have they done so—but also *what makes people blog*? What is their motivation?

And chapters which explore other areas of the Internet coincide in conceptual focus with the blogging chapters, for the blog is only one particularly generous host to such questions. So it is not only the blog which foregrounds self and subjectivity, identity and interaction, and the communities of recognition which these manifest. And it is not only the blog in its suddenness and salience that excites public commentary, and opens questions of antecedence and also of awareness: orbiting genre activities is consciousness of these, and attitudes towards change. Several discussions in this volume show that, tacit and normalised as genre behaviours may be, explicit remark also participates in genres' social action. And, while *form* has been downgraded in some current theorising of genre, it returns in full force—and under new terms—in research reported in this volume.

Amongst rhetoricians, literary specialists, and linguists, in any attempt at agreement about genre, form could be the deal-breaker. For literary specialists and linguists, form is a prior condition for reasoning about genre; for rhetoricians, it has been the disavowing of form's priority that has accelerated genre's conceptual revival. Amy Devitt's review of this action-prioritizing revival will be, for those unfamiliar with rhetorical approaches, a useful introduction—and also for those familiar with rhetorical theory an important reminder of the complexity of the earlier arguments. For, as Devitt shows, these arguments did not cancel form but, rather, formalism: that is, the treatment of form isolated from context, and uninterpretable thus separated from the scene of speech activity. In the early

days, form and function were *fused*: the “re-fusal” of Devitt’s title is both a recovery of the terms under which form was denied its priority and a recovery of the terms under which form and function fuse. To demonstrate the new fusion, and its embedding in context, Devitt re-analyses the findings of two landmark studies of blogging. She finds Herring et al. (2004) focussing on form alone and Miller and Shepherd (2004) privileging context but at a cost: form gets treated separately. Devitt’s re-analysis of these studies’ findings demonstrates the role of context in interpreting form, and also yields new principles for study of genre. These principles deliver genre as a *de*-stability and form as a variation and multiplicity: conditions evidently hospitable to the real-life users of genres, but possibly both disconcerting to analysis anticipating a stable set of forms and also challenging to the simpler claims for antecedence. Devitt coins “inter-genre-ality” to indicate the flow of forms across genres as they interact—complicating the notion of antecedence, by which forms are simply inherited. She also proposes that software may both accelerate this flow and reduce its plasticity.

The new principles for genre study will cover all contexts—“cultural, social, individual.” That is, form is interpretable, according to the level of analysis, as broadly indicative of cultural themes, as more locally indicative of component executions of those themes, and as signs of what some person is involved in at some time. But, Devitt warns, the new principles will not be easily applied, and her own interpretation of linking (as a formal characteristic) in blogging shows some of the challenges or opportunities. She suggests that an *absence* of linking turns attention to the self as contained and revealable; Grafton’s interpretation (in this volume) of linking, however, suggests that the *presence* of linking is not self-effacement but an additional means of rounding out the self. In reconciling such interpretations, we will find depths beneath formal surfaces.

Cornelius Puschmann’s study of one type of Wal-Mart corporate blog proposes that a genre being “abused” or “subverted” is proof of the genre’s “salience”: having developed functionally from people’s activities, formal features in themselves then lead people to infer the concomitant activities. Amongst the activities inferable from the features of the “prototypical” blog, Puschmann points to the self-publishing function: the blogger ‘owns’ the blog, unmediated by other authority. Blog form will lead readers to this inference. But in the case of the ‘Lives at Wal-Mart’ blog site, such an inference is confounded by the striking similarity and uniform skewing of narrative structure amongst blog postings, suggesting “editorial oversight” and a mediation of blog ownership/authorship—as if the bloggers had been ‘put up to it’. This uniformity or conformity is conspicuous, Puschmann suggests, because the prototype blog is whimsically free of “convention.” But we might also take from his study the possibility that genres in their natural habitat can be formally variable indeed: contrary to some traditional notions of genre as

being what is the same, this case suggests that formal sameness calls into question the authenticity of instances. While the very fact of “abusability” is evidence of some formal signature, that signature is also authenticated by its versatility and variability. It’s not a rubber stamp.

Kathryn Grafton also refers to Miller and Shepherd’s (2004) analysis of the blog as timely self-disclosure and exhibitionism, but presses that analysis to answer for more. Bringing Warner’s notion of ‘publics’ (groupings rendered not by people knowing one another but by mutually knowing their way around a discourse arena) to the puzzle of bloggers’ seemingly undefeatable appetite for disclosure, Grafton finds blog posts taking up a staged broadcast event—a national reading campaign (“Canada Reads”) in itself a genre complex engaging a Warner-esque public—but then blending the exigencies of that situation with those experienced by the bloggers. Grafton finds the rhetorical situation thus multiple: a situation calling for self-cultivation and validation is executed by responses to other situations, invoking the forms of the genres of these other situations. Staged and professionally designed as Canada Reads may be, it still cannot fully anticipate its own up-take: blogs multiply its possibilities. Nor are the blogs—as revealed in the blog posts—stand-alone speech events: they link not only to one another (engaging and producing the blogosphere) but also to non-digital events, each link rounding-out the blogger’s self-portrait (what kind of person is this?) and at the same time drawing down the broad (discourse) public to more local and interactive chains of interpretation.

In Grafton’s analysis, users of digital media are implicated in many speech sites at once, and theorists of genre have long said that, according to activities and affiliations, people know a repertoire of genres. Elizabeth Maurer’s chapter in this volume highlights the reciprocal of this condition: people being *known* by the genres in which they participate. While genre theorists have also long recognised that genre knowledge is an indication of community membership—of being an insider—Maurer’s study of the ‘homeless blog’ shows a field of intense activity around these identifications: it’s not all about insiders recognising and endorsing one another. Outsiders also see and react to the display of identity. To analyse this field of activity, Maurer brings to genre studies Goffman’s notion of *facework*—people’s efforts to present themselves, and to control that self-presentation, such efforts concentrated in this case in the meta-genres which characterise, classify, rate, and attempt to regulate generic practice: attacking, defending and interpreting even, as she says, apparently minor formal innovations. From Maurer’s account, we might also speculate that these meta-generic activities are intensified in the atmosphere of meta-discourse which surrounds CMC: its claims for democratic opportunity or charges of commercial appropriation, newness being once again the goad to commentary, as digital forms arrive and transform with apparently unprecedented

rapidity, and changes are ranked and rated as good or ill. Meta-generic activities may indeed be hallmarks of medial change for Laurie McNeill's research also finds genre wars on the Internet.

While literary studies may presume in writers a conscious awareness of genre—including strictures and ratings—linguistic methodologies with few exceptions exempt such awareness and rhetorical ones have favoured implicit or tacit know-how over explicit genre knowledge. McNeill's study of Internet diaries, however, finds amongst bloggers vigorous discussion of genre: struggles over classification itself. Some combatants call blogs on-line diaries. Others declare blogs *not-diaries*. While, as McNeill points out, bloggers go ahead no matter the label, and in McNeill's view produce Internet diaries, the controversy calls attention to the way *theory* of genre—at least to the point of classification—has a folk life of its own, both separate from and involved in practice. Much as homeless blogs excite classificatory controversy, the less specialised Internet diaries are objects of classification contests, instigated mainly by those who deny the diary as an “ancestral” genre. While such meta-generic controversy may not be unique to CMC, McNeill suggests that the “frontier” atmosphere of the Internet in these years motivated the debates: moving into unorganised territories, bloggers and others sought not only to stake their claims and territorialise, but also to establish status and rank. Genre not only enacts situation but also, at another level of awareness, rates the relative quality of those situations: high-class or marginal, respectable or shabby. This execution of the social order in the land of democratic levelling and community promise may be a disappointment. So too may be the terms of this ordering: McNeill shows that the branding of the blog as *not-diary* relieves the blog of the gendered embarrassment of a reputedly trivial, feminine ancestor, and paves the way for a canon of “A-list,” serious, male bloggers.

The awareness exhibited in genre controversy—resulting in rules and strictures—has a counterpart in deliberate, conscious efforts to teach or learn a genre. And, just as linguistic analyses of genre make pedagogical contributions, to the additional-language-learning areas of ESP and EAP in particular, rhetorical study of genre has also been concerned with pedagogical applications. Yet even as they share educational intentions, it's in pedagogical areas that linguistic and rhetorical approaches diverge most sharply: linguistic applications tend towards the formal and textual, while rhetorical applications have tried to focus on context and situation. Moreover, in rhetorical studies, the school setting exposes the phenomenology of genre itself: if genre is a situational rather than formal condition, how can it be learned out of context—or, as the chapter by Russell and Fisher asks, how can genres belonging to one “activity system,” the professional workplace, be learned in another “activity system,” the classroom? Often characterised as the problem of knowledge “transfer,” this question is thoroughly re-analysed by Russell and Fisher



as a matter of genre “recognition” and “participation”: mastery of a “genre system” means being able to typify instances not for their repetition of formal features but for their being “caused” by activities—activities which the genre adept experiences as a participant.

The work reported by Russell and Fisher explores the pedagogical problem by designing a computer-mediated simulation of a professional context, and also exposes genre’s involvement in identity and subjectivity. Novices in the simulated context, students forage for models, reconcile discrepancies, collegially improvise—and, thereby, to different degrees, assume professional identity. Similarly, subjectivity is rendered in other on-line environments: the self is disclosed or invented by blogging (Grafton; Miller & Shepherd, below), and group identities are constructed by meta-generic consultation (Maurer). Most tempting, however, is the invitation to compare this effective simulation to the hoax (Heyd, below) and the “subversion” (Puschmann). For Russell and Fisher’s investigation of student responses to their on-line experience shows that they found it a *timing* (cf. the *kairos* Miller & Shepherd, below, bring to their analysis) and a *place*, and thus, according to Russell and Fisher’s analysis a full (deep and broad) genre system to be entered into. So, while genre is not form alone, the complex re-mediation of multiple forms produces a working context.

Even as research by Grafton and by Russell and Fisher shows genres as multiply interlocking, and research by Devitt shows genre as a “de-stability,” many typical applications of the term leave ‘genre’ as an inert structure or dormant concept. As Miranda Burgess points out, literary studies can take genre as a principal category in claims for change or tradition but still fail to contextualise the instance or theorise the category. Some literary thinkers (Todorov, Cohen, Moretti), however, have theorised genre, and Burgess brings to this collection their perspectives, testing their explanatory power against episodes of medial change: the burst of new technologies, new texts and new audiences in the on-line 1990s, and, alongside this episode from our own times, the print-technological changes of the turn of the 19th century, also breakthroughs to new audiences and new texts. Claiming for genre a “self-consciousness” about history, Burgess makes *history* the key term in her study: all genres will be looking over their shoulder to the past and forecasting a future, telling a story of change. Accordingly, all genres will be about change of which they are themselves a “transcription,” and some genres will be devoted to these meta-generic functions. So Burgess finds in the net.goth networking websites of the 1990s both historical reference and projects for audience-building. In the 1990s, “meta-medial” commentary more fully pronounced history and prophecy, but still shared with net.goth a pair of narrative figures: *nation* and *book*. Most remarkably, in the 90s’ historiography of medial change, the common investment in these figures superseded



debate about the value of change (is it bad? is it good?): both “elegists” for the lost nation’s venerable books and “evangelists” heralding democratic community renewed by a recovered, antiquarian literacy—both factions resort to the figures of book and nation. This commonality is basis for Burgess’ bid for genre status for the historiography of medial change, the commonality being observable also in the earlier epoch, when new technologies of print production at the turn of the 19th century aroused sensations of change and opened prospects both historical and political. By careful attention to the motivations of context, Burgess’ analysis goes beyond the simple attribution of antecedence: book and nation are not simply legacies from an earlier period; nor do their recurrences transcend history as timeless universals. Each instantiation is activated by the sensation of history, and recurrence is the threshold of genre itself: as Burgess reports from Moretti, a genre has emerged when other possibilities (other figures, other materials of story) fall away. And the de-limitation is itself flexible to history, for book and nation in the 1990s tell a story different from the one 200 years earlier—at once differently contentious and more inevitable.

Sebastian Domsch examines the “completely new” genre effects of the migration of the print-news book review to the digital publication by bookseller Amazon of customer reviews: a newness demonstrating “placement” conditions, that is, the constraints on meaning cued by the instance’s immediate context. Describing the print book review as “monologic,” despite conventions of extensive quotation, Domsch shows that the customer review is, in Bakhtin’s terms, answerable and potentially dialogic. Book evaluations are themselves evaluated and rated on the Amazon website. Yet the commercialisation of customer reviews (cf. Miller & Shepherd, this volume, on the commercialisation of the public-affairs blog) may, Domsch suggests, produce a new monologism, as the technical capacities of on-line reviewing also sort readers for like-mindedness. While Domsch’s approach to genre is geared to the more traditional concerns of literary venues, his research observations and findings can be compared to those of Puschmann on the corporate blog site and Grafton on the reading blog-post, and generally to estimates of the democratic benefit of Internet communication.

As contributors to this volume report, Internet phenomena invite many declarations of newness—even as newness is matched with what is old (Burgess), or the newness only re-locates authority (Domsch). Theresa Heyd observes that, while popular voices herald radical change, when expert methods are taken to putative newness, the case collapses, and behind newness are found extant forms and functions recontextualised or hybridised. For Internet studies, newness is a prominent—if not *the* prominent—issue. For genre studies, newness is equally prominent: if genre is about recurrence of both function and form, of at once situation and linguistic response—if genre is about regularities of symbolic action,

at what point does symbolic action break through into new territories? How does this happen? At stake is genre's traditional reputation for conservative formality and its newer conceptualisation as adaptable, evolving, transforming.

Heyd proposes a model which accounts for both newness and continuity—a model which more seriously traces the genealogy and, as she says, the “ecology,” of the so-called hybrids. The model is both vertical and horizontal. At the top levels (also fundamental and relatively *unchanging*), Heyd places communicative function: in her example of e-mail “hoaxes” and other “forwardables,” folkloric functions of narrating and making lists connect individuals, keeping open the conduits of contact. Antecedents—in this case the “officelore” or office folklore of the photocopied joke or amusing list—feed into the top level, accounting for sensations of familiarity even amidst newness (people's experience prepares them). Difference then develops at lower levels, in a “fanning out” of “sub-genres,” diversified and enabled by forwarding capacities: narrative “tellability” becomes “forwardability,” and the forwarded world is a habitat or “ecology” of neighbouring sub-genres: the humorous story, the ludicrous photo, the jocular list, the political petition—and the e-mail hoax. In Heyd's analysis, the hoax is *not* directly related to its pre-digital namesake but, rather, embedded in its ecological digital neighbourhood.

As Heyd's discussion reminds us, genre's mainstream reputation is for regularity and repetition; amongst specialists those conditions are scrutinised for their origins and continuation. From both perspectives genre can be seen as an habituation, something got used to over time, while specialists will in addition argue for the timeliness of genre: its responsiveness to change and its involvement in history. But the twin obligations to repetition-over-time and timeliness can be an uneasy couple, and when time accelerates, as in the discourse arenas of Internet communication, genre may, from these perspectives, seem a likely casualty (hence, claims about the failure of genre itself in the Internet age). So Miller and Shepherd ask how does—or how can—genre survive the rapidities of change on the Internet? What is the basis for the recurrence at the heart of genre as a discourse phenomenon? Change in the sphere of the Internet being principally a technological effect, it is most conspicuous as formal manifestation: even as new channels technologically summon new audiences and designate new authors, they also introduce signal new forms. But genre is not form alone, nor channel, and Miller and Shepherd's thoroughly rhetorical analysis sets out to account for recurrence amidst “volatility,” and for the role of technologically-induced form in this recurrence.

With a main focus on the “public-affairs blog,” Miller and Shepherd first review the findings of their own influential study (2004) of the personal blog: the *kairos* or timeliness of it as a response to our era's appetite for “confession” and self-disclosure, mediated exhibitionism and voyeurism, all sharpened by themes

of “celebrity” cut through with “reality” cultural products and their commercialisation. In this *kairotic* analysis, the personal blog is neither inexplicable nor inevitable, however sudden its appearance and rapid its widespread adoption. Similarly, the public-affairs blog can be analysed for timeliness: for, that is, capacity for recurrence, rather than simply for coincidence of, as they say, new technologies with the “political cycle” and millennial disasters. Miller and Shepherd document in the times broad dissatisfaction with the mainstream media, its bland, corporate uniformity as U.S. legislators successively de-regulated media ownership. The means of response to this exigence arrived with new technologies capacitating new users. While it has been tempting to say that the technologies motivated their own use, Miller and Shepherd show that motive was already latent in a situation with which many people identified, and felt “sympathy.” Typifiable situation is grounds for recurrence.

Miller and Shepherd go further, though, in explaining the suddenness of genre in the case of both the personal blog and the public-affairs blog. They talk about *fit*, fittingness—a rhetorical condition linked to genre early in the reasoning which pointed to situation before form. A form which answers a situation successfully is fitting (cf. Devitt on the fusion of form and function): its rightness paves the way for up-take in future instances, as well as leaving behind marks of “decorum.” Reviewing Kenneth Burke’s notion of the “piety” of form being an excess of decorum, they also strive for an explanation which will be meaningful for genre, which cannot be explained on the basis of form alone. They turn to “affordances”: what is furnished or provided by the environment. Online affordances are technological, and, Miller and Shepherd argue, they are *in themselves* rhetorical: they are “suasory”; they both persuade to certain ways of communication (they have a “directionality”) and they *appeal* to users. Why do they appeal? Because of their *fit*. While fittingness in genre theory has been regarded mainly as a functional condition—a form works well for the situation—Miller and Shepherd propose an aesthetic criterion in addition: fittingness is experienced as pleasing, satisfying. A technological form appeals at once to many people, hence its rapid recurrence and, equally with the opportune fit, a tendency to identify the genre with the channel. And, indeed, genres’ first showings above the horizon of newness may have, historically, often entered community consciousness as technique, and form, and matter for debate.

In the traditional view, genre is what is rigid and uniform—and what would be predicted to be washed away by the waves of change that characterise the Internet world. Genre in the new view, however, as opportune and versatile, may be what enables language-users to weather seas of novelty, orient themselves, and carry on. At the same time, the Internet era may not be entirely business-as-usual. Like off-line genres, on-line ones develop in interaction. But more commonly than

off-line genres, on-line genres host a third-party to interaction: the technological design of forms, formats, and functions. This third-party presence may account for the additional layer of awareness to which Internet genres are prone. And the meta-generic debates and commentaries which attend the normally unspoken know-how of genre users may expose the secret life of form. Not only variable in structure but adaptive in function, form is clandestine in its operations. This is its efficiency in responding to the trepidations of situation. Technological innovation brings to light such operations, exciting notice, until the tide of interaction resumes, absorbing some formal innovations and leaving others behind.

Equally, genre not only as something rigid but also something that is complied with or conformed to would seem a likely victim of the kind of changes for which the digital environment is famous. In another branch of meta-discursive awareness, Internet citizens are pictured as liberated from stricture and convention. Even if we up-date the view of genre to emphasise the sensation of exigence rather than the obligation to conformity, we still might wonder how that sensation survives the disappearance of the situations to which exigence attaches. Yet the new territories, as rapidly as they are opened, rapidly organise, and language-users apparently experience the same—or greater—motivations to interaction. How does this happen? Possibly the fact that it does happen shows that our sense of situation has been too shallow, or two-dimensional. Rather than containing a single and linear communicative purpose, situation could instead be seen as articulating multiple contexts, these articulations overdetermining motives, and thereby accounting for surges of activity and not only its proliferation but also its variability. Such a model would apply to all genres, on-and off-line, but the capacity of Internet technology to connect across contexts may enhance the opportunities for such articulations, along new paths of interaction interlacing multiple contexts, traditional and new.<sup>1</sup> Along these pathways form travels, in functional transfers and

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1. The Japanese cell-phone novel could exemplify the genre-generating capacity of digital media to connect contexts. This genre has attracted headline notice for the astonishing circumstance of its reversion to non-digital channels: prototypically composed by teen-aged girls and young women on their cell phones and posted to Internet sites, cell-phone novels have been subsequently published in hardback, to commercial success and critical disdain. This rapid revolution, however, may be not so astonishing when we consider the phenomenon as an opportune articulation of multiple contexts. At this writing, the cell-phone novel awaits scholarly inquiry, but it has received serious literary-journalistic attention (Dana Goodyear, "I ♠ novels: Young women develop a genre for the cellular age," *The New Yorker*, Dec 22 & 29, 2008) sufficient to reveal its emergence at the intersection of many cultural contexts, only loosely contiguous before the breakthrough technology that reduced the perils of composing in Japanese. Goodyear's account shows the cell-phone novel linking the adolescent world of enervated longings; the ancient traditions of romance; the daily landscape of modern rural Japan; the patriarchal surveillance of family life; the cheeky glitter of pop culture; and the

transformations, across social scenes linked in new coalescences or distinguished in fresh differentiations.

In all, the Internet calls for genre study. And genre study in turn has many prospects in the study of new technologies. While those new technologies deliver ever-increasing volumes of searchable data to researchers, and tempt study to expanding focus, the chapters in this volume suggest that such study is best conducted at a low level of generality, that this is the meeting ground for linguistic, rhetorical, and literary approaches to genre. That level brings into view the complexity and variability of form in its traditional linguistic and conversational categories, as in indexicals and turn-taking, for example, and also in some newer manifestations, such as linking, rating, and e-list-making. In turn, these complexities and variations, at low levels of generality, will be found to indicate local situations—these situations discovered by research into their articulation to other contexts (the office, the emporium, the literary scene, the legislature, the calibrations of the social order) and study of the debates and commentaries which accompany innovations in linguistic consciousness.

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mass-market campaigns of print publishing. The suddenness of the genre's emergence, including its conversion to print channels, can be attributed to digital technology's capacity to connect so many contexts, drawing on the energies of each, and also inspiring wide-spread meta-generic discussion. For a less spectacular and pre-digital case of genre's articulation of multiple contexts, in this case the the 18th-century contexts of business, science, and travel, see Giltrow 2009.

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# Re-fusing form in genre study

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Current theories of genre based in action neglect form. While recognizing that genre study needed to reject earlier formalism, this chapter argues that genre necessarily encompasses form as part of the fusion of form, substance, and action and should be re-examined as contextualized form. Neither Carolyn Miller nor Mikhail Bakhtin, seminal genre theorists, rejected form but rather rejected formalism. Form in this chapter is defined as the visible results and notable absences of language-use in generic contexts. A contextualized treatment of generic form embeds form into its individual, social, and cultural contexts; recognizes generic form as variable individually, synchronically, and diachronically; balances treatment of generic forms as both unique and shared; and views generic forms as inter-genre-al, interacting with other genres.

## 1. Introduction

Reconceiving genre as rhetorical action over the last twenty years has led to breakthroughs in our understanding of genres and how they operate in human communication. Those breakthroughs have been achieved through shifting attention from genre as predetermined form, even formulae, to genre as social action, acting in social and cultural contexts to achieve rhetors' aims and fulfill groups' functions. This common description of the shift in genre study—from genre as form to genre as action—places genre study solidly within rhetoric by attending to the purposes and effects of language rather than language alone. Yet genre itself still involves language, and any complete understanding of genre will need to include the language forms that serve to achieve those purposes and effects, the forms that make generic action happen. In pursuing new perspectives on genre, form has largely been set aside. With decades of studying generic action and context beneath our feet, it is time now to return form to genre study lest form, as Janet Giltrow (2007) recently said, continue to haunt us.

The seminal articles that helped create this new genre study did not explicitly discard form; rather, each placed form in larger contexts. The shift to treating genre as social action opened the concept to new directions of research and theory, revitalizing the virtually moribund subject of genre. When Carolyn Miller extended

Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson's discussion of form and genre in Miller's often cited article on "Genre as Social Action" (1984), she created a framework for understanding generic activity rather than just generic form. The extensive and now seminal work that has followed—from Charles Bazerman's study of the experimental article (1988), through Carol Berkenkotter and Thomas Huckin's theory of social cognition (1994), through David A. Russell's use of activity theory (1997)—has developed a view of genre as richly embedded within historical, social, and cultural contexts. Dozens of major articles have explored the operation and the meaning and significance of genres within their institutional settings, and some have examined genres as individual acts as well. No well-informed person could say now, as a literary colleague said to me in 1985, "Oh, you really shouldn't keep studying genre. It's an old and boring topic with nothing more to be said."

But, now as then, there is something more to be said, something that has not been said openly in rhetorical genre study in a while: Genres also involve forms, and the forms that genres take matter. In an action-based theory of genre, returning form to genre study will require reconfiguring form as rhetorically, socially, and culturally contextualized. Neither Campbell and Jamieson's nor Miller's work openly disavowed form. In their theories, form played an essential role in constructing and making genres meaningful. Rather, these scholars and others rejected *formalism*, rejected treating form in isolation of its contexts. Another major source for rhetorical genre study, Mikhail Bakhtin and especially his work "The Problem of Speech Genres" (1981), also rejected formalism but not form. Returning to these articles can illuminate why form has gotten lost along the way and why it must be reintegrated into genre study, as well as the roles form might rightly take. The fluidity of form in genres on the Internet, particularly the case of blogs, especially challenges old notions of form and illustrates the need for dynamic and rhetorical views of form.

## 2. Fusing form into action

Genres require form, in action-based theories of genre, for form combines with substance to create meaningful generic action. Carolyn Miller's original article expressed her debt to Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson and their shift in emphasis. Their collection, entitled *Form and Genre*, argued for a shift in how rhetorical criticism treated genres, moving away from emphasizing form to emphasizing the action that the form helps to create. Campbell and Jamieson write that, "a genre is composed of a constellation of recognizable forms bound together by an internal dynamic" (1978: 21), resulting in generic classification that is "based on the fusion and interrelation of elements in such a way that a unique

kind of rhetorical act is created" (1978: 25). Miller spells out that fusion as semiotic, fusing substance (semantics), form (syntactics), and action (pragmatics). Miller characterizes their view of genre as—and her own work creates—a "situation-based fusion of form and substance" (1984: 153). Endorsing Campbell and Jamieson's perspective, Miller objects to rhetorical criticism that defines genres by similarities of form alone, arguing that "a rhetorically sound definition of genre must be centered not on the substance or the form of discourse but on the action it is used to accomplish" (1984: 151). Miller then adds the situational level by calling on speech-act theory and Wittgenstein to note that form and substance must be encompassed by context, thus "enabling interpretation of the action resulting from their fusion" (1984: 159).

Her explanation of the hierarchical nature of this fusion is important for my purposes because it demonstrates how form on one level "becomes an aspect of substance at a higher level (this is what makes form 'significant'), although it is still analyzable as form at the lower level" (1984: 160). "It is through this hierarchical combination of form and substance that symbolic structures take on pragmatic force and become interpretable actions; when fused, the substantive and formal components can acquire meaning in context. A complex hierarchy of such relationships is necessary for constructing meaning." (1984: 160) Although she privileges situation, Miller does not neglect form in her theory. Form and substance are the two key building blocks of action. At each level of action in her hierarchy, form and substance must develop from the form and substance at lower levels: "The combination of form and substance at one level becomes an action (has meaning) at a higher level when that combination itself acquires form." (1984: 160) At each level, substance must acquire form in order to become action.

It is in fact a fusion of all three—substance, form, and action—that Miller argues for in her article as creating genre, even though she privileges action in her definition. That privileging of action and situation may be a response to prior genre criticism. Miller's stated purpose in writing this article emphasizes the needs of critics rather than genre participants: she aims for "a single, clearly defined principle of classification that could promote critical agreement and theoretical clarity" within rhetorical criticism (1984: 154). Miller promotes the semiotic framework as offering "a way to characterize the principles used to classify discourse, according to whether the defining principle is based in rhetorical substance (semantics), form (syntactics), *or* the rhetorical action the discourse performs (pragmatics)" (1984: 152 *emphasis added*). She argues that any classification of discourse chooses a set of similarities based on a principle of selection. While that certainly is true for critics' creation of generic categories, it need not be—and I would argue is not—true for readers and writers, who interact with genres as substance, form, *and* action. This merging of the three is in fact what Miller articulates in her framework, and she

insists that any classification be rhetorically sound, presumably sound for the users as well as for the critics. Yet, in her discussion of that framework, Miller privileges action over substance and form. Doing so helps her react against critics' earlier privileging of substance and, especially, form, and it gives her an action-based principle for classifying texts. But such privileging of one component in the semiotic framework is unnecessary if our goal is not to classify texts but rather to capture what people interact with when encountering and using genres.

Even requiring a single principle of classification focuses on the critics' need for classification principles rather than people's use of those classifications. Miller herself argues for an ethnomethodological approach to classification to "explicate the knowledge that practice creates. This approach insists that the 'de facto' genres, the types we have names for in everyday language, tell us something theoretically important about discourse" (1984: 155). But on what basis do people in practice classify discourse into genres? Miller concludes that "A useful principle of classification for discourse . . . should have some basis in the conventions of rhetorical practice, including the ways actual rhetors and audiences have of comprehending the discourse they use" (1984: 152). With Miller, I would argue that readers and writers use form as *part* of the ways they have of comprehending discourse. Miller describes form as "guidance" to readers or listeners: "Form shapes the response of the reader or listener to substance by providing instruction, so to speak, about how to perceive and interpret; this guidance disposes the audience to anticipate, to be gratified, to respond in a certain way" (1984: 159). Form shapes textual substance in particular ways; it shapes response to textual situations in particular directions. Without form, of course, there is no text to interpret, no action. Form and substance comprise the action that genre creates. The fusion of form, substance, and situation creates the generic action that people, rather than critics, practice. All three elements—form, substance, and situation—contribute to writers' and readers' knowledge of genres; all three elements shape genres.

None of this argument, I suspect, would have been news to Miller when she wrote her "Genre as Social Action." She begins with the necessary fusion of form, substance, and situation. Throughout, she requires form to merge with substance at each level of her hierarchy in order to create meaning. She describes genre as both distinct from form and one example of form (1984: 163). She characterizes generic forms as revealing of culture (1984: 158). She notes that a set of discourses must have significant similarity of form to constitute a genre (1984: 163). Miller had no difficulty recognizing the importance of form to genre; rather, she was presenting an alternative to a rhetorical criticism that recognized form as the *only* important element of genre. In urging rhetorical critics to treat genre as more than form, she

privileges action and situation over form, but she never denies the significance of form to generic knowledge or practice.

Reading Miller's now-classic article in the context of her times and her purposes, I see a rejection of formalism, not of form. Scholars who followed Miller's lead (I among them) emphasized contextualized action in order to correct previous emphasis on formal classification. The fusion that Miller and Campbell and Jamieson and others have argued for as defining genre should lead us back now to form, to the recently most neglected element of the triad. As we return to form, though, we return with the caution against formalism and with the perception that genre's form contributes to social action. I reject formalism but accept materialism. Individual texts have a material reality, a physical, formed existence, and their material matters to people's construction of genre. The material reality of texts is formal, but our approach to it need not be formalistic.

### 3. Contextualizing form into utterances

Keeping form contextualized is a challenge we might meet by keeping forms embedded in utterances as well as genres, drawing on another seminal article on genre, Mikhail Bakhtin's "The Problem of Speech Genres" (1981). Bakhtin similarly criticizes past work that analyzed language form without a communicative context. Instead of form, he emphasizes the context of the utterance. His work should remind us to keep form embedded in utterance, with a speaker/writer and addressee, and to recognize the dialogic nature of form.

Like Miller's fusion of form and substance into meaningful action, Bakhtin begins with a combination of thematic content, style, and compositional structure that are "inseparably linked to the *whole* of the utterance and are equally determined by the specific nature of the particular sphere of communication" (1981: 60). That is, content and linguistic and discursive form fuse to create a context-specific utterance. The "relatively stable types of these utterances" are speech genres (1981: 60). Like Miller, too, Bakhtin criticizes previous genre criticism. Bakhtin complains that previous study of genre, primarily literary, has studied genres in terms of specific features that distinguish one genre from another but not as utterances that share a language. Critical for Bakhtin is to distinguish the "sentence as a unit of language" from the "utterance as a unit of speech communication" (1981: 73). Rhetorical study, he claims, has also focused too much on the specific features of specific genres rather than "their general linguistic nature" (1981: 61). So Bakhtin, like Miller, seems to be reacting against prior formal emphases. As he insists repeatedly, "A speech genre is not a form of language, but a typical form of utterance" (1981: 87).

Although Bakhtin emphasizes the utterance as the unit to analyze, that emphasis asks that analysis of linguistic form be embedded within its larger context, not that form be ignored.

Linguists, too, along with literary and rhetorical critics, have neglected the social nature of utterances and genres, according to Bakhtin. He argues that they view the utterance as strictly individual, while the language is social. Many linguists, he claims, “see in the utterance only an individual combination of purely linguistic (lexical and grammatical) forms and they neither uncover nor study any of the other normative forms [including genre] the utterance acquires in practice” (1981: 81). Again, he is concerned that the language be seen in the context of the utterance: “When we select a particular type of sentence, we do so not for the sentence itself; but out of consideration for what we wish to express with this one given sentence. We select the type of sentence from the standpoint of the whole utterance, which is transmitted in advance to our speech imagination and which determines our choice. . . . The chosen genre predetermines for us their [sentences’] type and their compositional links” (1981: 81).

Although Bakhtin thus criticizes approaches to genre that emphasize linguistic form over utterance—much as Miller criticizes rhetorical criticism that emphasizes formal categories over social action—Bakhtin, like Miller, is not denying the linguistic basis of genres: “After all, language enters life through concrete utterances (which manifest language) and life enters language through concrete utterances as well” (1981: 63). Both language and context are necessary for expression: “only the contact between the language meaning and the concrete reality that takes place in the utterance can create the spark of expression. It exists neither in the system of language nor in the objective reality surrounding us” (1981: 87). Utterances are “constructed from language units: words, phrases, and sentences” (1981: 75), but those language units only take on meaning in context of an utterance in its context. Bakhtin distinguishes language forms from genre forms, though, largely equating language forms with sentences and genre forms with larger structures. He notes that, “Speech genres organize our speech in almost the same way as grammatical (syntactical) forms do. We learn to cast our speech in generic forms and, when hearing others’ speech, we guess its genre from the very first words; we predict a certain length . . . and a certain compositional structure . . .” (1981: 78–79). He also considers generic forms more flexible and less mandatory than language forms (1981: 79–80). Although much of what Bakhtin says about language forms seems applicable to syntax only, the speech that we hear, triggering our genre guess, involves form at all levels. Bakhtin acknowledges form as essential to genre, even as he cautions critics to treat form as meaningful only when contextualized within utterances.

Bakhtin’s article also supports the argument that genres’ forms are necessarily and essentially involved in people’s lived experiences of genres. While again emphasizing that people acquire language only as parts of utterances, Bakhtin notes that people

acquire forms of utterances only along with forms of language, as “The forms of language and the typical forms of utterances, that is, speech genres, enter our experience and our consciousness together, and in close connection with one another” (1981: 78). From both Miller and Bakhtin’s original arguments, then, we find insistence on form as a necessary element of genres, inseparable from people’s experiences with genres. From both as well, we find conviction that such forms must be analyzed always in their contexts—of utterances, situations, or actions.

What might be lost with less contextualized analysis of form appears in Bakhtin’s final comments, and those comments suggest ways to treat form as we reintegrate it within genre study:

When one analyzes an individual sentence apart from its context, the traces of addressivity and the influence of the anticipated response, dialogical echoes from others’ preceding utterances, faint traces of changes of speech subjects that have furrowed the utterance from within—all these are lost, erased, because they are all foreign to the sentence as a unit of language. All these phenomena are connected with the whole of the utterance, and when this whole escapes the field of vision of the analyst they cease to exist for him. (1981: 99–100)

#### 4. Sketching four principles of form in generic practice

Analyzing form in genres without neglecting addressivity, dialogism, and the whole of the utterance is neither easy nor impossible. Neither should analyzing the whole of the utterance neglect form since form is a necessary part of the utterance, as both Bakhtin and Miller argue. A balanced genre study should address the whole and the part, the context and the form, without denying either. A balanced genre study should address the form and the substance that comprise the social action. In practice, though, scholars typically emphasize one or the other. In practice, too, actual genres challenge such a balance. In the rest of this paper, examples from genres on the Internet, especially blogs, will challenge and illuminate this proposed balance of form and context.

First, though, based on current understandings of language and notions of form, I would define form more inclusively than does Bakhtin and would blur Miller’s distinction between form and substance. Bakhtin distinguishes syntax from genre form, perhaps because he is reacting against stylistic approaches to genre. I include as genre form all material embodiments of genre, linguistic and textual elements that might vary from one genre to another. Most obviously, then, form includes words, sentences, organizational structure, format, layout, and other visual elements. In “Genre as Social Action” (1984), Miller distinguishes form from substance, but in her 2004 article on blogs, “Blogging as Social Action: A Genre Analysis of the Weblog,” co-authored with Dawn Shepherd, endnote 5 comments



on the “limitations of the distinction” between content and form. I would argue that, although necessary at times for the analyst, any distinctions between form and substance or content deny the essential fusion of the two. One does not exist without the other in the reality of actual texts. In fact, form may be an artifact of analysis.<sup>1</sup> The cultural anthropologist Michael Wesch, in the video “Web 2.0” posted on YouTube, argues, for Internet material in particular, that content can never be devoid of form and that form will influence what and how we interact with genres, as well as with all text, whether digital or penned (Wesch 2007). Finally, I would add that generic form/substance includes choices that are *not* made as well as ones that are visible. Absences of forms may be as revealing as presences, just as what is not taken up, what is silenced, can be as significant as what receives response (Bawarshi 2007). I will define generic form here, then, as the visible results and notable absences of language-use in generic contexts, from words and symbols to organizational structure and layout. It is what is said and written, and what is not said and written.

I must also, like Miller and Bakhtin, reject formalism, in order to avoid potential misunderstanding before form without formalism becomes well accepted. Merely raising the subject of form is not privileging the subject of form. I am not interested in studying form apart from context or technique without substance or action. Formalism privileges technique or text over content or context. New genre study—and this article—aims to treat technique or text along with content as comprising action in context. Form is part of genre, not all of genre.

Once we reintegrate form into our study of genre, a wide range of research questions requires investigation. In the rest of this article, I hope only to raise some of those questions, using computer-mediated communication and especially others’ research on blogs as examples. Finding answers to those questions will come only with much more research. Even initial scanning of a few online genres, though, reveals the outlines of a new treatment of form in genre study.

In the rest of this article, I will propose four basic principles for a fused study of form in genre. I am claiming neither originality nor comprehensiveness with these four principles. Rather, I hope to offer words with which others can interact to build a new fusion of form within genre study. I begin, in fact, with another’s words. Bakhtin describes words as existing “for the speaker in three aspects: as a neutral word of a language, belonging to nobody; as an *other’s* word, which belongs to another person and is filled with echoes of the other’s utterance; and, finally, as *my* word, for, since I am dealing with it in a particular situation, with a

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1. I am grateful to Janet Giltrow for this observation, as well as others that emerged through her comments on an earlier draft of this article.



particular speech plan, it is already imbued with my expression” (1981: 88). The first two principles that I will propose reject Bakhtin’s first aspect by rejecting the fruitfulness of treating form in genre as ever neutral or “belonging to nobody.” The following principles address form in genre as echoing others’ words and as yet expressing an individual’s words.

- The forms of genres are meaningful only within their full contexts—cultural, social, and individual.
- The forms of genres range widely, both synchronically and diachronically, and cannot be pinned down with closed or static descriptions.
- The forms of genres vary with each unique instance of the genre, but unique instances share common generic forms.
- The forms of genres are inter-genre-al, interacting with forms of other genres.

#### 4.1 The forms of genres are meaningful only within their full contexts—cultural, social, and individual

Generic forms are never neutral and always belong to somebody. Since genres are always, as Miller explains, pragmatic actions, they always exist within contexts. Since generic forms are those forms that comprise genres, they are always embedded in contextualized action. While descriptive and structuralist linguists might describe linguistic form as neutral, abstracted systems, contemporary genre study describes not an abstract system but realized actions. Genre study has more in common with sociolinguistics than with theoretical linguistics. As in sociolinguistics, the forms in genres take their meaning from who uses them, in what ways, with what motives and expectations.

Since weblogs (blogs) have been analyzed by genre scholars, they will serve as a primary example. Both genre scholars and technology specialists have described the forms of blogs, but forms in isolation rather than in context and more often as a neutral system than an active constructor of meaning. As recounted in two articles published in 2004, one by Carolyn Miller and Dawn Shepherd and another by S.C. Herring and co-authors, bloggers themselves have defined blogs in formal ways. According to their definitions and descriptions of blogs, blogs offer dated entries arranged in reverse chronology, they are updated regularly, and they include links to other websites. Miller and Shepherd also note the prevalence of present tense. Herring et al. quantify also the presence of comments, calendars, archives, and badges, which, they write, initially appear to identify blogs as blogs (2004: 5). Both sets of scholars also analyze blogs’ content and purposes. The content and purposes of blogs vary widely in these studies, but both sets of scholars found that personal logs had become the most common.

Neither set of scholars had as their purpose to demonstrate my point—that form should be analyzed in context—but each article illustrates how a contextualized treatment of form might bring new insights to the study of genres. Of course, as relatively early describers of blogs, these scholars may have focused more on the form of this emerging genre than would be the case if they were studying the more well-established genre today. Herring et al.'s aim in their analysis is to discover whether actual blogs at the time match common descriptions of blogs and what prior genres might serve as antecedents for this new genre. They discover that some formal features vary from claims, with blogs being more personal and less linked than expected (2004: 1). They also conclude that, based on those structural features that blogs have adapted, blogs are best characterized as hybrid genres (2004: 10). Although Herring et al. do include purpose in their analysis and do note a few contextual variables, their analysis largely isolates structural features and bases their conclusions on forms alone. In fact, Herring et al. go on to describe blogs as a “format” that “can express a wide range of genres” (2004: 10), ending with some uncertainty about the nature of blogs as a genre. Format is precisely form removed from substance, not generic form at all. In such isolation from context, the significance of the formal characteristics and discrepancies that Herring et al. describe remains obscure. What is the significance of the blogs having fewer links than expected? When the authors use similarity of structural features to identify potential antecedent genres that blogs might derive from, they treat genres as if they were species evolving genetically from common biology or related languages deriving from a common parent language. Consequently, the meaning of those common features remains unexplored. Perhaps the antecedent genres share with blogs important rhetorical features, common audiences, purposes, or subjectivities. Perhaps they share traits or ideologies of their cultural moments. Without a contextualized discussion, these formal facts remain descriptive facts that could have multiple significances.

Similarly, the authors detail the formal differences between personal home pages and blog home pages:

[H]ome pages of the blogs in the sample differ from those of personal home pages in several respects. Blogs appear to be less likely to contain a guest book, a search function, and advertisements than are personal home pages [3]. Blogs are relatively image-poor as well, compared to other genres which make greater use of the multimedia potential of the Web. At the same time, blogs exhibit features that personal home pages lack. Archives (links in the sidebar to older entries; 73.5%) and badges (small icons in the sidebar, header or footer advertising a product or group affiliation; 69%) are found in a clear majority of blogs. These are not, to our knowledge, characteristic of any other Web genre, at least not in combination. In contrast, while a calendar in the sidebar was perceived by us initially to be a typical blog feature, it turned out to be less frequent than we had thought (13%), as did the feature of allowing readers to comment on entries (43%). (2004: 7)

Such neutral quantification of formal differences between two related genres—including negative descriptions of forms that one genre does not have—provides great material for more fully understanding these genres and may be an important step as we try to rediscover the importance of form. The simultaneously necessary step requires interpreting those formal differences in context. A formal difference—that personal home pages more likely include advertisements and guest books—instantiates several possible contextual differences—perhaps greater acknowledgement of individuals as connected to others, less confidence in the individual's worth alone, heightened desire to please others, or even self-aggrandizing greed. That blog home pages include archives and badges might point to a willingness to identify the self as defined through time and associations, less confidence in the value of the synchronous self, or even self-aggrandizing greed. Identifying form is a necessary but not sufficient component of genre analysis; interpreting it in context gives that analysis meaning and significance.

In their own genre analysis of blogs, Miller and Shepherd apply Miller's semiotic approach to genre more fully, describing not only the form and substance but also the "pragmatic action" of blogs. Yet they describe each component in turn, in separate sections, and do not examine in any substantial way how form contributes to the action. As a result, they embed form no more fully in context than do Herring et al. Miller and Shepherd's primary aim in the article is to use blogs "to explore the emergent culture of the early 21st century" (2004), and they find the most revealing sources for that aim in bloggers' descriptions of their purposes, rather than descriptions of their forms. While they describe form and, like Herring et al., compare the features of actual blogs to features expected of successful blogs, their primary aim leads them to fuller exploration of purposes and culture than of form. They develop remarkable conclusions about the functions of blogs in creating some stability in subjectivity, in helping writers create a less fragmented self. Yet they do not explore directly how the forms of blogs contribute to that stability. The discussion of form remains isolated, in a separate section, to be included in a concluding list of the factors that combine at the cultural moment:

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. (Miller & Shepherd 2004)

Form takes its two rightful places in this list, as available conventions that combine with context to create action through a newly developed form of expression. But isolating form from the discussion of motive, exigence, and subjectivity in the

rest of the article misses the potential for analyzing a genuine fusion of form and substance into action. A more contextualized analysis of blogs' form would examine how those discovered formal patterns contribute to this stabilizing of self. How does that exigence, which Miller and Shepherd so aptly describe, take shape? Perhaps the authors considered the connection too obvious at times to detail, but the connections between the forms and the action seem potentially quite rich. Reverse chronology, for example, enables fragments to create stability without a pre-formed identity, as those fragments are compiled into a single text, layer added to layer until a self emerges. The time and date stamping and the use of present tense allow that self to appear still transitory, acknowledging current cultural beliefs, even as the document creates a historical stability, a record. The fact that links are not as common as expected—a negative fact of what the genre does not include that both studies find—furtheres Miller and Shepherd's claim of using blogs to create a self. With fewer links, the self in a blog is only somewhat linked to other people and is instead self-contained within this genre. Herring et al. found also that links for readers' comments were less common than expected, another negative formal instance of the blogger constructing a self within a more fixed and less fluid or fragmented parameter. Of course, no scholar can study everything, and Miller and Shepherd enabled my own brief analysis here by their thoughtful analysis of social and cultural context. In returning form to the mix of essential elements of genre to be analyzed, though, treatments of form will need to be connected to treatments of action more directly and explicitly. Doing so will open up new discoveries about how pragmatic actions are achieved.

Still missing from this brief discussion of the contexts of blogs, however, is the individual context. The genre belongs quite distinctly to the bloggers and readers of blogs. Genres in action must consist of all their instances, whether conforming to analysis or not, in order to capture the full and multiple meanings of form/substance in context. Both Herring et al. and Miller and Shepherd discovered that the formal similarities they found applied to some but not all the actual blogs they examined. I will explore this fact more in the next two sections, but I need to note here that the individual and peculiar situation of each generic instance must help interpret form as well. If, for example, some blogs include more links than others, those differences are likely meaningful in light of the individual bloggers' purposes, interests, personalities. As these careful analysts of the genre delineate, the genre of blog might encourage multiple primary purposes, might generally encompass different categories of interests, and might create particular types of subjectivities. Yet individual bloggers might still adapt these multiple varieties of the genre to a unique purpose, to a different interest, or to a distinct personality. No analysis of form is complete without recognition of this individual variation. How to include such recognition remains a difficult task for genre study. Perhaps

we will draw from ethnographic methods, as Miller and, in more detail, Mary Jo Reiff (2003) propose, to build our knowledge one group of individuals at a time. Perhaps we will accumulate studies of individual generic performances, drawing from methods of rhetorical criticism but with the goal of understanding the genre rather than of evaluating the quality of each instance.<sup>2</sup> Genre largely accrues through experiences with individual texts, so our understanding of genre might best develop through an accretion of individual instances. It will surely require mixed methods to gain sufficient understanding of how generic forms make individual, social, and cultural meaning.

#### 4.2 The forms of genres range widely and cannot be pinned down with closed or static descriptions

Not just individual but also group characteristics of genres include a wide range of variation, so that generic form never exists as the static, neutral system that Bakhtin characterizes for words. Rather, generic form destabilizes as well as stabilizes. That genres are dynamic constructs has been well established by multiple genre scholars, captured most vividly in Catherine Schryer's description of genres as, at best, "stabilized for now" (1993). I would argue that genres are not even stabilized for now, as they live and breathe through individual instances and interactions across and within genres. The stability of genres may be more an illusion of genre theory or genre criticism than a reality of genre action. Genres are destabilized for now and forever.<sup>3</sup> Any static description of a genre seems doomed to incompleteness and to contradiction from actual instances. Even action varies within a genre. Miller and Shepherd as well as Herring et al., for example, note that blogs vary in action from political commentary to self-definition, from knowledge forums to website filters. The most common purpose that Herring et al. found, the personal journal, still captured the purpose of only 70.4% of the actual blogs they examined. Perhaps this range characterizes emerging genres only, but established

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2. In Endnote 8, Miller and Shepherd distinguish linguistic and rhetorical study of genre: "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." I would suggest that such a rhetorical approach should depend first of all on linguistic as well as cultural and social information about the genre. I would like to see genre study broaden its sights beyond evaluating success in order to understand everyday achievements as well.

3. I first argued this point in *Writing Genres*, especially pages 187–188. The constant instability of genres appeared to me at that point through the multiplicity of genres existing within any single text. It applies as well to the instability of genre categories.

genres also often carry a range of actions. Consider the range of actions executed by the novel, the memo, or the architects' sketchbook (see Peter Medway 2002). Even such an apparently fixed and unified genre as the grocery store coupon acts to advertise as well as offer discounts; the workplace incident report covers legal liability and provides safety information. Perhaps not surprisingly, then, the forms that construct generic actions also range widely and resist static characterization. Nothing remains constant and static across all instances of a genre—not context, not substance, and not form. The individual variation of form creates generic variation of form, so that form—rather than stabilizing genre—participates in the destabilizing of genre.

Forms act to destabilize genre in part through their absence as well as their presence. As I noted earlier, Miller and Shepherd and Herring et al. report that bloggers define blogs by having dated entries in reverse chronology, updating regularly, and linking to other sites. In their studies of actual blogs, though, they found that updates varied from daily to rarely, with a range in Herring et al.'s study of 0–63 days between individual entries (2004: 7). Links to other websites appeared in just 53.7% of the blogs Herring et al. studied, and some sites (seventeen of them) had no links at all (2004: 8). The entries themselves tended not to contain any links, averaging just .65 links per entry (2004: 8). One of the most common structural characteristics that Herring et al. found in their study, the inclusion of archives, occurred in only 73.5% of the blogs (2004: 7). Allowing comments from guests, one commonly noted feature of blogs, appeared in only 43% (2004: 7). Even such a commonly expected feature as a header was missing in a minute but still variable .5%, the date missing from 6.4%. The only feature these scholars did not describe as missing from some of the blogs is the reverse chronological order. Such a format seems very little from which to construct a generic action. As I commented above, format is form without substance, lacking the necessary fusion for generic meaning. Perhaps blogs are part of a subset of genres that can be defined by format alone, denying our action-based definition of genres. More likely, I think, is that the form in context becomes substantive. Find reverse chronology online, and readers assume particular blog-like meanings and actions. A list of statistics or random names or nonsense syllables, formatted online in reverse chronology, would be interpreted as a meaningful blog—or as a meaningful poem, if formatted in short lines on the pages of a book, a different context. Reverse chronology may be the most visible form in blogs, but it still requires context and combining with other forms, variable as they are, to create meaningful generic action.

Such variation in form might suggest that form does not matter to genre, but form clearly matters to genre users. Bloggers are not alone in defining their genre by its common forms. Form seems definitive to everyday users of many genres, whether memoranda or talk shows, grocery lists or dictionaries, databases or blogs. Just as

we must contextualize generic form culturally, socially, and individually, we must contextualize our *descriptions* of generic form culturally, socially, and individually. Miller and Shepherd note the formal variation in blogs and use it to question whether genres should be defined “by an ideal or by the mean, by expectation or by experience” (2004). Their emphasis on the ideal and expectations is evident in their follow-up statement, that “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” (2004). If our emphasis shifts from the critic to the user, however, then our emphasis can shift from defining and evaluating to experiencing and acting. I suspect that all genres resist statistical regularity of form. All genres-in-use reveal unique variations. We should accept and expect a range of generic forms just as we accept and expect a range of generic purposes. As emphasized in the first principle, form exists always in its contexts, so the range of formal variation is interpreted within a context. The formal features of a particular blog—whether including comments, archives, badges, date stamps, present tense, or not—occur online, in the context of a topic search, a link, or a recommendation, at a particular time, for particular purposes, by particular people. The forms that fuse with content to create generic actions will necessarily vary as their particular actions vary.

Description of a genre’s forms, then, should be embedded in context by remaining an open class (rather than a closed set of fixed features), incorporating absences as well as presence of forms, and encompassing variation both synchronically and diachronically.<sup>4</sup> Scholars of a genre can then address that openness and variation by explaining how individuals adapt forms to their own situations, how the genre’s forms vary in different social settings, and how the genre has changed over time and continues to change in response to cultural changes. Sociolinguistic and ethnographic methods again might help capture this range of variation and its meanings. Generic forms exist not at the level of language system, belonging to nobody, in Bakhtin’s terms, but rather at the level of language-in-use, belonging to everybody. Bloggers and their guests do not encounter genre forms in isolation but rather as collections and absences of features in specific blogs. Actual blogs construct their actions through multiple forms, and neither bloggers nor readers require a single, closed set of unchanging forms to participate in blogging. If we

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4. In an earlier version, I had another principle: that the forms of genre are always multiple and appear at multiple levels of textual analysis. I trust that extensive linguistic and rhetorical scholarship has made it unnecessary to state this point, that no one today would reduce a genre to a single formal trait. I state it here just to caution against studies that might concentrate on a single, significant formal trait to the exclusion of the multiple forms that help make that trait meaningful.



abandon trying to define genres through closed, static sets of forms, we can permit forms to be what they appear to be: multiple, fluid, and yet constructive of generic actions.

4.3 The forms of genres vary with each unique instance of the genre,  
but unique instances share common generic forms

My conviction in the unique nature of each generic instance has surely become obvious through my discussion of the previous two principles. Particular genres, like particular languages, exist only in actual utterances.<sup>5</sup> Since each utterance is unique, each instance of a genre is unique. As noted in the last section, those unique utterances are not just unique combinations of the same forms. Each instance constructs itself from multiple forms, even multiple genres, in order to construct the specific action. Yet humans share experiences that create shared genres. The notion of genre itself exists across particular utterances, in human brains, as one type of categorization that humans make. These experiential and cognitive facets of genre contribute to genres being not only unique but also shared. One metaphor for genre that has become increasingly common is genre as performance (pointed out by Heather Bastian 2007). While that metaphor successfully captures the unique character of each instance of a genre and captures the live action of genres, the metaphor fails, I believe, because it requires the existence of a particular, pre-existing play or composition to be performed. The metaphor of jazz performance might better capture the play of the already existing and the unique that I am trying to describe. Jazz performers operate from some shared purposes, strategies, and forms, but each performance employs those shared elements and brings in others to create a unique composition.

Because keeping form within individual contexts is as critical as keeping it within social and cultural contexts, one of the particular challenges in studying genres is balancing the individual and the social. Rhetorical genre study has attended largely to the social, but attending to form in particular enables seeing the individual and the social simultaneously. Generic form, like language itself, is at once shared and unique. Speakers and writers of a language share a common language, but each uses the language in unique ways. Similarly, genres are always shared, but

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5. Languages do, however, seem to have a significant cognitive component that comes from birth, not experience. I think it likely that genres, too, have an inborn cognitive component. Human brains make patterns and group items. Genres may be one of the kinds of groupings that the human brain naturally makes, though the particular genres, like particular languages, of course would be culturally and individually specific and would exist only through actual use.



each text embodies that genre in unique ways.<sup>6</sup> As Bakhtin wrote, cited earlier, the word is always expressed within a particular situation and so “is already imbued with my expression” as well as with the words of others (1981: 88). Bakhtin, of course, most notably acknowledges the shared nature of utterances, their dialogic nature as well as their addressivity. “After all,” he writes, “our thought itself . . . is born and shaped in the process of interaction and struggle with others’ thought, and this cannot but be reflected in the forms that verbally express our thought as well” (1981: 92). Studying the forms of genres, then, can reveal not only their systemic but also their dialogic and expressive nature, including the individual as well as the shared forms.

Even though those forms will always be imbued with individual expression, genres require shared forms. The existence of genres in everyday parlance—like the recognition of blogs, for example—affirms the existence of shared forms since genres require form to fuse with substance to create the generic actions that are recognized in the word “blog.” Even though the blogs studied, for example, resisted formal consistency, groups of them developed enough similarities for scholars to propose possible sub-genres (k-logs, for example, or filter versus personal blogs). The very notion of sub-genre affirms the connectedness of form to action and the significance of form: groupings of similar forms indicate groupings of similar actions, with formal similarities calling attention to action similarities. Since genres fuse form and substance into action, identifiable similarities of action should reveal similarities of form, and identifiable similarities of form should reveal similarities of action. Studying a genre from either end of the fusion can prove fruitful.

The studies of blogs have come early enough in the development of this emerging genre, in fact, perhaps to be watching shared generic form emerge as individual blogs interact and struggle with others. The scholars all note some history of blogs and of early bloggers, including well-known prescriptions for the forms that blogs should take, based largely, it appears, on the forms that those early bloggers themselves chose. As both sets of scholars discovered, though, actual blogs do not match those early bloggers’ prescriptions. Links are proving less significant to the genre than reverse chronology, for example. Daily updating is less the norm than biweekly updating. Unimagined forms like badges are making appearances. The range of what is formally possible in the genre of blogs emerges through the choices individual bloggers are making and the receptions they are receiving. As individual bloggers take up the actions of previous bloggers,<sup>7</sup> they take up also

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6. For more discussion of this balance of creativity and choice, see Frances Christie or, from a linguistic viewpoint, Devitt *Writing Genres* Chapter 5.

7. See Freadman and Bawarshi for more on the concept of uptake in genre theory.

the associated forms. Since genre forms remain open and dynamic, though, as discussed in the preceding principle, the forms remain at play. In the multiplicity of generic and individual actions, the blogger plays a new composition jazzily, transforming the repeated forms in ways at once recognizable and variable.

#### 4.4 The forms of genres are inter-genre-al, interacting with forms of other genres

Genres interact with other genres in what has been called genre sets (Devitt 1991) and then genre systems (Bazerman 1995), within the framework of metagenres (Giltrow 2002), activity systems (Russell 1997), or a variety of relationships dependent on their actions in context (Devitt 2004: 54–59). Just as all texts are intertextual, so too are all genres inter-genre-al. For the study of genre forms, that fact means that genres take up forms from the genres with which they inter-act. Their overlapping actions influence their overlapping forms. That overlap creates another place to see genre forms in action.

The case of blogs, once again, illustrates inter-genre-ality. Of course, blogs form a set of genres for computer-mediated communication, along with text messaging and e-mailing, for example. The forms of each genre within that set vary as the types of actions vary. Experiences and contrasts with both e-mail and IM, for example, likely help shape the length, tone, and organizational structures of blogs. Blogs interact inter-genre-ally with other websites as well, linking to and commenting on personal home pages, news sites, and non-profit organizations' web sites, for example. The nature and shape of those links derive in part from the nature and shape of those other web genres, as do such structural features as side bars and archives. The common use of archives, for example, on home pages of organizations with listservs as well as journals surely contributes to the meaning of the archive link on a personal blog. Full study of generic forms would include studying the forms of other, related genres to see how the forms take their meaning in part from the forms of other genres.

Historical inter-genre-ality is an important element of genre forms that scholars could examine, keeping in mind the fluidity of genre forms and the need to keep them contextualized. The studies of blogs by Miller and Shepherd (2004) and by Herring et al. (2004) speculate on the antecedents or sources of blogs in other genres. Herring et al. trace some formal similarities among genres and finally define the origins of the blog as "a hybrid of existing genres, rendered unique by the particular features of the source genres they adapt, and by their particular technological affordances" (2004: 10). While they do discuss the purposes and content of genres, the "features" that blogs "adapt" include static structures apart from their contexts. Miller and Shepherd, on the other hand, identify source genres primarily from the actions that the genres perform and develop insights about the ways

that blogs construct contemporary selves. Miller and Shepherd neglect forms in this source history, however. An interesting follow-up study would identify sets of forms that serve to create such identity constructions. What forms from the sources are adapted into blogs, and how do those traces serve to construct identities differently from the sources?

Since genres and their forms remain open, fluid, and dynamic, the inter-genre-al traces that studies might discover would likely also appear fluid and irregular. One example from the study of blogs, though, suggests that some computer-mediated inter-genre-ality may inhibit fluidity and variation and may even restrict the meaningfulness of forms. Herring et al. note an important contextual frame for the form of blogs: the limitations of the Blogger software most commonly used to create blogs (2004: 7). As a technology, like HTML more generally, blogging software not surprisingly sets limits on forms. To make different formal choices requires knowing HTML, being able to write programming that will create the desired forms. For most bloggers, then, who use the commonly available freeware, some forms come more easily than others. These limitations become even more interesting when viewed in light of inter-genre-ality. As a genre and perhaps even meta-genre (Giltrow 2002), blogging software delimits another genre. When bloggers choose one instance of the blogging software genre—most commonly the blogging freeware called Blogger—they choose an entire set of forms and, with them, a set of potential actions. Those forms both enable and limit. Without Blogger, novice bloggers would be very restricted in the forms and resulting actions they could choose. With Blogger, they can add links, archives, badges, time stamps, and more. With Blogger, they cannot easily allow comments. Actions they might have chosen, such as interacting with their readers, become more difficult. Of course, the genres of blogging software and blog interact in the reverse as well. If bloggers insist on allowing comments in their blogs, perhaps choosing different instances of blogging software in order to allow comments, then the blogging software genre is likely to change to incorporate commenting in more instances. The inter-genre-ality of the two genre forms once again reveals the interaction of individual and social as well as the interaction of two genres. Individual decisions about forms and actions in one genre can influence the forms and actions available in another genre. If the example of blogging software and blogs is not unusual, then such inter-genre-ality may serve as a source of new variations in genre forms.

## 5. Concluding in a different form

Even these simple, basic principles demonstrate, I hope, that returning to form in genre study will require caution and vigilance against formalism but at the same time leaps of imagination. The moebius strip of the individual and the social in

genres requires considerable twisting and turning to maintain the connection. The relationship of form and action in genres resembles nothing so much as the visual relationship between figure and ground, the most famous example of which is the lamp that suddenly becomes a lady's head when the viewer shifts perspective. The jazz that each generic instance performs shows how impossible it is to separate Yeats' dancer from the dance. To simplify any of these metaphors in order to study one part, to quantify one element, requires breaking some essential connectedness in the actual play of forms within genres. The answer, I would argue, is not to stop when the moebius strip turns, nor to blind oneself to either the lamp or the head, nor to describe jazz or the dance without any details from the specific composition or dancer. The answer, instead, is to acknowledge the two-sidedness, the simultaneity, the inseparability of form, meaning, and action, of individual, social, and cultural context, of actual genres and genre-ness. Such a fusion is far more difficult and far more satisfying as genre study continues into its next twenty years of vital research.

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# Lies at Wal-Mart

## Style and the subversion of genre in the *Life at Wal-Mart* blog

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Blogs are increasingly popular among private persons, public institutions, non-governmental organizations and companies. While a range of communicative functions is associated with blogs in the way they are used specifically by corporations, one key area of interest is clearly public relations. This is especially pertinent to large businesses that face a significant amount of criticism in the media. As an example for such a case, this paper presents an analysis of *Life at Wal-Mart*, an image blog maintained by Wal-Mart Stores Inc. Following a description of corporate blogs as an emerging genre, I will outline how *Life at Wal-Mart* is used to further specific communicative goals of the company and what the findings indicate for a modern theory of digital genres.

### 1. (Ab)usability as an indicator of genre

When approaching a new form of digital communication with the assumption that one has encountered a new genre, the researcher is faced with a dual conundrum. As has been noted by many scholars, not only is the object of study elusive and unstable – what constitutes a “good” instantiation of a particular genre, where does a particular genre begin and end, what are constitutive features and how can they be measured? – but the term *genre* itself is ripe with ambiguity and broadness like few other descriptive labels.<sup>1</sup> It seems that genre means *something* to both researchers and non-academics; to film critics, journalists, scholars of literature, information retrieval experts and computer scientists alike. But, problematically, it appears to mean *something different* to all of these experts.

The academic outlook on the subject has also changed somewhat over time, mostly because entirely new disciplines have joined the effort to better understand

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1. Note, for example, the discussion conducted by Heyd (this volume).

genre as a phenomenon. A taxonomic and largely formal understanding of genre as a system for the categorization of art, especially literary works, according to traditional aesthetic criteria, has in parts given way to more dynamic approaches that take into account both form and function. A newer, more inclusive conception of genre which flourished in the late Eighties and Nineties was fully developed in the works of Miller (1984), Swales (1990), Bazerman (1994) and Berkenkotter & Huckin (1995) and meant a significant expansion and reconstruction of genre as a cognitive and social instead of a purely aesthetic category. Discourse genres were found to be constraint-inducing devices that mold concrete textual instantiations in specific, generic ways, according to the goals pursued by their authors. In them, formal features, the consensus was, are *mandated by function* and genres were seen as *doing* rather than merely *being* (cf. Miller's characterization of genre as *social action*). The idea that *communicative function* takes priority over the more mutable formal dimension remains central to this day, but undeniably *form* has never quite disappeared from the focus of genre research.

Partly, this is a result of technological innovation and the hope that expertise in genre recognition can be extended to machines. Practical applications of genre theory in computing (search-engine technology, data mining) are based solely on formal textual aspects, since only those can be effectively analyzed by a computer. To computer scientists and information retrieval engineers, hard, tangible formal aspects of new digital genres come before fuzzy and varied functional criteria, because only those features can be counted and measured, which leads to an understanding of genre that is naturally quite different from the view of functionally-oriented researchers. Combining different disciplinary approaches, however, can lead to a better understanding of the object of study and this paper follows that premise by closely taking into consideration both function and form of an emerging genre. Other recent studies work in a similar direction, redefining form as a more complex variable in a digital environment. Pointing to the important difference between form and formalisms and referring to Mikhail Bakhtin's work, Amy Devitt (this volume) notes:

Returning to these articles can help reveal the roles form might rightly take within genre study and illuminate why form has gotten lost along the way and needs to be reintegrated into genre study. The fluidity of form in genres on the Internet, particularly the case of blogs, especially challenges old notions of form and illustrates the need for dynamic and rhetorical views of form.

In particular, this paper seeks to demonstrate how the co-occurrence of selected formal features in terms of both visual presentation and linguistic expression *evokes* a certain genre, even in the absence of the evoked discourse community. I will postulate that the presence of these features leads to calculable assumptions



on the part of the reader regarding the communicative goals and authorship of a text, and that these assumptions can be exploited by genre users with covert goals. Exploitation can be regarded as a proof for the existence of a genre, since the exploiter must assume that his audience will recognize the genre he is imitating based on formal criteria if he wants his manipulation to succeed (in other words, genre salience is indicated by genre *abusability*).

It is noteworthy that the blog analyzed for this paper is a *company* web log that systematically replicates the characteristics of typical *personal* blogs in order to tie several formal and technical criteria to which it adheres to functional and communicative aspects that it flouts. If anything, this can be regarded as a powerful indicator for the convergence of form and function in a digital environment, both from the perspective of the researcher and from that of the genre (ab)user.

## 2. Personal blogs, corporate blogs and the blog prototype

Since their inception, web logs (or blogs) have matured into a popular publishing technology that is used in a range of different contexts. While in genre analysis they have sometimes been associated with pre-digital types such as the journal or personal diary (cf. McNeill 2005; this volume), their range of uses is much broader and their precise location in a digital *genre ecology* harder to pinpoint.<sup>2</sup>

While they appear relatively uniform in terms of visual presentation and are highly standardized in terms of publishing technology, blogs are difficult to characterize as a genuinely new genre using much of contemporary theory due to the very limited role that it assigns to formal criteria. The notion of novelty is derailed as soon as one applies the functional focus central to classical Swalesian genre theory to the candidate: blogs are neither written by or for homogeneous discourse communities, nor do they serve a limited supply of observable communicative functions. As Theresa Heyd (this volume) notes:

Since communicative functions can be expected to be few and fundamental and, as a consequence, highly stable elements of discourse, they should be relatively robust against medial change – there is no evidence that a new medial environment fosters new communicative purposes. In sum, it is problematical to establish, or even argue for, the emergence of new digital genres on the basis of current genre theory.

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2. See Heyd (this volume) for a useful discussion for the concept of genre ecologies and other theoretical approaches to the issue of genre classification.

Furthermore, blogs and their uses and usage communities are difficult to assess separately. As Danah Boyd (2006) critically observes: “seeing blogs as a genre obfuscates the efficacy of the practice and the acts of the practitioners”. While it is not entirely true that a dynamic understanding of genre must impose such strict limitations, the fact that, conceptually, blogging at once encompasses a usage-based *ad-hoc community* (the so-called blogosphere), specific *technologies* (such as XML-RPC, the web protocol that makes tracing citations in blogs possible), a set of *common practices* (such as linking and tagging), aspects of *visual presentation* (such as reverse chronological order, the existence of a blogroll) and finally a *textual dimension* is noteworthy for several reasons. In contrast to pre-digital genres such as the novel or the academic research article, blogs combine the above-mentioned amalgam of aspects without having a physical form or a usage community delineated by purpose or profession. It is exceedingly hard not to think of physical items when using the terms *novel* and *article* and to not associate the occupational roles of writer and researcher with the two genres, yet blogs have no physical form and very few bloggers are paid full-timers.<sup>3</sup> The only thing tangible about a blog is its author and the constitutive attribute of blogs appears to be *attribution* – sometimes to a pseudonym, fictional character or impostor, but always to someone.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, the fact that blogging is (a) a relatively new practice, (b) an activity that is still generally understood as a hobby and not a profession and (c) that it constitutes a fundamentally democratic means of publishing that is theoretically open to anyone with an Internet connection leads to the common perception of blogs as either ‘the genre of the people’ or, with less optimism, the genre of the *digital mob* (cf. Cohen 2006). Decisively, a blog belongs to its author<sup>5</sup> and thus placing the

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3. Though exceptions do exist. Cf. <http://www.oreillynet.com/pub/a/javascript/2002/08/12/megnut.html>.

4. A prominent case being ‘Fake Steve Jobs’, a blog parody of Apple founder Steve Jobs that was covertly written by a journalist (see Stone 2007). The existence of such imitations underlines how closely blogs are tied to the identity of their owners.

5. This general claim can be backed up with a brief comparison of established genres. Much of contemporary non-fictional text production is institutionally mandated (news writing, marketing, public relations) or serves a function in an institutional setting (memos, documentations, contracts). By contrast, individual writing has previously been restricted to direct interpersonal communication, with only few exceptions (one can argue that diaries have historically been used as personal publications with a public readership in mind). Whether or not they are actually used in that way, blogs give an individual the means to address a global audience. But it is this potential to empower the blogger that truly distinguishes blogs and triggers the association with diaries or journals, not the fact that their content is restricted

focus on “the practitioners” (Boyd), instead of merely the text they produce, is a logical reaction and a key observation when seeking to assess the potential of blogs for use and abuse.

To date, research into blogs has been conducted with a focus on areas such as politics (Adamic & Glance 2005; Bruns 2007), organizational studies (Kelleher & Miller 2006), personal knowledge management (Efimova 2004), gender (Argamon et al. 2003; Herring & Paolillo 2006), geography (Lin & Halavais 2004), personality (Nowson et al. 2005) and many others. While the specific use of blogs in a corporate environment is still a novel phenomenon, its uptake and reach are already impressive. According to a 2005 study by Guidewire Group, 89% of the international corporations interviewed stated that they had either already launched a blog or were planning to do so in the future.<sup>6</sup> While there is clearly a high level of interest in blogging in a corporate context, many decision-makers are uncertain about how to integrate blogs into their existing communications infrastructure. There are many different options: blogs can be used internally, for example for knowledge management (Efimova & Grudin 2007) and team communication (Charman 2006), or externally, in areas such as marketing or crisis prevention (Zerfass 2006). While advertising a product is often the starting point for company blogging, other activities are common, with a majority of corporate blogs being used for purposes other than marketing.<sup>7</sup> There are a number of functions that a company blog can realize and oftentimes an organization will maintain not just a single blog, but an entire hub that is either personalized or grouped according to thematic aspects.<sup>8</sup> In some cases, topic areas such as health care or public policy are identified as vital to the corporate interest and subsequently a blog is created to address a group of company-external stakeholders who play an important role in that area. Organic growth of employee blogs that aren't part of any concise communication strategy is

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to private thoughts or feelings (as blogs cover virtually any conceivable topic), or any other strictly formal criterion. The feature of extreme immediacy between writer, text and the practice of text production is constitutive for blogs, a notion frequently stressed by many bloggers. Cf. McNeill (this volume) for another perspective on diary-writing vs. blogging.

6. Guidewire Survey Executive Summary – Blogging in the Enterprise: <http://www.blogonevent.com/archives/Guidewire%20Survey%20Executive%20Summary%20-%20Blogging%20in%20the%20Enterprise%20-%20Oct%202005.pdf>

7. According to my representative corpus sample of 160 English-language corporate blogs.

8. For example, see the “More Google Blogs” section in the sidebar of the official Google blog: <http://googleblog.blogspot.com/>

also widespread and globally this group appears to make up the largest percentage of what can be considered corporate blogs.<sup>9</sup>

It is possible to accurately describe the relation between corporate blogs and personal blogs through application of a model of digital genre ecologies, such as the one developed by Heyd, with the caveat that the formal/functional relation suggested by her must be modified in order for the model to accommodate blogs. The supergenre of the personal blog,<sup>10</sup> which can be regarded as the historical antecedent of subgenres such as campaign blogs, health blogs, law blogs, news blogs and countless others, shows a high degree of stability in regards to the technical means of publishing (standardized open-source software and hosted services) and the resulting visual presentation (all blogs have titled and dated entries, reverse chronological order of entries on the main page and an archive function). Also, while certainly inviting variation, blogs of very different types show certain linguistic similarities which are the result of a single theme that can be considered universally relevant in both super- and subgenres: the blogger himself.<sup>11</sup> Thus, while virtually all formal-technical criteria and at least some formal-linguistic aspects are shared between the super- and subgenres, it is (ironically) function which differs among subgenres and remains unspecified in the supergenre. This is a logical result of the dual nature of blogs as both tools for producing content and containers in which the content itself is then stored. It is possible to climb down the ladder of classification to ever more specific purposes and communities, all the way down to combinations as specific as photo blogs for guinea pig enthusiasts. Defying such compartmentalism and instead resorting to broader definitions of purpose (e.g. 'biographical writing', 'expression of personal opinion') seems of little use: ultimately, communicative goals may vary not only from one blog to the next, but from one single blog post to another.

Applying these considerations, Table 1 provides an overview of different types of corporate blogs according to function, authorship and target audience.

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9. I define *corporate blogging* here as "the use of blogs by business professionals to further organizational goals" (Weil 2006).

10. 'Personal' being used in the sense of blogs maintained by private individuals that freely comment on news, events and topics of their own choosing including personal thoughts, feelings and experiences. While according to Blood (2000) the first blogs revolved around linking and commenting on web sites of interest, diary-like aspects became central to blogging at an early stage of its development.

11. This does not necessarily mean that blogs are exclusively about the private lives of their owners, but that the thoughts, opinions or comments of the blogger are very likely to surface in the blog in same shape or form, due to the nature of the technology as personal publishing. When the blogger is completely absent, the status of the blog as authentic may be called into questions.

**Table 1.** An organizational and functional classification of corporate blogs

| corporate blog type | organizational association      | target audience                | functions                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|---------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| product blog        | marketing, customer service     | consumers                      | (a) to promote a product directly<br>(b) to generate a discussion centered on the product<br>(c) to address issues closely related to the company's products<br>(d) to provide customer support                                                                                             |
| image/lobbying blog | public relations/communications | consumers/focal group          | (a) to create a positive public perception of a company<br>(b) to actively shape the public discussion of a company and its products<br>(c) to advance company interests in regards to policy (lobbying)<br>(d) to preempt or react to criticism (crisis management)                        |
| recruitment blog    | human resources                 | potential employees            | (a) to capture the interest of potential employees<br>(b) to communicate directly with potential employees and respond to their questions                                                                                                                                                   |
| strategy blog       | management                      | consumers, investors, partners | (a) discuss the position of the corporation and its products in the market<br>(b) evaluate competitors and their products<br>(c) legitimate management decisions such as layoffs, restructuring, expansion etc.<br>(d) outline future strategic goals                                       |
| knowledge blog      | subject-matter expert           | other SMEs                     | (a) to share specialized knowledge in a subject matter (e.g. engineering/software development/hardware r&d) with stakeholders inside or outside of the company<br>(b) to seek information and advice from other experts about such issues<br>(c) as as a mnemonic instrument for the author |
| multipurpose blog   | variable                        | variable                       | variable                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |

A signature quality of blog use in corporate environments is the tension between the communicative goals of the individual and those of the organization and the reoccurring question of how the two can be clearly delineated and prioritized. The first example illustrates the kind of personal coloring that many employee blogs exhibit and that they share with non-corporate personal blogs.

- (1)<sup>12</sup> Is anyone else reading Good to Great (Jim Collins)[hyperlink: <http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0066620996/bookstorenow57-20>]? I just started it and granted, I am reading 2 other books at the same time (Pledged and No Need for Speed....hey, I have diverse interests; rationalizing my sorority membership and being the best darned slow runner I can be), but it would be fun to get a little group discussion going if anyone else was interested in reading it too. Now nobody spoil it for the rest of us by telling us how it ends. Everyone must discover the secret sauce for him/herself.

There is usually no clear line separating the blog as a platform of personal expression from the official point of view that is communicated by the organization and due to this there have been incidents where employees have been reprimanded or even fired because of something they had blogged.<sup>13</sup> At the same time a blogger can acquire “spokesperson status”, with the views expressed in his blog being widely acknowledged while he does not officially possess the mandate for such a function.

Even in company blogs where a clearly defined organizational goal takes obvious precedent over the blogger’s personal motives, the presence of the blogger can still be recognized. Exceptions occasionally occur in product blogs, in cases where the author choses to follow the style of traditional advertising and forgo first person singular narration.<sup>14</sup>

- (2) From 21st September to 1st October 2007, Marseille hosts its annual international fair in its exhibition centre at Parc Chanot. Over 300, 000 visitors are expected to attend, where huge displays of pretty much everything from the latest technology to the best cuisine will be on display. Over 40 countries take part along with plenty of entertainment, so there’s plenty to see and do for all the family. For more information on visiting Marseille, visit our Thomson Cities guide.

Because blogs are generally understood as a means of *personal* publishing, it is conceivable why posts such as (2) are underrepresented in the corporate blog data – the lack of a discernible speaker is likely to be regarded as a source of dissonance

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12. All numbered examples are referenced in detail in the index.

13. For an early example, see [http://seattlepi.nwsourc.com/business/146115\\_blogger30.html](http://seattlepi.nwsourc.com/business/146115_blogger30.html).

14. Use of the first person pronoun (1P) appears to be a constitutive element in blogs, making it a part of the prototype. See <http://corpblawg.ynada.com/2007/03/23/no-i-in-corporate-blogs> for a detailed discussion of 1P frequency, both in corporate and non-corporate blogs.

by readers who have learned that where there is a blog there must also be a blogger. It is notable that strategies which overtly violate the conventions of the genre are still used, apparently because it is difficult for corporations to pursue strategic goals without falling back into established patterns of communication. Of course the visibility of the blogger does not make it impossible to pursue such goals, as this post by an employee of hardware maker X10 demonstrates:

- (3) Someone once asked me “If you had to choose your top 5 favorite X10 products, what would they be?” Hmmm... interesting question, and the more I thought about it the more difficult it was to choose as there were so many. But in the end, I put together my Top 5 List. Yours I’m sure will probably be different, but here’s mine in descending order [...]

But while in conventional advertising the listener is addressed by what could be described as the voice of the company, in a blog he is addressed by the blogger, who may or may not *lend* his voice to his employer. In such an exchange the organization is essentially sidelined and loses control over the communication, something that is further highlighted by the dialogic structure of blogs. Because feedback in blogs is usually welcomed and anticipated, bloggers often seek to engage the readership by involving it in a discussion. This is achieved in significant parts by three standard blogging practices: linking to other sources, citing or quoting other sources and using prompts as in (1):

- (1)’ Is anyone else reading [..]? [..] Now nobody spoil it for the rest of us by telling us how it ends.

Both the question and the request in this example are genuine interactional cues, seeking to elicit a response from the readers of the blog via the comment function. While the use of such devices in fictional texts aims to *simulate* actual communicative events to the reader, this is not the case here – a distinction that will prove relevant when examining *Life at Wal-Mart*.

In to-date research of blogging as a communicative practice, the personal and discursive nature of blogs is frequently highlighted.<sup>15</sup> This characteristic seems to override other specific organizational roles assigned to blogs:

[...] speaking in one’s own personal voice and being open for dialogue rather than engaging in one-way-communication are core elements readers have come to expect from blog communication, be it in private online journals, corporate blogs, or political blogs.  
(Schmidt 2007)

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15. Important contributions to research on blogs and genre formation come from Miller & Sheperd (2004), Herring et al. (2004, 2005) and Askehave & Nielsen (2005). Miller & Shepard in particular provide a detailed description of the development of blogs, something that I have chosen to forgo in this paper to focus specifically on one example of a corporate blog.

Taking such expectation into account it can be argued that from a cognitive blogging can be conceptualized as an amalgam of formal, technical, stylistic and cultural aspects, which together form a recognizable conceptual category – the *blog prototype*.<sup>16</sup> At the core of this prototype is the process of interpersonal communication in which a voice – that of the blogger – speaks to a community of readers, who may in turn themselves be bloggers. The readers are invited to respond and can usually do so via comments on the the blog itself, or by linking responses from their own blogs to the original post (so-called *trackbacks*). To someone visiting the blog website, what is presented is very often not the expression of a single author, but a mosaic of contributions by different individuals citing, quoting and linking to each other. In contrast to traditional means of publishing there is almost a symmetry of power between the different parties, with everyone being able to equally contribute to the discussion in a typical scenario. Table 2 illustrates some of the characteristics of the blog prototype in its presentational/technical, linguistic and contextual dimensions.<sup>17</sup> While especially the presentational/technical characteristics tend to be ‘hard’, i.e. mandated by the blogging software,<sup>18</sup> the contextual factors are ‘soft’, in other words dependent on the blogger’s conscious choices and for the most part unverifiable to the blog’s readers. While the linguistic properties are observable, they are partly subject to the blogger’s stylistic preferences and partly conditioned by the environment (e.g. since blogs are expected to textually involve their owner, high frequency of the first person pronoun is only partly a personal decision, as involvement is difficult to realize by other means in English).

Table 2. Characteristics of the blog prototype

| Formal aspect                | Degree of variability | Features                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|------------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| presentational/<br>technical | hard                  | (a) segmentation of text into entries ( <i>posts</i> )<br>(b) reverse chronological order of entries<br>(c) title, date, and author information is associated with entries<br>(d) archive<br>(e) blogroll<br>(f) comments<br>(g) use of hyperlinks<br>(h) use of a standard blogging software |

(Continued)

16. I make use of the canonical definition of the term *prototype* as the central member of a category with differently weighed constituting attributes (cf. Mervis & Rosch 1981).

17. Note that this enumeration is by no means exhaustive and that certainly more features could be productively added – what is provided here is a basic checklist.

18. Obviously the functions and constraints of a software package are still the conscious choice of someone, namely the software developer(s), but in the context of this paper I focus solely on bloggers and blog readers whom I assume to have less of a technical background.



Table 2. (Continued)

| Formal aspect            | Degree of variability | Features                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|--------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| linguistic <sup>19</sup> | medium                | (a) first person pronoun in subject position and as agent or experiencer<br>(b) <i>It</i> and other dummy pronouns in subject position<br>(c) high frequency of deictic constructions, especially person deixis<br>(d) high frequency of stative verbs<br>(e) high frequency of modals<br>(f) present tense over past tense<br>(g) active over passive voice<br>(h) relatively short sentences<br>(i) use of meta-language that describes or refers to blogging |
| contextual               | soft                  | (a) the self-referenced 'voice' of the blog is at once its writer and publisher (= 'blogger')<br>(b) the blogger is identified by name or pseudonym; if he uses his real name his is in fact the person he claims to be<br>(c) the events and experiences retold in the blog are either non-fictional or overtly characterized as fictional<br>(d) opinions and thoughts voiced by the blogger are truly his                                                    |

The third formal category (*contextual aspects*) contains a bundle of features that appear to be highly relevant when evaluating the question of whether a blog is 'real' or 'fake'. Blogs associated with corporate marketing are in rare cases written by company employees or paid professionals who claim to be regular consumers. These so-called *flogs* (fake blogs) are passionately rejected by the blogosphere and their use is seen as antisocial and deceptive.<sup>20</sup> Flogging as a strategy can be regarded as another indicator of the 'speech-like' quality of blogs, no so much because of their interactiveness (many blogs garner few comments and are monologic in their language), but because of the immediate connection between utterance and speaker. In the terminology of classical linguistic pragmatics: if the speaker is not who he claims to be, the perlocution of his utterance changes and the blog entry as a speech act is no longer felicitous.

19. The tendencies given assume the median values of pre-digital written language such as scientific papers and newspaper editorials. The basic for this observation is my corpus data. To be relevant beyond a relatively small sample, such generalizations would obviously have to be backed with more empirical data and quantified accordingly.

20. See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fake\\_blog](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fake_blog) for a brief description of flogging.

Because individuals, not companies communicate through blogs, the interests of the organization are constantly in danger of being relegated to a secondary position behind the communicative goals of the blogger. This poses a problem for obvious reasons: how can a blog serve organizational goals if it is a channel of personal expression that is controlled only by its individual owner? There are two immediate options: either the extremely individualized blog prototype is modified to somehow accommodate organizational objectives, or the objectives must be realized in other ways than they are in traditional media.

In *Life at Wal-Mart* an alternative and essentially covert strategy is chosen. Its creators seek to avoid both *conforming* with the requirements of the blog prototype and its obvious *flouting*, in order to preempt both the loss of control associated with the first choice and the loss of prestige and credibility associated with the second. Instead, they solve the problem by developing a drastically different approach – *subversion* of the prototype (i.e. *flogging*) – that will be discussed in detail in the following chapters. It is assumed that the main communicative goal of the blog is to positively influence the opinion of the reader, something which is best achieved by presenting him with a textual environment that is homogenized and free of external (and therefore possibly dissenting) voices. Only by controlling the communicative environment and by effectively simulating individual voices can a positive message about Wal-Mart Stores Inc. be transmitted without interferences. What is pivotal about the use of a blog for this task is the fact that blogs are so closely associated with the culture of individual participation described above. Subversion as the strategy of choice incurs the violation of prototype features in all three described categories: entries in *Life at Wal-Mart* make no use of hyperlinks and do not allow comments (presentational/technical aspect), are often written in past tense and contain no meta-language (linguistic aspect) and are not written and published by the same individuals (contextual aspect).

The strategic goal is apparently to harvest the positive associations that the public audience has with the blog prototype as personal and discursive in absence of the actual qualities that have led to such a view. If successful – that is, perceived as “the real thing” –, a *faux* blog can serve to reinforce the persuasiveness of the company message, which in the case examined is an unwaveringly positive depiction of the corporate entity Wal-Mart. In the remainder of this paper I aim to demonstrate how that goal is realized through the blog and why specifically the blog prototype lends itself so well to subversion in the context of public relations.<sup>21</sup>

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21. A collection of 52 blog posts from *Life at Wal-Mart*, collected between 21 June 2006 and 21 June 2007 forms the basis of this investigation. Said corpus is in turn part of a larger database of 133 company web logs that I will evaluate as part of my doctoral thesis.

### 3. *Life at Wal-Mart*: Context and presentation

*Life at Wal-Mart* is part of the retailer's *Wal-Mart Facts* web site<sup>22</sup> (see Illustration 1), a site that contains news and business information and is visibly geared towards public relations and creating a positive image of the otherwise controversial company. The caption for the link leading from the main page of the site to *Life at Wal-Mart* is "Read our Associate Blog". However, the terms *blog* or *blogging* are not used anywhere else on the site, nor do they occur in any of the 52 entries that were reviewed for this study – a highly atypical distribution.<sup>23</sup>

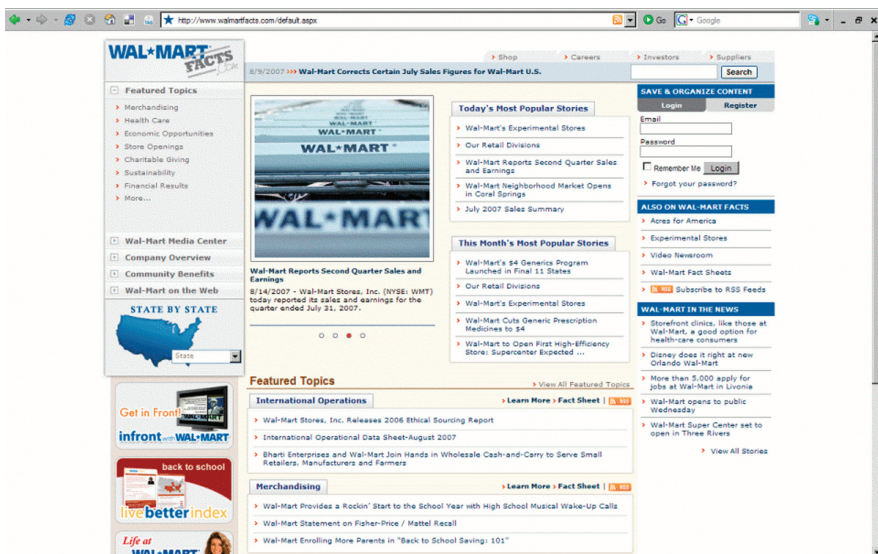


Illustration 1. Wal-Mart Facts: [http://web.archive.org/web/\\*/http://www.walmartfacts.com/default.aspx](http://web.archive.org/web/*/http://www.walmartfacts.com/default.aspx). Retrieved 19 August 2007

*Life at Wal-Mart* itself is seamlessly integrated into the design of *Wal-Mart Facts*, with individual entries superficially looking very much the same as the news items published in the press room section of the site (compare Illustrations 2 and 3).

22. [http://web.archive.org/web/\\*/http://www.walmartfacts.com/default.aspx](http://web.archive.org/web/*/http://www.walmartfacts.com/default.aspx)

23. Out of 133 corporate blogs that were reviewed, 125 (= 93.9%) contain at least one occurrence of the word *blog* in at least one post. Notably, those sources with no occurrences of the term were marketing-related and advertised products in very brief entries, with the sole exception of *Life at Wal-Mart*. Furthermore, *blog* is the fourth most common noun in the corpus overall, an indicator for its salience as a genre marker.

In strictly visual terms the blog does not distinguish itself from other sections of the site containing dynamically updated pieces of texts (news items, reports, figures et cetera), but certain structural characteristics that are usually associated with blogs are present.



Illustration 2. Wal-Mart Facts Pressroom Item: [http://web.archive.org/web/\\*/http://www.walmartfacts.com/articles/5235.aspx](http://web.archive.org/web/*/http://www.walmartfacts.com/articles/5235.aspx). Retrieved 19 August 2007



Illustration 3. Life at Wal-Mart Main Page: [http://web.archive.org/web/\\*/http://www.walmartfacts.com/lifeatwalmart/](http://web.archive.org/web/*/http://www.walmartfacts.com/lifeatwalmart/). Retrieved 19 August 2007

A textual hyperlink marked by the word *Permalink* connects individual entries with the blog main page. The term *permalink* is ubiquitous in blogs and is universally used to describe the permanent storage place of a post. On the right-hand side of *Life at Wal-Mart*'s main page two boxes are displayed that contain the *Categories* and *Archives* navigations. Both of these terms are equally characteristic of blogs. Categories are labels that can be attached to posts to thematically classify them. Readers may use the blogger-assigned categories to filter the general list of entries for posts categorized (or *tagged*) as belonging to a particular topic. *Life at Wal-Mart* contains the following ten categories:

- Business
- Community Benefits
- Diversity
- Environment
- Health Care
- Helping Communities
- Helping Others
- Mr. Sam
- Opportunity
- Voter Registration

Since categories are created by the publisher of the blog, they can act as salient indicators of the blogger's motivation. The tags used in *Life at Wal-Mart* point towards the goal of demonstrating the company's positive involvement in regards to services such as health care and community aid. Since categories can be freely assigned and there is no limit to how many you can assign, many bloggers use them liberally and develop highly descriptive personal ontologies. By comparison, *Life at Wal-Mart* uses few and fairly vague terms. Several abstract nouns are used (*diversity*, *opportunity*) and the verb *helping* occurs twice with markedly vague objects (*communities*, *others*). While in general bloggers make a sincere effort to descriptively label their writing with such tags, the overall impression here is that not the informative use of the categories is important, but the ontology itself and the positive prosocial qualities it conveys.

In blogs of all types, the archive is the generic way of accessing older posts that are no longer displayed on the main page. It contains links to all posts in the blog grouped according to the month they were published in. In general, monthly archives are automatically created, making this a 'hard' characteristic that is shared by all blogs published with a popular blogging software such as Wordpress<sup>24</sup> or Movable Type.<sup>25</sup>

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24. See <http://wordpress.org/>.

25. See <http://www.movabletype.org/>.

#### 4. Author vs. publisher status

Blogs have historically been associated with personal diaries, partly because of the common topical focus on the daily life of the author, for structural reasons, and because blogs as a means of publishing are available to individuals, in contrast to pre-digital publishing technologies which are generally available only to institutions (cf. Blood 2000). For example, the popular blogging software Wordpress is described as a “state-of-the-art semantic personal publishing platform” on the project website. As a result of both the heritage of early blogs as online diaries and the simplicity and cheapness of the technology, very many blogs are built around their authors and the presence of the the blogger is in most cases clearly visible in both the presentation and the language of a blog. It is exceedingly unusual for blogs – including corporate ones – to be published anonymously, a practice that separates them from neighboring genres such as press releases, which are generally not attributed to an individual author. Furthermore, because of the simplicity, cheapness and ease of deployment of blogs, there is no reason for author and publisher to be separate individuals. Publishing in blogs is generally achieved by clicking on a button, essentially similar to email, therefore separating the two functions is exceedingly uncommon.

In *Life at Wal-Mart* it however appears that not only are the roles separated, but that the writers are entirely unaware of the medium their contributions are published in. There are several indicators for this:

- none of the entries contain hyperlinks
- none of the entries cite other blogs, or any other sources
- none of the entries contain literal interactional cues<sup>26</sup>
- none of the entries contain any metalanguage that refers to blogging or the Internet

While this alone can be regarded as a strong indicator that the roles of writer and publisher are indeed separated in *Life at Wal-Mart*, it is the layout of a single post that makes this atypicality even more apparent. Blog entries are normally ‘signed’ i.e. they contain an automatically generated signature that names the author and the time of writing. In most blogging applications the author is identified via his user name, which may or may not be identical with his real name. Illustrations 4 and 5 show such signatures from the researcher’s own blog and from *Life at Wal-Mart*.

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26. I use the term here to describe discourse markers generally used in spoken language to signal turn opportunities to conversation partners.



Cornelius posted this article under [Blogosphere, Opinion, Media](#) on Tuesday, August 14th, 2007 at 9:18 am You can follow any responses to this entry through the [RSS 2.0](#) feed. You can [leave a response](#), or [trackback](#) from your own site. [Edit this entry](#).

**Illustration 4.** Signature below an entry in CorpBlawg: <http://corpblawg.ynada.com/2007/08/14/old-media-semantics>. Retrieved 19 August 2007

Posted by admin on June 21, 2007 01:16 PM | [Permalink](#)  
« [Previous Article](#) |

**Illustration 5.** Signature below an entry in Life at Wal-Mart: [http://web.archive.org/web/\\*/http://www.walmartfacts.com/LifeAtWalmart/2007/06/for\\_the\\_last\\_six\\_years\\_my\\_fami.aspx](http://web.archive.org/web/*/http://www.walmartfacts.com/LifeAtWalmart/2007/06/for_the_last_six_years_my_fami.aspx)

Despite the fact that all 52 entries in *Life at Wal-Mart* are allegedly from different authors, the single user who is identified as the publisher of all posts via the automatically generated signature is *Wal-Mart Facts* and *admin* respectively. What appears to be a signature line identifying the author at the very beginning of each piece is in fact a part of the full text that has been manually formatted to give the impression that it identifies the author.<sup>27</sup>

Under the assumption that the publisher(s) of the blog are not identical with the writers (who are suggested by the site to be *bloggers*, which is highly misleading in the light of their very limited involvement) several other unusual characteristics of *Life at Wal-Mart* are explicable:

- authors are not identified by full name and cannot be contacted
- commenting on posts is not possible
- trackbacks to posts are not shown

This attempt to blur the line between author and publisher can be interpreted as an obfuscation strategy. The PR firm publishing the *Wal-Mart Facts* website possibly receives the testimonials directly from Wal-Mart, which are then published as blog entries. They may well be written by Wal-Mart employees, but they lack any of the

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27. See for example the line *Bonnie B., Assistant Manager, Glenmont, N.Y.* ([http://web.archive.org/web/\\*/http://www.walmartfacts.com/LifeAtWalmart/2007/06/for\\_the\\_last\\_six\\_years\\_my\\_fami.aspx](http://web.archive.org/web/*/http://www.walmartfacts.com/LifeAtWalmart/2007/06/for_the_last_six_years_my_fami.aspx)). A look at the HTML source code confirms that the line has not been added by the blogging software but is the product of manual editing. All entries in *Life at Wal-Mart* have are thus extremely likely to have been published by someone other than the alleged authors.

characteristics of authentic blog entries (personal publishing, discursiveness) and their authors are apparently unaware of how they are used.

*Life at Wal-Mart* thus deviates significantly from the blog prototype in that the roles of author and publisher appear to be separated. It is noteworthy that the actual publisher, who closely controls what in a typical blog is a communicative mosaic, is not explicitly identified anywhere on the *Wal-Mart Facts* website.

## 5. Thematic and formal classification of posts

There is generally a high level of diversity in blogs in terms of what topics are explored and how an entry is structured. Authors are not limited to a fixed list of issues they can write about, unless they choose to impose such a limit themselves. While corporate bloggers tend to limit their entries to specific business-related topics, they very often sprinkle in personal information, for example about their families and friends. There are few conventions as to how to write or what to write about and accordingly, no two blog entries are ever entirely alike.

*Life at Wal-Mart* differs from this in the sense that there appear to be generic or at least reoccurring themes that are paired with certain stylistic patterns. What is remarkable is that these tropes exist in multiple instantiations by different authors, all with astounding degrees of similarity, which makes it exceedingly unlikely that there is no close editorial oversight. The post categories used in the blog (see Chapter 3) directly map to this generic structure.

### 5.1 The crisis/incident account (A)

A reoccurring theme in many blog entries found in *Life at Wal-Mart* is that of the personal crisis, a dramatic event involving sometimes the storyteller and more often a loved one that is retold in an emphatic and emotive style. The most frequent type of incident reported is the medical emergency.

(4) Laurie W., Merchandising, Bentonville, Ark.

On June 5, I will celebrate my eight year anniversary with Wal-Mart. It bothers me when I hear people say that Wal-Mart does not care about their associates. In June 2004, my mother and I had to make the decision to have Hospice start coming to help take care of my father, who had been dealing with many health problems for quite some time. One month later, my father had another stroke and by the next day was not doing very well at all. When I found out that he had gotten worse, I told my supervisor that I needed to leave so that I could be with my family to help take care of my dad. My supervisor drove my car and our office manager followed, as they both wanted to make sure that I made it home safely. My father passed away three days later after fighting a battle with congestive heart failure, diabetes



and bone cancer. I notified my manager and supervisor that I would be going out of town for the funeral. The call center associates and management really came through to help me in this time of need. Instead of flowers, they gave me a prepaid phone card and took a collection for me. I knew this would be very helpful to cover my gas expenses for the trip. So believe me, Wal-Mart does care about the associates and I will always be grateful for what my call center did for me and my family! God bless Wal-Mart and what they do to help us!

Often medical emergencies are narrated that are sudden and unexpected (heart attack, discovery of a tumor etc), but accounts where the outcome can be described as predictable, like (4) (the father passes away after a period of illness), are also numerous. This underscores an aspect specific to *Life at Wal-Mart* that is a deviation from the means of how a story is typically presented: while we can ordinarily expect the victim to assume a central role in the account of a personal crisis, the central role in these accounts is assigned to Wal-Mart and its associates and to a detailed description of how they supported the victim and comforted the storyteller in a time of uncertainty and fear. Narrative episodes are present in a large number of posts in *Life at Wal-Mart*, a fact that is significant because they are in turn quite uncommon in other corporate blogs. Notably, they occur in personal (non-corporate blogs) with greater frequency than in corporate sources, but that they are nowhere as common as in *Life at Wal-Mart*.

The observable typicality of narrative episodes in the blog invites the application of a classical structural model such as that proposed by Labov and Waletzky (1967) and Labov (1972).

(5) Bonnie B., Assistant Manager, Glenmont, N.Y.

For the last six years my family and myself have had the privilege of working for Wal-Mart. Yes I said my family myself, my son, my daughter and daughter-in-law each in a different Wal-Mart. A few months ago my husband had a massive heart attack and his body went into septic shock it was touch and go but thankfully he made it. All the while each Wal-Mart was extremely kind and considerate. They allow us the time we needed be at the hositipal, without question. And each time I came into my Wal-Mart I was greeted with hugs ,and clear cut concern for my husband and myself. Each time I left to go back to the hositipal I felt not quite so overwhelmed, like the associates took away some of the stress, and I was able to get through another day. Everyday I thank my management and associates for allowing myself to having the privilege of working with them and let them know that I am successful because we have built a successful caring team.

Bonnie B's account lends itself well to the Labovian narrative model. The *orientation* (*For the last six years my family and myself have had the privilege of working for Wal-Mart*) is followed by what is basically a compression of *complicating action* and *resolution* in a single sentence (*A few months ago my husband had a massive heart*

*attack and his body went into septic shock* [end complicating action] *it was touch and go but thankfully he made it* [resolution]). However, what can be considered the *evaluation* – the justification for telling the story, in Labov’s terms – is provided after that summary; it is the enumeration of acts of affirmation and support experienced by Bonnie in reaction to her husband’s illness. While most narratives in crisis accounts are more climactic than (5), this ‘bottom line’ of the story is usually presented in much greater detail than those parts of the narrative that report the central sequence of events. The ‘so what’ question that according to Labov must crucially be preempted by the storyteller can thus still be asked, because what is initially assumed to be the ‘point’ of the story (that Bonnie’s husband survived a heart attack) is backgrounded in favor of the role of Wal-Mart in the crisis.

This tendency is even more evident in the following example. The account of Christopher Mondy about his son’s emergency surgery can be subdivided into four basic parts: (a) an introduction (or *orientation*) that provides the *raison d’être* for the story, (b) the account of events as pertaining to Ryan, the storyteller’s son, (c) those events not directly concerned with Ryan and his illness, but with the reaction of the storyteller’s colleagues at Wal-Mart and (d) the conclusion (or *coda*) of the story, which is less concerned with creating *chronological* harmony and coherence (bridging the narrated past and the present in which the story is told) than with creating a *logical* connection between the described events and the positive picture of Wal-Mart that the storyteller draws.

(6) Christopher Mondy, Replenishment, Bentonville, Ark.

[INTRO]I have been with Wal\*Mart for almost 17 years. I have seen our company in the news with stories that have been untrue by people who “believe or feel” that Wal\*Mart does little to help their associates and pays too little of a wage with very little to offer in Benefits. Let them explain to me how they can “believe or feel” when they have never worked with this company.[/INTRO]

[DRAMA]On November 3, my families life was and forever will be changed. My 6 year old son Ryan, had had a sinus infection and still had headaches. The Dr after having checked him 2 weeks earlier noticed a dramatic change. After some initial tests, he ordered a CT for a better understanding of what was causing the headaches. At 2:30pm, we were informed that there was a golf ball sized Tumor behind his right eye. We were then informed when the Dr came in to see us that he was going to be Air Lifted to Arkansas Children’s Hospital in Little Rock, some 225 miles away.[/DRAMA]

[WM]Stunned, I called my family to give them the news and then called to tell my supervisor, Teresa Stewart. As we were trying to figure out what to do before the Helicopter landed, Teresa showed up at the Hospital to see if she could do any thing for me or my family.[/WM]

[DRAMA]On Saturday November 4, my son had to have an emergency surgery to remove the Tumor in a life or death situation.[/DRAMA]

[WM]I talked to Teresa to let her know what was going on, my family was with me and my Wal\*Mart family needed to know also. On Monday, Teresa and Jean made the 3 1/2 hour trip to Little Rock to check on us. My Meat and Seafood Replenishment team that I worked with had gathered money, food, and other things that my family needed. At least 1 time per week, someone from My Meat and Seafood Replenishment team came to the Hospital to see if we needed anything and brought things with them for us to show they were there for our support. As word spread, it reached the local Wal\*Mart that we were there and the Market Manager, Market Human Resource Manager, and Store Manager Bruce all came with items that we could use again to show support for us.[/WM]  
 [DRAMA]Ryan was released from the Hospital 43 days after he went in and is still receiving Chemo treatments and Radiation treatments.[/DRAMA]  
 [CONC]The care and support from My company is overwhelming. When people talk about why Wal\*Mart is different, it is the People. Our stores are made of Bricks and Mortar but it is held together by the Associates that work there. It is held together by the kindness and care for our fellow associates. I hope that no one ever has to be faced with what my family has been faced with but if they have to face it, they will not be alone. They will not even be able to imagine the support that they will receive. If any of our critics would like to ask Me what I “believe or feel” I will be more than happy to explain it to them.[/CONC]

A calculation of the number of words in each section reveals how the content that is technically tangential to the story's outcome dominates over the account of the events as such.

|                                    |     |       |
|------------------------------------|-----|-------|
| a. introduction [INTRO][/INTRO]    | 72  | 13.3% |
| b. dramatic events [DRAMA][/DRAMA] | 149 | 27.5% |
| c. role of Wal-Mart [WM][/WM]      | 196 | 36.2% |
| d. conclusion [CONC][/CONC]        | 124 | 22.9% |
| -----                              |     |       |
| total                              | 541 | 99.9% |

Strictly speaking, the only part not concerned with Wal-Mart is (b). However, even when we limit ourselves to comparing the number of words devoted to the story proper (b) with the role of Wal-Mart and its associates (c) we find that the the second section outweighs the first.

A recurring element of the crisis account is thus not only the crisis itself and its resolution, but the consistent support that both the victim and the storyteller experience on behalf of Wal-Mart's caring employees. Their care and support automatically imbue Wal-Mart the corporate entity with similar qualities.

For several reasons, accounts of traumatic personal experiences such as the death or maiming of a family member are ideally suited for this purpose. Firstly, such an event generally spurs interest in readers due to its existentially threatening nature.

Secondly, it is universally tragic in that many people have experienced similar loss, or fear to experience it at some point in their lives. Thirdly, because of its nature as a both universal and at the same time highly personal experience, sharing such a tragedy marks a strong and significant bond between storyteller and listener. Because of the gravity that must be assigned to the account, the storyteller gains the trust of the listener – he is humanized and familiarized through the event and his account of it.<sup>28</sup> It is exactly this foundation of trust that then serves to support the account of Wal-Mart's associates and their empathy and the conclusion that this implies that *Wal-Mart does care about the associates* (4).

## 5.2 The career/life story (B)

Those posts not concerned with dramatic events and their resolution are often of the career/life story type. The following example shows elaborately how this type is structured in the majority of cases.

(7) Deana F., Field Manager, Bentonville, Ark.

While recently doing my Open Enrollment it made me start reminiscing about my past 22 years with Wal-Mart and how fortunate I am to have such a great career. My story goes like this. Twenty-one years ago I was helping run a family dairy farm and times were hard, and our biggest payment was our family's health insurance. Our son had asthma, so this was not something we could do without. I decided to go to town and find a job so I could have insurance and Wal-Mart was where I wanted to work. Fortunately I got hired on the spot. The store manager came to the service desk and asked if I wanted to start tomorrow. I told him I only wanted to work so I could have insurance coverage, and I was hired as a 10 to 2 cashier. I started to move up in the company, becoming a CSM, department manager over different areas of the store, claims clerk, cash office. I then decided I would quit Wal-Mart and become a nurse, to have a career. When I gave my notice the store manager asked if I would like a career with Wal-Mart. I told him I felt I had already done everything I could do at Wal-Mart and he asked me if I would like to go into management. The district manager along with my husband convinced me that this was a career I would like to pursue. I was an assistant manager at several stores in Nebraska and Missouri and was then offered a position with Store Planning as a training supervisor. I came to Store Planning as a training supervisor and have now been promoted to a Field Manager. I started to work for Wal-Mart for insurance benefits and have found a career I love, have great benefits and a great work family.

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28. Of course the closeness is in this case superficial: not only is the story not told but published on the Web, but it is also unclear who exactly the writer is (in contrast to a 'real' blog) and what audience he has in mind. The closeness between storyteller and listener is therefore largely superficial is the specific context of *Life at Wal-Mart*.

In contrast to type A entries, posts of this variety can always be expected to be anti-climactic. The life story or, more often, the career at Wal-Mart as part of this story is presented chronologically, with no dramatic turn of events or climax and a linear path that the reader can follow from the past to the present. Sometimes anecdotes are inserted into such an account, the most popular form being the encounter with Wal-Mart's founder, Sam Walton (referred to as *Mr. Sam*), who pays a surprise visit to the store where the storyteller works (see type D). The account generally ends with a reflection of the storyteller about his good experiences at Wal-Mart and a positive judgment regarding career opportunities and employee benefits at the company. Interestingly enough, the writers seem to unanimously assume that the reader initially has a negative impression of how Wal-Mart treats its employees. In (7) Deana F. does not consider a career at Wal-Mart an attractive option (except for the health care plan the company offers) and is then convinced otherwise. The underlying assumption is that the reader will follow Deana's deduction and change his view of Wal-Mart as a working place as a result of hearing her story. Alternately, Wal-Mart employees who read Deana's account may be encouraged to believe in the company's prosocial behavior.

### 5.3 The opinion piece (C)

Whereas the previously described types are heavily dependent on the writer's self-characterization via storytelling and on the trust he consequently gains, the third type seeks to gain the reader's support by presenting opinions that are likely to be similar to his own. Via these opinion pieces, which usually take on a decidedly conservative, pro-market and pro-corporate view, the blog publishers aims to conflate a set of blue-collar American values into a consistent ideology and make Wal-Mart the torch-bearer of this ideology. Issues raised in these posts include a variety of areas, such as Christian holidays, energy-efficient light bulbs and voting.

#### (8) Joe R., Market Fashion Merchandiser, Midland, Texas

With all the criticism that our company has taken these past few years I am very pleased with the decision our company has made to promote people to vote. I know we do not nor should we tell people how to vote, but making associates aware of those candidates who wish ill on this great company and on our associates will help loyal associates make informed decisions when entering the voting booth. In the light of recent scandals on both sides of the aisle, some Americans may decide to "sit this one out." I encourage you not to do this, because by not voting you are voting. The person with the views opposite yours would love for you to stay home, however I encourage you to go out and vote for the best of the candidates, regardless of their weakness or failures to satisfy your political views. I personally would like to have more conservative candidates than we have had in many years, but if they are not in we need to vote for the next best one.

From the use of the nouns *people* and *associates* in conjunction with the second person pronoun (*people* → *associates* → *you*) it is plausible that the advice Joe R. gives is not solely directed at the general readership, but instead addresses Wal-Mart's employees. R. skilfully creates an ideological battleground, positing himself as the honest voice and warning readers about *the person with the views opposite yours*. His almost passing note that he would prefer more conservative candidates clearly locates him on the – at least in large parts fictional – map of ideologically clear-cut America, where corporate conservatism and blue-collar values are easily compatible. The fact that he notes his preference for conservative candidates and then closes the entry by stating *if they are not in we need to vote for the next best one* can be seen as a suggestion on what end of the political spectrum Wal-Mart employees should look for suitable political representation.

As with the other described types, the opinion piece's power lies in the closeness it creates between storyteller and reader. Whereas types A and B approach the reader through the established pattern of sharing experiences (and by appealing to shared experience) in narrative form, this third type appeals to shared ideology instead. It is decisive that these bonds are created only superficially between the storyteller and the reader, because the storyteller merely acts as a conduit for Wal-Mart the company. Since everything published in *Life at Wal-Mart* is licensed by Wal-Mart, all opinions expressed there can be assumed to be endorsed by the corporate entity, even though it is theoretically possible for the the blog's maintainers to claim otherwise. Once again, the separation of blog writers and blog publisher creates a unique dynamic, where it can be assumed that one is effectively acting as the other's mouthpiece.

#### 5.4 The encounter with Mr. Sam (D)

Finally, a third type of narrative post can be identified when looking at *Life at Wal-Mart*'s repertoire: the encounter with *Mr. Sam* – Sam Walton, the company's iconic founder.

- (9) Brian C. , Network Engineering, Bentonville, AR

My most memorable meeting with Sam Walton occurred in 1991 at Store 1 in Rogers. I had only been with the company a few months and had just completed register training on checking out customers. The store had only been open a couple of months since we had just moved from the old store 1 building into the new store 1 building. I was a floater for the store which is to say I worked where ever I was needed. I was stocking shelves in the candy department when I was called up front to help check out customers. This was my first time checking out customers by myself and I was a little nervous. I had checked out several customers with no problems and was getting the hang of it when Mr. Sam walked up to my register. As I was trained I greeted him with "Hello, how are

you today” and then added “Did you not find what you were looking for?” I asked him this because all he had in his hand was a pack of chewing gum and a 50 dollar bill to pay for it. Mr. Sam replied “I’m doing great and this is all I needed, thank you”. I checked him out and thankfully I counted his change back because I found out later he was making sure the checkers were counting change back to the customers. I told him to have a nice day and as he left my register Mr. Sam handed me the pack of gum and said “Good job Brian and keep up the good work”. I was taken off guard by his gesture and started to tell him I was not allowed to take the gum when a Customer Service Manager walked up and greeted him with “Hello Mr. Sam, how are you today?”. It was not until just then I realized whom I had just checked out. I nervously replied back “Thank you Mr. Sam for the gum” He just smiled at me and then sat down on a bench in front of the registers and began talking with the associates and customers. Needless to say after my encounter with Mr. Sam I was no longer nervous checking out customers. I’m so glad I decided to count the change back to Mr. Sam or I might not be telling this story 15 years later.

The reverence with which Brian C. describes Walton is reproduced in a similar fashion by other associates. Walton acts as the personification of the otherwise non-corporal corporation and its values. The combination of grandeur (as the founder of a multi-billion dollar enterprise) and down-to-earth charm evokes the idea of the paternal corporate leader who looks after his employees. The founder’s power is matched by his fairness towards his employees, who assume the role of children in the corporate family, children who need parental support (see type A posts), guidance and sometimes supervision. Notably it is not the *biographical* Sam Walton who is in fact the subject of these entries, but the paternal authority of Wal-Mart the corporate entity.

## 6. Linguistic features and functions

Linguistically, *Life at Wal-Mart* seeks to embody the same attributes that are also reflected in the structure of posts, the dominant topics and the presentational context: simplicity, immediacy and honesty. The average word length for the 52 entries published in the blog is only 3.9, whereas the corpus average is 4.4. Sentences are on average slightly longer and entries markedly longer than the corpus mean. The latter effect is at least partly the result of an abnormality in *Life at Wal-Mart*: there are no links. Generally, entries containing only a link to something the blogger deems interesting and very little text are common in blogs. Since there are no citations or links in *Life at Wal-Mart* and because of the large percentage of narrative entries (which effectively have a minimum length), entries are especially long in comparison with the rest of the corpus. In contrast to most corporate blogs, posts



in the Wal-Mart subcorpus contain a relatively high number of spelling mistakes, colloquial expressions and expressions that are stylistically well below the standards of professional writing. Most likely only some of these issues are corrected by the blog editor, while the rest is deliberately left in place to preserve authenticity.

### 6.1 Pronoun use

All 52 posts have an explicit authorial presence that is foregrounded by frequent use of the first-person singular pronoun (1P). In contexts where actions or events are described that involve the author, avoidance of 1P, while possible, must be realized through marked linguistic strategies such as passification, existential *there* or inanimate agent constructions.<sup>29</sup> While such distancing strategies are common in registers such as academic writing and journalism, they are not characteristic for letters or blogs, where the relationship between speaker and referent is more immediate.

The average frequency of 1P in *Life at Wal-Mart* is significantly higher than in the comparison data. Of 52 posts, 33 have one or more instances of singular nominative or accusative 1P, or use of the first person singular possessive determiner (1PD) in the title, while 5 make use of first person plural pronouns (1P-PL) or possessive determiners (1PD-PL).

Post titles are interesting in other regards as well. Very frequently they are phrased as direct speech and often they are enclosed by quotes to signal orality. Note the use of quotation marks in the following titles:

- (10) "I still can not believe everything that the company has allowed me to achieve"
- (11) "I just wanted to share my thoughts on the new little stubby, squiggly fluorescent bulb."
- (12) "Thank you, Wal-Mart and Sam's Club, for having so many good associates"
- (13) "I don't have to tell you – Wal-Mart came to the rescue!"

Speech acts, such as thanking and praising (12), are extremely common, as are meta-discursive hedging devices such as *I just wanted to share* (11) which evoke oral communication and involve an implied reader with whom the story is shared. While the use of 1P sets the stage for a simulated conversational exchange in (10), (11) and (13) the speech act in (12) is similarly effective in inserting the speaker

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29. An popular alternative in corporate blogs is the use of 'institutional *we*' (1P-PL) which allows expressing sentiments, intentions and actions collectively. However, since so much of the writing in *Life at Wal-Mart* can be considered biographical and therefore takes on a narrative form, 1P-PL is not a viable option and consequently there are relatively few occurrences of *we* referring to Wal-Mart collectively.



into the text. The listener, in turn, is grammatically visible in (13) via 2P reference, pragmatically visible through the speech act in (12) and grammatically implicated in (11) via use of the verb *share*, which is commonly accompanied by a prepositional phrase that refers to a human actor. Thus *share my thoughts* could be easily be interpreted as an ellipted form of *share my thoughts with you*. This is further supported by use of the hedging adverb *just* which in (11) functions as another orality marker and suggests a degree of politeness towards the addressee on the part of the speaker.

The use of the second-person pronoun (2P) poses slight difficulties for analysis because of its versatility in English. *You* is not limited to deictically marking a communicative partner (or partners, as English lacks morphological marking of number on 2P-PL) but can also be used to refer to a generic third person (*one*) or to the speaker himself. The deictic ambiguity in *Life at Wal-Mart* is further increased by the fact that we encounter a scripted speech situation in which the speaker addresses the listener in the mode of an oral conversation, but in a technological frame that does not permit feedback. Furthermore – and this is the decisive contribution of the editor – the speech is redirected to address the readers of the blog. Its original referent is unclear, since we cannot tell whom the author was originally thinking of when writing the text.<sup>30</sup>

- (14) So next time someone says to you that our company does not make available to us health coverage, you can have that person talk to me.

In (14) none of the pronominal referents are clear beyond doubt.

- The speaker (*me*) is identified only as “Rick W”
- The group he identifies himself with via 1PD-PL (*our*) and 1P-PL.OBJ (*us*) can be assumed to be Wal-Mart, but the stylistic choice made is noteworthy
- The reader becomes the referent of 2P (*you*), but only when the blog editor publishes the text
- Finally, the assumed Wal-Mart critic (*someone*, *that person*) cannot be clearly identified

Obviously the reader can’t actually tell someone who criticizes Wal-Mart to speak with Rick, since there has been not been any real sort of communication with him. Pronominal ambiguity is one way by which the alleged bloggers aim to gain the trust of the reader, who is supposed to believe that what he is engaged in a

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30. This ambiguity is further increased by the lack of plural marking on 2P-PL. Whereas in languages that morphologically indicate plural number the speaker would have to chose between addressing a collective audience or an individual, he is not required to specify this in English.

conversation – if a mediated one. Note that the specific presentational context of blogs to a degree obfuscates the ambiguity: because information about the author and links to external sources are usually part of a blog, the blogger can assume this information to be available to readers and rely on pro-forms and “link deixis”. But because this kind of information is omitted in *Life at Wal-Mart*, the pronominal pointers used do not point to any clear referent.

## 6.2 Tense, aspect and narrativity

As previously noted, *Life at Wal-Mart* differs from other company blogs in that its contributors are not identical with the blog’s publishers, but merely act as the content providers. It seems very unlikely, given the overall conception of *Wal-Mart Facts*, that posts in *Life at Wal-Mart* are not carefully edited and tailored towards producing specific archetypal messages – messages that support the notion that Wal-Mart is a fair and caring employer. Taking this into account, certain linguistic anomalies of *Life at Wal-Mart* become explicable.

*Life at Wal-Mart* differs significantly from the corpus average in terms of verb tense and aspect distribution. Simple past, present perfect and past perfect are much more common in *Life at Wal-Mart* than they are in other sources, where non-past expression is preferred. Present tense in *Life at Wal-Mart* is generally more frequent at the beginning and the end of a post, when a series of reported events are framed by the present state of the speaker.

- (15) [NOW]With the anniversary of Hurricane Katrina upon us, I wanted to express my appreciation for what the company did for me during that time last year.<sup>31</sup>[/NOW]

[PAST]I was in Louisiana for the storm. Born and raised outside of New Orleans, I lost my home to Katrina. I was working at Distribution Center 6048 at the time and as traumatic as the whole catastrophe was, the good people at my DC supported me.[/PAST]

[NOW]I don’t know if I could have made it without them or Wal Mart. I am at DC 7045 now, and even though the memories of Katrina haunt me, I know I work for a company that stood by me and thousands of others just like me. This is one of the reasons I am proud to be an associate at Wal mart.[/NOW]

Past tense is not indiscriminately used to refer to all events preceding the fictional exchange between speaker and listener, however, but instead specific narrative episodes are frequently retold by the speakers inside of a story-contextual frame.

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31. Though the opening sentence is grammatically past tense, expressions of the form (*just*) *wanted to say/express/let you know* do not refer to a past event, but seek to qualify what is said as a kind of pretext. Semantically there seems to be very little difference between present (*want to express*) and past tense (*wanted to express*) in the example.

- (16) I have been a Wal-Mart associate for 26 years. I opened Store 267 in Webb City, Mo., in 1980. It was a small store and I worked at night while I was going to college. One Friday night I was working the service desk and we were very busy. [...]

This is realized by switching from present perfect to simple past to past continuous (*I have been an associate* → *I opened Store 267 in Webb City* → *I was working the service desk*). Such a sequence is common across sources and representative for the crisis/incident account post type (see type A, Chapter 4.1).

Especially the use of continuous and perfective juxtaposed with simple past in longer narrative episodes is significant, because it functions as an effective tool to draw the reader into a past event.

- (9) Brian C. , Network Engineering, Bentonville, AR  
 [SP]My most memorable meeting with Sam Walton occurred in 1991 at Store 1 in Rogers.[/SP] [PERF]I had only been with the company a few months and had just completed register training on checking out customers. The store had only been open a couple of months since we had just moved from the old store 1 building into the new store 1 building.[/PERF] [SP]I was a floater for the store which is to say I worked where ever I was needed.[/SP] [PROG]I was stocking shelves in the candy department when[/PROG] [SP]I was called up front to help check out customers. This was my first time checking out customers by myself and I was a little nervous.[/SP] [PERF]I had checked out several customers with no problems[/PERF] [PROG]and was getting the hang of it[/PROG] [SP]when Mr. Sam walked up to my register. As I was trained I greeted him with[/SP] “Hello, how are you today” [SP]and then added[/SP] “Did you not find what you were looking for?” [SP]I asked him this because all he had in his hand was a pack of chewing gum and a 50 dollar bill to pay for it. Mr. Sam replied[/SP] “I’m doing great and this is all I needed, thank you”. [SP]I checked him out and thankfully I counted his change back because I found out later[/SP] [PROG]he was making sure the checkers were counting change back to the customers.[/PROG] [SP]I told him to have a nice day and as he left my register Mr. Sam handed me the pack of gum and said[/SP] “Good job Brian and keep up the good work”. [SP]I was taken off guard by his gesture and started to tell him I was not allowed to take the gum when a Customer Service Manager walked up and greeted him with[/SP] “Hello Mr. Sam, how are you today? ”. [SP]It was not until just then I realized whom[/SP] [PERF]I had just checked out[/PERF]. [SP]I nervously replied back[/SP] “Thank you Mr. Sam for the gum” [SP]He just smiled at me and then sat down on a bench in front of the registers[/SP] [PROG]and began talking with the associates and customers.[/PROG] [SP]Needless to say after my encounter with Mr. Sam I was no longer nervous checking out customers. I’m so glad I decided to count the change back to Mr. Sam or[/SP] [PROG]I might not be telling this story 15 years later.[/PROG]

Examples such as *I had checked out several customers with no problems and was getting the hang of it when Mr. Sam walked up to my register* are typical of a narrative

sequence. A certain procedure has been repeated several times (checking out customers), a process is taking place that is not yet completed (learning how to do this effectively) and a sudden, essentially climactic event then occurs (Mr. Sam walks up to the register).

What is striking is the systematic, highly structured and therefore predictable dimension of the storytelling: (9) begins and ends with an evaluation (*My most memorable meeting.../I might not be telling...*), reproduces spoken language in an idealized way and drives home a clear point about the central figure, Mr. Sam. The storyteller, Brian C., is essentially reduced to the role of giving witness to the event. The following example, not taken from Life at Wal-Mart but the blog of Microsoft staffer Heather Hamilton, is a much more typical example of how personal experiences are related in blogs.

- (17) I have recycler guilt. I check everything for recyclability (huh?) . I wash out the containers so my recycling bin doesn't get stinky. As we know, I hate "stinky". Unless it's pleasantly stinky (gasoline, magic markers) , then I love it in a light-headed-I-don't-care-about-my-braincells-they'll-grow-back kind of way. Also, clean wet dog is kind of nice and some other things, but I don't want to scare you and that's beside the point. So anyway, I don't feel guilty enough for this. Let's see, can we weigh the value of making a dramatic (and valuable) point with the fact that you probably smell like the liquid that leaks out of the bottom of a trash dumpster, for 2 weeks? Two weeks of stink! Unbearable. On the flip side, I had to move some stuff around in my garage yesterday so I could get my new garage door installed and I'm a little peeved about the fact that I have been storing some old crap in my garage simply because it's difficult to dispose of. Namely, one computer monitor (that Goodwill won't take.... I know! I could give you a list of things they don't take) and an unused box spring that was rendered redundant. Plus some furniture and electronics (anyone want a 27 inch TV? A broken Tivo box?) . I can't bring myself to take this stuff to the dump, but I am POed every time I pull into my garage and try to get out with an armful of shopping bags and minimal lateral clearance. I see those people that actually, like, do stuff in their garage. You know, stuff with screw drivers and table saws. Yeah, that's not me. Lately, it's been a drop-it-and-go kind of a situation. But I guess it could be worse. I could be carrying around last weeks leftovers in a bag around my waist. Gross.

Even a cursory analysis makes stark differences between (9) and (17) apparent. Self-reference via 1P is abundant in (17), occurring 20 times in a post with only 306 words and 23 sentences.<sup>32</sup> The reader is treated like a conversation partner

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32. Notably, there are 20 occurrences of 1P.SUBJ and only a single occurrence of 1P.OBJ. Self-reference is usually clause-initial and frequently paired with stative verbs (*I hate/love/want/feel...*).

via 2P, pragmatic implication (*that Goodwill wont take.... I know!*) and because the everyday topic of the post is something you might plausibly chat about with a friend. Decisively, there is no sequence of events that leads up to a climactic event or conveys a 'point' of the telling – the end is merely to express a personal sentiment in an entertaining way. The perceived orality of the telling is a result of the marked involvement of the teller, lack of a strict chronological structure and the strong emphasis on the teller's subjectivity.

Storytelling following classical patterns is an exceedingly popular device in advertising and public relations. The sub-genre of the testimonial is especially powerful in this context, because the status of the storyteller as (a) a real person and (b) someone the reader can identify with makes the story credible and fosters a sense of community. In (15), the author places the moment of narration in the present (the anniversary of Hurricane Katrina), then moves backwards in time to retell his experiences and finally to arrive in the present again. But when contrasting his well-organized and thoroughly planned telling with the *small story*<sup>33</sup> told in (17) it becomes apparent that the scripted account in which the teller is merely a witness is uncharacteristically perfect. Both the sequence of events and the teller in (9) are props arrayed around a central argument, while in (17) the blogger herself is the sole true focus, theme and point of the text.

## 7. Conclusion

All of the described linguistic and presentational patterns are used in their specific roles for a clearly defined purpose: to build trust between the *Life at Wal-Mart* storytellers and the readership. By convincing readers of the authenticity of their accounts, Wal-Mart hopes to capitalize on the trust gained and make itself appear in a more positive light.

The central function of *Life at Wal-Mart* is to use the positive associations of readers with the blog format in absence of the decidedly personal character that blogs normally have. Specifically, the use of personal pronouns is meant to suggest a real interpersonal exchange to the reader, while in fact no such thing takes place. In the same vein, the reproduction of established and idealized narrative structures with predictable tense shifts and orderly chronology is used to frame the positive message of the blog. It is the combination of technological obfuscation and linguistic strategy through which the reader is to be misled, and ironically it is its over-designedness that makes *Life at Wal-Mart* seem starkly unauthentic compared to actual blogs.

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33. In the sense proposed by Georgakopoulou (2006).

Reviewing the genre mimicry conducted by the creators of *Life at Wal-Mart* yields important realizations about the nature of blogs and beyond that, about digital genres in general. As Miller & Shepard (2004) have aptly pointed out “the blog-as-genre is a contemporary contribution to the art of the self”. The authenticity of the blogger is what gives a blog its authority, just as the identity of the speaker is central to the evaluation of spoken discourse. This parallel is not a result of similarities in the *situational* context – face-to-face synchronous speech production is spontaneous, while blogging is asynchronous and planned – but because, as in a conversation, *individuals are communicating* via blogs. Because the intentions, opinions and interests of individuals change over time, blogs are bound to exhibit significant variation in terms of both style and content. They are virtual extensions of their authors, not tangible artifacts, and they are shaped as much or more by the whim of their authors than by the conventions of neighboring texts.

The choice of the creators of *Life at Wal-Mart* to fake not any type of writing, but blogging, is explicable before the background of the blog prototype’s contextual dimension. Blogs are assumed to be the raw, unfiltered and essentially ego-centric expression of individuals and as such revolve around the blogger and his readership. Because the focal point of the blog is expected to be the blogger, his communicative goals are relatively overt and essentially predictable: presenting oneself in a positive way, preserving face and gaining recognition in the blogosphere are a few plausible aims. These obvious and – most importantly – *familiar* goals of any social interaction between individuals can be contrasted with the covert and impersonal goals of the corporation. Egocentricity is a central source of tension in corporate blogs in general, as deemphasis of the individual blogger means straying from the blog prototype (which is dangerous, as blogs are used in the first place to appear more human and authentic) while keeping a truly prototypical blog risks ejecting the company from the text as the blogger’s personality takes over.

In the specific case of *Life at Wal-Mart* this extension of the self via a digital publishing platform is incompatible with the traditional Bernaysian approach to public relations<sup>34</sup> that the blog follows, which was developed for one-way communication between collective institutions and a collective public. It envisions communication as a controlled process and therefore *Life at Wal-Mart* resorts to simulating the process of blogging while in fact publishing canned texts.

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34. The term referring to Edward Bernays (1891–1995), who is often characterized as the father of modern public relations (along with Ivy Lee). Bernays interpreted PR as positive propaganda that organizations could utilize to influence the public sentiment. Mass opinion and its ‘engineering’ are the cornerstones of Bernays’ original approach.

In summary, this paper has put forth the argument that potential for abuse can be regarded as an indicator for the association of certain recurring formal and functional features with blogs as a publishing technology. This bundle of features (the blog prototype) has been suggested as the template on which the genre of the corporate blog is modeled, sharing some of the prototype's aspects while modifying others (e.g. seeking to accommodate personal communicative goals with those of the organization). In contrast to other representatives of the corporate blog genre, *Life at Wal-Mart* has been presented as a fake blog (or *flog*) that imitates some of the formal aspects of the prototype but functionally deviates from a 'real' blog (e.g. it has no unity of writer and publisher, no comments, no use of hyperlinks, no egocentricity). How this strategy is pursued has been demonstrated via presentational and linguistic criteria that exemplify the interplay between form and function in a dynamic genre setting.

If two central observations can be made as a result of this case study, they are that (a) blogs (and possibly digital genres in general) are dynamic extensions of their individual users much more significantly than pre-digital artifact-genres and therefore may never adhere to fixed and unchanging functions of use or formal criteria (in a stylistic sense) and (b) that form (in technological terms) means something entirely different in digital genres (where it is presupposed by software) than in pre-digital ones (where it must be consciously imitated).

Technology appears to at once facilitate and constrain the balkanization of genres, which is logical in light of the realization that it has usurped some of the functions previously held by a discourse community that passed on the knowledge of formal conventions associated with a genre from one generation of practitioners to the next. It remains to be seen where this individualization of genre will lead us next.

## 8. Index of cited blog entries

Note that all blog entries from *Life at Wal-Mart* are referenced via the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine (<http://www.archive.org/web/web.php>), as both *Life at Wal-Mart* and the *Wal-Mart Facts* website are no longer operational. In those instances where no URL is given, IA has not stored a copy of the page in question. All cited entries are additionally identified via their unique key in the CBC/Corporati corpus (CBC xxx).

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# Situating the public social actions of blog posts

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This paper responds to Carolyn Miller and Dawn Shepherd's proposal (2004) that the personal blog acts upon an exigence of self-cultivation and validation. I turn to situational rhetoric (Bitzer 1968; 1980) to further contextualize bloggers' motives and illustrate how the blog's presentation of self is constituted rhetorically. Engaging Michael Warner's theory of publics (2002) and Anne Freadman's concept of uptake (2002), I argue that bloggers who write public posts about a public event, *Canada Reads*, participate in two situations—the blog and the event—and their resulting social actions accommodate exigencies belonging to both. By directing attention to the post, we glimpse the intentionality of each mediated self, seen in the varying publics engaged, situations defined, interpretants selected, and exigencies affected.

## 1. Introduction: Social actions of blog posts

A blogger, Fabulous Alex, begins an entry in her weblog with the following lines:

Tuesday, February 22, 2005

### **Battle of Books**

I stumbled over this article today: [Feisty lit battle Canada Reads kicks off Monday](#) ("Battle")

This utterance participates simultaneously in two sets of public discourse: her entry, or "post," is one of many on her blog, *Panem et Circenses*, and also circulates amongst a myriad of other public texts about an annual literary event, *Canada Reads* (CR). While not all blogs are public, Fabulous Alex publishes *Panem et Circenses* for anyone to read. She constructs an online self by writing posts on a wide range of topics, many of which, like this one, are about reading (entries that include her own book reviews and to read lists), while others are commentaries on news items, observations about popular culture, and narratives of what she did on the weekend. This particular post takes up *Canada Reads*, a show produced by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) and fashioned after a popular reality TV show, *Survivor*: during the week-long show, five celebrities each champion a Canadian literary work that they believe Canadians should read, and over the

course of a five-day debate, they vote books off until only one remains, the sole “survivor,” the book that Canada reads.<sup>1</sup> How do these two public contexts—the blog and the literary event—shape Fabulous Alex’s *post* as social action?

While major genre studies to date have focused on the blog as a genre (Miller & Shepherd 2004; Herring et al. 2005), this paper calls attention to the social actions of blog posts, reverse-chronological entries within a blog that typically include a date, headline, body text (sometimes with corresponding hyperlinks), author name, time stamp, permalink, and a section for others’ “comments.” While this formalist listing of typical characteristics, so often appearing in scholarly and popular literature, might imply that the post is itself a genre, I argue that the post, in its ability to perform a multitude of social actions, is instead the site of many different genres.<sup>2</sup> Laurie McNeill draws attention to two types of blog posts in what she sees as the “hybrid form” (the collapse of the diary and the blog) used by “the latest generation of writers” who “marry personal narratives (like a diary) with critical commentary about the Web and its content (like a blog)” (2005: 2–3). Laura Gurak et al. also note that the “content” of blogs is varied, combining “musings, memories, jokes, reflections on research, photographs, rants, and essays,” but they argue that it is not “the nature of the content” that defines blogs but “their form and function” (2004). However, I underscore that the “contents” they identify are, in fact, different kinds of genres. This paper reframes the blog as a collection of generic utterances, and advocates studying the post-as-utterance in the dual context of the blog itself and the topic of the post in order to situate bloggers’ social actions.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. Theoretical approach: Situational rhetoric, publics, and uptake

Fabulous Alex’s fleeting reference to the genesis of her blog entry—she “stumbled over” an article—raises the question of what prompts a blogger to write about a

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1. The CBC selected a reality TV genre made famous by the CBS series, *Survivor*, as one of the antecedents to the literary event. The semiotic ties between *Canada Reads* and *Survivor* were discernable in the CBC’s 2002 announcement that launched *Canada Reads*: it describes how “[d]ay by day” panelists “vote a book off the list until only one remains” (CLA 2002); on *Survivor*, contestants stranded in a remote setting compete in “Challenges” (first in teams, then individually), and every three days, they vote off one person until there is only one survivor.

2. For examples of such listings, see “Table 7” in Herring et al. and Hourihan’s “distinguishing characteristics” of a post.

3. While this paper focuses on generic utterances found in the blog post and (to a lesser extent) the post’s comment, other texts within the blog might also be approached productively as public utterances: for instance, the blogger profile (an autobiographical note) and the blog roll (a list of other recommended blogs).

public event such as *Canada Reads*? Does Alex perceive herself as an audience member in a rhetorical situation that involves this literary spectacle, and turn to her blog as a means to act on its exigencies as a rhetor? Or is her decision to maintain a blog accompanied by a social motive that she must express herself publicly on a regular basis, an exigence that motivates her to seek out, to “stumble over” articles of interest like the one featuring *Canada Reads*? I propose that instead, both kinds of exigencies are always to some extent at play: encounters with rhetorical situations and their exigencies motivate Alex to write blog posts, and a situational exigence for regular self expression on her blog motivates her to participate in different rhetorical situations. The apparent negotiation of differently situated exigencies within a single entry by bloggers like Fabulous Alex leads me to approach blog posts through the critical lens of situational rhetoric. I argue that bloggers who write posts about *Canada Reads* participate in (at least) two situations—that of the blog itself and that of the public event—and their resulting social actions accommodate exigencies belonging to both. Drawing on Lloyd Bitzer’s formative theory of rhetorical situations (1968; 1980) and Carolyn Miller’s emphasis on their intersubjective recurrence (1984), I first propose a recurrent situation of the blog, and then examine how this situation intersects with those involving the material circumstances of *Canada Reads*, as seen in different bloggers’ posts about this national literary event.

The examination of the blog and post that follows suggests that viewing a generic utterance as participating in a single situation and acting only on its exigencies provides insufficient context for understanding the richness of the utterance’s social action. In redirecting attention from the blog as a whole to the blog post, we may glimpse the intersection of rhetorical situations (that of the topic and that of the blog), for here, the blogger notes a *role* shift from audience to rhetor, and marks a *textual* shift by recording the original text that inspired her own text.<sup>4</sup> When Fabulous Alex writes, “I stumbled over this article today: Feisty lit battle Canada Reads kicks off Monday,” she quotes the headline of and provides a hyperlink to a news article (CBC 2005, February 21)—the text of which she is audience—, and participates as a rhetor in the situation of both *Canada Reads* and her blog by writing and publishing her post. I enlist two different theories to trace the role and textual shifts that indicate situational overlap. Because I focus specifically on bloggers who write publicly about a public event, I approach the move from audience to rhetor through Michael Warner’s theory of publics (2002), which,

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4. I write “glimpse” here, because as an external observer and qualitative researcher, I can never understand fully the situational context of individual utterances like a blog post. Indeed, a single entry may address the social motives of many situations.

to my knowledge, is new to both situational and new rhetorical genre theory.<sup>5</sup> To trace the shift from public texts that bloggers take up to public texts that bloggers produce, I turn to Anne Freadman's concept of "uptake"—"the interaction of, minimally, a pair of texts" (2002: 40), which in the case of Fabulous Alex is the interaction between the CBC news article and her blog entry—, and focus on how such generic pairings are situated. Together, Warner's theory of publics and Freadman's theory of uptake indicate how a single post participates in the dual situations and corresponding exigencies of *Canada Reads* and the blog.

### 3. The blog post's negotiation of differently situated exigencies

This paper is itself a public uptake, in part, of Carolyn Miller and Dawn Shepherd's "Blogging as Social Action" (2004), in which they document the story of a social motive of self-cultivation and validation that found an outlet in the blog during a kairotic moment of the late 1990s. They argue that the blog genre arose from a *kairos* (understood as "socially perceived space-time") 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." Focusing, as I do, on blogs written by individuals for public consumption (rather than those written by rhetors representing a profession, business, or organization or those written for private consumption), they suggest that the blog, as a new rhetorical occasion, offers a fitting response to a "widely shared, recurrent need"—an exigence—"for cultivation and validation of the self."<sup>6</sup> The blog genre enables a rhetor to construct a mediated self within a *kairos* where "the access and attention and intensification that media provide" achieve self-validation. Here, Miller and Shepherd draw upon work by Clay Calvert (2000), who argues that two subject positions, both formerly socially objectionable and now morally neutral, typify this kairotic moment: "mediated voyeurism," where subjects are separated by a screen "temporally and spatially from the object of their interest," and "mediated exhibitionism," where subjects engage in "self-disclosure"

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5. As well, see my earlier discussion with Elizabeth Maurer about Warner's publics, blogs, and genre (Grafton & Maurer 2007). For other applications of Warner's theory to weblogs from a non-genre perspective, please see Cohen (2006) and Curtain (2004).

6. Following their 2004 suggestion that the blog may be "already evolving into multiple genres, meeting different exigencies for different rhetors," Miller and Shepherd then compare "personal and public oriented blogs" in "Questions for genre theory from the blogosphere" (this volume).

(Miller & Shepherd 2004). Already adept as voyeurs in their media consumption, bloggers also adopt the role of mediated exhibitionist, inviting others to peer voyeuristically as they display their constructed selves online. Blog posts, I suggest, offer further insight into these rhetors' acts of self-disclosure: each post provides a piece of the always-under-construction self (adding, contrasting, restructuring, reinforcing), and together, these posts present a multifaceted, mediated portrait. And yet, while posts by bloggers about *Canada Reads*, including a "to read" list, an "addict confession," and a "winner prediction," indeed seem rhetorically motivated to cultivate and validate the self, the force of this exigence varies as bloggers also strive to act upon other exigencies surrounding the literary event. These generic instances suggest that our understanding of blogging as social action must be more socially situated. I draw upon situational rhetoric to further contextualize bloggers' motives and to illustrate how the blog's presentation of self that Miller and Shepherd identify is constituted rhetorically.

### 3.1 The post and situational rhetoric

To shift focus from the blog in a broad kairotic context to the blog post in a specific situational context, I turn to Bitzer, who defines rhetorical situation as "a complex of persons, events, objects, and relations presenting an actual or potential exigence which can be completely or partially removed if discourse, introduced into the situation, can so constrain human decisions or action as to bring about the significant modification of the exigence" (1968: 6). Its three key components, he argues, are *exigence*, "a problem or defect, something other than it should be"; *audience*, those "capable of being constrained in thought or action" to modify the exigence positively; and *constraints*, those situational aspects that have "the power to influence decision and action needed to modify the exigence" (1980: 23). His formulation thus posits situation as objective and the determinant of rhetorical activity. Situational theory's significance to studies of genre is the role of recurrence: as Bitzer states, "comparable situations" recur, which prompt "comparable responses," and thus "rhetorical forms," genres, are formed (1968: 13; 1980: 36). Miller, in "Genre as Social Action," counters that an understanding of recurrence requires the rejection of any "materialist tendencies" (1994: 28): if rhetors comprehend situations "as somehow 'comparable,' 'similar,' or 'analogous,'" then neither material nor subjective arrangements of objects, event, and people recur, for these are distinct both in time and space and from individual to individual; rather, what recurs is the intersubjective "construal of a type" (1994: 29). Moreover, she continues, exigence, too, is not material or subjective, but a kind of "social knowledge – a mutual construing of objects, events, interest and purposes" that renders them "an objectified social need" (1994: 30). For Janet Giltrow, exigence is experienced as rhetorical motive,



“the feeling that a certain sort of writing *should* be done, *now*” (2007a: 2, emphasis hers). Similar instantiations of the public blog across different rhetors writing as individuals suggest that bloggers construe both a recurrent situation type and exigencies, and yet the wide array of genres found at the level of blog post suggest that these performances of self are very differently staged.

We can glimpse a recurrent rhetorical situation of the blog in rhetors’ sense that they need to construct their mediated selves on a regular basis both for themselves and their audience, those mediated voyeurs who witness their exhibitionism.<sup>7</sup> While the regular publishing of blog posts is typically viewed as a formal convention, I propose that associating such regularity with social action, as frequent acts of self articulation, reveals a recurrent situation of the blog and a rhetorical motive to cultivate and validate the self *on a regular basis*. While Miller and Shepherd see frequency as a formal feature, they emphasize that the self under “construction is an *ongoing* event, the self being disclosed is a *continual* achievement” (emphasis mine).<sup>8</sup> Rhetors repeatedly publish blog posts not because convention deems that they should, but because, as Giltrow might argue, their social experience rhetorically motivates them to do so (2007a: 21, 22; 2007b). Bloggers Rebecca Blood and Meg Hourihan reflect on how the blog’s exigence to cultivate and validate the self affects both the rhetor and her imagined audience. Blood writes of watching her constructed self unfold daily in her blog, *Rebecca’s Pocket*: “In composing my link text every day I carefully considered my own opinions and ideas, and I began to feel that my perspective was unique and important” (2000, September 7). Here, she attributes her mediated self’s authenticity to recurrent acts of self expression. Hourihan considers the expectation of regular exhibitionism from the point of view of blog readers, a voyeuristic expectation reinforced by two semiotic ties: posts’ reverse-chronological order and time stamps that indicate when a post is published. Having “the freshest information at the top of the page” gives readers “a sense of immediacy,” a sense of the mediated self’s presence, which,

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7. Miller and Shepherd underscore the blog’s audience as two-fold: the blogger exhibits her mediated self before “a potentially large, though distant and invisible, audience”; at the same time, the blogger is “her own audience, her own public, her own beneficiary,” peering voyeuristically at her exhibited self (2004). Bitzer’s notion of rhetorical audience includes occasions when “a person engages himself or ideal mind as audience” (1968: 8), a definition that can include bloggers writing for themselves.

8. Miller and Shepherd classify frequency as a formal feature, noting that “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” (Mortensen & Walker 2002: 249, in Miller & Shepherd).



she suggests, a reader may perceive as a virtual encounter: “if I visit your site at 4:02 p.m. and see you just updated at 3:55 p.m., it’s as if our packets crossed in the ether. You, the author, and I, the reader, were ‘there’ at the same time – and this can create a powerful connection between us” (2002, June 13). The regular acts of self-cultivation and validation, for Blood and Hourihan, are necessary to construct the mediated self, which must be displayed frequently to achieve authenticity for both exhibitionist and voyeur.<sup>9</sup> Blog posts, taken together, present a self involved in the quotidian activities of life, a self continually re-positioned in relation to a range of rhetorical situations.

An exigence of frequent self-expression drives the blogger to write about *something*, but not about *anything*: the ensuing post must be a fitting response to her ongoing performance of self. Bloggers’ own commentary on their writing process suggests that while sometimes the need to articulate the self motivates them to find a fit topic, other times, their participation in a rhetorical situation stimulates them to write a post. Fabulous Alex’s reference to finding the *Canada Reads* article is ambiguous—she might have ‘stumbled’ upon it while seeking something about which to write, or, instead, while engaged in another activity—, but Blood more specifically recounts rhetors’ acts of discovery while in the recurrent situation of the blog. She depicts the earliest blogs as “link-driven,” with “editors” spending “several off-work hours every day surfing the web and posting” to their sites; the style of these pioneer “filter” blogs, she continues, has been adopted by many contemporary bloggers, who provide a “filtering function” for readers (2000, September 7).<sup>10</sup> Bloggers’ acts of “searching out” and “highlighting” (or stumbling over) material suggests that rhetors are engaged in a situation of the blog, which then intersects with that of the text that they take up. Other times, bloggers’ posts about *Canada Reads* seem to be triggered first by a rhetorical situation

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9. While Blood writes of daily posts, and Hourihan emphasizes readers’ expectation of regular updates, a 2004 quantitative study of 3,634 blogs hosted by eight blog-hosting services suggests that such frequent self-expression is the exception rather than the norm. Jeffrey Henning observes, “Blogs are updated much less often than generally thought. Active blogs were updated on average every 14 days. Only 106,579 of the hosted blogs were updated on average at least once a week. Fewer than 50,000 were updated daily” (2004: 3). This study, though, does not indicate whether the frequency of online self-articulation affects both bloggers and their audiences’ sense of the exhibited self’s authenticity; such statistical approaches do not address expectations of rhetors or audience.

10. Situational exigencies for filter blogs, Blood’s description suggests, are to cultivate and validate the self and to inform an audience. These dual exigencies are similar to those of the “homeless blog,” with its social motives to cultivate and validate the self and to effect change in the treatment of other homeless people, as Elizabeth Maurer argues in this volume.

tied to the literary event, which then intersects with that of the blog. For example, Wandering Coyote writes in the opening lines of her post, “There is a preview for the Canada Reads debate tomorrow night currently airing” (2005, February 20) on television. Another blogger, Ransom, notes that he regularly listens to a specific nightly radio program, but the week he writes his post, this program has been “truncated for the annual Canada Reads series” (2005, February 26). In both these posts, the television and radio public broadcasts of *Canada Reads* seem to engage the bloggers in a rhetorical situation as audience, which in turn prompts them to participate as public rhetors by formulating posts that also meet the blog’s exigence of regular self-cultivation and validation.<sup>11</sup> Bitzer, in response to criticism that his original formulation was too deterministic (Vatz 1973; Consigny 1974; and Hunsaker & Smith 1976, in Smith & Lybarger 1996: 200), conceded that rhetorical situations are more fluid than he first proposed: situations are not “isolated from one another; within a single frame of time and place, they may overlap and implicate one another” (1980: 24–25). While bloggers’ posts about *Canada Reads* illustrate that indeed, situations overlap, their entries also call for a revision to a theory of imbricated situations: a single generic utterance may simultaneously address exigencies of more than one situation.

### 3.2 The post and publics

In their respective posts, Wandering Coyote and Ransom each construct a self who is audience to a particular *Canada Reads* text and who is also a rhetor seeking to influence audiences of her and his own. To examine the *public* character of these audiences, I enlist Warner’s theory of contemporary publics. In Bitzer’s own examples of rhetorical audiences, he implies a group of actually existing people: for instance, Richard M. Nixon’s two resignation speeches are addressed “to the nation” and “to the White House Staff” (1980: 37). Unlike social totalities that exist independently from the discourse that addresses them (Warner 2002: 65)—such as “Americans” or “Canadians” (or even “tax accountants,” the subject of Amy Devitt’s study (1991))—or bounded totalities (Warner 2002: 66) of people who share a physical space—such

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11. While neither Wandering Coyote nor Ransom is initially motivated by web-based texts to take up *Canada Reads*, both offer contextual information to their audience by linking to the CR website (“Canada Reads”). The presence of hyperlinks, in these instances, does not mean that either blogger “selects, displays, and comments upon the mediated reality of the internet” (Miller & Shepherd); rather, Wandering Coyote and Ransom take up a “mediated reality” of television and radio, respectively, and enlist the internet because its materiality remains behind, readily accessible to interpretant texts through links or copying and pasting, even after the event has passed.

as people attending a White House staff meeting or those attending a library debate about the *Canada Reads* 2005 shortlisted texts—mediated publics, Warner explains, “do not exist apart from the discourse that addresses them” (2002: 72). Instead, what binds “otherwise unrelated people” together as a public is that they have taken up the same texts “at different times and in different places” (2002: 68). As such, what connects Fabulous Alex in Waterloo, Ontario (“About Me”), Wandering Coyote in “Kootenay Country,” British Columbia (“Profile”), and Ransom in Ottawa, Ontario (“Blogger Profile”) together as a “discursive public” (Warner 2002: 121) is not that they belong to the same social totalities (“Canadians” and “bloggers”) but that they have all taken up texts about *Canada Reads*.

Warner introduces the concept of “active uptake” (2002: 87) to explain how the “fiction of the public” (2002: 15) is perpetuated: “Between the discourse that comes before and the discourse that comes after one must postulate some kind of link,” he writes, and “the link has a social character; it is not mere consecutiveness in time but an interaction” (2002: 90). A public “exists *by virtue of being addressed*” (2002: 67 emphasis his), which recalls M.M. Bakhtin’s notion of addressivity, “the quality of turning to someone” (1986: 99): texts turn to a *public* someone, anticipating an uptake. And a public “*is constituted through mere attention*” (Warner 2002: 87 emphasis his): people who take up a text, however fleetingly, however distracted, are members of its public. *Canada Reads* texts produced by the CBC address an imagined public of Canadian readers who are interested in Canadian literature; the degree to which public participants pay “attention” can vary widely, from knowing about the “book brawl” (CBC 2005, February 8), to noting which titles are shortlisted, to listening to the celebrity debates, to reading one or more of the competing works, to debating the texts’ literary merits with family and friends. Fabulous Alex, Wandering Coyote, and Ransom constitute the *Canada Reads* public by paying “attention” to the CBC news article, the television preview, and the radio broadcast. These bloggers are all motivated to participate in a rhetorical situation of *Canada Reads* as more than a public audience: in blog posts, they become public rhetors. And at the moment of their “active uptake,” the situations of CR and the blog overlap. Accordingly, the bloggers’ discourse must address two audiences: their posts re-imagine and re-circulate the public of *Canada Reads*, and also accommodate hoped-for readers of their blogs who may encounter the literary event for the first time through their posts. Significantly, while addressivity is crucial, Warner’s public is not Bakhtin’s “someone” but rather the discursively enacted relation *between* someones. Those addressed (the public imagined) may differ from those who pay attention (the public realized) because of the text’s “circulatory fate” (Warner 2002: 114), actual uptakes (or the absence of uptakes) that are outside of its control.

### 3.3 The post and uptake

In genre studies, “uptake” is Anne Freadman’s term, a productive means to study the textual shift that marks situational overlap. Just as Bakhtin conceptualizes a generic instance as an utterance within a chain of other utterances, at once responsive and assuming a response (1986: 69–75), Freadman proposes that “‘genre’ is more usefully applied to the interaction of, minimally, a pair of texts than to the properties of a single text” (2002: 40). Working with Peirce’s notion of the interpretant (1982), she argues that “the text is contrived to secure a certain class of uptakes”—it assumes a response—and “the interpretant, or the uptake text, confirms its generic status by conforming itself to this contrivance,” or, importantly, modifies or denies its status “by taking its object as some other kind” (2002: 40). The “bidirectional relationship” between text and interpretant Freadman names “uptake,” and a generic “sequence” (2002: 42) comprises a series of uptakes. For example, Fabulous Alex’s post on *Canada Reads* is an interpretant of the article that she stumbled over; she marks this preceding link by quoting the article’s full title and providing a hyperlink: “Feisty lit battle Canada Reads kicks off Monday” (2005, February 22). In doing so, she forges her post to a genre sequence of *Canada Reads*. At the same time, her post links to a genre sequence within her blog: her utterance is an interpretant of earlier posts about reading, and adds to previous constructions of self as public reader. Fabulous Alex’s post not only responds to two sets of preceding utterances, but also anticipates interpretants of its own: uptakes from the CR public, other readers of her blog (who, by directing attention to her post, now also belong to the public of the CBC book brawl), and Alex herself, who later writes other reading-related posts and, as I will discuss, a second post on *Canada Reads*. While other types of utterances may be links in multiple generic sequences, the blog’s significance to genre studies is that this overlapping situational context is materially available to its public audience at the level of post, where, for instance, they may trace the interpretant’s history through hyperlinks and read its realized uptakes in the comments section. Those best positioned to grasp the complexity of the post’s social action are those most familiar with its social context within generic sequences: the blogger and her imagined—her idealized—audience.

### 3.4 The post as materialization of the self

Warner’s theory of publics suggests that for blog posts, Bitzer’s “mediating audience” may be not only the audience realized by the entry but that hoped for by its rhetoric. Or, in Freadman’s terms, audience may be found both in the post’s uptake and in its contrivance of one. Keith Grant-Davie concurs, arguing that while for Bitzer, audience is “a group of real people,” a more appropriate definition is “those people, real or imagined, with whom rhetors negotiate through discourse to achieve

“rhetorical objectives” (1997: 270).<sup>12</sup> The blogger’s act of exhibitionism needs the *possibility* of voyeurs beyond herself; such an imagined public can serve as a “mediating influence” (Bitzer 1980: 23) by bearing witness to the self being cultivated. In Warner’s terms though, most blogs do not have a public (exceptions would be blogs that attract a significant, sustained readership, such as those written by famous people or now-famous bloggers): publics must be multi-textual, multi-vocal, multi-generic, and multi-media in order to produce the necessary reflexivity to create “an ongoing space of encounter for discourse” (2002: 90). But blog *posts* about the literary event imagine an already constituted public, the public of *Canada Reads*. Overall, a blogger’s composite address to multiple publics in multiple posts that participate in multiple situations constructs the self. As Warner argues, “the moment of uptake that constitutes a public can be seen as an expression of volition on the part of its members,” which in turn enables us to “understand publics as scenes of self-activity.” If, as Warner proposes, the “direction of our glance can constitute our social world” (2002: 89), then blog posts are a materialization of this glance, an intricate view of a blogger’s social world and place within it. Bloggers mark selectively (perhaps even as acts of social ambition or imposture) to which publics they belong, and in so doing, provisionally circumscribe their constructed self’s “social world.”

#### 4. Examining blog posts: The materialization of public readers

If the blog may be conceived as trafficking in situations with differing exigencies, then this complicates Miller and Shepherd’s implication that the exigence of self-cultivation and validation serves as Bitzer’s “organizing principle” (Bitzer 1980: 7) to govern all public blog discourse.<sup>13</sup> Turning to posts on *Canada Reads* written by three different bloggers, Fabulous Alex, James Koole, and John Mutford, I show how while the exigence identified by Miller and Shepherd informs each entry’s social action, its force varies because of other situational exigencies that these public rhetors strive to accommodate. Studying generic uptake at the level of blog post

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12. In expanding Bitzer’s definition of audience, Grant-Davie turns to Douglas Park’s “specific meanings of audience: (1) any people who happen to hear or read a discourse, (2) a set of readers or listeners who form part of an external rhetorical situation (equivalent to Bitzer’s interpretation of audience), (3) the audience that the writer seems to have in mind, and (4) the audience roles suggested by the discourse itself” (Grant-Davie 1997: 270).

13. While Bitzer noted the presence of various exigencies within a single situation, he argued that one serves as the “organizing principle” by specifying “the audience to be addressed and the change to be effected” (“Rhetorical” 7).

enables us to move beyond a generalization that one exigence governs bloggers' public discourse while, at the same time, acknowledging the significance of this drive to cultivate and validate the self on a regular basis.

#### 4.1 Rhetorical situations of *Canada Reads*

Importantly, bloggers who write about *Canada Reads* not only act upon the blog's exigence of self-care, but also exigencies surrounding this annual literary event. Its publicly-touted social motive—choose a book for the nation to read—is met by an official genre sequence (texts produced by the CBC) that includes a “shortlist announcement,” each of the five-day “debates,” and the “winner announcement.” *Canada Reads* “is quickly becoming one of the most important prizes in Canadian literature,” Laura Moss observes, adding, “It may not be high on prestige, but the economic and cultural spin-off is enormous” (2006: 7–8): the *Survivor*-style “battle of the books” (CBC 2005: “Debate”) has a major impact on both book sales and the popular canonization of shortlisted works. Its broad spectrum of participants (who, in Bitzer's terms, are often both rhetors and audiences) includes CBC stakeholders, the debate's “referee,” celebrity panelists, authors of the shortlisted works, publishers, booksellers, librarians, media, teachers, academics, and the public of Canadian readers who take an interest in Canadian literature. When *Canada Reads* first launched in 2002, a CBC press release immediately and deliberately undermined the exigence, choose a book for the nation, from its possible status as organizing principle by asking, “Is it possible to find a single book that captures the imagination of an entire country?” (CLA 2002, March 13). This press release conjures the nation as multiregional, multilingual, multicultural, and multiracial<sup>14</sup>—impossible to capture in a single work of literature—while simultaneously imagining a public who will take up this quest, connecting participants through the process of debating texts' literary merits more so than through the shared reading of a winning title. While choosing a book for the nation, then, motivates much discourse about *Canada Reads*, other exigencies circulate within its rhetorical situation, including building the nation and furthering literacy (the “Canada” and “Reads” of *Canada Reads*). These exigencies are broad enough to engage different rhetors' motives: for instance, those of the CBC to attract a broader and younger audience; the celebrity panelists to promote a writer from their hometown; or the publishers and booksellers to sell more Canadian literary works. But what of bloggers' intentions? If exigence enables rhetors to “know how to take an interest,” to

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14. See CBC's “Mandate” for a detailed articulation of how the public broadcaster is charged with constructing the nation, an exigence to which the genre sequences of *Canada Reads* are a fitting response for the contemporary *kairos*.

“intend to participate” (Miller 1994: 31), then how do rhetors participate who are less able to affect these social motives directly or substantially? Miller’s argument that in “‘defining’ a material circumstance as a particular situation type, [rhetors] find a way to engage [their] intentions in it in a socially recognizable and interpretable way” (1994: 30–31) suggests that bloggers writing as individual rather than professional selves might ‘define’ *Canada Reads* as a situation type that differs from those rhetors constrained by overtly institutional forces (e.g., broadcaster, panelist, publisher, bookseller, and cultural critic).

In defining a situation of *Canada Reads* as a certain type, bloggers are also motivated to accommodate the rhetorical situation of the blog and its exigence to cultivate and validate the self. Many Canadians perceive exigencies of *Canada Reads* (a nationally recognizable event), but some individuals feel the “situated motive” (Bawarshi 2003: 37) to act upon these exigencies in a variety of genres: for example, taking up the shortlist announcement in a “book club discussion,” participating in a CR “debate” at a local library, or writing a “winner prediction” in a blog post. While all of these generic uptakes participate in a rhetorical situation of *Canada Reads*, the uptake in a blog seems a particularly fitting response as it enables a rhetor like Fabulous Alex to respond to the public exigencies of this public event in *public*: while a rhetor in a book club speaks to a known group, and a rhetor in a library addresses a bounded totality, the rhetor in a blog may imagine (and perhaps actualize) a public audience. These different means to participate in *Canada Reads* underscore Freedman’s argument that uptake is not “automatic,” but the “taking of an object” from “a set of possibles” (2002: 48). Bloggers’ genre selection—choosing the “winner prediction” in a blog instead of a different genre to act on exigencies of *Canada Reads*—affects the ways in which these rhetors can act within a rhetorical situation; as Anis Bawarshi argues, genres not only help rhetors to “articulate motives or desires” through writing, but also help rhetors to “obtain motives and desires to write” (2003: 12). By taking up the blog, a “cultural artifact” (Bawarshi 2003: 41; Miller 1994: 164) with its exigence of self-cultivation and validation, rhetors are motivated to participate in a rhetorical situation of *Canada Reads* in a way that expresses and legitimizes the self.

I now turn to uptakes by three bloggers: Fabulous Alex and James Koole, who both wrote posts about *Canada Reads* 2005, and John Mutford, who engaged with *Canada Reads* 2006 in multiple entries of different genres. How does each blogger construe the public event as a situation type? What exigencies do their posts act upon, and specifically, how does the blog’s exigence to cultivate and validate the self varyingly motivate their public social actions? While the bloggers’ recognition of situation and exigencies and their subsequent performances of self share some similarities, their varying responses, seen at the level of blog post, reinforce how genre is mobilized as “a site of differentiation rather than regimen” (Giltrow 2007b).



As I will argue, Fabulous Alex's posts on *Canada Reads* suggest how each post's public engagements and genre selection contribute to a self portrait; James' entry illustrates just how complexly situated bloggers' social actions may be; and Muford's posts foreground how differently situated exigencies can become interdependent when experienced as rhetorical motive.

#### 4.2 "New additions": Refining a portrait of self as public reader

Fabulous Alex writes two posts on *Canada Reads 2005*, each of which are links in two genre sequences: the book brawl, where her post becomes part of the "long, ramified, intertextual and intergeneric" (Freadman 2002: 40) sequence of uptakes by its public, and her blog, which includes other posts about reading. Her first post is an interpretation of a CBC news article promoting the upcoming CBC event (CBC 2005, February 21), and the second an uptake of the 2005 winner's announcement. The full text of her initial entry is as follows:

Tuesday, February 22, 2005

##### **Battle of Books**

I stumbled over this article today: [Feisty lit battle Canada Reads kicks off Monday](#)

So, new additions to my "to read" list:

**Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*.**

**Rockbound by Frank Parker Day.**

**Mairuth Sarsfield's *No Crystal Stair*.**

**Leonard Cohen's *Beautiful Losers*.**

**Volkswagen Blues by Jacques Poulin**

Side note:

Maybe Margaret Atwood is not really on my "to read" list...we won't go any further into that though.

Posted by Fabulous Alex at 8:14 PM 0 comments ("Battle")

Alex seizes the upcoming CR event as a rhetorical occasion for self construction, an opportunity to add to her ongoing portrait of self as avid reader. Significantly, the news article offers various details about the book brawl (including when it airs, how it works, who the celebrity panelists are), yet Alex's uptake focuses only on the article's mention of the five short-listed works and their authors. While other audiences of this news article might approach the material circumstances of *Canada Reads* as a CBC spectacle of national pride or perhaps a celebrity debate, Alex seems to define the rhetorical situation as a reading event (a typification that other rhetors would recognize), and accordingly directs attention to the five titles, which, as reading recommendations, meet her motivations as public reader.



Fabulous Alex's post is not really about the *Canada Reads* shortlist but about her mediated self. Accordingly, to meet the blog's exigence of self-cultivation and validation, she selects the "to read" list" genre, a genre that she has engaged in previous blog posts, for part of her generic performance of self as public reader is a reading list that she updates. The five *Canada Reads* works are, in fact, "new additions" to this list, a descriptor that recalls her prior posts (2005, February 18; 2005, February 21), and thus highlights that this entry is an interpretant not only of the CBC news article but also of her earlier blog posts.<sup>15</sup> In marking the differently situated texts that prompt her uptake, she forges her post as a link in both a genre sequence of her blog and a genre sequence of *Canada Reads*.

In the context of *Canada Reads*, the to read list can be seen as a generic uptake that affirms the contrivance of the CBC news article to promote the reading event, for through this utterance, Alex publicly declares her intention to participate by reading the works, a declaration that serves the CR exigence to promote literacy. However, at the same time, she qualifies this declaration with a "side note," a modification to her to read list that she may not read Margaret Atwood's dystopic tale, *Oryx and Crake*. This aside about Atwood's work builds the nation by imagining a particular kind of national public: Canadians who read, watch, or listen to texts about Canadian literature and are thus 'insiders' to the writer's status as a now ubiquitous icon ("we won't go any further into that though").<sup>16</sup> Alex re-positions her imagined public from the broader one of *Canada Reads*, those with an *interest* in Canadian literature, to the narrower one of readers with specialized *knowledge* of Canadian literature, and in so doing, refines her self presentation as a member of this second public.

A week later, Fabulous Alex again participates as public rhetor by writing a second post about *Canada Reads*. This time, the text that prompts her uptake is the 2005 winner's announcement on the CR website (CBC 2005, December 28), which she links to with the words "defender's speech":

Monday, February 28, 2005

**Canada Reads Finalist Announced**

Drum Roll, please...Rockbound by Frank Parker Day.

I am not sure I feel inclined to read it, but I may take a look at it next time I am at the library. Even the defender's speech isn't very compelling...  
posted by Fabulous Alex at 11:40 AM 0 Comments: ("Canada")

15. Fabulous Alex takes up her "to read" list in later posts as well (2005, February 23; 2005, February 27). In total, she writes five posts that contribute to her reading list between February 18 and 27, 2005.

16. For discussions of how Atwood has become the international literary success who Canadians love to hate, see Ferguson (2001), Huggan (2001), and Moss (2006).

In this post, Alex appears to type the situation as an announcement of a literary winner with a corresponding exigence to read the winning title. In relation to this exigence, she participates in contradictory ways by both re-circulating the announcement to the imagined audience of her post (the CR public and readers of her blog) and stating her intention before these hoped-for voyeurs to perhaps *not* read Day's novel, an undesired and therefore uncontrived interpretant of the CR winner announcement. Her uptake is in the "blog news commentary" genre; while the genre label is my own, the identification of the genre arises from "talk about" genre, or a meta-generic description (Giltrow 2002), by Blood.<sup>17</sup> As with Alex's first post, this utterance—straddling two situations—is both a link in a genre sequence of *Canada Reads* and her blog. Specifically, this instance of a blog news commentary may be read as an uptake of her first post about the literary brawl, with Alex amending her to read list by tentatively crossing out *Rockbound* due to other texts that inform this interpretant: information found on *Amazon.ca* (which she links to with "[Rockbound by Frank Parker Day](#)") and the *Canada Reads*' "[defender's speech](#)."<sup>18</sup> In so doing, she both questions *Canada Reads*' canonical authority, and paints a more nuanced self-portrait, that of avid-yet-*discriminating* reader: she marks herself as a more intimate member of the CR public (one who has taken up two additional texts), and now that she has more information about *Rockbound*, she is less "inclined to read it." While refining her self-portrait within the recurrent situation of the blog by imagining different publics and engaging different genres, Alex simultaneously participates as public rhetor in the situated context of

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17. As noted earlier, Blood describes early "filter-style" blogs that included links and "commentary," a "style" created by pioneer bloggers and used by many "current" bloggers (2000, September 7); Blood's typification is taken up by Herring et al. who describe the contemporary filter blog as containing "observations and evaluations of external, typically public events" (2004). And yet Blood herself offers a broader characterization of these blog ancestors, noting that the "original weblogs" were "a mixture in unique proportions of links, commentary, and personal thoughts and essays" (2000, September 7). The bloggers who write posts about *Canada Reads* sometimes take up public events in entries that meet Blood's description, and other times take up public events or private happenings in posts of different genres; as a result, I propose that Blood's meta-generic explanation of "blog news commentaries," at least as it pertains to "current weblogs," is more productively applied to specific posts rather than to entire blogs.

18. With the text "[Rockbound by Frank Parker Day](#)" (2005, February 28), Alex links to a special page on *Amazon.ca* that features the CR 2005 winner, implicitly encouraging her imagined public to purchase *Rockbound*; further, as a member of the "Amazon Associates Program," an "online affiliate program," Alex earns a percentage of each book purchased as a result of her referral (Amazon 2007). This hoped-for uptake by her audience reveals a financial motivation for Alex to write posts about books. Her original post, however, suggests that this is not Alex's primary rhetorical motive, as she did not link to Amazon Associate pages for any of the five titles listed in that entry.

*Canada Reads* 2005: although the utterances produced by the CBC seek to persuade their imagined public to read the five shortlisted works—particularly the winner, *Rockbound*—as a means to build the nation and positively affect literacy, *this* Canadian reader of Canadian literature intends to read some, but not all, of the celebrities’ reading recommendations.

#### 4.3 “Addicted to reading”: Addressing a trio of situations

Two and a half weeks after Alex wrote this post, another blogger, James Koole, began a post with the following:

**Addicted to Reading**

March 17th, 2005

My name is James, and I have a problem. I’ve recently started reading novels and I think I might be hooked. It started with [Canada Reads](#). The [discussion about](#) Volkswagon [sic] Blues by Jacques Poulin prompted me to go and buy the book which I have to say, I enjoyed quite a bit. (“Addicted”)

In writing this post, James—like Fabulous Alex—shifts from public audience of the *Canada Reads* debates to public rhetor as a means to cultivate and validate his mediated self, an exigence that appears to govern his discourse. While Alex’s posts on the brawl continue to revise an already-under-construction portrait of self as public reader, James’ tongue-in-cheek entry exhibits an apparently new side of his public self: addict, someone recently “hooked” on novels. Instead of participating directly in a rhetorical situation of *Canada Reads*, his post suggests that the earlier situation of the book brawl precipitated a second situation—overcoming addiction—, with an accompanying (flippant) exigence to confess his new habit; this situation of overcoming addiction then overlaps with a third situation of the blog. James’ post simultaneously meets three differently situated sets of exigencies: build the nation and promote literacy; confess his addiction; and further construct his mediated self. The three overlapping situations are visible in the many texts that inform this post as interpretant. First, the situation of *Canada Reads* may be seen in James’ reference to the discussion of one shortlisted title, *Volkswagen Blues* by Jacques Poulin; second, the situation of overcoming his reading addiction is also shown in his uptake of Poulin’s work (the ‘cause’ of his addiction) as well as two other novels (Canadian writer Wayne Johnston’s *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams* and English author Mark Haddon’s *the curious incident of the dog in the night-time*); and third, the situation of his blog may be viewed in his implicit uptake of previous entries in which he does *not* exhibit a self who compulsively reads novels.<sup>19</sup> While James’

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19. James forges contextual links between his post and the literary brawl by providing hyperlinks to three different texts: the main page of *Canada Reads* (“[Canada Reads](#)”), the

post participates only indirectly in the literary brawl, the social action of “Addicted to Reading” is still a link in the complex genre sequence of *Canada Reads*: as nation building, his utterance presents a Canadian reading two Canadian novels (*Volkswagen Blues* and *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams*); as literacy advocacy, James’ self-as-addict demonstrates that *Canada Reads* is an enabler, feeding a love of reading.<sup>20</sup>

James’ humorous choice of interpretant to address this trio of situations is one that compels self disclosure, the “addict admission,”—a typically oral genre associated with meetings attended by recovering addicts (e.g., Alcoholics Anonymous) of abusive substances *other* than literature. His genre selection is both imitative and innovative. On the one hand, in the context of the blog, James’ self-presentation is not original, for bloggers elsewhere engage this genre for revelations of self arising from other rhetorical situations in which certain activities result in addictive behaviour: “My name is dmmgmfm and I’m a Blogaholic” headlines one post (Laurie 2006, December 17); and another blogger composes a headline, “Hello. My Name is Suzy and I have a Problem,” followed by a confession, “I am a workaholic” (Suzy 2006, June 10). On the other hand, no other rhetor that I found met dual exigencies of the blog and *Canada Reads 2005* with a post in this genre: James’ social action constructs a public reader who is differentiated from self-portraits such as Fabulous Alex’s, yet recognizable in its typification.

#### 4.4 “Discussion forum”: Acting on dual exigencies of self and public expression

While uptakes of *Canada Reads* texts by Fabulous Alex and James Koole are primarily driven by an exigence of the blog to cultivate and validate the self, blogger John Mutford’s uptakes of *Canada Reads 2006* are influenced but not dominated by the social motive of self-care. Alex and James’s posts are about themselves: they each address their imagined audience predominantly as witness to their online exhibitionism. Mutford, in comparison, attends to an imagined public of *Canada Reads* whose anticipated uptakes of his posts may positively affect exigencies of the literary brawl. Unlike Alex and James, who also write posts on topics other than reading, Mutford writes entries that all focus on his passion for books. He promotes his blog, *The Book Mine Set*, meta-generically as an “*Online book discussion forum*,” a forum hosted not by a professional critic but by a hobbyist and amateur writer, a mediated self who loves “reading” and “discussing books.” Through self-described “Reader’s Diary” posts (in-process responses to what he is

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overview of *Volkswagen Blues* (“[discussion about](#)”), and—later on in his entry—the celebration of *Rockbound* (“[the Canada Reads winner](#)”).

20. Although James does not explain how he came to select Johnston’s novel, it was shortlisted for *Canada Reads 2003*, when it lost to Hubert Aquin’s *Next Episode/Prochain Épisode*.

reading), entries about his own writing experiences, and posts on reading-related news and events, Mutford fosters a bookish environment, and he cultivates a “discussion forum” by inviting his imagined public to participate in the comments section of each post—he poses open-ended questions within his entries, responds to his actualized audience’s comments, and even comments on his own posts to generate further discussion. As a blog, *The Book Mine Set* acts upon an exigence to cultivate and validate the self (here, Mutford as public reader and book discussant), and as a forum, it also serves a social motive to foster discussion amongst an imagined-then-actualized public of book lovers.<sup>21</sup>

A self-described “book geek,” Mutford refers to *Canada Reads* as his literary “Superbowl” because “the game of Canada Reads” appeals to him (2006, February 19). Its appeal is no doubt heightened by the rhetorical motives that prompted him to create and foster *The Book Mine Set*: his uptakes enable him to participate in *Canada Reads* not merely as audience but as public rhetor, and simultaneously, to act within the motivating context of his blog-forum, with its dual exigencies of regular self and public expression. He typifies the rhetorical situation of *Canada Reads* as a cultural “game,” and accordingly selects genres from popular culture and sports to construct various aspects of a mediated self, each of which can publicly participate in different ways. Mutford’s mediated performance is both compelling and comprehensible, since his chosen genres are steeped in sociability. Taking up the 2006 shortlist announcement first, he writes posts that he meta-generically labels “reader’s diaries” of the competing titles (e.g., 2006 January 4; 2006 January 10; 2006 February 5).<sup>22</sup> These entries cultivate and validate a self as public reader, as do Fabulous Alex’s “‘to read’ list” and “blog news commentary” and James’ “addict confession,” but since the three bloggers have different rhetorical motives and select different uptake genres, the result is different public readers. Mutford next takes up the same shortlist announcement in two new posts—“Canada Reads – Part One (Who Should Win)” and “Canada Reads – Part Two (Who Will Win)” —, which are recognizable from similar generic instances when critics predict who “should” win (based on merit) and who “will” win (based on politics and other factors)

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21. While Fabulous Alex and James Koole’s blogs do not have their own public, Mutford’s *The Book Mine Set* cultivates an imagined public that is eventually actualized by uptakes in various texts, voices, genres, and media that together, produce a public through “reflexively circulating discourse” (Warner 2002: 11–12). Mutford’s success in realizing a public for his blog-forum is due in large part to his extensive uptakes of *Canada Reads* 2006 and 2007.

22. When the 2006 shortlist was announced, Mutford had already read two of the five titles, *A Complicated Kindness* by Miriam Toews and *Cocksure* by Mordecai Richler. He wrote multi-post reader’s diaries for the remaining three titles in anticipation of the *Canada Reads* debates: Frances Itani’s *Deafening*, Joseph Boyden’s *Three Day Road*, and Al Purdy’s *Rooms for Rent in the Outer Planets*.

an upcoming sports or cultural event (e.g., *The Superbowl* or *The Oscars*). These posts enable him to cultivate a public self as *Canada Reads* expert, self-positioning vastly different from Alex and James' mediated relation to the event, yet necessary to host a credible online discussion about the 2006 book brawl. His genre selection and assumed subject positions—confident reader, *Canada Reads* expert—lend Mutford the authority to then take up the five-day literary debate in posts written in the “daily recap” genre (“Canada Reads – Day One” to “Canada Reads – Day Five”), as described by one of his respondents in a comment (Mutford 2006, April 20). Through these recaps—his recapitulation or summary of events—he adopts subject positions of “play-by-play announcer” and “colour commentator” for his literary Superbowl, self-positioning that foregrounds the forum's exigence of public discussion, a discussion that Mutford is motivated to host. His engagement with *Canada Reads* produces texts that hold the potential to circulate his opinions—opinions of a knowledgeable, trustworthy self; opinions that often counter those voiced by the celebrity panelists—within its public, thereby potentially influencing others' views about which book Canadians should read.

The “daily recap” genre (with corresponding announcer/commentator subject positions) would seem an unlikely *sporty* interpretant of texts generated by a *literary* event, but is nevertheless a fitting response to a situation typed as a bookish Superbowl; the rhetorical audience responds positively to Mutford's inventive yet identifiable pairing. Evidence of an actualized public is found in 31 comments from eight rhetors, four of whom comment four or more times throughout the brawl-related posts (as well, other rhetors might read one or more posts, but choose not to respond publicly). Mutford adds to the sense of a “discussion forum” by participating in the comments section with a total of 14 uptakes, either responding to rhetors or taking up his own posts. I argue that in his move to public rhetor, Mutford addresses a situational exigence not voiced by the CBC—the CR public needs a means to participate actively—, which is then affirmed by his realized public. As one commenter states, the *Canada Reads 2006* site offers “little to really engage or entice a potential participant” (Mutford 2006, April 13). The week of the debate, the same commenter writes a post on his own blog that directs people to Mutford's blog-forum:

Local book blog [The Book Mine Set](#) is offering up some wonderful commentary and a chance to register your own opinions.

For bibliophiles, CBC fans, and bloggers alike, it's worth checking out.

And CBC should take a note – their own [Canada Reads](#) site offers nothing as interactive and enjoyable. (Robert 2006, April 19)<sup>23</sup>

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23. The CBC did note the exigence for the CR public to participate more directly in the book brawl; the following year (*Canada Reads 2007*) a discussion board was added to the CR website

Mutford's posts actively "engage" and "entice" public participants, inviting audiences to make their own predictions, review the literary works themselves, critique or applaud the celebrity panelists, suggest alternative shortlists, and propose other formats for *Canada Reads*. His social actions together also meet other exigencies of the book brawl, build the nation and promote literacy, by bringing together a public of Canadian readers to share their opinions about Canadian literature. Significantly, Mutford's entries, unlike those of Fabulous Alex and James, actively work towards the most publicly promoted exigence of the book brawl, choose a book for the nation: his uptake of each public text in the formal genre sequence of *Canada Reads* with posts of his own fosters a parallel debate to that of the celebrity panelists as to which book the nation might read together. In so doing, he takes the CBC's public spectacle of democracy that is typically performed *for* the people, and hosts a debate *by* the people. Mutford's multiple uptakes of *Canada Reads* suggest just how complexly rhetors may experience rhetorical motives, for not only does an exigence for public discussion (shared by both the forum and book brawl) enable him to construct different facets of his mediated self, but these self-presentations are necessary in order to act upon this dually situated exigence of public participation.

## 5. Summary and further considerations

I have argued that viewing a generic utterance, a blog post, as participating in one situation and acting only upon its exigencies provides insufficient context to comprehend the nuances of its social action; more broadly, this paper underscores the need to contextualize social actions through critical theories such as situational rhetoric, uptake, and publics. By recasting the blog as a collection of generic utterances and examining posts through the lens of situational rhetoric, we can socially situate blogging as social action and study material evidence of how mediated selves are constituted rhetorically. Fabulous Alex, James, and Mutford all display selves as public readers through their engagement with *Canada Reads*, and yet while their actualized audience comprehends these exhibits because the uptake genres are recognizable, the self-portraits are also quite distinct: an avid but discerning reader of Canadian literature, a reader newly addicted to novels, and a "book geek" hosting an online CR discussion. While public blogs by individuals are, as Miller and Shepherd argue, sites of exhibitionism, pressing upon an exigence to continually cultivate and validate the self, only by directing attention to the blog post can we

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with ten different discussion threads (all initiated by the CR team) that together resulted in 110 comments from an actualized public (CBC "Your Say" 2007, September 20).



begin to glimpse the intentionality of each mediated self, seen in the varying publics engaged, situations defined, interpretants selected, and exigencies affected.

In proposing that a single text, a post, responds to exigencies of more than one rhetorical situation, I do not wish to claim that this is unique to the blog. Rather, I suspect that participation in dual situations occurs in other public genres where rhetors face exigencies of regular expression of self and/or public: I might characterize these as public serial genres. Consider, for instance, the afternoon radio call-in show, the daytime television talk show, or the monthly magazine editorial. While each individual segment or editorial responds to a particular rhetorical situation (e.g., a high-profile instance of bullying in schools, an announcement of a national budget, or a launch of an author's latest novel), each generic instance also arises from a recurrent situation in which people determine the topic of the next segment or editorial, while at the same time attending to other exigencies associated with the genre as typified response. The resulting utterance must be what Bitzer would describe as a "fitting response" to the situational demands of both the host genre and the chosen topic.<sup>24</sup> For instance, a team brainstorms ideas for next week's slate of radio segments, knowing that their concepts must speak compellingly both to the exigencies of whatever rhetorical situations they select (e.g., a rise in childhood obesity; a recent debacle in local politics) and to the social motives for the host genre such as "our public needs to be informed" and "our public must be given a voice." Each individual segment is an instance of a genre—Monday's show, as an example, includes "a health check-up" addressing childhood obesity; Tuesday includes "a political panel discussion" on local politics—that presses upon the exigencies of the radio segment and the rhetorical situation of its topic. So too with public blog posts: the post's genre (returning to Gurak et al.'s examples—a "rant" or an "essay"—or from my own examples—a "to read" list, an "addict confession," or a "daily recap") responds to differently situated exigencies belonging to its host genre, the blog, and its situated topic.

Warner's theory of publics, tied to genre theory through Freedman's notion of uptake, has broad implications for how we approach public genres and their rhetors and audiences: examples range from CMC genres such as "profiles" on social networking sites, "corporate blogs" on business websites, and "travel videos" on sites like *YouTube*, to more established genres in other media such as short story collections, documentary films, and television newscasts. An emphasis on the public-ness of such genres requires seeing a generic utterance as imagining a public and then through its circulation, actualizing or failing to actualize a public.

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24. Utterances in (typically) private serial genres such as the diary may also negotiate exigencies of more than one situation.



An emphasis on publics entails viewing people as members of a myriad of publics, participating as both audiences and rhetors, who realize publics through the rhetorical act of uptake (by “paying attention”) and who re-imagine and re-circulate publics through texts of their own. As bloggers’ public posts on *Canada Reads* demonstrate, a public view of generic uptake extends our understanding of the sociability of the self, a self not only continually articulated through a complex array of situated social actions but also through ongoing engagements with a multitude of publics.

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# “Working consensus” and the rhetorical situation

## The homeless blog’s negotiation of public meta-genre

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Examining uptakes of the “homeless blog” (a weblog written by a person who is experiencing or has experienced homelessness), this essay investigates constraints facing marginalized rhetors in their attempts to address rhetorical exigencies in innovative ways via “online genres.” Such rhetors face an environment of public meta-discourse in which readers may mischaracterize their texts according to analogous or “antecedent” (Jamieson 1975) genres. This essay proposes that to understand how rhetors negotiate constraints on their social action and build consensus about their discourse in such conditions, it is useful to consider public meta-genre as informed by “face-work,” Erving Goffman’s (1955; 1959) theory of how subjects engaged in self-presentation negotiate “working consensus” (Goffman 1959), provisionally-agreed-upon understanding of situations and participants.

Five months ago, Barbieux, started a Web log about his life ([TheHomelessGuy.net](#)). His goals for the “*blog*” were modest. Mainly, he wanted to show people a different side to homelessness.

...

The blog started as a whim. He’d heard about *blogging*, *the diarist-style writing that has swept the Web*, through friends. (emphasis mine)

(Luo 2003, Mar. 17)

A few weeks ago, Anya Peters was homeless and living in a car, .... Her contact with the outside world was through *an online diary*.

But this *blog*, published under the name of Wandering Scribe, was picked up by readers around the world and has provided a remarkable way out of her homelessness. She has written her own *escape story*.

The story of her homelessness and her previous life is going to be turned into a book, with a publishing deal signed and the hardback scheduled to reach the bookshops next Spring. (emphasis mine)

(Coughlan 2006, May 31)

[Gary] Trudeau draws a street person going to collect his e-mail at the public library, where addresses had been handed out free to the homeless. Looking for potential employers' responses to his job resume, he posts an address that puts the hype about the universal democracy built into the technoscientific information system into perspective: `lunatic@street_level`.

(Haraway 1997: 6)

## 1. Introduction

Since their introduction, email, blogs, and other internet technologies have generated an enduring climate of optimism about new rhetorical opportunities for marginalized people: opportunities for reaching hard-to-access readers and listeners, for bringing new voices and discussion to the public sphere, for writing one's way out of difficult circumstances, for writing one's way into different subject positions. Rhetors and readers see the internet as a field of generic innovation, where features like the speed and low cost of transmission and the absence of face-to-face contact offer ways to overcome constraints faced by existing print and oral genres—or to inflect genres with new characteristics and purposes. Resulting innovations are seen as a powerful influence on the evolution of genres such as the diary. In this essay, I examine conditions influencing genre innovation and evolution by considering how rhetors and their readers negotiate public meta-discourse about the blogs, or *weblogs*, frequently-updated websites with postings often arranged in reverse chronological order (Walker 2005). I do so by directing attention to the “homeless blog,” a blog written by a person who is experiencing or has experienced homelessness, dealing explicitly with experiences and issues of homelessness. Conditions influencing the homeless blog and genres like it—heightened vulnerability to competing conceptions of the rhetorical situation, an upsurge of public meta-generic activity, and exigencies of self-presentation—require a new way of theorizing negotiations over generic innovation and evolution. Erving Goffman's theory of “face-work” in social encounters (1955; 1959), I propose, offers rhetorical genre theory a way to follow how readers and rhetors build, resist, and protect localized provisional agreements, “working consensus” (Goffman 1959: 10) about genres in these conditions.

## 2. Diaries and cardboard signs: New rhetorical situations and “antecedent genres”

In the terms provided by Lloyd Bitzer, internet users behave and talk as if something has changed in the “rhetorical situation”—a situation in which a socially recognized



exigence, or "imperfection marked by urgency" (Bitzer 1968: 6), is seen as able to be modified through "fitting" (1968: 6) discursive responses. As Donna Haraway's description of Gary Trudeau's "comic" portrayal of the homeless email user suggests, technologies like email alter the rhetorical situation by appearing to offer new ways to meet existing exigencies. Homeless bloggers and their sympathetic readers have deemed the homeless blog a fitting response to existing exigencies of homelessness: the absence of a permanent and private home and material resources, policies failing to address the causes of homelessness and its remedies, and homeless people's lack of meaningful connection with community and civil society. Through the homeless blog, bloggers can describe personal experiences, give advice, solicit aid, answer questions, encourage debate, interview other homeless people, draw attention to policy changes, and critique homeless services in ways not previously possible. These activities are newly viable because the Internet and blogging software offer the chance to speak publicly and garner publicity, the ability to hyperlink with influential texts such as newspaper articles, removal from face-to-face contact, and an environment where skilled narration of personal experience—especially of a unique personal story—confers new social capital. Kevin Barbieux's *The Homeless Guy*, begun in Nashville in 2002, was the first homeless blog to receive significant attention for taking advantage of these opportunities; reporter Jacob Ogles has called it, in *Wired Magazine*, "the most popular homeless blog on the web" (2006). Since the start of Barbieux's blog, many other homeless or formerly homeless people—like Anya Peters—have, in turn seeing the homeless blog as a fit response, begun writing their own homeless blogs: *Norsehorse's Old Home Turf*, *The Homeless Guy in NYC*, *View From the Sidewalk*, *Homeless in Abbotsford*, *Homeless in Long Beach*, *Jamie's Big Voice*, and an ever-growing list of others.<sup>1</sup>

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1. *The Homeless Guy* has been followed by homeless blogs in the United States, Britain, and Canada, including first-wave homeless blogs Vermont-based *Norsehorse's Old Home Turf* (Morgan Brown) and New York-based *The Homeless Guy in NYC* (James Christian). More recently, perhaps in response to renewed media and public discourse about the genre, another wave of homeless blogs has appeared and garnered attention in the media and in blogging circles. *View From the Sidewalk* chronicles the homelessness and recovery of Michael Brown and his family in North Carolina; *Homeless in Abbotsford* follows writer and homeless advocate James Breckenridge's experience of homelessness in Western Canada; *Homeless in Long Beach* contains "alyceclover's" memories and observations of homelessness in California. And they continue to emerge. Perhaps the most well-known since *The Homeless Guy* is *Jamie's Big Voice* out of Britain, whose name echoes the pioneer street paper *The Big Issue*. *Jamie's Big Voice* began when its author, James McCoy, was approached by homeless advocacy group Crisis and democracy advocacy group Hansard to write an "election blog" (McCoy 2005: 4) during the 2005 British election, but McCoy decided to continue blogging after the election, asserting in his tagline that his blog is "A voice battling for homeless people. The blog does not stop just because the election is over."

Their ambitions, however, are subject to contestation as they encounter competing constructions of the rhetorical situation which see homelessness as an exigence with a different range of fitting solutions—job-hunting, networking, and therapeutic genres—or which see homelessness as an exigence requiring non-discursive action. The central problem the homeless blog raises—confirming genre scholars’ concerns with genre stability and change online, and with the correspondence between “online” and “offline” genres—is the relationship between writing subjects, new rhetorical opportunities afforded by technology, and older genres considered analogous or “antecedent” genres (Jamieson 1975). In “Antecedent Genre as Rhetorical Constraint” (1975), Jamieson suggested that when people encounter a *new* rhetorical situation, one without a typified solution ready to hand, they turn to older rhetorical situations, drawing on the “antecedent” genre that worked in those situations. Jamieson’s observations are useful not only for thinking about new exigencies: they can also be useful, I suggest, for considering situations in which an exigence previously existed, but in which an event or development (like the development of new technologies) suggests new openings for discursive solutions to the exigence, for new “social actions” as Miller came to later describe genres (Miller 1994). Jamieson’s key observation about antecedent genres was that they could constrain social action in the new rhetorical situation because traces of the old genre might be unsuited to their new purpose. She observed, for instance, that Americans complained about the Congressional Reply to the President’s State of the Union Address because they sensed that the antecedent (the British parliament’s reply to the “King’s Speech”) was incommensurate with American political ideals (Jamieson 1975: 406). Americans interpreted the new genre—the Congressional Reply—in terms of an older, familiar genre.

The possibilities for antecedent genres to act as constraint rest on the dynamics of genre recognition and “uptake.” Anne Freadman usefully proposes that the bi-directional relationship between a pair of texts (a text and its “uptake” or “interpretant text”) has the power to confirm or deny the status of a genre, to “block” its social action.<sup>2</sup>

...The text is contrived to secure a certain class of uptakes, and the interpretant, or the uptake text, confirms its generic status by conforming itself to this contrivance. It does so, by—say—“taking it as” an invitation or a request. By the same token, however, the uptake text has the power not to so confirm this generic status, which it may modify minimally, or even utterly, by taking its object as some other kind. (2002: 40)

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2. To adapt Freadman’s own example of the last judicial execution in Australia, a court sentence is an “uptake” of the stories told in evidence, the personal memoirs, films, and newspaper stories of being involved in the court case are uptakes of the controversial sentence and punishment, and her own critical article is an uptake of this range of texts.

Freadman's theory of uptake recognizes the vulnerability of genre to local moments and responses, including responses which "take" a genre as derived from an antecedent.

Arguably, genre innovations online are especially vulnerable to being "taken" as new versions of antecedent genres; definitions of online discourse have invariably tried to explain the "new" in terms of the "old"—leading to explanations of the blog as a kind of online diary, for instance. "The politics of naming," McNeill points out in her study of the blog/diary relationship, "are particularly potent when generic terrain is emerging, shifting, and unstable, as it was (and to some extent still is) online as the Web became an established discursive location" (this volume). She notes both the impulse to describe blogs as diaries, and bloggers, strongly invested in the idea of the blog as *new*, rejecting such characterizations (this volume). Uptakes of homeless blogs draw attention to a process of interpretation similar to that noted by Jamieson and McNeill; homeless blogs are often described in terms of antecedent or analogous genres and sometimes resist those characterizations. As with the complaints that Jamieson observed about the Congressional Reply, meta-discursive references to the antecedent genres at work in the homeless blog may challenge the genre's status. Two examples from Kevin Barbieux's blog show this dynamic at work. From the beginning, Barbieux asserts in his blog banner<sup>3</sup> and in blog posts that his purpose in blogging is to

relate to you the realities of homelessness. But there is certainly more to a homeless person than being homeless, and this may be the best thing this blog could accomplish – a greater awareness about the whole-ness of homeless people. Not every post will be about homelessness, but they will all be about a homeless person, me. For some people it will be their first experience with the "me" identity within a homeless person. Welcome to My world, a subsidiary of Our world.

He casts his blog as an autobiographical act (all his posts will be about himself), but in the service of advocacy (to show the "whole-ness" of homeless people.) Over time, in the kinds of posts I've identified above—advice for non-homeless people, up-to-date commentary on municipal policies, and so on—*The Homeless Guy* expands its civic mandate beyond showing "the realities of homelessness" to proposing real changes in how communities deal with those realities. As such Barbieux's blog is an innovative, unanticipated use of the personal blog whose exigence, as Miller and Shepherd describe it, is "self-cultivation and validation" (Miller & Shepherd 2004).<sup>4</sup>

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3. This statement appeared in a sidebar (a portion of the blog on the side of the blog posts, that appeared no matter when readers visited.) A version of this statement would later become the banner for his blog. Only in the past year has it ceased to be visible on the blog.

4. In "Public engagements and public arrangements of blog genres" (2007), Kathryn Grafton and I explore how bloggers may address this exigence not just through community building

Talk about the antecedent genres of *The Homeless Guy*, however, sometimes challenges this image of the genre. Barbieux's innovative use of the personal blog for advocacy has often been miscast as an "online diary." Reminding us of the diary's "image problem" (it is "a form stereotyped as pedestrian, domestic, and—perhaps worst of all—feminine"), McNeill suggests bloggers may reject such miscasting as a threat to a blogging community ethos of novelty and exploration (this volume). But an early *Salon.com* uptake of Barbieux's blog suggests how uptakes interpreting the blog as a diary may do more than threaten community ethos. Within two months of his beginning the blog, Barbieux attracted the attention of journalist Noah Shachtman, one of several journalists who would write about *The Homeless Guy*. When Shachtman reports Barbieux as having written that his "intention is to legitimize homeless people" (Shachtman 2002: 1), he does acknowledge the social action to which Barbieux's blog aspires. However, Shachtman introduces *The Homeless Guy* as an "Internet diary," beginning his article,

If you want to know what cereal a total stranger eats for breakfast or how he feels about invading Iraq, there are hundreds of thousands of *Internet journals*, popularly known as *blogs*, waiting for you. But to find out where the best soup kitchen is in Nashville, Tenn., or how it feels to pick up trash until dawn for \$30, or what it's like to sleep in a '71 Ford Granada, you'll have to go to Kevin Barbieux's *Internet diary* for answers. (Shachtman 2002: 1) (emphasis mine)

This meta-generic description of a blog as an "Internet diary" claims the diary as a key antecedent of the blog (in the rest of the article, Shachtman calls it a journal five times, and refers to it as a blog only twice). It also characterizes "Internet diary" as a text written by a stranger, full of mundane details and personal opinion, feelings, and experience. While such texts might feed readers' prurient curiosity about others' personal habits or feelings, the diaries/journals that Shachtman describes do not commonly legitimize or even speak for the class of people to which the diarist belongs. Thus, although Shachtman's article gestures to the exigence that *The Homeless Guy* seeks to address, it firmly associates *The Homeless Guy* with an antecedent genre that is not associated with that exigence or ambition. It thus threatens to "block" the social action of the genre.

Online texts like Barbieux's blog, in fact, may become subject to mischaracterization at multiple junctures because new technologies arise which invite new innovations and, consequently, new identifications with antecedent genres—identifications that may contradict the author's understanding of what he or she is doing with his or

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(as Miller and Shepherd observe many bloggers proposing (2004)), but also by inserting themselves into the "publics" (Warner 2002) of other texts and reimagining those publics. In this way as well the homeless blog can be seen as an innovation on the personal blog.

her writing. The "affordances" (Norman 2002)<sup>5</sup> of the internet and digital text give rise to new software applications that can be added to homepages, different kinds of blogs, social networking site profiles, and other familiar genres—in theory enhancing texts but also, potentially, invoking antecedent genres in ways that may undermine the texts' social action. Examples of such technological developments include "micro-blogging" services like Twitter,<sup>6</sup> meta-tagged photo streams on Flickr,<sup>7</sup> and, as I discuss below, donation buttons linking texts to online payment services like PayPal. Such new technologies enable further innovation (texts can be more up-to-date, more searchable, more visual, more interactive) but also invite new comparisons between new kinds of writing and speaking online and more familiar, antecedent genres.

Barbieux adopts technologically-enabled innovations in his blog; he draws on affordances to enhance the social action of his text in the same way one might use a new material or technological development to build a more durable billboard or more aerodynamic bicycle. When he does so, however, he faces reader reactions that interpret these innovations in terms of analogous activities or antecedent genres in potentially constraining ways. After the blog's initial success in 2002, Barbieux added one such innovation, a "PayPal" button,<sup>8</sup> to his blog—a link which allowed visitors to make donations to Barbieux electronically. This significant innovation enabled Barbieux in theory to make money from writing—to *be* a writer in a way not usually permitted to homeless subjects (one of whose defining traits in stereotypical terms is unemployment and lack of industry).

The PayPal button was not a central feature of the blog, but the reader commentary it drew suggests that for some readers it coloured views of the blog overall. One interpretation of this innovation—including Barbieux's own—associated *The Homeless Guy* with literary blogs, whose writers, bloggers hoping to make money from their writing outside of established publishing channels, had already been

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5. Norman's interest was in helping designers, but as Miller and Shepherd point out in "Questions for genre theory from the Blogosphere" (this volume), his observations about how affordances allow and foster some actions—how paper affords different activities than wood or glass—can also help us to understand the relationship between genre and medium.

6. A social networking, "micro-blogging" service that allows users to instantly send short (140 character) updates via IM (instant messaging) or (SMS) short message service to their blog or to people who have signed up for the updates.

7. A photo-based social networking service that allows users to post photos, "tag" photos with key words, and search for photos with tags of interest. Currently, for instance, one can "geotag" photos—that is, tag photos with their geographical location—and locate photos of a region taken by other users by clicking on a map.

8. A link through which people can easily send money to the blogger through an online money transfer service called PayPal.

accepting donations from readers. These uptakes described the PayPal button as a “tip jar” (Barbieux, 2002, Sept. 19; Humphrey, 2003, Mar. 17), promoting a view of the blog as a performance or service warranting reward. Others who responded to the PayPal button addition—by emailing Barbieux and posting comments on the Web—cast *The Homeless Guy* as a kind of panhandling or “spanging” (spare changing.) People publicly responded (for and against) to what they perceived as the electronic equivalent of the panhandler’s sign or outstretched cup, in spite of the fact that Barbieux had, early on, explicitly criticized panhandlers as drug addicts, actively discouraging people from giving them money. One blogger, for instance, wrote of a homeless friend: “He wants to start a sparechange website, but it looks as if he was beaten to the punch” (Daosu, 2002, Aug. 31); the donation capability, according to this uptake, makes the blog a “sparechange website.”

Such responses suggest that innovations in writing permitted by new technologies can be reaccented via identification with antecedents (blogs identified as “diaries” or “panhandling,” weblog “posts” about the environment identified as “articles” or “essays” rather than blog posts, or SharePoint “My Site” pages<sup>9</sup> in the workplace treated as “Facebook” pages.) Those identifications are shaped by, and in turn shape, perceptions of how a rhetor is addressing a rhetorical exigence. If we believe that homeless rhetors are likely to address homelessness through pathos and personal narrative, or that environmentalists are likely to do so through information and argument, these beliefs about “homeless people” or “environmentalists” will inform how we interpret innovative writing in terms of antecedent genres. In turn, interpreting such writing in these ways—seeing evidence that these are the kinds of writing these subjects produce—reaffirms those beliefs.

### Street newspapers and tip jars: Resisting uptakes

Barbieux’s responses to these uptakes of his PayPal innovation are suggestive. They draw attention to two responses to mischaracterizations: rhetors may reject outright meta-genre linking their texts with antecedents (as McNeill observes (this volume) or may themselves invoke alternate antecedents. Demonstrating the second, Barbieux told Shachtman and a *USA Today* reporter (Luo 2003, Mar. 17) that he had previously edited and published a street newspaper called *Homeword*. He writes the same in a September 9, 2002 blog post (a month after the Shachtman article), offering

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9. SharePoint is a Microsoft web application used for both internet and intranet sites. One application in SharePoint is the “My Site” application, which allows for each person in a network to have a page that lists interests and hobbies, provides links to colleagues’ My Site profiles, lists skills in a searchable database, and so on. While this does work similarly to a Facebook profile page, My Site also allows people to share documents and to set up discussion forums, wikis, and “workspaces”; in other words, unlike Facebook, it is designed as a workplace tool.

the street newspaper as an antecedent genre alternative to the self-focused diary. From the 1990s, street newspapers, such as those now united in the North American Street Newspaper Association, have been a familiar site on the streets of many major American cities. Lee Stringer, a formerly homeless man who began selling, then writing for and eventually editing a street newspaper, had brought this antecedent (and the idea of the homeless writer) to the public eye in 1998 in his memoir *Grand Central Winter: Stories From the Street*. Unlike the diary, the street newspaper often includes a mix of personal narratives (the voices of homeless people themselves) and alternative journalism focused on homelessness issues, and is thus an antecedent recognizable as providing "a voice for a once unheard community" (Van Lier 1999: 16).

In a September 10, 2002 post on his blog, Barbieux points to another antecedent genre, the political pamphlet or flyer. He tells readers that he has recommended blogging to his friend who used to publish a "flyer" or "pamphlet" that offered a counter-narrative to the one produced by a local mission, the Nashville Rescue Mission (Barbieux 2002, Sept. 10). Like the street newspaper, this antecedent situates the blog in a set of public genres that speak out on behalf of others. Writing of how his friend takes up his recommendation, Barbieux tells a story of genre evolution much different from "*diary becomes internet diary*":

Well, here it is, Jack's Mission Blog. It is Jack's Mission to inform you about life at the Mission. Compare both the Mission's web site, and Jack's, and weigh the difference for yourself. (Barbieux 2002, Sept. 10)

This genre talk does not reject the diary (after all, the blog does address exigence in part through diary-like autobiographical writing), but counters assertions that the blog is *simply* a diary, attempting to protect the innovative use of the blog for both self-cultivation/validation and for advocacy. As Barbieux's handling of meta-generic classifications of his blog as a diary shows, in an environment of public meta-generic uptakes, rhetors may clarify or reassert the nature of the genre by invoking multiple antecedents, especially in the face of complaints or competing claims.

The panhandling charge against his blog gets similar though more direct treatment. Barbieux publicly complained in an early post about readers' "confusion" over the character of his blog:

There still seems to be a bit of confusion about me having a PayPal button on this blog. I first became aware of the donation button when I saw it on other blogs, other "non-homeless" blogs. I also found donation buttons on internet service web sites such as b3ta.com.

I am a bit confused as to why there is a difference between my blog and others. *On other sites the PayPal donation button is considered a tip jar, but on my site it's considered panhandling?* This is an obvious double standard and indicative of the prejudice that people have towards homeless people. To bring such things to your attention is one of the reasons I am blogging. (Barbieux 2002, Sept. 19) (emphasis mine)



Offering an alternative model for the genre (it is a performance which might earn “tips”), and calling out the unsympathetic uptakes as “an obvious double standard” and “prejudice,” he reasserts the generic character of his blog: *The Homeless Guy* is responding to exigencies of homelessness not by begging but by raising awareness.

The homeless blog therefore suggests that Jamieson’s observations about antecedent genres as constraint remain relevant to online genres, where technologically-mediated changes appear to present “unprecedented rhetorical situation[s]” which encourage rhetors to turn to past experiences and genres (Jamieson 1975: 408). But it also suggests questions that remain unanswered in Jamieson’s account, and in subsequent accounts of antecedent genres which I discuss below. Though Jamieson characterized antecedent genres as the constraint, we might more properly characterize her observations as showing how meta-generic talk about an antecedent genre may act as a constraint: it is not just the lingering traces of an antecedent, but awareness and discussion of those traces. If meta-generic talk can constrain discourse, how might this potential be heightened in an online environment, where meta-generic activity is vigorous and public in new ways? Especially given the socially and economically marginal positions of some rhetors now seen as being given a “voice” online (Mitra & Watts 2002), how might rhetors’ own participation in this meta-generic activity impact the possibilities for generic innovation and evolution?

### 3. New and improved: Innovation and evolution in theories of online genre

Other studies of genre and the internet have, like this one, been concerned with the relationship between old and new genres. But emphasizing the “newness” of online genres (as in Dillon and Gushrowski’s designation of the personal homepage as the first “uniquely digital” genre (2000)) overlooks the dynamics of uptake. Shepherd and Watters, for example, propose a neat taxonomy of “cybergenres” in which “novel” cybergenres:

may be completely new genres, not based on any genre existing previously in another medium, or they may be based on genres originally replicated in the new medium but which have evolved so far from the original that they are classed as being new genres. (1998: 3)

The homeless blog suggests that such divisions are not as straightforward as they might appear; even something quite new and unanticipated may invite comparisons with what has gone before. Acknowledging meta-discourse about antecedent genres is one way to take up Miller and Shepherd’s invitation to take “a careful look at the nature and sources of stability and recurrence” (this volume) instead of just change and newness.



It is also an opportunity to further rhetorical genre theory's concerns with power and ideology in genre. As Coe et al. (2002) remind us, genre theorists have brought important questions about ideology to the table. Coe et al. identify a move away from genre theory's earlier concerns with providing "access to power and status for disadvantaged students" by teaching them the genres of the powerful toward a concern with the effects on individuals of mastering the genres of power in "coercive" situations (2002: 4). The meta-discursive environment of the internet, I argue, requires returning to the question of access but via newer concerns about subjectivity. Historian Mark Poster (2001) articulates the resilient belief that the access to writing provided by internet technologies can empower writing subjects to move beyond the subject positions to which they are limited in face-to-face contact. Subjects' construction of their identities in "cyberspace," Poster suggests,

does connote a "democratization" of subject constitution because the acts of discourse are not limited to one-way address and are not constrained by the gender and ethnic traces inscribed in face-to-face communications. The magic of the Internet is that it is a technology that puts cultural acts, symbolizations in all forms, in the hands of all participants; it radically decentralizes the positions of speech, publishing, film-making, radio and television broadcasting, in short the apparatuses of cultural production." (2001: 184)<sup>10</sup>

Access to public "cultural acts," to "the apparatuses of cultural production," is here seen as enabling subjects to publicly take on subject positions that they would not otherwise be able to take; moreover, Poster's emphasis that "the acts of discourse are not limited to one-way address" suggests that those who speak back to such acts will support the "subject constitution" that is theoretically enabled. Charles Bazerman, like Poster, sees rhetors as able to take on new subject positions through online acts of discourse. This is because people "develop and form identities through participation in systems of genres within ordered activity systems" (2002: 15), including the genres and activity systems of activist groups which have "provided a major site for the development of individuals as citizens" (2002: 26). The web, Bazerman suggests, introduces new kinds of communication, with the potential for "changing the total ecology of political communication" (2002: 26), and, by implication, for providing new opportunities for rhetors to develop identities as citizens. Genres like the homeless blog suggest that online genres may promise new kinds of subject positions ("citizen," "advocate," "writer"), but that this promise may open such genres up to contestation.

Studies of weblogging, like studies of online genre more generally, offer two main approaches to understanding innovation and evolution in genres like the

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10. Poster originally articulates this position in a 1997 chapter "Cyberdemocracy: Internet and the Public Sphere."

homeless blog. The blog is alternately conceived of by scholars and internet users as a new genre enabled by technology and as a “*remediation*,”<sup>11</sup> or remedying, of existing genres. Blog studies of both types gesture toward how older responses to rhetorical exigence inform new possibilities, but raise questions about how to account for responses to genres like the homeless blog. Miller and Shepherd in “Blogging as Social Action” (2004), tracing the early evolution of the blog in the late 1990s, see the emergence of a *new* genre for *existing* exigency; they suggest that in the case of the “personal” blog, “we can examine what the evolutionary biologist would call speciation, the development of a new genre, rather than the process of adaptative transformation” (2004). This new genre meets an existing and “longstanding” exigence of “self-cultivation and validation,” which can newly be met online because the blog has been “made possible by technology that is becoming more available and easier to use” at a kairotic moment when “voyeurism and exhibitionism have been morally neutralized and are on their ways to becoming ordinary ways of being...” (Miller & Shepherd 2004). They account for the presence and influence of antecedent genres by proposing that “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. (Miller & Shepherd 2004) (emphasis mine)

This image of “speciation” potentially constrained by older genres raises questions. Are “new” genres less vulnerable to the traces of ancestral genres than those genres which result from a “process of adaptative transformation”? More importantly for thinking about the homeless blog, how do people recognize when an antecedent

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11. I use “remediation” in its most general sense—to fix a flaw, to remedy—to describe the potential reaccenting of genres already familiar and available. I do not draw here on Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin’s notion of remediation as articulated in *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (1999). Bolter and Grusin usefully discuss the representation of one medium in another, their argument specifically addressing media’s impulses toward immediacy and transparency. Miller and Shepherd intriguingly draw on Bolter and Grusin’s work to discuss features of the blog which create immediacy, and which in turn relate to the exigence of the blog. Brooks et al. in “Remediation, genre, and motivation: Key concepts for teaching with weblogs” (2004), suggest that Bolter and Grusin’s concept of remediation can be used to examine how genres are remade online. I suggest that a more general notion of remediation is more appropriate for this latter task unless the focus of the study is the transparency or immediacy of the genre in question.

(a diary, a panhandler's sign) has been "incorporated" into a new genre; and whose perception wins out? As McNeill points out in her study of the blog as (not) "diary," "Online as well as off, paying attention to who gets to speak—or, more importantly, whose opinions are heeded—about a text-type can illuminate key social elements of genre" (this volume). If the "ancestral" genre "help[s] define the potentialities of the new genre" "within limits" (Miller & Shepherd 2004), what (or whose) are those "limits" or situational constraints?

Having observed the evolution of blogging and concluding that the blog is a "medium" permitting a multiplicity of genres like the "public affairs blog," Miller and Shepherd, in an article in this volume, take up the question of antecedent genres by asking why *formal* traits of old genres linger in new genres (this volume). Their conclusion—that it is due to "oppressive institutional constraints or to the inadequate inventional powers of a rhetor" resulting from "an excess of decorum, an over-deference to precedent or to institutional history" (this volume) is intriguing. But it does not account for how formal traces are perceived as "incorporated" (Miller & Shepherd 2004) by some and not by others as they are in uptakes of the homeless blog.

Other theories of the internet's effects on genre innovation propose that the internet may act as a way to "remediate" existing genres. From this perspective, a homeless blog may be an innovative modification of an existing genre, taking advantage of that genre's recognizable nature and function, but also working better than the earlier "version" of the genre. In his study of newspapers' move to online news sites, Boczkowski, though not a genre theorist, usefully shows how the potential of technical innovations such as hyperlinking in news articles is influenced by journalists' local values regarding gatekeeping and liability (2004: 81–82). But other accounts of "offline/online" genres are often problematic because they assume a level of consensus or common knowledge about blog "types" and about the correspondence between antecedent genres and their remediated form. Current genre theoretical accounts of blogging tend to propose that the blog is a genre with *sub-genres* identifiable and often linked to older genres by formal characteristics. Brooks et al. for instance, adopt veteran blogger Rebecca Blood's<sup>12</sup> categories of "journal, notebook, and filter weblogs" (Brooks et al. 2004), suggesting in turn that these categories "remediate existing print genres (journals, notebooks, and note cards)" (1). Such approaches assume that formal features (for example,

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12. In her history of the blog, Rebecca Blood notes that when free and easy-to-use blogging software arrived in 1999, early-style "filter" blogs, which sifted through internet content to provide links to and commentary on that content, were joined by so-called "diary" or "journal" blogs, which offered personal accounts of writers' lives (Blood 2000).

dated entries in chronological order) reveal the nature of the text. If exigence is considered, it is only in relation to print antecedent texts that have similar formal qualities. That is, formal features point to the notebook, so the exigence motivating the “notebook blog” is assumed to be the same as that of the notebook. Brooks et al.’s approach does recognize that there may be a connection between formal traits and the social action of the genre, but it fails in its assumption that formally similar texts (“notebook blogs” and “notebooks”) are also similar in terms of the rhetorical situation.

In fact, *consensus* about the relationship between antecedent genres and online genres—even with something as apparently straightforward as “diary”/“online diary”—is hardly as stable as such accounts imply. Audiences respond to the homeless blog as a configuration of form and situation—including the subject position of its writer—rather than as one of the blog types set out by Blood (2000), Brooks et al., Herring et al. (2004; 2005), and others. The genre is defined not by its formal characteristics or simply as an instance of the broad category “blog,” but is defined in the nexus between the reader’s socially-constructed notion of communications technology, his or her imagination of the homeless blogger’s rhetorical exigence and rhetorical opportunities, and—as I show later in this essay—his or her perception of what other people have provisionally accepted about the genre.

How, then, might readers and rhetors online *negotiate* competing perceptions about antecedent genres, writing subjects, and rhetorical situations? Studies identifying multiple antecedent genres or the hybrid nature of blogs underline the need for negotiation. Herring et al. in their study of the blog as a “bridging” genre characterize blogs as “a hybrid genre that draws from multiple sources” (2005: 144) such as diaries, editorials, project journals, and homepages (2005: 158–159). These antecedent genres each have obviously different implications for the likely range of uptakes: one responds differently to traces of an editorial than to traces of a diary; these traces will be even more differently received (more potentially contentious) depending on who is seen as editorializing or diarizing. Miller and Shepherd themselves, asking where the blog came from, likewise identify several “ancestral” genres that may be at work in different types of blogs: the ship’s log, the “commonplace book,” the clipping service, the pamphlet and broadside, the diary, and the homepage, among others (2004)—all with similarly diverse possibilities for uptake. Just as the “social scenes” (Stein and Giltrow this volume) of genre are multiply-determined, the perceived presence of multiple antecedents creates a need for negotiation: if a genre is a “hybrid,” how do the elements of that hybrid influence the life and evolution of the new genre? What kind of interactions occur between perceptions of the social scene of the genre and perceptions of the hybrid elements or antecedent genres at work? In the next part of this essay, I show how conditions of publicness and fervent meta-generic activity make these questions

more urgent, and suggest that Erving Goffman's theory of face-work can provide insight into how generic innovations are negotiated.

#### 4. Public meta-genre and face-work

Investigations of the hybrid nature of some genres are not new, and not confined to online genres; Kathleen Jamieson and Karlyn Kohrs Cambell argued much earlier for thinking of genres as "not only dynamic responses to circumstances; each is a *dynamis*—a potential fusion of elements that may be energized or actualized as a strategic response to a situation" (1982: 146). But in online environments of public meta-genre, that hybridity comes to our attention in new ways, raising questions about the "potential" of each element to be "energized," and about whose uptakes call elements into a state of activity. The homeless blog is subject to new conditions created by *public* uptake and by a surge in public *meta-generic* activity. Many online genres—like the homeless blog, the electronic petition, the review, and the "tute" (a tutorial, often related to sewing or crafts, which usually contains both images and text and allows readers to post comments expressing appreciation or asking for clarification)—are often public; that is, they circulate publicly and can be accessed by anyone. Importantly, uptakes of these public texts are likewise often public themselves: responses to blogs like Barbieux's appear on an unprecedented scale in settings where anyone might join or overhear the discussion. For instance, blog posts about homeless bloggers, such as Daoso's "Homeless Blog Stumbled Across" (2002, Aug. 31), as well as newspaper and magazine articles online, introduce homeless bloggers to ever-widening publics. In doing so, these public uptakes arrange for uptakes themselves, both in the "blogosphere" (the collective of networked blogs on the Web) and elsewhere. That is, participants may take up a homeless blog, uptakes of a homeless blog, or uptakes of uptakes of a homeless blog.<sup>13</sup>

These public uptakes of public texts often engage in *meta-generic* activity by commenting explicitly on the genre, often, as I have suggested above, making claims about antecedent genres. Janet Giltrow describes as "meta-genres" (2002) the "atmospheres of wordings and activities, demonstrated precedents or sequestered expectations—atmospheres surrounding genres" (Giltrow 2002: 195). Looking at

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13. For instance, bloggers may quote or hyperlink to newspaper articles about homeless people, often with commentary that invites readers' comments. Uptakes may occur privately through email, through readers talking to the blogger in the coffee shop or following the blogger's advice in one's interaction with a homeless person, but even private uptakes may become public when the blogger writes about them.

these atmospheres, Giltrow suggests, we might ask about their motivations and effects—their usefulness or dangers.<sup>14</sup> One effect of the public meta-generic activity around the homeless blog is to draw attention to the competing trajectories of uptake the genre faces (some confirming, some blocking), and to one's own place in a web of competing uptakes. Arguably, rhetors often face competing uptakes; online, however, the environment of public meta-generic uptakes draws them to rhetors' and readers' attention. This environment thus offers all participants opportunities to publicly ratify uptakes, or to reject them in cases of misrecognition of their own or others' discourse. Public responses to online genres take an active and complex role in negotiating agreement about the lineage, ambitions, and potential of such genres—especially those of online genres from activists or marginalized writers, which, in promising social improvement, even social transformation, open themselves to contradiction and contestation.

Another effect is that, in a public meta-generic uptake, one's confirmation or denial of a genre—one's rejection of a homeless blog as "panhandling" or as a narcissistic diary-like waste of precious computer time that ought to be used for circulating resumes, for instance—becomes publicly attached to oneself, an act of self-presentation that opens *oneself* up to evaluation. Consider the implications of the homeless blog's status as a civic genre, a genre that sets out to do civic action such as advocating for others or promoting democratic discourse. We might include in this group genres like the street newspaper, the political pamphlet, the World Vision-type television ad soliciting donations, and so on; we can also include civic genres taken up online to address issues of social justice, such as the electronic petition, the activist website, or the social advocacy video game,<sup>15</sup>—genres which appear able to overcome constraints posed by space and time, economics, prejudice, laziness, and so on facing civic discourse. Like such genres, homeless blogs speak on behalf of others to insert their voices into public discourse, to speak back to texts that speak about them. To read or comment on such genres, to take a stance toward them via our uptake—for example, to buy a street newspaper, to forward an electronic petition, or to cite a homeless blogger in discussion—has

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14. Some meta-genres, for instance, "seem to implicate writers in the struggles and conflicts of institutional systems" (Giltrow 2002: 191); in other situations, the presence of more than one meta-genre may create a site of contest.

15. Social advocacy video games, a type of "persuasive game," are created on the premise that by experiencing and learning about a situation such as homelessness or global hunger in a game format, players can be persuaded to see situations differently and then to move toward positions of social advocacy. See, for example, Terry Lavender's game "Homeless: It's No Game" (<http://www.homelessgame.net/>) and the United Nations World Food Program game "Food Force" (<http://www.food-force.com/>).

implications for how others perceive our own beliefs about citizenship, democracy, homeless people, and so on. Competing trajectories of uptake, therefore, may arise from readers' concerns with their own self-presentation: a desire to present oneself as pro-human rights by taking up civic genres in a sympathetic way may conflict with one's desire to appear a cautious, discerning and sensible consumer of online texts. How then are uptakes of a genre and its antecedents guided not only by readers' recognition of formal characteristics of a genre, or recognition of its status as a typified solution to a recognizable problem, but also by readers' awareness of their uptakes' implications for their own self-presentation?

Erving Goffman's theory of "face-work" in social encounters, more commonly used in studies of self-presentation or politeness, can help theorize the competing trajectories of uptake and environment of public meta-genre that the homeless blog brings to our attention. As others have pointed out, Goffman is useful for countering technologically deterministic "hyperbole" about postmodern identities in cyberspace, because "his theory is premised not on an elusive definition of selfhood per se but on the image of self that social participants put forth as viable means of negotiating normal social life" (Wynn & Katz 1997). For genre theorists, Goffman offers a way to think about how the rhetorical situation and "fitting" responses come to be negotiated between participants in discursive encounters: how, for example, genre ratification can be perceived as threatening, how misrecognition can be resisted, and how disruption may call for repair. Looking at how and why people arrive at and maintain provisional agreements about the homeless blog, a "working consensus" (Goffman 1959: 10) about rhetor, rhetorical exigence, audience, and uptakes, can in turn help theorize the evolution of online civic genres or other contested genres facing public meta-genre.

In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), Goffman proposes that social encounters be characterized as performances enabled by mutual recognition of the nature of the situation and of those within it. He describes this in "On Face-Work" (1955) as recognizing the "lines" that performers are taking.

Every person lives in a world of social encounters, involving him either in face-to-face [sic] or mediated contact with other participants. In each of these contacts, he tends to act out what is sometimes called a line—that is, a pattern of verbal and nonverbal acts by which he expresses his view of the situation and through this his evaluation of the participants, especially himself. Regardless of whether a person intends to take a line, he will find that he has done so in effect. The other participants will assume that he has more or less willfully taken a stand, so that if he is to deal with their response to him he must take into consideration the impression they have possibly formed of him. (1955: 5)

That is, Goffman explores how we negotiate provisionally-agreed-upon definitions of situations in which we have laid claim, temporarily, to an identity and position,



and have accepted others' claims. In any genre, but especially in genres associated explicitly with self-presentation (those in the blogosphere, on social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace, on online dating sites, and so on), rhetors lay temporary claim to identities and positions—they take lines—as part of setting out to meet rhetorical exigencies.

Barbieux, for example, turns to the blog to “act out” (Goffman 1955: 5) lines that he hopes will be accepted. Following common practice in other blogs, he posts personal narratives, links to webpages that he thinks are important, photographs, book reviews, pop culture references, and so on. This “pattern of verbal and non-verbal acts by which he expresses his view of the situation and through this his evaluation of the participants, especially himself” (Goffman 1955: 5) first asserts Barbieux’s *individuality*—he takes a line as someone *different from* stereotypes of homeless people as lazy, indifferent to people’s opinions of them, uneducated, and drug-addicted. Second, it presents Barbieux as an *advocate* and therefore *citizen*: one whose responsibility it is to critique social structures, to invite public sphere dialogue on issues like homelessness, to stand up for marginalized people in one’s society, to counter the narrative that all homeless people are alike. As part of his taking of these lines—advocate, citizen, and so on—Barbieux also takes a line as *writer*. In one early post, for example, he implies that the writing in his blog is analogous to that in a book (Barbieux 2002, Sept. 1).

However, in Anne Freadman’s terms, more familiar to rhetorical theories of genre, one’s line is dependent on uptakes both anticipated and actual. Effectively, uptakes may confirm or deny the line the rhetor is taking, either by misrecognizing, deliberately misconstruing, or ignoring it. Seen through face-work, uptakes that “take” the homeless blog as alternative journalism confirm the genre’s motive to represent marginal voices and the rhetor’s line as journalist or advocate. Uptakes that “take” it as panhandling fail to ratify the line (seeing the antecedent as incommensurate with the line); in failing to ratify the line, they also reject the genre’s putative motive, threatening to block the social action of the genre. Freadman’s observations about uptake offer important cautions about the kind of optimistic conclusions that Poster and others come to about “acts of discourse” in the public sphere: access to media or other means of cultural production may mean nothing if the social action of genres is blocked by uptakes which deny the status of the genre, or of the line the rhetor is taking.

### Subjectivity and antecedent genres as constraint

Given Barbieux’s complaint about the “double standard” in characterizations of his PayPal button as “panhandling” (Barbieux 2002, Sept. 19) we might suggest that genre innovation and evolution is constrained by perceptions of the antecedent



genres attached to the line the rhetor is taking. In contrast to Jamieson's, and later Miller and Shepherd's suggestion that sometimes the ancestral genre will constrain the social action of the genre, it may be the recognizability of the subject and the subject's line that constrains how genres and their antecedents are perceived in the first place. The PayPal/panhandling/tip jar thread complicates the question of how traces of "ancestral" genres are "recognized" in new genres; it calls into question whether the ancestral genres that readers identify have, in fact, been "incorporated" into new genres in the way that Miller and Shepherd propose in their study of the blog (2004). The competing characterizations of *The Homeless Guy* suggest that a new genre may bear almost no resemblance to a claimed antecedent, that a reader or rhetor may perceive the presence of antecedent genres that others do not. In fact, uptakes may respond meta-generically to the perceived presence of the antecedent because the subject position of the rhetor invokes a set of fitting responses. In cases where a genre is conspicuously a hybrid genre incorporating many antecedent elements, a similarly-cued reader may privilege one element over another regardless of how slight its presence in the new genre.

Viewed as face-work, the case of the homeless blog draws attention to another way of thinking about the genres that "belong" to a community. For instance, we can expand the notion of a "genre set"—a set of genres shared by professionals through which they do their work (Devitt 1991). Rather than limiting "genre set" to describing the genres used by a community, we might instead think of it as the group of genres associated with a subject position like "homeless person" (or "Gen-Exer" or "teenage girl") whether such subjects would ever use them or not. A genre set conceived in this way may serve as part of the expectations of such a person's "personal front," the "expressive equipment" (Goffman 1959: 22) with which they are associated. And our expectations of their personal front will vary according to our local circumstances and belief systems. Homeless rhetors and their advocates are often seen as turning to genres that focus on immediate needs. In North America, these occur as part of encounters with the public or with government agencies: the panhandler's sign, which may include a very abbreviated version of a personal narrative ("Got downsized"); the welfare or low-income housing worker interview; and the sales exchange between street newspaper (*Street News*, *The Big Issue*) vendor and customer. Hence the PayPal button is interpreted as panhandling not because Barbieux has incorporated the antecedent genre into a novel situation, but because taking a line as "homeless" invokes expectations of such antecedents. Haraway's interpretation of Trudeau's comic reminds us of one reason that a homeless blog might be considered a diary even if it contained many non-diary-like elements, and why the diary might be considered part of the genre set associated with homeless rhetors. In suggesting that the street person given a free email account would choose an email address like "lunatic@street\_level," the

comic relies for its punch line on the common assumption that homeless people often become homeless through mental illness. Although Trudeau's comic suggests that job-hunting genres like the resume are the most fitting ones for homeless people to take up, the association his comic makes between homelessness and mental illness also invokes the diary or journal—a genre sometimes used for therapeutic purposes—as part of the genre set of homeless people; diary-like writing (offline or online) can be a fitting response for such rhetors if the purpose is therapy, self-healing and thereby reintegration into mainstream society (as, in fact, some homeless bloggers describe their own blogs).<sup>16</sup>

This strong association between the line taken in a genre like a homeless blog and the antecedents taken up as defining features of the genre suggests that even apparently stable generic classifications can be subject to reaccenting depending on the line its rhetor takes. For instance, at first glance the “blog” and “homeless blog” would seem to fit Heyd's proposed two-level “ecology” of genres: “a function-based ‘supergenre’, which branches out into a variety of associated ‘subgenres’ individuated through form and content specificities” (Heyd this volume)—with the blog being function-based and the homeless blog being “individuated through form and content specificities.” In contrast to the proposal that supergenres are “medially stable and have relatively clear genre antecedents in pre-digital discourse,” while subgenres “are more diverse, more prone to change, and may easily be generated within a changing medial environment”) (Heyd this volume), I suggest that even the “relatively clear genre antecedents” of the “blog” are not as stable as might be thought. It may not be the “form and content specificities” that open a genre to instability, but the line the rhetor takes in generating form and content and readers' responses to form and content in relation to that line.

### “Working consensus”: Provisional agreement as exigence

Face-work illuminates potential constraints that may arise from competing trajectories of uptake in response to “lines” rhetors take. At the same time, face-work suggests, finally, how consensus can be negotiated and itself become a constraint on genre. Goffman's theory of face-work observes that when one's line is accepted, other participants take up lines in response; participants consequently not only “recognize” each other but also form a shared definition of the situation that (ideally) they mutually strive to protect and that must be vigilantly maintained to protect the face of all participants. They come to a “working consensus”: a temporary and

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16. Alternatively, it must be pointed out, this association between mental illness and homelessness also implies that the online discourse of homeless people might be best treated as suspicious (as can be seen in uptakes of Anya Peters' blog *Wandering Scribe*.)

provisional agreement about the lines they have *accepted* from one another, "a single over-all definition of the situation which involves not so much a real agreement as to what exists but rather a real agreement/as to whose claims concerning what issues will be temporarily honored" (1959: 9–10). In other words, the fulfillment of hopes for new access to subject positions such as those expressed by Bazerman (2002) and Poster depends in part on participants' willingness to honor the moves made and agreements reached by other participants. Goffman's view of situation can encompass Bitzer's definition of rhetorical situation "as a natural context of person, events, objects, relations, and an exigence which strongly invites utterance" (1968: 5). In the social encounters of which Goffman writes, people's view of situation and participants can include their view of whether or not participants might consider a rhetorical situation to be at work, and of what kind of responses might be fitting according to the lines that are likely to be accepted. At the same time, however, Goffman's situation is not limited by Bitzer's proposals that though a situation may involve more than one exigence, "in any rhetorical situation there will be at least one controlling exigence which functions as the organizing principle" (whether it is weakly or strongly perceived by those encountering the situation) (1968: 7). Rather, a "player" may perceive multiple exigencies that accompany the lines other players are taking, and sense which lines are being acknowledged and accepted by other players—and therefore what final definition of situation he or she has a responsibility to protect (or disrupt).

Goffman's theory of situation thus allows us to see more clearly how assessments of rhetorical situation—of the exigence serving as the "organizing principle," might be influenced by players' perception of the working consensus—of what has been provisionally accepted by other players in the context of a series of exchanges. Additionally, it allows us to consider that maintaining the definition of a situation may itself become an exigence that rhetors try to meet. Goffman's observations point to the tensions inherent in maintaining definitions of the situation in social encounters:

Sometimes disruptions occur through unmeant gestures, faux pas, and scenes, thus discrediting or contradicting the definition of the situation that is being maintained....We find that performance, audience, and outsiders all utilize techniques for saving the show, whether by avoiding likely disruptions or by correcting for unavoided ones, or by making it possible for others to do so. (1959: 239)

Taken to genre theory, these observations about avoiding disruption suggest that protecting working consensus about the nature and fitness of a discursive response to exigence requires both rhetors and readers to strategically avoid or respond to disruptions that occur. The desire to avoid disruption can itself be a constraint. This

is especially true of situations where we anticipate conflict about the genre's fitness, the possibility of face-threatening meta-genre, and participants' vulnerability to disruption—such as a homeless blog written to counter common beliefs about homelessness, a Wikipedia entry created to advertise a blog,<sup>17</sup> or an electronic petition forwarded to one's social network to protest anti-feminist laws abroad.

To understand how this process may influence developments in public genres with public uptakes, I look finally at how Barbieux and his readers, and homeless blogger Anya Peters and her readers, work toward and protect “working consensus” about the “homeless blog.” As in the social encounters Goffman looks at, in situations of generic innovation, rhetors and readers may achieve a level of consensus about the genre and the lines being taken in which claims are “temporarily honored.” One way that working consensus can be observed in Barbieux's blog is that, as his ability to arrange for uptakes becomes more secure, Barbieux begins to point toward the homeless blog itself, consolidating the status of the genre rather than pointing toward antecedents. As he notes in one blog post, “There are other homeless blogs out there”—even some which are “false” (Barbieux 2004, Sept 27)—suggesting that the genre is recognizable enough to be taken up even by rhetors for whom the actual exigencies are absent. Additionally, he seeks out and lists links to other homeless blogs. In a March 2006 post, for example, Barbieux draws our attention to an article about a “New Homeless Blog,” Michael Brown's *View from the Sidewalk*, and requests:

I would like to create an up-to-date blogroll [a hyperlinked list of blogs] of all homeless blogs. If you know of any, please email them to me – or you can make a note of it in the comments section of this post. Thanks. (Barbieux 2006, Mar. 2)

That is, over time, an image of the genre is consolidated, and people begin to talk about the “homeless blog,” suggesting there is already a level of consensus about the lines that people are taking when they generate this kind of text.

Uptakes of the PayPal button controversy suggest that temporary, provisional consensus about the genre can also emerge from meta-generic uptakes that protect the rhetor's line. The *USA Today* article that takes up the PayPal thread confirms Barbieux's meta-generic repair (the PayPal button as “tip jar”) and his resistance to panhandling, and therefore confirms the line Barbieux is taking and the role that the genre of homeless blog plays in establishing that line.

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17. See, for example, the Wikipedia entry for “Wandering Scribe” (2008, Feb 9 (last edit)) and the linked “talk page for discussing improvements to the Wandering Scribe article” (2006, Aug. 26 last comment) where posters criticize the article as advertising and call for its deletion.

The blog includes a "*tip jar*," a button that allows visitors to use their credit cards to deposit money in his bank account. Barbieux, who says he doesn't approve of panhandlers, sees the feature as a way for people to support *his work*. (Luo 2003, Mar. 17) (emphasis mine)

This meta-generic explanation, itself an uptake of a meta-generic debate, might be read as maintaining Barbieux's face, consolidating the line he has taken, and therefore as revealing the negotiation of—or even the protection of—a working consensus about the genre and the PayPal button as an element of genre evolution.

It suggests also that in the face of a multiplicity of readers, public genre talk, and new instantiations of the genre, this consensus will never be complete or secure. Rather, it may exist between rhetor and readers who take up either text in an agreeable rather than contradictory way: a localized provisional consensus. In the context of public genres where rhetors are seen as asserting lines, some meta-genres, "situated expressions, motivated by their contexts of use" (Giltrow 2002: 196), can be thought of as situated not only in terms of the rhetorical situation but in terms of the working consensus about the genre. They may be "motivated by their contexts of use" in the service of responding to face claims and maintaining definitions of situations. The need for initial acceptance of a line, and for its continuing acceptance as fitting to the working consensus, constrains how rhetors can take up genres new to them or can remediate existing genres.<sup>18</sup> But the temporary honoring of claims and the impulse to maintain face opens a space in which rhetors may address rhetorical exigencies—a space in which innovations might thrive.

### Monitoring disruption: Genre evolution

Finally, focusing on arrangements for and protection of working consensus about genres also suggests ways to theorize threats to the life-span of a genre. While the

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18. Working consensus about the definition of the situation may be undermined by developments in the homeless blog itself, requiring that bloggers like Barbieux maintain a line that is consistent or risk generic decay. Both Barbieux and James McCoy, for instance, produce writing that they deem unsuitable for their homeless blogs, maintaining the lines they've taken by keeping such material in other "non-homeless" blogs. McCoy, whose blog emphasizes his roles as "voice" for homeless people and as political commentator on homeless issues, started a blog called *Jamie's World of Poetry* where he posted poetry and sold a book a poetry that he self-produced. While McCoy's profile itself describes McCoy as writing poetry, supporting McCoy's line as a formerly illiterate drug addict who has overcome past failures, the sharing (and sale) of the poetry itself McCoy deemed unsuitable for *Jamie's Big Voice*. Likewise, Barbieux himself, over the years, began several other blogs, including an Ebay blog to promote origami that he sold, a blog where he gave advice for a fee, and a blog that aimed to focus on "non-homeless" issues.

emergence of new instantiations of the homeless blog assists rhetors in arriving at a working consensus about the genre, the emergence of new motives for individual rhetors, or the shifting of the rhetorical situation (an increase in exigence's urgency, for example, such as a sudden crisis), may create a desire for further innovation of the genre that may undermine consensus and require renegotiations. The evolution of genre may, in this way, be face-threatening to the reader, because the reader's understanding of the situation may be undermined.

Anya Peters' blog *Wandering Scribe* provides a case in point. Begun in February 2006, *Wandering Scribe* claims to record Peters' experience of living homeless in her car near London. Its uptakes create disruption to the working consensus about her blog as a homeless blog: it leads to a book deal with Harper Collins, who contract her to write a "misery memoir" (*Abandoned* (Peters 2007)) about her childhood abuse. In the terms suggested by Charles Bazerman (1994), her blog moves into a new "genre system": Peters moves from "homeless blogger," writer of an "online diary," to "published author" of a memoir. The uptake of Peters' blog in the world of commercial publishing is seen as disrupting—for good or bad—the system of genres that lead to remuneration for writing. Uptakes of her announcement of the book deal—in comments on her blog, comments and posts on other blogs, and comments attached to the BBC news coverage of her blog—have varied from congratulation<sup>19</sup> to vituperative attacks: spurring other critics<sup>20</sup> on, her biggest critic, the author of a copycat blog called *Wandering Ego*, has repeatedly implied that Peters faked homelessness via the blog in order to get attention from publishers (for example, *Wandering Ego*, 2006, May 19). Moving outside the genre set/system associated with the line originally taken may cast doubt upon the line, and therefore undermine working consensus about the situation. Such public critical uptakes of Peters' blog are therefore face-threatening to Peters personally, but also indirectly threaten the face of other homeless bloggers and their readers by disrupting the consensus that has been worked out about (a) what homeless blogs do and (b) the lines that readers are taking when they take up homeless blogs in different ways.

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19. Reporter Terence Blacker, for instance, echoing the optimism of Poster and others that rhetors online can gain increased access to the means of cultural production, suggests approvingly that Peters' success shows that the "medium" of the weblog may reconfigure expectations about who has access to the "closed, forbidding world of publishing" (Blacker 2006, June 2).

20. For example, in a blog post entitled "Wandering Scribe Does Book Deal," Michael Allen muses on his initial skepticism and current cynicism about Peters' blog (given the book deal's possibility and actualization) (2006, June 27).

Though working consensus is enough for people to keep going forward, Goffman's discussion prepares us for such eventualities in the lives of new genres by reminding us that working consensus also requires constant monitoring to ensure that it is not disrupted. Such public statements put readers—of Peters' blog or of other homeless blogs—in a position of having to ignore the face threat, to join in (hence redefining the situation, with subsequent implications for the kinds of writing we will or will not accept from rhetors like Peters and Barbieux), or to repair/mitigate face threats with public statements of support. Kevin Barbieux, significantly, has publicly supported Peters' success even though elsewhere he has remarked on "false" homeless bloggers. In a February 2, 2007 post, he writes:

She did it. She wrote the book. I'm glad for her, and I'm very envious. She got the book deal through the blog she wrote about being homeless – "Wandering Scribe" The story of my own book is still in my head, and as I'm still homeless, I don't have an ending for it, yet. That, and I become so easily distracted. I imagine this will be a great book. In reading the synopsis, I have no doubt that this is will be as accurate an account of homelessness that you'll find. Click on the picture and buy the book. (Barbieux 2007, Feb. 2)

His support and expression of envy counter the idea that Peters' success disrupts working consensus about her blog: that "homeless person" and "writer" are contradictory lines, and that a homeless blog's commercial success invalidates its generic status as a fitting response to exigencies of homelessness. Observing this process of disruption, monitoring, and repair underlines meta-genre's dual potential: for protecting working consensus and stabilizing genre; and for challenging participants' face and throwing genre and situation into a vulnerable state.

## 5. Conclusions

The homeless blog suggests implications for rhetorical approaches to weblogging specifically, for understanding how media like the internet might condition the rhetorical situation of other genres, and for understanding genre evolution within questions about power and ideology. It should be clear that my approach advocates revision to current notions of blog types. Analysis of the homeless blog therefore also suggests cautions regarding interpretations of the uptakes of blog genres. One caution is that researchers need to look at uptakes of particular genres, not only of broader categories such as "blog." Herring et al. (2004), for example, analyze which populations (youth, women, men) are most likely to create which types of blogs, and then examine mass media coverage of "blogs" (as a general category) to see which type of blog, and therefore which population, media



favours. Their approach is to match subject position with formal types (teen girls write diaries, adult men write filter blogs), and to line up media uptakes of blogs with those categories. Their study concludes that because media tends to pay more attention to “filter-style” blogs written by older men, other populations of bloggers write at a disadvantage because their audiences will have been swayed by the image of blogging portrayed in the media. I have suggested that, in fact, rhetors and readers respond to particular blogs as instantiations of different genres of blogs—as embedded in rhetorical situations. Moreover, while both blog writers and readers are constantly monitoring media reports of blogs, they are also responding to them. Therefore, analyses of uptakes of blog genres must consider their rhetorical situations and their competing constructions by readers; they must also consider the chain of uptakes, not privileging mainstream media discourse in its examination of a genre’s development.

Considering uptakes through the lens of face-work is relevant not only to the homeless blog or other blogs. It is worthwhile considering whether some genres may offer opportunities for face-work that other genres do not by virtue of their place outside highly-structured systems, of their challenge to beliefs in which the public has a special investment, or of their technological features. One example of the latter is the possibility that web texts may be revised: blogs and many web texts are ongoing utterances, with built-in expectations of and mechanisms for revision. Blogs’ generic profile, for example, suggests that a blog should be updated frequently, and it is also part of the very nature of blogs—inherently and self-consciously responsive texts—that they respond to other texts and to their own uptakes (a blog comments on events in the world; it remarks upon the comments that readers leave in the “comments” section or on emails that readers send.) “Uptake” may therefore be more subject to face-work considerations because the text that is originally taken up is an ongoing and self-consciously responsive utterance, not a completed utterance. Thus it is not only genres online that invite us to observe the building, monitoring, repair, and breakdown of consensus, but genres similarly subject to public meta-genre, to competing constructions of the rhetorical situation, or to other expectations generated by the “affordances” (Norman 2002) that a medium introduces into a genre’s profile.

Looking at how we negotiate the possibilities for generic innovation and evolution online—for reproducing, refining, transforming, or creating genres through the use of new media—allows us to rethink the relationship between “offline” and “online” genres. Rather than asking only about differences or equivalencies between online and offline genres, or about technology’s *effects* on a genre (is an electronic petition the same as a traditional petition?), we can look at why and how meta-generic moves are made which make bids for the presence of one antecedent or another, and how these influence the possibilities for social action. When do



texts or their uptakes presume equivalencies? When do they insist on them, or deny them? Thinking of genre innovation and evolution in terms of face-work draws out the distinction between *recognition* of typified actions or other elements of "personal front" (Goffman 1959: 22) and their *acceptance* in individual contexts. Positing rhetors' interpretations of uptakes within the frame of face-work offers a way to understand how they navigate a multiplicity of uptakes that would promise to have competing effects (some blocking, some confirming the social action of the genre.) In this way, face-work suggests trajectories of response in encounters where the recognition and ratification of both lines and genres are at stake.

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# Brave new genre, or generic colonialism?

## Debates over ancestry in Internet diaries

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This chapter analyses online users' debates about the generic classification and ancestry of "blogs" and "Internet diaries," looking in particular at users' defensive definitions and meta-generic commentary that would distinguish the blog from the diary. I argue that these directives draw on traditional generic stereotypes, reproduced from print culture, that associate the diary with the narcissistic, feminine, and amateur, qualities apparently antithetical to self-styled "bloggers." Since actual practice does not necessarily support a tenable distinction between blogs and diaries, I suggest that such genre claims arise from and protect particular communities' ideals about the World Wide Web—and therefore its forms of communication—as novel. These often-heated commentaries offer opportunities to explore how communities understand and invest in genre in an evolving situation.

A blog is not a diary. A diary is where you store private information and self reflection about your life, snapshotted feelings, etc. A blog is publicly there for anyone to see....A blog is a living autobiography...

—Austin (2006 19 Oct.)

*Weblog*, *n.* A frequently updated web site consisting of personal observations, excerpts from other sources, etc., typically run by a single person, and usually with hyperlinks to other sites; an online journal or diary.

—*Oxford English Dictionary* (2003)

Defining "blog" is a fool's errand.

—Jeff Jarvis (2005 27 Aug.).

### 1. Introduction

Whether or not definition is a "fool's errand," as blogger Jeff Jarvis suggests, the quest for classification and clarification and, perhaps more importantly, the sense of obligation to offer such pronouncements seem to press heavily on producers of two of the most popular forms of online writing, the "blog" and the "diary."

These three voices from and about the blogosphere illustrate the difficulties of and demands for generic boundaries between these parallel, if not synonymous, text-types. The venerable *Oxford English Dictionary* offers an authoritative definition that nods to both generic camps, but its status as a print-culture institution from “outside” the community of users may make its contribution suspect to bloggers themselves. Austin, a blogger, distinguishes his text from a diary, beginning with content but shifting to audience as the fundamental differential; he ends by framing his blog through yet another genre that challenges classification, the “living” autobiography. Austin’s description is overwritten with unspoken assumptions about the series of (co-?)genres—the blog, diary, snapshot, and autobiography—he evokes, setting off a chain of stereotyped associations with and disassociations from recognized forms that characterizes many bloggers’ definitions. Jarvis appears to throw up his hands, but his refusal to offer a more concrete meaning for “blog” indicates the pervasive sense that bloggers in particular *should* define the genre. As practitioners of an apparently emerging genre, they feel a need to stake out generic territory, to plant a distinct flag that makes some sort of formal claim. They draw their authority from their “insider” status: because they blog, they have the right, even, it seems, the *duty*, to share their expert opinion. These definitions, and the codes or rules for practice inherent in them, provide a rich site for exploring how genre in general, and these genres in particular, are understood and practiced on the Internet, where “old” and “new” collide or co-exist, and where norms (for example, for comportment, content, or “fittingness”) continue to be scrutinized and (re)established. The frontier mentality that infuses much World Wide Web discourse fosters the sense of both possibility and lawlessness, and therefore invites commentary, definition, and prescriptions from those on the ground.

The three definitions offer a snapshot from the ongoing generic evolution of the online diary and the blog that outlines the two predominant ways these texts have been approached: blogs are *not* diaries v. blogs and diaries are synonymous. Actual practice suggests they can be two distinct text-types, a finding supported by research by the BROG ((We)Blog Researchers on Genre) project (2003 – ), Carolyn Miller and Dawn Shepherd (2004), and others. Considering them as one text-type may be totally wrong-headed in the first place; Carolyn Miller and Dawn Shepherd argue that “it may no longer be accurate to think of the blog as a single genre” (2004), if it ever were accurate. However problematic these classificatory debates may be, they persist, even as—and, seemingly, despite the fact that—the majority of bloggers of both stripes continue to produce texts without concern for terminology. This gap between theory and practice, rule-makers and rule-breakers, calls for critical attention, because it illustrates how discussion about genre can be quite distinct from and in fact in conflict with actual practice. Such a disjunction leads us to investigate who is making and evaluating generic proclamations, and with

what intentions. In examining the dissent between majority and minority voices/opinions, we can explore what ideas, assumptions, and values that rule-making and generic commentary may be covering for.

Several factors account for hype about the blog-diary face-off occluding actual practice. One problem site is nomenclature: by 2003, “blog” had become a blanket label encompassing both “diary” and “blog” (Herring et al. 2005), with the shift to synonymous usage powered by both practitioners and outsiders such as the media. Another contributing element is investments in the “new” by media, communities, and the popular imagination; as Miller and Shepherd (2004) have argued, and bloggers’ commentary demonstrates, we must read conversations ostensibly about terminology, functions, or practices within the socio-historic context of the blog’s naissance. Further, problematic associations with ancestral genres, namely the diary, the “most frequently mentioned ancestral genre in the voluminous meta-talk about blogs by bloggers” (Miller & Shepherd 2004), reinforce some users’ and observers’ desire to distinguish online forms from print culture genres. Most pressingly, however, may be gender, a factor that lurks around the diary in particular, and seems to have reemerged, though surreptitiously and often in disguise, in debates about Internet practices and communities. While I oppose the idea that some genres are gendered, i.e., inherently “male” or “female,” I recognize that assumptions about genre are often informed by assumptions about gender, which genders turn to particular genres, and which functions those genres can fittingly perform. I see such gendering haunting the blog/diary distinctions and think we need to consider the ramifications of this return to generic stereotypes born out of print culture.

However invested some users may be in marking clear boundaries between blogs and diaries, actual practice—as opposed to expectation and assumption, as we will see—also demonstrates that many users pay little attention to generic borders, blithely creating diaries while calling their texts “blogs” (e.g., Herring et al. 2005, 2006; Su et al. 2005; Trammell et al. 2006), a hybrid approach the *Oxford English Dictionary*’s catch-all definition captures. Though the “blog as not-diary” camps may be vocal minorities, they are the voices that are being heard, reproduced, and cited by the media as authoritative and typical discourse (Herring et al. 2005; Su et al. 2005; Trammell & Keshelashvili 2005) that regulates generic production and shapes interpretation. Norman M. Su, Yang Wang, and Gloria Mark call attention to the “paradox that a minority genre [the blog] is most influential in the blogging community, whereas the majority genre exerts little influence.” Why, they wonder, do Internet diarists, “despite their large numbers,” have a “much less a visible, collective force of interpretation?” (2005). Online as well as off, paying attention to who gets to speak—or, more importantly, whose opinions are heeded—about a text-type can illuminate key social elements of genre.



The persistence by bloggers and critics to figure out what a blog is, and, perhaps more importantly, what it is not, provides a rich body of conversations that are explicitly about genre and therefore implicitly about sundry other things—gender, community, or legitimacy, for example—that often drive classificatory concerns but cannot be articulated. The presence of often quite militant “gendarmes of genre,” to use Peter Hitchcock’s delightful phrase (2003: 302), underscores the fact that a great deal is attached to these generic labels, perhaps even more so than generic practices. The politics of naming are particularly potent when generic terrain is emerging, shifting, and unstable, as it was (and to some extent still is) online as the Web became an established discursive location. Definitions give invested users—that is, those practitioners who desire greater accord in how genres are produced, and wish their own versions/visions of the genre (and all that comes with it, including who should be producing it and in which situations)—ways to position themselves in the social hierarchy of the genre. Reading these definitions as rhetorical, and analyzing the commentary that the genre(s) blog/diary and their descriptions generate thus enables insight into the social and cultural make-up of the World Wide Web and those who populate it. In this analysis, I will examine the traffic—and the congestion—at the borders of the blog and the Internet diary, beginning with a history and overview of their practices, in order to understand what these conversations represent, what generic distinctions signify, and why they matter. Rejection of generic antecedent, particularly disidentification with the diary, suggests the need to unpack the cultural associations of both forms as foundational to interpreting conversations about genre on the Internet. In the process, I will situate the blog debate within the overall Internet culture, connecting concerns about “newness” and “oldness” to early and pervasive claims about the World Wide Web. To borrow from colonial rhetoric, those who would see the Internet as the “clean breast of a New World” particularly resist associations with “Old World” cultural practices, attitudes that may act as Bitzerian constraints on generic production.

## 2. Blogs by any other name: Generic history and definitions

Blogs and Internet diaries have existed for a little over a decade, both emerging in the mid-1990s. Online diaries were first out of the gate, appearing online in 1994 and typically developing out of personal home pages (*Online Diary History Project* n.d.). These sites focus on the life and experiences of the diarist, with text-based posts, and are updated regularly if not daily. In addition, they may also feature photos, supporting pages (“about me,” “FAQ,” and such), video or audio files, and



hyperlinks.<sup>1</sup> Comments pages, guestbooks, and “e-mail me” links are standard fare. Web-logs, a term coined by Jorn Barger in 1997 to describe the “handful” of pages of annotated links (Blood 2002b: 7), acted as filters for the burgeoning content of the World Wide Web, directing readers to material the blogger found particularly worthwhile. They too incorporate biographical and contact information for the blogger or about the community or company the site represents, and rely on frequent posts to keep readers coming back.

From 1994–1998, these forms operated quite distinctly. In 1999, everything changed, however, when sites such as Blogger and Pitas became available, offering free, fill-in-the-blank site-building and publishing software that did not require knowledge of HTML, resulting in both social and technological consequences for these two text-types. With producers no longer restricted to the software savvy, the numbers of both diaries and blogs mushroomed (Blood 2002b: 8); as critic and blogger Rebecca Blood notes, “[o]nce literally *anyone* could make a weblog, literally anyone did” (2002a: x). With the despecialization of these sites and forms, blogs and diaries also became less distinct, with more bloggers incorporating journal components into their traditional “[l]ink-plus-commentary” formula (Powazek 2002: 3). These journal-blogs shifted focus from “the Web-at-large” to the personal lives of the writers (Blood 2002b: 10). By 2004, the majority of “blogs” operated as diaries (Herring et al. 2005; Herring & Paolillo 2006 *passim*).

This blending has inspired directives, from the practical to the vitriolic, suggesting that the merging of generic worlds is more than a simple formal *faux-pas*. For instance, in a trenchant defense of the blog as distinct from the diary, blogger Neale Talbot argues that blogs “share similar elements to the journal world, but that don’t mean one will eat the other. Distinct places. Distinct genres.” He explains, “They’re different styles for different audiences about different things” (2002: 157–58), in part because “[t]he blog points outward. The journal points inward” (159). Though Mark Amerika suggests that “A blog should not be defined,” he stresses right away that “A blog is not a diary” (2004). In “5 Crucial Tips for New Bloggers,” Codrut Turcanu devotes his third tip to reminding readers that “A blog is not a diary. If you’re looking to keep a diary, do so offline” (2007), though the particular logic restricting diaries to the world of pen-and-paper remains obscure (perhaps Turcanu feels it goes without saying). In a year-end self-analysis, “Heck of a Guy” reflects on his blog, noting “[s]ome blogs are explicitly presented as public dia-

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1. However, studies by Herring, Scheidt, Bonus and Wright (2005) and Trammell, Tarkowski, and Sapp (2006) found far fewer links than expected, another instance of practice not supporting hype or expectation.

ries,” but that “The *Heck Of A Guy* blog is not a diary or journal” (2006). These negative definitions, consistently evoking and disavowing connection to the diary, set up bloggers as quite entirely distinct from diarists, a separation that suggests both how integral the idea of “blogging” is to community identity, and the level of lingering and unarticulated assumptions about the diary genre and its producers. (They also, by extension, reinvigorate old offline debates about whether and how “diaries” and “journals” are distinct, a point to which I will return.)

This ongoing need to define the blog is striking. Typing “what is a weblog” into the search engine Google reveals hundreds of thousands of discrete hits,<sup>2</sup> revealing how widespread—and perhaps expected—the practice of generic explanation is. Janet Giltrow (2002) notes that such meta-genre,<sup>3</sup> talk or writing about genres by writers and readers, springs up in particular when genres are being established and delineated; she argues that “negotiations or struggles within those boundaries, or [...] disturbances at the threshold” generate explanations, instructions, and defence (2002: 187). Notably, she cites “community boundaries” as hot-spots that elicit commentary (2002: 187). On the borders of several genres, not least the diary, blogs require this public counselling by practitioners, both to initiate newcomers and warn off outsiders. Meta-genre, by advising and even prescribing how writing should be produced, what it should look or sound like, typifies a genre, a process that’s important as a genre evolves. It’s important for established genres whose legitimacy may be seen as under threat from ill-informed practitioners, but is particularly important, I imagine, for genres that need legitimizing, as new forms do. In such instances, commentary and rules indicate that the genre is established and reputable—it has particular requirements that take skill and/or attention to meet. Meta-genre also aids forms, like the blog, that keep being read through or as other text-types (e.g., the diary) that are not highly ranked aesthetically or culturally; commentary in such cases serves to remind practitioners and interpreters to distinguish the emergent from the established, if ill-reputed, genre. The diary’s long-standing “image problem” as artless and amateur, private and domestic, for instance, may particularly plague bloggers who are trying to be taken seriously as producers of a new genre, in some cases, or as journalists or public commentators in others, and for whom diary associations hinder rather than help. (For instance, Danah Boyd (2006) notes how the *New York Times*, in coverage of bloggers being given full press credentials to cover the 2004 Democratic National Convention, stripped these writers of any kind of journalistic credibility by referring to them

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2. Google generated 368,000 hits on April 28, 2007.

3. Trammell and Keshelashvili (2005) give meta-commentary a cyber-update, calling it “metablogging” (2005: 976).

as “diarists” (2006: par. 21).) For online writers creating texts in the shadow of the diary genre, meta-genre offers a way to (attempt to) set and maintain standard generic practices, be they about content or function or audience.

The persistent presence of meta-genre in blogs (significantly, a feature of traditional offline diaries, as well) enables practitioners to explain (and typify) their own writing practices, to articulate (even impose) their interpretation of generic standards for other bloggers, and to inform readers how to read. Where and how blogs belong in a social and literary hierarchy seems key to anxieties about regulations—note, not *regularities*, but rules—that Amerika and Turcanu and their ilk produce. As Giltrow argues, meta-genre can function to “explain good practice to newcomers [and] point out ways in which others are liable to go wrong” (2002: 187). We might consider who establishes what “good practice” is for a genre as abstract as the blog, and what consequences—if any—might exist for newcomers who fail to heed such advice, or whose interests are distinct from those offering meta-genre. With hundreds of thousands of producers, blogs continue to have a high rate of “newbies” who might be too casual in their blogging, co-opting the name to describe a text that is in fact a diary. The diversity of users who have adopted the blog may be another source of this generic tension. Unlike the fairly specific communities negotiating genres, such as the tax accountants studied by Amy Devitt (1991), the IRS employees in Frances Sullivan’s work, or even the broader but still specialized groupings of academic writers Giltrow has analyzed, “the” blogging community is, ostensibly, unlimited and unspecialized, open to the “anyone [who] could keep a Weblog.” With such an amorphous pool of practitioners at work, competing interests and visions will be inevitable, making “good practices” (and, by extension, the good *practitioners*) especially difficult to establish and, it seems, police, producing the “sign[s] of trouble” in a community to which Giltrow is alert (2002: 201).

The presence of genre gendarmes and controversies is, ironically, antithetical to the ideal of the blog that many of these same meta-bloggers claim to uphold. Indeed, the blog was celebrated as an ideal example of “electronic democracy” (e.g., Rheingold 1993); Blogger.com’s oft-quoted slogan, “push-button publishing for the people,” helped promote the impression that blogs and bloggers levelled traditional off-line hierarchies of what texts and voices could be heard. Such attitudes suggested that expert status would not be reserved for institutionally-supported “artists” but for *all* producers of the blog, simply because they created instances of the genre. But research shows that, despite this talk of democracy and the championing of the voice of the “ordinary,” private citizen, not all bloggers will be accorded equal authority or access to the public’s attention. The almost immediately established blogging “A-list” (Clark 2002: 59), sets up some sites and producers as particularly authoritative. Kaye D. Trammell and Ana Keshelashvili’s

study of A-list blogs notes that such bloggers, those “most well-known and regularly linked by others,” consequently attract the most media attention, shaping how blogs are presented and understood in the mainstream media (2005: 968). The more media attention these bloggers receive, the higher their position on the A-list, perpetuating this canon and the authoritativeness of A-list meta-genre. Trammell and Keshelashvili observed that “[s]ome of the bloggers saw themselves as opinion leaders and look to this role with responsibility and obligation” (2005: 976). Using their blogs to produce “authoritative” commentary on the blog in general appears to be part of fulfilling that obligation. The apparent openness and democracy of blogs remains a fantasy perpetuated in the face of increasing attention to regulation.

In a further assault on generic democracy, this A-list contains inherent biases of both type and gender that re-establish cultural and social norms imported from off-line; the shift in medium does not, apparently, sever entrenched mores and practices. In their study of the gendered representation of bloggers in the media, Herring, Kouper, Scheidt and Wright (2004) noted that the A-list is incestuously self-generating: bloggers “link to ‘A-list’ blogs, which tend overwhelmingly to be filter-type blogs created by men, thereby contributing to these blogs’ perceived popularity and status. The ‘A-list’ blogs, in turn, link mostly to other men’s blogs” (2004). Further, “[m]edia reportage about weblogs, even when ostensibly concerned with the phenomenon of blogging in general, tends to focus on adult male weblog authors” (Herring et al. 2004). Notably, Herring, Kouper, Scheidt, and Wright found that this gendered focus arises because more men than women keep filter-style and political blogs (2004). It is these types, instead of diaries, that have garnered the most popular and scholarly interest, particularly their roles in covering such “newsworthy” events as 9/11/01, the war in Iraq, U.S. elections, and the scandal over U.S. Senator Trent Lott’s expressions of nostalgia over segregation (Herring et al. 2004; Herring et al. 2005; Herring et al. 2006; Su et al. 2005; Trammell & Keshelashvili 2005: 969). This attention belies the fact that, overall, far more women than men keep blogs, and, correspondingly, diaries overwhelmingly outnumber texts dedicated to Web-filtering or politics (Herring et al. 2004; Herring & Paolillo 2006). Herring, Kouper, Scheidt, & Wright (2004) argue that, in privileging the few—a “minority elite (educated, adult males)” —bloggers “contribute unwillingly to creating a hierarchy within the blogosphere with adult males at the top” and “reproduce societal sexism and ageism” (2004). This generic hierarchy, placing (male-dominated) blogs above (female-dominated) diaries, constructs a proto-canon that mirrors traditional canons in Western literature, with these formal rankings carrying attendant hierarchies of gender, race, and class.

Although this A-list constitutes a very small faction of the hundreds of thousands of blogs, this elite, and the media hype that celebrates and generates it, serve

to make this part represent the whole. Bloggers who insist on promoting the filter, political, or journalistic blog in distinction from the diary, as if proclaiming such blogs as “pure” or “authentic” (in contrast to one “tainted” or “diluted” by diary), do so even as most users ignore or disdain such strict definitions. The majority of blogs occupies a middle ground, with “diaries” including links, and “blogs” including personal commentary as well as annotations, suggesting that, despite their apparent desirability, rigid generic distinctions will not hold. These genre benders, busy with producing rather than pontificating about the texts they read and write, may well be content with Peter Medway’s concept of “fuzzy” genres, the idea of “degrees of genreness” (2002: 141). Medway suggests that “when people do roughly similar sorts of textual things in circumstances perceived as roughly similar,” we may find it “helpful” to identify those “roughly similar” things as a genre, because they are, apparently, working as recognized responses to (roughly) recurring situations. But, putting theory and practice again at loggerheads, such fuzziness seems anathematic to the Neale Talbots of the blogging world. Given A-listers’ (self-perceived) position as “experts” on the genre, I find this stubborn blindness to what’s really being produced by “bloggers” ironic, and read within it fidelity not to blogs, but to some kind of status that this particular vision of blogs (i.e., not-diary) was meant to bestow. Talbot’s rejection of the diary “eating” the blog (or vice versa) implies fears about generic cannibalism, and a resulting loss not just of formal but also of communal autonomy and, thus, identity, that seems, to him and like-minded commentators, particularly dangerous.

Clearly, some bloggers feel passionately that territorial claims in the generic landscape of cyberspace must be protected, but for what—or whose—benefit? Whose voices are silenced in these ongoing discussions of generic borders and practices? As well, we should consider what’s feeding this anxiety about and investment in the A-list blog. What kinds of communities think they’re better served by a “blog” and not (horrors!) a “diary”? Calling on postcolonial studies to pay more, or more consistent, heed to genre, Peter Hitchcock reminds us that “the policing of the borders of genres tells us something about the logic of power and the political arena” in which texts circulate (2003: 302). That many bloggers have kept up this policing indicates that concerns about generic fidelity—or the unspoken issues (e.g., gender or belonging or appropriate function) these concerns stand in for—continue to matter: keeping those borders distinct has less to do with fittingness, or legibility, than with how genres and their users will be perceived. Border patrols may be struck most frequently by those most invested in a particular vision of the Internet and its users as part of a new enterprise, one that breaks ground. Since, I believe, claims and investments about newness underpin blog-diary debates, we need to examine how the apparent (and much touted) novelty of blogs develops out of and contributed to anxieties about definition.

The answers lie partly in the cultural history of the World Wide Web. The Web, a series of connected, hyperlinked pages that operate on the Internet, took shape about 1990 (Berners-Lee 1998). The rise of blogs coincided with excited conversations about the World Wide Web and its possibilities, particularly for the development of new, global communities and conversations and, with those new exchanges, opportunities for social change. The utopian visions of Howard Rheingold, among others, contributed to a potent sense of novelty about the Web and its “citizens” (“Netizens”), with much-hyped virtual communities as the solution to a myriad of “real life” problems, including the loss of democratic public spaces. Early theories of the Internet imagined the possibilities for diverse communities to join in conversation, prompting a return to democratic public discourse and debate; the agora had been reinvented in the fluid “halls” of cyberspace. In these visions of cyberspace, Kevin Robins recalls, “it is suggested [that] identity will be a matter of freedom and choice” (2000: 79), and identity crises can be warded off by participation in online communities (2000: 83). Cyberspace represented “the ultimate flowering of community...where individuals shape their own community by choosing which other communities to belong to” (Jones 1998: 3). “Critical to the rhetoric surrounding the Internet use,” Steven Jones noted in 1998, “is the promise of a renewed sense of community and, in many instances, new types and formations of community” (1998: 3).

Blogs, “hailed as fundamentally different than what came before” (Herring, Scheidt, Bonus & Wright 2005) and as native to the Web, carried a great deal of that promise. To be “fundamentally different,” however, the blog could not acknowledge print culture antecedents, and certainly not the diary, a form stereotyped as pedestrian, domestic, and—perhaps worst of all—feminine. The *Oxford English Dictionary* picks up on this ethos in defining “blog” as a verb: “To blog is to be part of a community of smart, tech-savvy people who want to be on the forefront of a new literary undertaking” (qtd. in Boyd 2006: par. 14). This definition, along with bloggers’ meta-genre and mainstream media’s bestowal of newsworthiness, highlight a peculiar persistence of vision about the Web: that it is a “brave new world” and that the blog, as a form “native to the Web” (Blood 2002a: xi), and therefore not derivative of offline genres, is a poster-genre for that promise and novelty. Bloggers’ outrage and nostalgia about “pure” blogs should be read against the history of idealism that the Internet fostered in the early 1990s.

But this early promise of the Web, and, I suggest, the blog, did not bear fruit. Instead of new communities, critics argued that virtual ones were simply extensions of offline groupings, and problematically homogenous instead of heterogeneous, centrifugal instead of centripetal (e.g., Baym 1998: 35–38). The border-patrolling about blogs arises out of this (failed) idealism and this focus on *new* communities. The allure of the new, of embracing the apparent possibilities of



the untested, may produce a sense of elitism about newness that presents itself as a rejection of the old; in this case, the diary became the hallmark of that old order. Moreover, as Herring, Kouper, Scheidt, and Wright (2004) note, the demographics of these halcyon days of the Web were “strongly skewed towards adult, white, English-speaking, technically-savvy males” (2004)—notably, the same constituents of blogging’s A-list—and hardly the ideal grounds for reinvention of communities. Moreover, the almost immediate commercialization of the Web turned community into a cash cow (Bolter 2000: 18–20; Dean 2000: 4–5), tarnishing its utopian image. The co-option of blogs by the corporate world, with every product roll-out generating a blog, or what John Dvorak calls “faux-blogs” (qtd. in Miller & Shepherd 2004), challenged bloggers’ perceptions that their texts were immune to such “selling out.” The disapproval of commercialism rang with disappointment over wasted potential, the failure of users to overcome traditional and dominant forces, such as commercialism, in making a new space with new modes of communication to suit new communities and their needs. This nostalgia about the “golden days” of the Web—days that likely never existed quite as remembered—marks and initiates some blog commentary, especially about generic dilution.

Proposing guidelines and generating commentary enables writers to demonstrate their generic savvy, showing their allegiance to communal standards of decorum and to maintaining the ideal of the “*new* literary undertaking” that seems to be under siege from a number of fronts. On Metafilter, a “community web-log” on which the specific, singular community is not articulated but, I suppose, meant to be recognized by its members, users became embroiled in a debate about the length of posts (inspired by Talbot’s admonition to “leave your 3000+ words at the door, buddy, because it doesn’t work for this medium” (2002: 159). Brad Graham, a blogger since 1998, headlined his post with a quote from *Star Trek: The Next Generation* character Captain Jean-Luc Picard: “Does anyone remember when we used to be *explorers*?” (2000: <http://www.metafilter.com/1142/>). This language of exploration (which he repeats in an essay, “Why I blog,” on his own site) taps back into that ethos of innovation and novelty that marked the early commentary on and about the Web. As Talbot’s fears indicated, remarks about generic dilution may mask concerns about *community* dilution. Protecting the genre could be read as a way to preserve the exclusive “club” that upholds blogging’s “true” ideals. Eschewing connection with the diary, a form saddled by print-culture and other, even more damaging associations, these explorer-bloggers patrol generic borders to keep out contaminating forces. Their definitions imply that the diary is one of the key sources of contamination, threatening to colonize this fledgling form and its community of explorers and ground-breakers. In this final section, we will unpack what “diary” signifies and conjures up for die-hard bloggers, and how the

moral panic over the diary is, once again, founded on theory and stereotype rather than tradition and practice.

### 3. The familiar within the strange: The diary in cyberspace

This A-list attention, and the homogenous view of blogs that it promotes in the popular imagination, ignores the overwhelming reality that most writers call their texts “blogs” and produce diaries and that the diary persistently haunts explanations of the blog, cementing these forms’ synonymy. For example, early descriptions in the media consistently hedged their definitions, calling the blog a “kind of spontaneous online public journal” (Taylor 2002: 68), a “sort of hybrid diary/bio/community/bulletin board” (Webb 2002: 22), or a “chronological diary” that is a “descendant of the personal homepage” (McKinnon 2001: 67). Even Blogger.com’s ten-item definition begins, “A blog is a personal diary” ([http://www.blogger.com/tour\\_start.g](http://www.blogger.com/tour_start.g)). In the majority of the pages answering my “what is a weblog” Google query, writers described their blogs as diaries, or forms of them—along the lines of “basically a journal that’s on the web.” Therefore, the idea inherent in anti-diary meta-blogging that the genre would not “do” for Netizens’ needs precludes the very fact that it quite obviously works for most of them. After all, when people starting writing lives online, publishing daily posts about themselves (not about Web content), they called their texts *diaries*, not postcards or scrapbooks or memoirs or broadcasts or letters or any other genre that performs many of the same functions, and on which the diary draws. The diary was the go-to genre from the beginning for many users, and remains so for the silent majority. The persistence of this generic snobbery, despite overwhelming evidence of the diary’s suitability, suggests the strength of stereotypes—about gender, function, and literariness, for example—that masquerade as concerns about genre. Bloggers’ repeated, and sometimes rancorous, disidentifications with the blog’s generic brethren highlight how the diary has become a pariah genre, something that “everyone” may do but certainly don’t want to be caught doing. In the “new” world of the Web, such an “old school” genre seems too passé.

Nonetheless, bloggers who loudly protest against the diary as a synonymous form may be losing the war of words, particularly in commentary about blogs from outsiders to outsiders, as the *OED* entry suggests (indeed, the predominance of diary-blogs in the face of injunctions against such muddling may further indicate that this “war” is one-sided, with most practitioners unaware of or not interested in engaging in generic battles). As a highly recognizable form, the diary establishes instant generic common ground. In “An Introduction to Blogs and Blogging,” a webpage encouraging teachers to adopt this practice in the classroom, Michael Stach



explains that “[b]logs are Internet-based journals” (2004:). However, he prefaces this definition with a caveat:

Sometimes [terms] can create counter-productive images in the minds of students. For example, imagine saying to a class of seventh-graders, “Today we are going to write a diary.” For adolescent girls a diary may be pink in color guarded by a heart-shaped lock and containing the secrets of school ground crushes. But chances are most of the boys will be turned off as soon as they hear the word diary. Yet imagine the teacher saying “Today we are going to write a journal.” Now the word journal carries with it the notion of Lewis and Clark and of other brave explorers keeping a leather-bound record of their discoveries and adventures. It sounds more acceptable – rugged, no-nonsense, and even important. (2004)

Even better than saying “journal,” though, would be to introduce the class to blogging, which is “sure to be an attention-grabber” because it “carries an air of mystery sprinkled with a dash of high tech” (Stach 2004). Noting that the blog will conjure up images of *Star Trek* for (male?) students, Stach concludes, “A blog is high tech and futuristic and may get students interested in writing.” Putting aside for a moment the problems of Stach’s ideas about diaries/journals, this introduction is notable for its authoritative tone: Stach has no qualms about making a concrete definition. Writing as a tech-savvy instructor to teachers (who, evidently, have no online experience), he gives them a tool they can use to work with writing in a way that seems “cool” and cutting-edge, even “futuristic,” though it also calls upon historical—and macho—functions of exploration, language Graham and other bloggers have used to emphasise the import and novelty of their enterprise. Ironically, this “high tech” pedagogical tool draws on decades-old practices of using the diary in the classroom (Gannett 1992). Stach’s premise is to make the diary more appealing—or “more acceptable”—by naming it something else; in contemporary marketing lingo, the diary is being “rebranded” to reach new consumers.

Such generic sleight-of-hand seems necessary because of the diary’s image problem. Stach’s comments draw on popular ideas about the diary that are, like hype about blogs, based on assumption about and stereotype of the diary rather than actual practice. Given the diary’s close but problematic relationship to blogs, I think it worth attending to the key assumptions, particularly as they also illustrate the familiarity of the debates about genre that bloggers have reignited. Stach’s representations of the diary and the genre reify misapprehensions about the diary as feminine (pink!), secret (needing the protection of lock and key), and irrelevant, recording “crushes” instead of “important” material from the macho world of exploration, and a sure turn-off for male students. The blog, as an extension of the more manly journal, must, by association be “gender-neutral”—that is, not gendered as *feminine*—and its cyberspace milieu supports this gender bias. The Web has been considered a “masculine” space, in part because of the lingering

association of technology with a “male” domain (Green & Adam 2001: xiv-xv), and because of the Internet’s “roots” in the “male world” of “the military, the academy, engineering and industry” (Scott, Semmens, & Willoughby 2001: 5). The false separation of “journal” and “diary” that Stach proposes connects to long-standing concepts of these forms as disparate and those disparities as gendered, and it is significant that the Internet reignites rather than dispenses with such old debates.<sup>4</sup> Despite Web pioneers’ attempts to create a communicative situation that would dispense with the need for old responses, as well as their often problematic cultural associations, actual users have brought over their practices and the prejudices, meaning that they read and write with sensibilities forged both in the past and the present. Popular conceptions of diaries and journals, as Stach’s comments indicate, read the journal as pointing “outward,” to echo Talbot’s language about blogs, dealing with experiences of interest and import to the public, to “History.” The diary, in contrast, point “inward,” the vehicle for the domestic and the quotidian (Carter 1997; Culley 1985; Gannett 1992).

Such gendered readings both reinforce and spring from associations of the diary with the secret, the kind of text needing securing with a lock and key, whether “heart-shaped” or not. In “Blogging as Social Activity, or, Would You Let 900 Million People Read Your Diary?” (2004), Bonnie Nardi, Diane Schiano, and Michelle Gumbrecht draw on this seeming paradox: “Why would so many people post their diaries—perhaps the most intimate form of personal musing—on the most public communication medium in human history, the Internet?” (2004). However, the idea of privacy, and the potential power of the revelations written in a diary, is relatively recent to the diary, a form that has existed in English for over four hundred years. Indeed, for several centuries, the diary was a relatively “public” form, in that diarists used these texts for a range of functions requiring other readers. For example, seventeenth-century Puritans wrote spiritual diaries, addressed to God and read by their confessors (Gannett 1992: 110–11); travellers and immigrants, away from loved ones and reliable mail services, created letter-diaries (e.g., Hassam 1994); mothers and daughters, sometimes over several generations, co-authored diaries to chronicle family history (Cully 1985; Huff 1996). While the diary was “private” in that its circulation was limited, it was not “secret” in the sense of “for oneself alone.” This ban on outside readers arose in mid-nineteenth

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4. The gendering of forms that has attached to blogs and diaries indicates the profound failure of the ideal that the Web would allow users to transcend the body—the “meat”—and take on a variety of identities in a sort of postmodern play (e.g., Baym 1998; Turkle 1995; Wilson 2000).

century, coinciding, as Cinthia Gannet notes, with the popularization of Romantic ideals of the Self as singular, autonomous, and private, as distinct from public and communal, and thus worthy of greater introspection; this shift was bolstered by the emerging field of psychoanalysis, with its attention to the unconscious and the possibilities for unlocking the “secrets” of the self through (self-) analysis (Gannet 1992: 141). Kathryn Carter argues that Victorian diarists and consumers operated under a “willful denial about diary writing and its alleged privacy” (1997: 251). The insistence on the diary as private served the “ideological function” of upholding “a certain model of selfhood that contributes to the consolidation of public and private spheres necessary to mid-century notions of class and gender” (1997: 251), rather than reflecting actual practice. The diary sold with a lock and key, an early twentieth century invention (Culley 1985: 3), embodies and perpetuates this stereotype.

In other words, the idea(l) of the “authentic” diary as private was a public construct, if not a fiction, that served public interest by separating public and private selves, writings, and performances. The public’s investment in supposedly secret, or at least highly personal, texts and their revelatory promise may be one reason why the diary has done so well online, even though, as Nardi, Schiano, and Gumbrecht point out, the medium’s accessibility seems antithetical to the production of the genre. In their analysis of the blog’s social actions, Miller and Shepherd (2004) situate the blog’s emergence in a kairoic moment when the public and private boundary has become unstable and voyeurism and exhibitionism are valued (2004). Though political or filter blogs may not satisfy such desires, personal blogs—what I would call Internet diaries—very well might. Even if the promise of titillation goes unfulfilled, or is not precisely what a reader is looking for, diaries, with their snapshots of daily, often domestic life, construct and respond to another, closely linked *kairos*, what Leigh Gilmore calls “the age of memoir” (2001: 16). Gilmore charts contemporary Western—particularly North American—society’s growing fascination with and expectation of the confessional mode. Noting the influences of the “media confessional” and “real life media,” Gilmore posits that “[c]onfessional practices pervade and, arguably, define mass culture” (2001: 17). Spiritual diaries, in which writers confessed sins, helped set up expectations for confessions in “secret” diaries in print culture, and readers may well see them as so integral to the production of the genre that, even online, diaries must be confessional. Trammell and Keshelashvili (2005) observe that A-list bloggers have had to adjust their content to become more personal, if not confessional. They note that “filter blogs which point readers to interesting stories without much commentary no longer provide a formula for success.” Instead, A-listers “must put more out there about themselves” (2005: 978). Miller & Shepherd see the pressing exigence in blogs as not informational but related to

“the self and the relations between selves” (2004) Once again, practice and expectation blur the lines between blogs and diaries.

In addition to—or, perhaps, because of—these established expectations, Internet diaries do provide an oasis of familiarity in the “new” terrain of cyberspace, and perhaps the reliance on a print-culture form has something to do with the uncertainties within the new situation: you’re Carolyn Burke or Steve Schachlin or Justin Hall, the first online diarists. How do you shape what you do so that it serves your needs *and* will communicate successfully? Dillon and Gushrowski (2000) note that the need for instant recognizability for genre users leads to online adaptation of offline modes: “many paper-based conventions are adopted in the hope that such familiarity of form will leverage user comprehensions” (2000: 202). Crowston and Williams (2000) concur, noting that “given a socially recognized need to communicate,” individuals “will communicate in a recognized genre” (2000: 202). Faced with a situation in which they evidently felt compelled to write, Internet diarists took up a print culture form and made it work for their virtual needs. Taking an existing genre into a new situation helps define that new situation and its possibilities for participants; as Miller and Shepherd (2004) explain, 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 its audience” (2004). The denial of the diary as an ancestral genre, then, may explain why bloggers feel an obligation to define the blog, but find it difficult to make one that does *not* call on existing forms.

#### 4. Conclusion

The diary, in its instant recognizability and its demonstrated fluidity and flexibility, allowed early Web-writers a way to make their private intentions known to the public (Miller 1984: 158). The history of the diary genre, from its earliest instances to its most contemporary, has been marked by change. Significantly, however, these changes have not been in style—a diary entry written in the 18th century will still be recognizable as a diary entry to 21st century readers. What has changed over the centuries has been public perception of the genre, popular and critical ideas about what the diary genre is, what it should do, and for whom, raising a series of tightly interwoven issues that include privacy, authenticity, and audience. These shifting perceptions arise in the different contexts of production and reception, which generate different ideas about acceptability based on the dominant ideologies of the time. What functions will be mutually recognized or seen as appropriate will differ in individual contexts. Conversations about generic standards, how to read and write texts, what practices will be appropriate, what we

might call a consciousness of genre, thus can indicate the debates, tensions, and unarticulated mores that construct the Age of the Internet.

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# Online, multimedia case studies for professional education

## Revisioning concepts of genre recognition

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As communication in both formal education and workplaces is more and more mediated by online content management systems, it is possible to simulate online within professional education the systems of genres that characterize professional work. Our research group has been designing, teaching with, and researching online, multimedia, fictional case studies for professional education, which dynamically represent the genre systems and communicative practices of organizations. The theoretical underpinnings of the simulation and the pedagogy lie in a New Rhetoric or activity approach to genre. A qualitative analysis of students' responses suggests that this approach may successfully address problem of the lack of transfer of genre knowledge from formal schooling to professional work.

### 1. Introduction

In the last fifteen years, a theory of genre systems informed by cultural historical activity theory (Bazerman 1994, 2004; Russell 1997, 2003) has been applied to understanding professional work (e.g., Smart 2006; Winsor 1996, 2003; Spinuzzi 2003). Genre is viewed not in terms of the substance or form of discourse but rather, following C. Miller (1984: 159), as “typified rhetorical actions based in recurrent situations,” as *social action*. Contexts such as organizations, professions, or disciplines are viewed as complex *activity systems* mediated by complex systems of intertextually- or hypertextually-linked genres, through which knowledge circulates and work is coordinated in more or less regularized ways. By tracing the genre systems through which people coordinate their activity and knowledge, researchers have gained insight into a range of cultural-psychological processes in organizational communication (Smart 2006), power relations in workplaces (Winsor 2003), computer-supported collaborative work (Spinuzzi 2003), and scientific communication (Bazerman 1999). And this synthesis of cultural-historical activity theory and North American genre theory has produced a tradition of

theorizing relationships between texts (in various media) and their multiple contexts of use (see Russell & Bazerman 1997; Bazerman & Russell 2003).

This theoretical approach has also informed research on genre in education, particularly professional education. A central but uncomfortable finding is that there is little “transfer” between communication in the genres of professional education and communication in the genres of professional work. That is, students recognize and create texts as belonging to the genre system of schooling, though the texts teachers assigned for reading or writing may have been drawn from or intended for workplace systems of genres. Freedman and others (Dias et al. 1999; Freedman et al. 1994), drawing on activity theory and Miller’s (1984, 1994) theory of genre as social action, argue that there is little or no “transfer” because acquiring a genre means acquiring an activity, learning to do the activity in its context. The social motive of schooling (epistemic) is fundamentally different than that of work (pragmatic). And schooling cannot represent the activity of workplaces, even in simulations.

To [participate in the actions of the workplace community], they [students] will need to sense from the inside the nature of the social action entailed by these new genres: the instrumental and praxis-oriented social motives, the complex phenomena of multiple readerships (some remote in time and place), the different life-cycle of their texts, and the different literacy practices surrounding the texts (reading practices and collaborative composing strategies). None of this know-how will have been made available through simulations, no matter how realistically or elaborately staged. (Freedman et al. 1994: 221)

Writing in 1994, just a year after the release of the Mosaic browser, Freedman and her colleagues could not have foreseen the impact Web technologies would have on professional (communicative) practices as well as the relationship among school, work, and leisure life. But for many people in 2009, workplace, school, and leisure activities now cross paths within the Web browser. And their characteristic social actions, once realized largely in the physical world, have moved into virtual realms. One purpose of this paper, then, is to suggest how this sea change in our means of coordinating and accomplishing work enables educators to revisit simulations, this time in computer-mediated activities, as one possible means of enabling transfer of genre knowledge between educational and workplace settings.

## **2. Addressing the problem of genre transfer: Current trends**

There have been three main ways of addressing the problem of the lack of “transfer” of genre knowledge from formal schooling to other contexts. One approach might be termed “genre acquisition”: teaching in an explicit (though not necessarily presentational) way certain generic “moves” or conventions of genres, derived

from analysis of the genres in context, as with major SFL approaches (Martin 2000; Christie 1999) or second language (ESP/EAP) writing approaches (Swales 1986, 1990, 2000.). The goal is to provide linguistic resources that students are assumed to then use in new contexts (see the literature review in Carter, Ferzli & Wiebe 2004).

A second approach (Devitt 2004; Bawarshi 2003; Reiff 2004) is to teach “genre awareness” as distinct from (but related to) genre acquisition. Students first rhetorically analyze familiar genres whose contexts they have experienced, then move to less or unfamiliar genres that are related to them (antecedent genres, usually), studying both the form and aspects of the context, always trying to “keep form and context intertwined” (Devitt 2004: 198). Devitt argues that teaching genre awareness, rather than particular skills, will facilitate transfer, as previously learned genres become antecedent genres for further learning and practice of related genres (Devitt 2004: 202ff).

With both these approaches, professional texts are in the learning environment, but the target context of use (the activity system) is not; the context of use is represented through other texts, ordinarily. Students are taught the genre set of, for example, some domain of professional work but not the genre system, the texts-in-use in a professional activity system. The activity system remains that of the classroom. Thus, the target genre is not ‘decontextualized’ per se, as the texts function in the activity system of education, but rather the genre is abstracted from its context of use in professional work and is recognized as operating in the activity system of education. The effect is to teach the genre (and its contexts) in largely textual terms, analytically, and not ways of acting in context using the genre. Perhaps this explains why students have difficulty gaining a “feel” for the genre, its mediation of activity, and thus the difficulty students have in “transfer”.

A third approach is to teach a genre explicitly in the process of performing a rhetorical action in its target context of use, what has been termed an *activity* or *New Rhetorical* approach. For example, Carter et al. (2004) developed an online tool for teaching the laboratory report genre in science and engineering education. LabWrite leads students through the process of *doing* and *representing* (textually, mathematically, and graphically) the laboratory activity. The goal of instruction is not to teach “the genre” or “writing” but to teach scientific concepts and scientific method using genre as a mediational means. The genre is a tool for doing and learning science in the context of the course-specific laboratory, and the students learn the genre as a matter of course, in doing the activity. This approach shows particular promise. It is the only one that has been shown effective (using quasi-experimental methods) in teaching a genre to L1 adults. But because the study was confined to a very specific and regularized genre and context (the laboratory report in laboratory science instruction), the potential for “transfer” from formal schooling to activity systems beyond is not addressed, as Carter et al. point out. Yet “transfer” is very often the goal of teaching genre, particularly in professional education.

The problem for this third approach is: how to immerse students in an activity system *beyond* the classroom without actually working in it, as with internships or service learning, which are expensive, and offer little opportunity to control or monitor the experiences students have. For this we turned to computer-mediated simulations.

### 3. Revisioning transfer: Computer-mediated simulation of genre systems

As work (and communication) and education come to be more and more mediated by computers (CMC) and electronic content managements systems (CMSs), it becomes possible to represent within professional education the systems of genres that characterize professional work, and to dynamically simulate the systems of activity that the genre systems mediate. Our research group has been designing, teaching with, and researching online, multimedia, fictional case studies for professional education, which attempt to represent the genre systems and communicative practices of organizations, through a new educational CMS we have developed called MyCase (Fisher et al. 2008; MyCase 2009; Fisher 2006). In this paper we describe one of the multimedia online case studies, drawing on activity theory and genre theory, to show how the CMS represents the genre systems and activity of workplaces, and how students responded. (For a full description of the research studies, see Fisher 2006). Omega Molecular is a fictional bio-technology company developing genetically engineered products. In a technical communication course for 24 seniors in bio-systems engineering, the students played the role of consultants to it. The teacher played various roles, but mainly that of team leader to these consultants.

We draw on focus group data from that research to re-theorize the problems of genre recognition and participation—particularly in ‘contexts’ of schooling—in light of genre systems theory, Bakhtin’s concept of chronotope, and attribution theory from social psychology.

We are not documenting instances of transfer of knowledge or skills (a very difficult research problem, theoretically and methodologically). Rather, our work is based on socio-cultural theories that conceptualize transfer not as the movement or transition of knowledge from one context to another but rather “patterns of participatory processes as part of the social and material contexts,” where both individuals and social organizations (school, work) are changing (Tuomi-Gröhn & Engeström 2003: 34–35). That is, we are looking for evidence that students are *typifying* (Schutz & Luckmann 1973) the experience in ways that resemble workplace participants. Those patterns of participation come to be construed and constructed (recognized) by participants as genres, and attributed to workplace activity.

### 3.1 Simulation to enable typification and attribution

One of our goals in developing portals with the MyCase software, then, has been to create environments in which students can develop a fuller feel for what it is like to participate in discourse-demanding contexts outside the classroom: to provide them with the means of, in C. Miller's (1984) words, construing new types, in Freedman et al's (1994) parlance, sensing new genres from the "inside" or, as Simon Pardoe (2000) puts it, attributing professional significance to the activities they undertake in the classroom. We attempt to make the MyCase portals different in certain ways from typical e-learning environments today. Portals created with MyCase are not self-study titles, nor are they simulations in which students work to optimize behaviors in order to "win" at some activity (e.g., make more money than other teams). Instead, we designed these portals to enable students and instructors to modulate between traditional classroom roles and professional roles, as they function in multiple contexts. We hoped this would facilitate the development of genre knowledge by enabling teachers and students to take part in social activities that resemble those that characterize two semiotic domains, to develop (critically) the subjectivity (and ultimately perhaps identity) of professionals, to gain this "sense of the genre from the inside" (Freedman et al. 1994). Students and teacher thus inhabit a very different subjectivity than in the approaches mentioned above that teach genre through analysis of texts and/or contexts, either in class or as ethnographic observers, where students and teachers are outsiders, "objectively" encountering the genres, for the purpose of typifying them (immediately) for study, not for use.

Again, the portals are designed as environments for purposeful activity *within* an existing (albeit fictional) genre system and circulation of discourse. The goal is to teach students to perform typical (typified, genred) social actions, to help students to come to recognize (define, as Miller, following Schutz, puts it) the genres as a system and construct an always-provisional definition of professional work in the domain as evoked by the genre system.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, we had to construct a simulated and *typical* situation for the field, a context for the generation, circulation, exchange and consumption of texts within a system of genres, regularized and stabilized-for-now (Schryer 1994). Students (or newcomers of any sort to an activity) come to sense the genre "from the inside" (Freedman et al. 1994) by coming to recognize the genres as mediating certain kinds of actions and

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1. At the same time, we also hoped to create an environment that promoted activity different than what might result from a monolithic representation of organizational practices within the university classroom (for a discussion of the problems with the "tyranny of the 'real,'" see Herndl 1993). We wanted to create a space in which students could "develop the capacity to speak up, to negotiate, and to be able to engage critically with the conditions of their working lives" (The New London Group 1996: 67) as a result of reading the elements of those lives.

operations. To do so they must, in Pardoe's term, make certain *attributions* when confronted with various artifacts. In social psychology, attribution theory investigates the ways people explain (attribute) the behavior of others (or themselves) in terms of its causes. They must attribute communicative behaviors (texts) to causes, and thus classify certain texts to certain genres if they are to master the situation (remembering that a single artifact—e.g., text—may be recognized and indeed operate in multiple contexts) (Russell 1997). They must do this in order to make good predictions about the behaviors that will succeed, the typical. Indeed, the problem of genre recognition is in a deep sense a problem of social psychological attribution, of explaining *why* something happened causally, the “because.” Thus the challenge of designing multimedia online simulations is to create an environment where students will experience artifacts as both genres for learning (the classroom activity system) and genres for doing productive work, albeit vicariously (the target activity system). This is so because we are not teaching the students certain skills or behaviors to be transferred per se, but rather “patterns of participatory processes as part of the social and material contexts”—contexts that have been typified, abstracted, from the target activity system (work) to the activity system of schooling. But unlike most instructional analysis, which looks for discrete elements to bring into the learning environment (information, skills, concepts), we are attempting to bring a communicative environment into the classroom for the students to subjectively inhabit (as well as objectively study)—a goal that only a multi-media, internet-based CMC makes (potentially) possible.

The critical pedagogical considerations for designing online simulations that can be used within professional writing courses to give students a sense of what it is like to learn genre “from the inside” might be understood in terms of what Russell (2002) characterized as the “depth” of and “breadth” of genre. Russell argued that genre recognition can operate across activity systems (e.g., disciplines and professions) not only in terms of “breadth” (the range or “set” of genres available) but also of “depth” (the ways those genres mediate activity at various levels of specialization within a single activity system and among activity systems—the genre system). The texts students read and write in any professional education classroom can be thought of as functioning, at least potentially, in two different activity systems: the specific classroom for which they were written and the professional world beyond, from which they derive generically (a laboratory report echoes an experimental article in a journal; a classroom research paper echoes an industry white paper, etc.) (Russell 1997).

But the fictional, virtual “real-world” activity system of the simulation collapses the distance (vertical ‘depth,’ if you will) between the genre systems of schooling and those of work in the domain for which the students and/or teachers imagine the texts to be read/written. In a sense, each text in the Omega Molecular simulation

works potentially as two genres: as a vehicle for and evidence of classroom learning of technical communication; and as communication in some system of activity beyond the class, in the fictional “real world” of Omega. Though one function may dominate at any one moment in time and place, students showed, at various points, that they recognized the ways these texts functioned—and might function—in another system of activity. And as we shall see, they attributed their learning more to the fictional, online environment than to the real classroom.

The genre system of the course is more “real” in the sense that the students and teachers are participating directly and immediately in it; it has direct consequences. But it is worth emphasizing—as the theory of activity and genre we are developing here suggests—that the most salient genres in the classroom for the students and the teachers are or should be the *imagined* ones. Those genres, we must remember, are the ones toward which the students are moving in their lives, potentially. And it is to these “real life” genres, that the actions of students and teachers are designed to lead. Schools and the wider social practices toward which schools orient students are *kindred* human activities, always linked potentially by the kind-ness of genres they share or be imagined to share. So that it is impossible finally to conclude, *Non scholae, sed vitae discimus*. It is never only school, but life we speak of. And the capaciousness of genre, viewed in terms of its breadth and depth, past and future as well as present, can be a resource for understanding the relation between the activities of formal schooling and other human activities.

### 3.2 Simulation to enable immersion in “professional” space and time

To move students from perceiving genres as a broad set to a deep system, mediating activity in contexts beyond the classroom, we had to simulate space and time within professional contexts. Bakhtin’s (1981) concept of chronotope (Bazerman 2004; Schryer 2002; Prior 1998) is helpful here because it theorizes the relation between genre and the spatial-temporal structure of activity—a necessary condition of seeing genre and professional work “from the inside.” When subjects recognize an utterance as belonging to some type, some genre, they know not only the kinds of actors, objects, and actions that are likely—though never inevitably—involved, but also the time-space setting invoked—the landscape of interactions (Bakhtin’s example is the Greek romance). To take a contemporary example, when one recognizes a document as a U.S. Internal Revenue Service tax form (Bazerman 2000), it is clear that one is defined within a bureaucratic identity of financial calculations, obligations, specific deadlines and places for submission—and ultimately complex regulations, enforcement procedures, and legal sanctions. It is also clear what actions and tools are salient (and irrelevant) within the time-space landscape the genre invokes. Yet “no matter how constrained by forms, conventions, regulations



and sanctions, the tax form becomes the scene of struggle between compliance and each individual's desire to protect personal financial interests," a way of "aligning or contesting motives in relation to the activity system of US government tax collections" (Bazerman, Little & Chaivin 2003: 459). A genre (particularly a written one) crystallizes the motives of participants and makes possible certain kinds of interactions while making others more difficult (though never impossible). A genre calls forth certain actions or (for some participants) operations with certain tools at certain times and places.

"In short genre recognition attunes us in deep and complex ways as to what to make of the utterance" (Bazerman, Little & Chaivin 2003: 456). In this sense, genre as social action differs from other theories of genre in emphasizing the positive valence of genre, as a landscape for action, rather than emphasizing its limitations on or regulation of action, and calls attention to the strategic agency of participants, who further their interests through mutually recognized, genred action, within the moments of utterance—though always constrained by the degree of congruence in their understandings, and always open to difference. Indeed, genres facilitate improvisation and innovation, marking out the expectations against which innovation is perceived as such (and not as meaningless nonsense), in much the way the chordal and melodic structure of a tune facilitates jazz improvisation (Schryer et al. 2005). And even when (or perhaps especially when) participants are at odds, they must have or develop a socially shared repertoire of genred actions to achieve understanding, coordination, and cooperation—to meaningfully disagree over time. As Bazerman (2006: 221) puts it, "genres are ways of seeing what acts are available that are appropriate to the moment as you see it—what you can do, what you might want to do. For example, you may perceive a moment in a disagreement as offering possibilities of either a rejoinder or an apology. Your motives, goals, plans will take shape within those two constructions of potential action. You would not even consider appropriate filing a legal brief—and if somehow you found a motive and means to pursue that path, that would radically change the nature of the situation and your counterpart's set of genred options."

#### **4. Developing a simulated genre system**

How does electronic communication in this virtual learning environment (VLE) afford and constrain genre recognition? What follows is a description a portal we developed and deployed within several sections of a technical communication service course for juniors and seniors in Agriculture and Biosystems Engineering. In this chapter we show how the portal created with the MyCase software provides simulation or game-like affordances designed to evoke an activity system and its



genre system to help students learn genres “from the inside,” in terms of attributing “real-world” significance to them, in terms of sensing the breadth and depth of the professional system of genres, and in terms of evoking a chronotope of professional activity. These affordances are different than affordances provided by textbooks, even when the books are repurposed and deployed via educational VLEs, or by traditionally narrated case studies (e.g., Harvard-type case studies), which have been considered a chief means of brining in extra-university experience into the classroom (Williams 1992).

#### 4.1 Simulated chronotope: Generic space and time

To create a situation that would be believable for students and at the same time would help address some of the issues Freedman et al. have raised about the lack of efficacy of traditional case studies for immersing students in the social motive of genre, we tried to create a VLE that would afford a much more dynamic circulation of information and a much more complex system of genres than in a traditional VLE (e.g., Blackboard or WebCT). As we thought about what we wanted our students to do when they interacted with the portals we were developing, we came to the conclusion that, to an extent, we were building an educational strategy game, in which individuals and groups would confront multiple demands and multiple tasks simultaneously and produce communication (acts) as required by these discourse-demanding situations (Aldrich 2004). The group of the students we focus on here would be leaving school in hopes of obtaining engineering positions. They would find themselves engaged in the cyclical process of dealing with a number of different workplace texts, in an intertextually connected system or (following Spinuzzi 2003) *ecology* of genres, even as they made their own contribution to this document universe. The students were to be the ones “on the ground,” making sense of an organization from within. As a result, our game had to include a number of authentic *opening documents*, as we call them, or texts like those a consultant might face—all at once—upon being given access to an organization. (For a fuller discussion of the types of content in Omega in relation to game genres, see Fisher 2007).

In the Omega simulation, students go to work (i.e., the portal; see Figure 1), log in, and gain access to documents (and audio and video) in a range of genres that represent the ongoing history of the organization, the latest organizational happenings (represented through emails, video clips, etc.), and an organizational calendar—in short, the genre system that provides the chronotopic landscape of the fictional, virtual activity system (Fisher et al. 2003). That is, these opening documents place students in a chronotope of possible discursive actions (Bazerman 2006).

Students play the role of bio-systems engineers hired as consultants as they interact with case materials in virtual time and space. During their consulting engagement they confront a number of issues through the genre system, including:

- Discrepancies between what company officers say in public forums and the scientific and financial data (or lack thereof) that informs their messages,
- Issues of intellectual property and their relationship to humanitarian and/or for-profit activity,
- The need to assemble a coherent story about the company and its current situation based on information provided in the form of artifacts and to subsequently adapt that story for various audiences and purposes (e.g., requests for financing for humanitarian projects vs. requests for investment dollars).

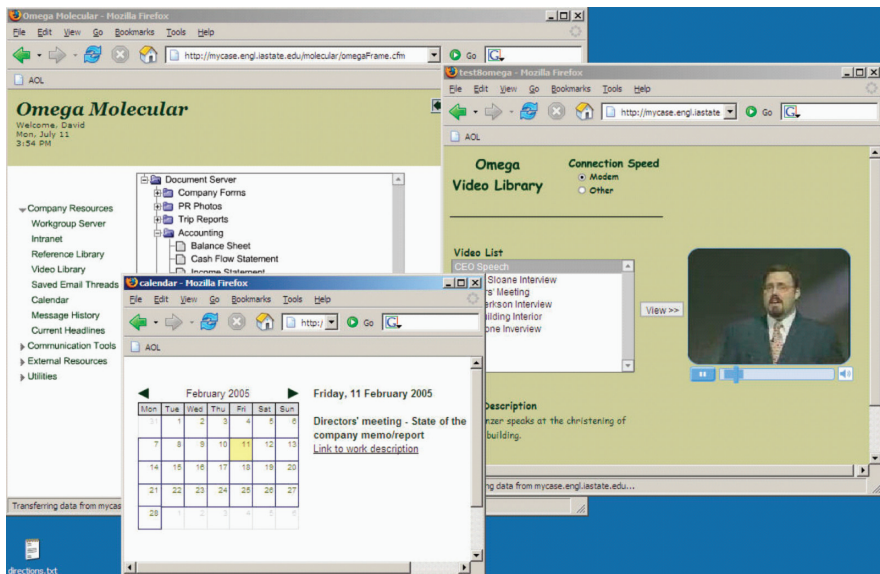


Figure 1. Omega Molecular Portal: Opening texts combine to create a chronotope

#### 4.1.1 Evoking space

We designed the Omega VLE to afford the representation of genres spatially, both in terms of “breadth” of genres and “depth” of genres. For example, the document server (Figure 2) is one “place” that contains genres that represent various departments (and disciplines) within the organization: management, marketing, accounting, research, etc. Accounting, for example, is evoked in part by its characteristic genres: balance sheets, cash flow statements, cost projection worksheets for products under development. The breath of genres is far greater than could be contained in a paper casebook. But the large genre set also becomes a genre system as documents refer to other documents in ways that allow students to construct histories of use—to drill

into the depth of the genre system. For example, the CEO's video speech represents accounting and field trial data in a much more positive light than the accounting and research documents in the document server do, potentially raising ethical questions. Students must drill deeply into the system of genres to unearth information (and construct a history and project a future) that is useful for their consulting work. For example, one of their "assignments" from the point of view of the classroom and from the point of view of the consulting engagement is to write an "investor bulletin" that refers to field trial data. They must not only learn what the genre is and how it is used and produce an example (as in genre acquisition and genre awareness models) but also do so in a communicative environment where there are contradictory interests and complex power structures operating in different "areas" of the environment—in a system of activity (imaginatively) other than the classroom.

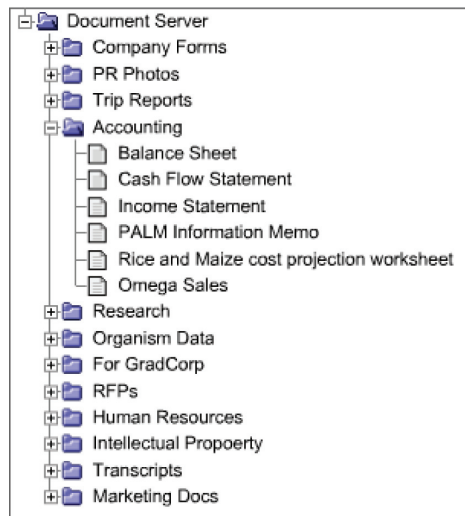


**Figure 2.** Omega Document Server. This component represents the organization's file server. Additional documents and additional folders appear in this tool as the simulation progresses

The assignments are given in Figure 3 as they would be on a classroom syllabus. But the students get them as work duties, "deliverables" for the consulting firm, in the form of memos from fictional staff members or from the teacher in the role of consulting team leader. The eight assignments (taking up 10 weeks of a 15 week course) are designed to force students to purposefully explore—and come to recognize and use—the genres in the system actively, to add value to data/information by making it genred in social action. They must employ data/information across a breadth of interlinked and interacting genres, imbuing it with purpose as part of one or more goal directed actions in the context of the overarching motive(s) of the organization—and to reflect on their learning as they do that.

|   | Assignment                                                                                                     | Characteristics                                                                                                                                                              | Format/Genre                                                                                                                                                           |
|---|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1 | Define and/or describe a tool/process involved with genetic engineering                                        | (Individual) Incorporation of at least one graphic                                                                                                                           | Definition for web glossary designed for Omega newcomers                                                                                                               |
| 2 | Create a team charter/project plan                                                                             | (Group) Task identification; time estimation                                                                                                                                 | Memo for team lead (instructor)                                                                                                                                        |
| 3 | Summarize/synthesize scientific findings<br>Summarize/synthesize financial situation                           | (Group) Using various tables and lab reports provided in the learning environment<br>(Group) Using financial statements and "testimony" provided in the learning environment | State-of-the-company report                                                                                                                                            |
| 4 | Create a product/process data sheet                                                                            | (Individual)                                                                                                                                                                 | Datasheet for audience interested in learning about/buying process/product;<br>Or investor bulletin for venture capitalist interested in investing in the company      |
| 5 | Develop and deliver an oral report about political and agricultural conditions in a Southeastern Asian country | (Group) Accompanied by PowerPoint presentation                                                                                                                               | Videotaped presentation to be available on the corporate intranet                                                                                                      |
| 6 | Create a proposal or business plan                                                                             | (Individual)                                                                                                                                                                 | Proposal directed at funder (RFP available in learning environment)/Business plan directed at potential investor (document criteria available in learning environment) |
| 7 | Develop a public Web presence for Omega                                                                        | (Group) Display and defend in front of class (characterize major argument(s) and how they are rendered in structure and content of site)                                     | Web site for the public                                                                                                                                                |
| 8 | Wrap-up report                                                                                                 | (Group/Individual) Actual vs. Budget assessment; self assessment                                                                                                             | Project post mortem in which students do actual vs. budget analysis on the time they projected they would spend working the project vs. the time they actually took    |

(Fisher et al. 2003)

Figure 3. Assignments in the class room genre of syllabus

Students work in groups and individually. But even when they work individually, they may share information. There is a document sharing space for students-in-the-role-of consultant. This is “their” space. Thus, the VLE represents the genre set (Devitt 1991; Bazerman 2004), the breadth of genres, spatially.

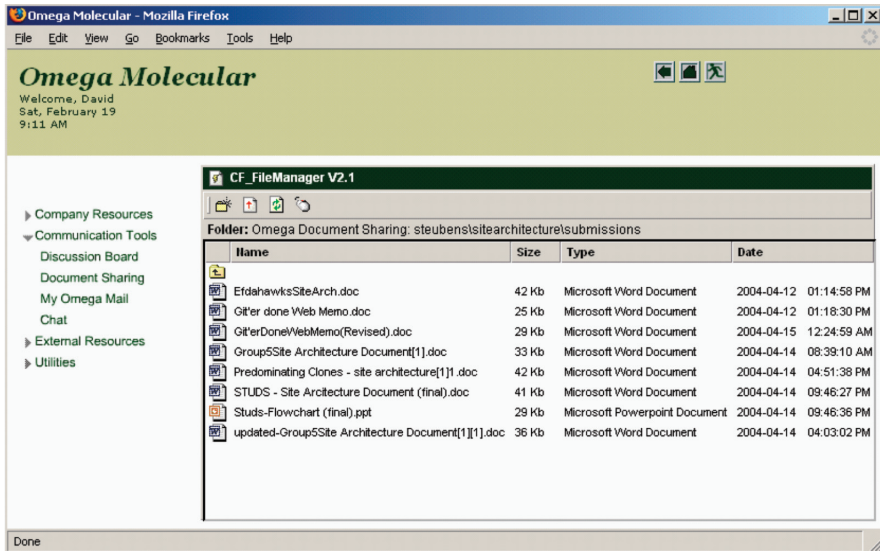


Figure 4. Omega Document Sharing. Students post drafts and assignments to these folders and are able to access them from anywhere.

A teacher might use this VLE (as documented thus far) as a computer-mediated environment to support teaching genre acquisition or genre awareness, as it contains a wide array of examples of genres (offering greater breadth than most traditional paper classrooms), and it provides information (videos, etc.) on how those genres are used. However, the affordances of the VLE for evoking organizational *time* afford the possibility of moving beyond teaching genre acquisition and genre awareness to an activity or New Rhetorical approach to genre teaching. It is this diachronic dimension, evoking the depth of genre, that that enables students to approximate the activity of organizational newcomers, to see genres from the “inside”.

#### 4.1.2 Evoking time

The content management system (CMS) also affords the representation of genres temporally. The “broad” genre set becomes a “deep” genre system, as activity is set

in motion through various rhetorical exigencies designed (largely) by the instructor (analogous to “assignments” in the genre system of a traditional classroom). This temporal dimension of genre is enacted through various tools.

**4.1.2.1 Calendar.** There is first of all a calendar. But the deadlines are represented as growing out of the genre system of the fictional organization (not the classroom). They are put on the calendar within the fictional time of the organization, and may change with “new” information added to the document server, video library, and so on. As Yates and Orlikowski (2002) argue, time comes to be recognized within a genre system not so much in terms of calendar time, but in terms of *kairos*: “The awareness and strategic use of genre systems and the active shaping of *kairotic* moments (rather than passive acceptance of *chronology*)” is fronted in complex electronic communication, and the students use time in the VLE to understand what actions are available and to craft responses in time. The calendar makes the organization’s (fictional) staff’s dates the students’ dates, and vice versa.



**Figure 5.** Calendar of Events. Assignments arise from “workplace” exigencies (e.g., Director of Marketing preparing a glossary for new hires, CEO going to venture capital seminar, Director of Marketing going to trade show).

**4.1.2.2 Time-stamped emails and document reviews that are role sensitive.** The VLE sets in motion the genre set and creates *kairotic* time and the *chronotope* of the genre system through communication tools that evoke organizational communication rather than classroom communication (though the former very often serves as the latter). Through a time-stamped email system within the Omega portal, students had the ability to email not only other students and the teacher/team lead, but also fictional members of the organization with questions or concerns. The instructor actually responded, but by playing the role of (pretending to be) the character to whom the email was directed. A number of students used this

tool to email fictional characters to fill information gaps they found in the portal. The genres of teacher-student email (clarifying assignments, etc.), which students know well, become genres of supervisor-employee email (clarifying job tasks, etc.). They are kindred genres.

**Omega Email -- Management Team**

**To:** aturkle@omega.com  
cmalieckal@omega.com  
danzer@omega.com  
gatesp@omega.com  
joel.gleiger@omega.com  
lawrence.talburt@omega.com  
michelle.miesher@omega.com  
mlopez@omega.com  
srich@omega.com  
steubens@omega.com

**From:** ddfishe@iastate.edu

**Re:** State of Company

**Message:** Directors-  
I've figured out that Omega is in dire need of

Submit Reset

Figure 6. Omega Organizational Email

**4.1.2.3 Role-sensitive document reviews.** The email system, combined with Microsoft Word's Track Changes function and a document-sharing software tool in the VLE, allowed us to represent the temporal document cycling, mediated through electronic communication, that goes on contemporary organizations. Students received comments on their work via the Track Changes tool in Microsoft Word. This feature enabled the instructor to change the "identity" of the commenter, so that it matched that of the fictional organizational character to whom the document was submitted. As with the role sensitive emails, the comment function allowed the instructor to comment playing the roles of various characters, just as several employees in a real organization typically comment on an important document. In the case below (Figure 7), Jake Steubens, Director of Marketing has commented on a memo report from a (student playing) consultant.



MEMO

|       |                |
|-------|----------------|
| To:   | Jake Steubens  |
| From: | M. K. Freeburg |
| Date: | 10/8/2004      |
| Re:   | Lime           |

Lime-Lime is a fertilizer used to control the pH of agricultural soils. If soil is too acidic, lime is added to soil to bring the pH up towards 7.0, which is a neutral pH value. The main active ingredient in lime fertilizer is calcium carbonate. Lime with a high calcium carbonate equivalent (CCE) tends to neutralize soils faster than that of low CCE. Acidic soil is cause of several negative effects on crop growth and nutritional value. In low pH soils, nitrogen fixing is limited due to reduced microbial and insect activity, which is necessary for healthy plant growth \*what does nitrogen fixing do? This is the cause and effect for Lime.

Soils around the world will have varying soil acidity. Lime is used to control and emulate some unfavorable soil conditions that Omega's VitA rice may be able to \*Can you be more specific here? Why does Omega need to emulate th  
does it emulate these soils? How is it part of Omega's business/technology strategy?

Jake Steubens, 10/10/2004 12:19 PM: Inserted

Figure 7. Comments made on a “student” draft “by” the fictional Director of Marketing

Students submit all drafts to the document-sharing tool (Figure 4). The instructor reviews documents (as an organizational reviewer, for example, the Director of Marketing) and submits reviewed documents to the document-sharing tool. The only drafts that are not submitted to this tool are the graded drafts, which the instructor emails directly to students.

Discourse not only circulates through organizational time and space in the document cycling of review, but also in longer time scales potentially, extending even beyond the chronological time limits of the course to the chronotope of the fictional organization’s genre system and activity. Student-produced documents or information they find and post in a Web Reference Library can be used by other students, either that term or—if the instructor chooses to leave them and the students give their permission—in future terms, so that students contribute to the workings of simulation by providing discourse other—perhaps even future—students can use.

**4.1.2.4 Student texts repurposed in other genres within the genre system.** The fictional genre system allows students and teacher to organize the workflow over time, as documents created in one genre for one organizational exigency (and class assignment) are repurposed for other exigencies (and class assignments) in other genres—and often linked intertextually or hypertextually. One effect of this circulation process was to make available to students the “best drafts” of each other’s work. The instructor encouraged students to draw on each other’s work as they progressed through the semester to increasingly complex assignments. One result



of this writing circulation was the development of an online glossary from definitions developed by each student within the Omega case. Figure 8 shows how definition memos were repurposed by one group to create an online glossary that comprised part of the public web site the team built for Omega. Students were then able to use the glossary they collaboratively created for their future projects.

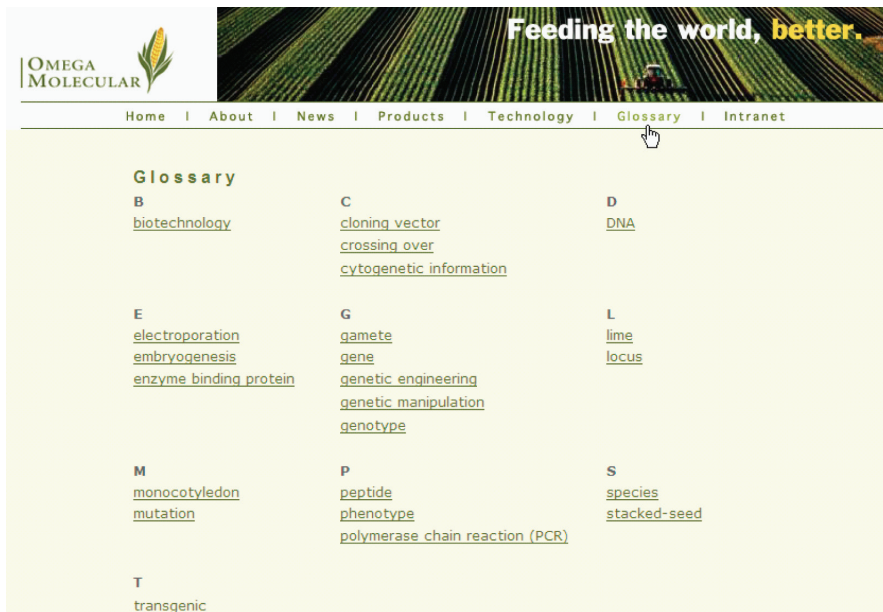


**Figure 8.** Glossary assembled from student definition memos and deployed on external web-site developed for Omega Molecular

We have described some of the ways we used electronic means to represent not only the breadth of genre in engineering communication (the genre set) but also the depth of genre (the genre system) by creating a chronotopic landscape of space and time that moved the genres from being inert to active in a systematized way. We now consider some of the affordances and constraints of this representation of genred space and time for students.

#### 4.2 Affordances and constraints of simulated space

Unlike most face-to-face classrooms, a virtual learning environment can manipulate space in complex ways visually and electronically. Most VLEs (e.g., WebCT, Blackboard) represent the space of the classroom in more or less its own terms, through traditional classroom genres (with spaces marked out for readings, assignments, discussions, schedule, etc.). We tried to test the affordances of an electronic VLE

for representing space in terms of the chronotope and genres of a target system of activity: consulting for a bio-technology engineering firm.

#### 4.2.1 *Space for Action*

Omega contains a number of genres, such as laboratory reports and financial statements as well as software tools, which are typical of biotechnology companies. Indeed, as we pointed out, the interface for these portals is nothing more than a representation of what an actual web portal might look like for a typical employee at a biotechnology company.

Because of the hypertextual nature of this representation of organizational space, students, from the time they log into the environment, face an indeterminate situation. They must struggle to set (frame) problems (i.e., figure out what to do) within the problem space of the company and the stakeholders that interact with it (e.g., environmental activists, insurers). They must use know-how they have acquired from life, from their previous courses, and from what they have covered thus far in the course. Schön sees this framing struggle an essential part of learning any new competency:

The paradox of learning a really new competence is this: that a student cannot at first understand what he needs to learn, can learn it only by educating himself, and can educate himself only by beginning to do what he does not yet understand. (Schön 1983: 93)

One example is the Omega state-of-the-company report (see Figure 3) in which students are asked to formulate and support their assessment of the organization's health and future prospects while also providing a plan of action for the upcoming months. While their familiarity with the report genre in classroom terms helps them to understand some of the activities they must undertake to complete this assignment (similar to Devitt's (2004) use of antecedent genre for teaching genre awareness), they still have to figure out just what a state-of-the company report is in this particular context and how producing such a report will help the organization take the direction their consulting group recommends. Students, then, must turn back to the case context to determine what the potentials for action are in this situation. They must visit various information "spaces" representing different "areas" or functions of the organization, each representing a range of genres, often with several instances of each. They also often have to go "outside" the organization to find information, usually at other "sites" on the web.

In the course described in this study, all groups developed ideas about Omega and its place in the market, at the request of Omega CEO Kurt Danzer. Several groups went further and suggested changes to what they saw as problematic workplace practices at Omega.

For example, one group, noting that the CEO seemed unwilling to authorize insurance coverage for same-sex partners (they gathered this from an email exchange that appeared in the site), researched corporate insurance rates at a number of companies and found one that would supply at the same price for the projected number of people. They provided an overview of this research and detailed pricing figures with their report.

Another group suggested that Omega designate a “knowledge manager” to ensure that some of the communication disconnects—including problems with the company’s financial reporting that had characterized the company’s existence thus far—be remedied. They provided a detailed plan for restructuring the information located in the Omega document server as well as budgetary estimates for developing and managing a more sophisticated intranet.

As we might expect with any indeterminate situation, different students with different histories noticed and emphasized different potentials in taking action within the classrooms in which this simulation was deployed. The point here is that because of the constellation of genres in the simulation, students were able to decide for themselves (i.e., “frame” or “set”) what the “real” problems were and then propose solutions, based on the know-how they gained from the course as well as potentials made available within the genre system and chronotope of the simulation.

#### 4.2.2 *Sharing location*

These types of rich-context-dependent activities and the partial assumption of workplace social motive would have been much harder to produce in a classroom situation in which students were not engaged with a group of electronic texts (Omega) from which they were drawing and to which they were adding throughout the semester. Students reported that the learning environment helped to provide this continuity and in doing so, contributed to the realism of the simulation (for methodology and complete results see Fisher 2006). In focus groups, all students agreed (n=8, for the question) that the online environment helped rather than hindered their learning experience:

Interviewer: Do you feel that the on-line case environment helped or hindered your learning in this class?

Eric: I mean, it’s one thing to come into class and attempt to say, okay now you are in a business, you know. But I mean, and you don’t go to the building. You don’t go to the building for the business; you don’t go and convene all in one room. I mean, we’re all over the place; I mean, the web site was kind of like the location, sort of, where everybody combined, and that kind of brought us together as a company, I think. So, all the company data was there, we would share files there, sort of brought it all together, whereas without it I don’t think I would

have felt like I was in the company, and I don't think I would have treated it as a company. And acted like that, if it wasn't there, so I think it helped.

Interviewer: Interesting. What else? Help or hurt?

Ryan: This is kind of continuing on that, yeah, it helped, because you know, it kind of felt like we were really involved in a real world company. Because you know, even trying to write this investor bulletin, I was talking to someone who was trying to help me through it, and they said, well, knowing it's kind of like a real company on there with all the information that we have, we can't really make anything up about it, and can't make stuff up about competitors, because there are real competitors out there. So. You know, it gave us the experience of actually working for someone rather than here are a bunch of assignments, turn them in, get a grade.

In Eric's statement, we see the importance of the online tool enabling students to act in ways they might not otherwise have. In other words, the portal helped make this student willing enter into the chronotope afforded in the simulation by providing a workplace to which he returned when he needed to attend to his project.

Ryan carries this idea further, explaining how the real-world significance he attributed to the game caused him to play by a set of rules he might not have if he were tackling a purely "academic" situation in which there might be the tendency to "dry lab" or simply fabricate certain aspects of the assignment for expediency's sake. Thus, even though Omega was fictitious, it was richly so. In other words, there were enough details about the company provided so that students could (if they chose) act as if it really existed.

The MyCase simulations posed a number of constraints as well. Students were always only "acting" as if they were in a professional environment, and they continued to see their learning in terms of the epistemic and institutional motives of schooling, such as grades, though less so. In a survey in one course students were no more likely to say they "played the role of a professional in addition to the role of a student in this class" as compared with students in a traditional classroom. Another group of students (four in this interview group out of a total of 20 for this interview), while much less enthusiastic about the experience than the group above, still noted the effects of a prolonged immersion, even as they evidenced some of the tensions between classroom context and target (workplace) context that spring from the assigning of grades:

Matt: I think we all came to the consensus that we are looking for a grade and not really learn more about Omega, even though we did learn more about Omega.

Matt's statement that he learned about the organization in spite of his unwillingness to play a role other than student suggests one direction for further study. How might students participating in a simulation like Omega offered in a course within

a discipline compare with students using the traditional curriculum when evaluated against concrete performance competencies?

#### 4.3 Affordances and constraints of simulated time

Perhaps the clearest way in which the Omega portal enabled students to immerse themselves in the world of the simulation is through their depiction of time in terms of simulation events, rather than classroom events, the *chronotope* and *kairos* of the simulated organization rather than of formal education. In other words, students (as consultants) are asked to complete assignments (submit deliverables) based on simulation exigencies (i.e., the Director of Marketing is attending a trade show; the management team is having a meeting; regulators are coming on site) rather than classroom exigencies (i.e., we need to get your state-of-company-report in before spring break). Just as Yates and Orlikowski (2002) found that an electronically-mediated group did better than a collocated group at using a ballot genre system, the students seemed to recognize themselves as responsible to the electronically-mediated genre system and (fictional) actors, in terms such things as responding to the feedback of fictional characters, and organizing their groups' work to meet deadlines. Yates and Orlikowski speculate that this may be because the collocated actors in their study may have assumed that they could coordinate face-to-face but often in fact did not. In the Omega VLE, the students may have recognized the genre system as immersing them in a new *chronotope* and *kairotic* time that evoked greater responsibility than traditional classroom activity systems, in much the way interns often engage with job tasks more fully than with school tasks (Taylor 1988).

Another way the *chronotope* and *kairos* of simulation time underlies (and is emphasized within) the Omega portal is through various public acts where students go on record as taking an action that alters their relationship with the organization and with the other participants in the simulation. Thus students can consider themselves as they were before and after the public act in question. The best example of one of these acts is the non-compete contract, a very common genre in the corporate world, which students were asked to sign before they began working with Omega. This public act required students to project themselves into a time-scale that extends (fictionally) beyond the consulting engagement into their future professional work, and a genre system of legal requirements that must be negotiated now with consequences much later. This fictional agreement outlines expectations Omega has for its consultants and includes the following section that covers expectations for consultant's employment choices after the Omega agreement:

Consultant agrees not to divulge and trade secrets or other proprietary information encountered during the engagement to competitors or entities Omega management deems potential competitors for two years following the consulting engagement.

The wording in this clause is problematic from the perspective of an individual who wants to seek work after the Omega engagement. Omega management can call virtually any company a potential competitor, if it wishes. While some students do not see an issue with this wording, others opt to modify the agreement. When students confront this document in class, the instructor (Fisher) begins by asking them to read and sign. He generally doesn't say anything else and waits to see if students raise issues on the document without prompting. In cases where no one in the class seems to have issue with the document, he begins to ask them questions about the agreement, especially with regard to the troublesome passage cited above. This technique is used throughout the simulation. Very often students will find issues that they had not considered without his prompting, but occasionally he finds it necessary to give them hints about things they should think about as they proceed.

Two examples of students' reworking of the non-compete agreement appear below (Figures 10 and 11). These are both samples from students who did not require prompting to find issues with the document.

• **knowledge-building deliverables**, including posts to Omega Web reference library and oral presentations.

*Ethical concerns*

Consultant agrees not to divulge any trade secrets or other proprietary information encountered during the engagement to competitors or entities Omega management deems potential competitors for ~~two~~ *six months* years following completion of the consulting engagement.

I the undersigned have read this document and agree to the terms set forth within.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

*5/19/04*  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

Consultant reserves the right to divulge to the appropriate authorities any ethical violations he or she may encounter or discover.

Consultant, furthermore, agrees not to reveal any proprietary information (e.g. methods, technology) to ~~similar entities~~ *any company engaged in similar business ventures* for a period of six months following the end of this agreement (Omega Molecular will provide listing of whom it considers to be direct competitors)

<http://www.public.iastate.edu/~ddfishe/Summer314/content/ConsultingAgreement.html> 5/19/2004

Figure 9. Response from student who raised specific ethical concerns

The student who modified the preceding agreement talked frequently about the Enron scandal in class and was particularly concerned about ethical violations (with respect to accounting practices or with respect to the organisms themselves)



that the company might commit. As a result, he indicated that his conditions for working for the company included the right to report these violations. He also wished for a more particular definition of “proprietary information” and so he elaborated this to include “methods” and “technology.” Finally, he felt that two years was too long to ask him not to work for a competitor, so he changed the time to six months and specified that Omega would deliver a list of organizations they deemed competitors. This student engaged both time (length of non-compete) and the metaphoric space (the position of Omega in relation to other competitors and the legal and ethical landscape of the field).

Another student, see Figure 10, was more concerned about the amount of work he would be required to do, as well as the compensation he would receive for that work.

Omega  
not clear

Consultant is responsible for providing concrete evidence of participation in the aforementioned activities including, ~~but not limited to~~, the following:

Am → this is pretty open & vague

- **document deliverables**, including product information sheet (fact sheet), proposal or business plan, and Web site and
- **knowledge-building deliverables**, including posts to Omega Web reference library and oral presentations.

Consultant agrees not to divulge any trade secrets or other proprietary information encountered during the engagement to competitors or ~~entities Omega management deems potential competitors for 2 years~~ following completion of the consulting engagement.

Am 1 → Completion of these requirements guarantees an A grade for 3 credit hours. (12 equality points)

I the undersigned have read this document and agree to the terms set forth within.

last  
than for me

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date 5/19/04

What is the penalty for not meeting criteria

How much can we getting paid?

Completion

<http://www.public.iastate.edu/~ddfishe/Summer314/content/ConsultingAgreement.html> 5/19/2004

Figure 10. Response from student who raised concerns about quantity of work and rewards/penalties for that work

In this case the student marks out the part of the introduction to the deliverables that says “but not limited to,” calling it “open and vague.” He also wants to ensure that “completion of these requirements guarantees an A grade for three credit hours.”

This student construed the genre as operating in both the genre system of the fictional organization and the class.

For each of the examples above, the instructor (in the role of an Omega human resources person) returned to the students a photocopied version of the marked up documents pictured above with additional feedback from the Omega representatives. In the case of the first document, he listed a number of companies Omega deemed direct competitors. In the case of the second student, he briefly outlined the quality criteria he would have to meet in order to receive credit. The effect of this document cycling was, again, to get the students to think in terms of the simulation's chronotope, rather than in terms of a classroom chronotope.

However, there were again constraints. The MyCase simulations required the instructor to be familiar with the roles, motives, and circulation of discourse in the activity systems represented in the simulations. Unfortunately, many academics have not (or not recently) been immersed in such environments. Indeed, one instructor who used a MyCase portal in his class made salient just such a constraint when he noted that in working with the numerous genres represented in the portal as well as the student work that sprang from them:

I can kind of sense now how a real executive might feel, you know, somebody who gets bombarded with stuff, and so if you're going to communicate with me, can you really lay it out so I can see right away, so you and I can link up right away and I know where you're coming from?

This professor, a nationally known expert in management, indicates how the chronotope of the simulated organization has caused him to better understand the role of his counterpart in industry, in terms of corporate time versus academic time. He had become a participant in document circulation that characterizes the genre system evoked within the simulation.

In addition, the fictional chronotope of the simulation must interact with the real chronotope of classroom time, with its institutional constraints of grading deadlines, as the previous example suggests. MyCase simulations, like any professional educational environment, inevitably involve trade-offs between the realities of work and school, and a contradiction between the genre systems of the two contexts. The question becomes how to make this contradiction productive by creating a dialectic between the two realities in their representations.

## 5. Studying simulated genre systems

As we noted, Freedman, Adam, and Smart (1994: 221) argue that for students to understand and practice workplace genres:



They will need to sense from the inside the nature of the social action entailed by these new genres: the instrumental and praxis-oriented social motives, the complex phenomena of multiple readerships (some remote in time and place), the different life-cycle of their texts, and the different literacy practices surrounding the texts (reading practices and collaborative composing strategies).

Based in part on their study of a class using the traditional case method, Freedman and her colleagues do not believe students can achieve this “sensing from the inside” within the bounds of the classroom as it is traditionally configured, even when case studies and practices like “wearing suits to class” are employed. Freedman, Adam and Smart (1994: 200), however, do hint at what we might do to provide more immersive environments when they suggest that “teachers have a central role to play in setting up facilitative environments” in which the kind tacit learning necessary for participating in genre can take place. In doing so they also echo a number of educational theorists like Dewey (1916); Schön (1983; 1987); Engeström (1987); Brown, Collins, and Duguid (1989); Bransford et al. (1990); Schank et al. (1993/1994); Cole (1996); and Jonassen (2000) who have theorized and attempted to enact such environments within educational institutions.

Our preliminary research suggests that the MyCase simulations were for many students a “transfer-encouraging” environment. When we analyzed student texts and transcripts of student focus groups ( $n=16$ ), we found (1) students were much more likely to attribute their learning in these MyCase simulations to professional work than their learning in either traditional classrooms, traditional (paper) cases studies, or computer-mediated learning in environments such as WebCT or Blackboard. Students (2) specifically pointed to elements that simulated the genre system of professional work as leading them to those attributions: sharing work, feedback from fictional professionals, and so on. And (3) students constructed problems and responses to them from the interactions among diverse genres in the system (Fisher 2006).

However, the potential electronic mediation has for setting up facilitative environments has just begun to be explored (Jonassen, 2000). We have argued here that genre is a particularly important theoretical tool for understanding and creating electronic learning environments. Our experiments in representing work activity in electronic educational environments suggest that the problem is first of all one of the breadth of genres chosen, both for reception and production. Electronic environments make it possible to expose students in an efficient way to far more genres and more examples of each, and to represent them in organizational spaces in more complex ways.

But more importantly, electronic learning environments allow teachers and educational planners to take as a central problem the depth of genres—the genre system. This is because electronic media make it possible to create a genre system

which represents activity both spatially and temporally. As we have tried to show, these electronic simulations afford genre recognition in relation to time and space. And here the concepts of chronotope and kairotic time are crucial.

In order for students to recognize and use genres in ways that may be more likely to prove useful outside the classroom—to see genres “from the inside”—the place of genres in a genre system operating in time and space can be represented using electronic media in ways that traditional classrooms (or traditional VLEs such as WebCT) cannot represent them. Bazerman (1994: 100, qtd. in Yates & Orlikowski 2002) states, “Only by uncovering the pathways that guide our lives in certain directions can we begin to identify the possibilities for new turns and the consequences of making those turns.” Electronic media, by allowing the representation of space/time in educational environments, can lay out these paths and their consequences for students—and challenge students to make new turns in a low-risk (and relatively inexpensive) environment.

## 6. Conclusion

Finally, we must ask how an internet-based educational environment might be important for genre theory? It provides a test-bench for understanding genre recognition and attribution. The Omega simulation, and other Web 2.0 database-driven virtual environments, highlight the relationships among genres in different activity systems, the ‘kindred’ nature of them, and allow us to study the ways people operate in multiple systems of activity through genre recognition and attribution. In the experience of students working/learning/playing on the fictional Omega Molecular intranet, school is and is not work, just as for the telecommuter opening a “real” company intranet site, work is and is not home. Genres migrate in and out of the web, in and out of activity systems, resonating, inviting us to re-cognize them in relation to other systems, other possible motives and futures. When we designed Omega, we deliberately drew the genres we included in it from the activity system of commercial biotechnology and made of them educational genres, with all the ambiguity and tension that brings. RFP’s are school assignments, feedback from the boss is teacher comment, and so on. The distinctions between domains that made “transfer of learning” so hard to identify previously may well be broken down by creating virtual environments that mimic, generically, other virtual environments. And the processes of learning a genre become processes of learning a genre system or ecology.

Finally, the multimedia simulation VLE’s we constructed are fictional, where imagination and play are evoked. Bakhtin theorized the chronotope to understand literary fictions, into which people entered imaginatively, vicariously. But Web 2.0 allows us to create fictional—and ‘real’—chronotopes in virtual worlds that people

literally write themselves into, act in, play in, and work in. In these sites, one does not perceive space and time as a spectator only, a reader, but as a participant, a writer. Of course people have always created genres and systems of genres (every time an institution came into being). But never with such ease and speed as in database driven virtual environments. Web 2.0 thrusts genre theory into a multiple, fragmented spaces, inter/hypertextually linked but always only recognized for now.

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# Nation, book, medium

## New technologies and their genres

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This essay examines some ‘new media’ practices of the 1990s together with late twentieth-century critical commentaries on computer-mediated communication and electronic textuality. It compares both with discussions of changes in communications technologies and readerships from the turn of the nineteenth century. Based on observations about narrative form—especially the mutual metaphoricality of the nation and the book—in conjunction with the associated qualities of self-consciousness about sociability, historicity, and mediatedness that emerge from this study, I propose an understanding of genre formation as a characteristic, and under-recognized, response to the experience of media change and outline the possible contributions a more self-conscious theory of genre could make to existing theories of media, mediation, and media succession.

### 1. Introduction

This essay examines contemporary responses to the explosion of communications technologies in the last years of the twentieth century. It does so in two primary ways. First, it brings together scholarly commentaries on what tended, in the 1990s, to be referred to as “new media”—computer-mediated communication and electronic textuality—with the comments produced by new media practitioners themselves. Second, as this union of first- with second-order texts suggests, the essay ranges across two distinct kinds of media objects while arguing that the commonalities are as worthy of attention as the differences.

What allows me to bring these objects together, and to make an object of inquiry of their common ground, is genre. It follows that this essay, like the others in this volume, treats genre less as a self-evident proposition than as an analytic category that is undergoing (re)definition, a scholarly mode that has itself become the object of study. In the instance of my own argument, such an understanding of genre requires a particular case to be made. In arguing that the self-reflexive discourse of new media shares both a history and a form with the



scholarly discourse about new media, this essay makes the case for the utility of genre theory in charting the process of media succession and in examining the experience of media change.

My emphasis here will remain on experience, which I would like to define as the interface between history and the subject, or the perceptual and analytic exchange between the flow of events and their narrative rendition. Yet while I follow Fredric Jameson's classic understanding of this interface as the subject's encounter with a process that "sets inexorable limits to individual as well as collective praxis" and "can be apprehended only through its effects," I depart from his rendering of history as "the experience of Necessity" in "the inexorable *form* of events" (Jameson 1981: 102). Rather I wish to emphasize, as in Slavoj Žižek's re-reading of the encounter, the sense-making narrative function that defines the difference between history apprehended as the present and the past (Žižek 1991: 221–222). Viewing the experience of history in this way, as a narrative process that is at once broadly social and specific to the subject, makes genre an ideal tool for its analysis.

In defining genres as a "codification of discursive properties" within "a society," Tzvetan Todorov made room for an understanding of narrative genre as at once an enunciation of the experience of history, simultaneously personal and social, and itself a historical force (Todorov 1976: 162). He responded to late twentieth-century claims about the death of genre by proposing that "it is not 'genres' that have disappeared, but the genres of the past, and they have been replaced by others" (Todorov 1976: 160). At the same time, he noted that "genres come... from other genres... by inversion, by displacement, by combination" (Todorov 1976: 161). For Todorov, genres are the interface between history and the subject and also between the subject and society, simultaneously codified and dynamic, emerging into conventional forms at the same moment as these forms begin to undergo contest and transformation. The self-consciousness about history as a process that is embedded in genres from their origins, as well as in the commentaries on them that are Todorov's primary subject, means that for Todorov all genres very quickly take on at least some of the properties of what Janet Giltrow has termed "meta-genre," or "situated language about situated language" (Giltrow 2001: 190).

While, as Ralph Cohen has noted, Todorov's and Mikhail Bakhtin's socially- and process-oriented approaches to the rethinking of genre have long since been broadly influential among literary historians, relatively few have sought to remake genre theory as what Cohen calls "a theory of behavior" (Cohen 2003: iv). By attending in a specifically historical way to what I will be calling the genre of new media history, this essay aims to propose, if not a general theory of generic motivation, then at least an account of genre formation in the context of the experience of change.

## 2. Genre: Model, method, theory

Throughout the 1990s, a debate raged, among scholars and practitioners alike, about the gains and losses made possible or inevitable by new media. The evangelists of computer-mediated communication and electronic textuality painted pictures of an electronically enabled future society bathed in the light of organicism and soothed by the harmony of privacy and cooperation. Their accounts reproduced, in mirror form, the elegies produced by skeptics who continued to call for a return to the electronically unmediated past. Both sides in the debates turned to what they represented as past media objects and social formations—the book and the nation—as figures for the history they are conceiving and representing, whether with longing or loathing, enmity or desire. It is a historical turn that appears with striking consistency. Cited congruently and at times interchangeably across the range of new media discourse in the 1990s, nation and codex came together as touchstones for the history to be vanquished or reclaimed, mutually enabling (each is said to provide a foundation for the other) and mutually metaphorical (each becomes the other's rhetorical stand-in.)

Marshall McLuhan addressed the citation of older media by newer ones in his famous aphorism that “The ‘content’ of any medium is always another medium” (McLuhan 1964: 23). According to Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, whose influential 1999 book *Remediation: Understanding New Media* summed up the state of the new communications technologies at the turn of the twenty-first century, the adage continued to hold true in the 1990s:

new media are doing exactly what their predecessors have done: presenting themselves as refashioned and improved versions of other media. Digital visual media can best be understood through the ways in which they honor, rival, and revise linear-perspective painting, photography, film, television, and print. No medium today... seems to do its cultural work in isolation from other media, any more than it works in isolation from other social and economic forces. (Bolter & Grusin 1999: 15)

New media at once claim kinship with existing media in order to condition users familiar with existing media to embrace their use, and at the same time declare their superiority to the existing media they revisit and pay homage to. For Bolter and Grusin, the key to this double process is “remediation,” the recycling of superseded or competitor media. Remediation takes place through interlocking practices of “immediacy,” the downplaying by a medium of its own mediatedness, and “hypermediacy,” a medium's exaggerated attention to itself and/ or to other media. Remediation is complicated by the use of each one of these processes in order to achieve the other. For example, producers of new

media works self-consciously refer to books or television—established media more familiar and thus less visible to consumers—as a way to help new media dissolve into immediacy in the minds of their users. It is in this context of remediation that N. Katherine Hayles characterizes the relations between contemporaneously existing forms as a “medial ecology”: all media, and thus all mediated works, are to be understood in a context of interaction within and against one another (Hayles 2002: 33).

With their powerful account of media relations and media change, and especially in their analysis of the intimate connection between nostalgia and avowed supersession in the uses of existing media by new ones, these arguments helped to define the nascent field of new media historiography. What is equally remarkable about the scholarship that discusses new media and their history, however—especially in light of their audible connection with Todorov’s theory of generic origin, transformation, and change—is the absence of a conscious theory of genre. This is not to say that pioneering historians of new media such as Hayles, Bolter and Grusin, Espen J. Aarseth, and George Landow are unconcerned with the form or classification of electronic texts, for all of them classify texts formally—even, at times, generically. In her account of remediated texts in *Writing Machines*, for example, Hayles makes several references to genre:

Not only electronic literature but virtually all periods *and genres* are affected as print works are increasingly reproduced as electronic documents. (Hayles 2002: 19; emphasis added)

Like other works in *the genre* [artists’ books], *A Humument* interrogates the material properties of the book and mobilizes them as resources for signification. (Hayles 2002: 78; emphasis added)

*House of Leaves*... recuperates the vitality of the novel *as a genre* by recovering, through the processes of remediation themselves, subjectivities coherent enough to become the foci of the sustained narration. (Hayles 2002: 112; emphasis added)

What these observations share is a conception of genre as an analytic given, a category at once purely formal and temporally stable, a mode of classification that requires little in the way of self-consciousness or reflection. Artists’ books are “in,” or belong to, “a” genre; “the novel” is a genre; and while their features and parameters may change as a result of remediation, genres themselves remain historically consistent and formally discrete. The contrast between such taxonomic uses of genre and the historiographically complex and formally nuanced account of media change and its textual effects, in Hayles’s work and in the work of other new media historians, is striking. In such writings, the medium—the stuff of electronic or print composition, the content-carrying properties of pixels, light, and screen

or white space and inked impression—displaces genre in the history of form, and as the material form of historical experience.

Yet the argument can also be made that new media historians, precisely in locating the medium as an irreducible category of analysis and proceeding to limn its formal complexities and chart its historical mutations, are already doing genre theory, at least in a rudimentary sense. The curriculum of genre theory, as Michael B. Prince has recently contended, is composed of

the decisions writers make to adopt some categories as opposed to others, the range of influences that help determine their choices, the steps writers take to defend or naturalize these categories, and the decisions historians and critics... then make to study the past through one lens instead of another. (Prince 2003: 475–476)

All that is missing from the genre theory implicit in the new media histories is an account, in whatever form such an account might take, of decision-making in historical analysis and historical change—that is to say, of the essentially pragmatic, or behavioral, origins of genre and its evolution. This is perhaps unsurprising in the post-McLuhanite context of new media historiography, for when McLuhan argued that “the ‘message’ of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern it introduces into human affairs,” and thereby acknowledged the historicity, and the historical force, of medium as a changing formal category, his analysis left out any role for decisions and the contexts that condition them (McLuhan 1964: 23–24). Historians who have inherited this kind of analysis may similarly argue, like Bolter and Grusin, about what “new media are doing” without much attention to the role of producers and users in determining what new media do, or to the socioeconomic, political, affective and other conditions that shape these human choices (Bolter & Grusin 1999: 15).

I wish to emphasize the pragmatic character of genre in my own account of new media history, which will argue for the recognition of genres in process where a common ground of what I will call, for lack of a better term, narrative form can be found among writers and new media producers. But I want, at the same time, to underline the role played by genre both as an experiential reflection and a motor of historical change. The distinction here is between Carolyn Miller’s influential theorization of “genres as typified rhetorical actions based in recurrent situations” (Miller 1984: 159) and Ralph Cohen’s account of the “interweaving between history and genre,” which adds, to the pragmatic account of “genres [as]... open categories” that change as “[e]ach member alters the genre by adding, contradicting, or changing constituents,” a historiographical emphasis borne out in Cohen’s insistence that “genre concepts in theory and practice arise, change, and decline for historical reasons” (Cohen 1986: 204).

The work of Franco Moretti, who has elaborated a “Darwinian history of literature, where forms fight one another, are selected by their context, evolve and disappear like natural species,” offers a powerful illustration of the workings of such “historical reasons,” both in terms of a general theory and in specific times and places (Moretti 1988: 255). Moretti’s most recent book treats “form”—the shifting system of codified and communal textual categories, which can be as large as “the novel” and as small as texts that include a given set of references to material things or social events—as “the most profoundly social aspect of literature,” the means by which “the force ‘from without’” that is history “reveals the direct, almost tangible relationship between social conflict and literary form” (Moretti 2005: 64, 92). For Moretti this social and historical conception of form resembles Cohen’s and Todorov’s understanding of genre while treating it more directly as a “diagram of forces; or perhaps, even, . . . *nothing but force*” (Moretti 2005: 64). I want to hold these theories in mind in pursuing an understanding of genre and its formation as not only situationally but also historically contingent: as the more than allegorical embodiment, or perhaps the surviving artifact, of experienced change and its sociohistorical causes.

In what follows, I offer a series of three case studies that provide a basis for identifying the mutual metaphoricity of nations and books as the formal hallmark of an enduring genre of new media historiography. I show how this feature appears in late twentieth-century meta-media (academic and journalistic arguments for and against the effects of computer-mediated sociability and electronic textuality) and in new media productions (online histories and social networks produced by the technically and historically literate “net.goth” culture) contemporary with these. I then turn to a narrative corollary at the turn of the nineteenth century: the hypermediated printed works of the poet and novelist Walter Scott and their context, the origins and spread of the first truly mass print culture. By examining the national and textual longings that characterize these discourses, I illustrate the emergence of a common narrative form amid progressive and conservative, academic and popular, “primary” and “secondary” responses to technological change at two distinct moments in the history of Anglo-American social and intellectual life. In the final section of the paper, viewing this formal synchrony through the lens of genre theory will allow me to propose answers to several historical questions: about the consequences of the mutually metaphoric linkage of nation and book for an understanding of new media, social formations, and the genres that narrate them; and about the connections between the production, circulation, and consumption of texts and the forging, evolution, and persistence of national communities. My larger aim is to gesture, I hope fruitfully, but necessarily incompletely, toward the contributions that reading new media through genre might make to genre theory itself.

### 3. New media histories: Three overviews

#### 3.1 Meta-media: The scholarship on new media, 1991–2000

In the Anglo-American world of the 1990s, salons and newspapers rang to the clash of competing voices as academics, journalists, politicians and public intellectuals argued about new media. From Al Gore to the Electronic Frontier Foundation, commentators praised the openness and breadth of the Internet as a source of “information,” a creator of global cooperation, or a medium for renewing social ties and creating social responsibility (Stratton 1997: 265; Kapur 1991). Other analysts, especially scholars of the postmodern such as Jean Baudrillard and Jameson, were engaged with a corresponding set of problems, which they characterized as a loss of cultural depth, of a sense of location, of a historical sense, of a sense of the real (Jameson 1991; Baudrillard 1988).<sup>1</sup> Forming alongside the division within the discourse on electronic sociability was a counterpart schism in the discourse on electronic text. Robert Coover and Sven Birkerts predicted the “end of books” and “the fate of reading” amid the rush of hypertexts (Coover 1992; Birkerts 1994) while George Landow, Jerome McGann and others celebrated the new opportunities for literacy, textual and historical scholarship, and the art of the word that electronic textuality was making possible (Bolter 1991; Landow 1992; McGann 1996a).

The conversations made strange bedfellows, methodologically as well as ideologically. For example, the loss of historical engagement described by Baudrillard and Jameson, theorists influenced by Marxian historiography, shared many features with what Alvin Kernan presented as the declining authority and stability of the traditional humanities in his conservative jeremiad against the contemporary academy (Kernan 1990). In similar fashion, the work of McGann, a pioneering editor of historical works whose textual theory is dedicated to the archaeological recovery of the material lives of texts, celebrated the “nonhierarchical” possibilities of electronic textuality in terms that coincided with the claims of body theorist Allucquère Rosanne Stone, who identified in electronic life a hope of transcending the material world and in electronic text a space that is “consensual, interactive, and haptic” (McGann 1996b: 153–157; Stone 1995: 121). The character of the common ground between otherwise disparate stances is best identified by tracing the unexpected alliances between a representative sampling of texts that heralded and texts that criticized the coming technologies of text and social space and, again,

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1. Baudrillard’s attention to what he calls “hyperreality” and “simulation” (e.g. Baudrillard 1988) predates the explosion of the new media in the 1990s but received new attention as a result of the perceived sympathy between his work and the effects of the new media, which was emphasized in his works of the 1990s such as *The Perfect Crime* (Baudrillard 1996).

between the debates on electronic text and those that centered on computer-mediated sociability.

The writings of Howard Rheingold and Stephen Doheny-Farina on computer-mediated sociability exemplify these strange alliances. Rheingold, a journalist and public intellectual, is one of America's most influential early adopters, having been a founding member of Stewart Brand's Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link, or WELL, a San Francisco Bay Area-based system of electronic bulletin boards and chatrooms, and a theorist of "smart mobs." Doheny-Farina is an academic rhetorician and communication theorist who has declared his profound suspicion of the Internet's social implications. In the mid-1990s, both published books evaluating the political potential of the Internet. Rheingold's *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* (1993) makes two concessions to new media skeptics: he recognizes the danger to citizen autonomy posed by corporations' seeking to assume governance of cyberspace and he acknowledges the possibility that people participating in online social networks might simply "forget" that electronically mediated communication is an "illusion" of presence (Rheingold 1993: 15, 299). Even so, his goal in this volume is to pay tribute to computer-mediated culture, and he does so, as the title of the book suggests, by invoking a vanished nation, the America of the unspecified past. For him the WELL is a "cozy little world," a "virtual village," and an "authentic community" that bestows a "sense of place" on its participants—a space "where people can rebuild the aspects of community that were lost when the malt shop became a mall" (Rheingold 1993: 2–3, 26). Rheingold's nostalgic projection of the all-American malt shop closely resembles the "coffee shop" eulogized in Doheny-Farina's *The Wired Neighborhood* (1996), a work that, as its title suggests, is equally but differently invested in ideologies of community. For Doheny-Farina, the advent of online communities is just another symptom of the fact that "local public space has largely disappeared" from America, surviving only in inferior virtual projections such as "Main Street" interviews broadcast during presidential campaigns (Doheny-Farina 1996: 52). While he agrees with Rheingold about the desirability of a communitarian vision, Doheny-Farina nevertheless maintains that the new communications technologies will only take American society farther than ever from such a way of life. Nostalgists both, separated only by their angle of approach to the common historical object, the new media skeptic and the new media evangelist partake of the same nationalist assumptions and historicist ideals.

These historians of online social networks are not alone in their national nostalgia, which appeared in similar form, and with some similar assumptions about the American past, on both sides of the concurrent debates about electronic textuality. The eloquent and much-debated work in which the journalist Sven Birkerts lamented what his subtitle called "the fate of reading in an electronic age" could



not have reached conclusions more different from those of the new media scholar Jay David Bolter, whose first book celebrated what he saw as a computer-mediated return to the open, public, and dialogical character of the manuscript scroll after centuries dominated by the codex. Yet Birkerts's *Gutenberg Elegies* (1994) and Bolter's *Writing Space: The Computer, Hypertext, and the History of Writing* (1991) alike invoked the nation—an America now predictably defined as vanishing—and what these writers viewed as America's cultural heritage.

Birkerts worries that new communications technologies have already deprived young Americans of “an entire system of beliefs, values, and cultural aspirations,” which define what he calls “our entire collective subjective history—the soul of our societal body” (Birkerts 1994: 19–20). The society his subjects have lost is founded on a feeling for “history as a cumulative or organic process” and a sense of “geographic place and community,” both to be gained only by reading books (Birkerts 1994: 27). Among the consequent losses is an experience of the local, which is subsumed in the global as new media users “move... at great rates across subject terrains, crossing borders that were once closely guarded” (Birkerts 1994: 137–138). Bolter concurs that the printed book “seems destined to move to the margin of our literate culture,” surviving only as an object of “luxury consumption” (Bolter 1991: 2). For Bolter, however, “the space defined by perfect printed volumes that exist in thousands of identical copies” is a frightening “metaphor... for the human mind” in an American culture united by print, whose “institutions of learning and research” produce subjects whose minds conform with such print-based expectations (Bolter 1991: 11). The computer, in contrast, lends “new life to... techniques of the past,” such as wax tablets, scrolls, and illumination, which predate the sameness and hierarchy that Bolter laments in the printed codex (Bolter 1991: 40). Not least, because “electronic technology makes texts particular and individual,” as unique as the people who read them, it rejuvenates precisely those qualities of individuality and equality, lost in modern American life, that Birkerts fears it will destroy (Bolter 1991: 8–9).

Just as historians of electronic text refer to the nation in tracing the consequences of media change, so do commentators on computer-mediated sociability take the book as a narrative touchstone. Here too the pattern of historical reference cuts across academic and journalistic discourse, positive and negative evaluations of media change. “The Screener's Maps,” a 1994 essay by comparative literature scholar and textual theorist Mireille Rosello, compares writing and reading to “ways of appropriating space” (Rosello 1994: 131–132). For Rosello the reading of print-based texts, which still has a “monopoly” on literary criticism, not only resembles but actually rehearses spatial practices such as “colonization,” “nationalism or regionalism” (Rosello 1994: 129, 130, 132). Rosello's western, implicitly male print-reader resembles Rheingold's cyberspace citizens as much as Birkerts's

literati; the printed text is the nation or colony the reader founds or conquers. Theorists of electronic text, Rosello argues, must deliberately position themselves against such reliance on “distinct and self-contained territories” and “invent communities that... have little to do with proximity and context” by embracing “multi-dimensional thinking about cultures, ‘contact zones,’ gender, and oppositionality” (Rosello 1994: 131–132).

For Rosello, electronic textuality is best metaphorized in the lauding of transnational space and in contrast to the space of nations. But her analysis also blurs tenor with vehicle: only in moving beyond the printed book will scholars abandon their damaging attachments to the nation as an object of study (Rosello 1994: 132). The journalist Thomas Valovic takes up such critiques of the book in his *Digital Mythologies: The Hidden Complexities of the Internet* (2000), a work that examines what Valovic sees as the inescapable pitfalls of computer-mediated sociability and politics. Yet Valovic, as much as his opponents, treats electronic sociability as inseparable from the history emblemized by the book and the nation. He complains that “the thought leaders of digital culture,” in proclaiming the social potential of the Internet, “lack... gravitas about the things they are trying to replace—the grand traditions of scholarship and learning that, as if tainted by guilt by association, are held to be lacking simply because they are represented in the medium that we call the book” (Valovic 2000: 13). He objects, more broadly, to “the deeply embedded set of assumptions that we, as a nation, have internalized,” namely the “belief that science and technology are primarily responsible for social progress” (Valovic 2000: 180). Yet Valovic is attached to the technology of the book in precisely the same measure. For him, proponents of electronic sociability who uphold the democratic potential of the Internet bring about “the death of history” because they reject “literary and cultural tradition—Shakespeare, Yeats, Plato, Aristotle, and all the other great minds our civilization has brought forth” (Valovic 2000: 62). In other words, for Valovic, “The traditions of our civilizational narrative,” and especially the book form in which they are embodied, are the foundations of the “society” “we, as a nation,” “end up with” and the guarantors of its continuance (Valovic 2000: xiii, 180).

From Bolter to Valovic, the new media histories of the 1990s reference a past whose characteristic modes of social organization (the nation) and of writing and reading (the book) exist in an analytic proximity—indeed, an intimacy—that yields to a slippage between them. To read these works as a group (let’s call it, preliminarily, a genre) is to conclude that seeking to characterize electronic sociability and electronic textuality in the 1990s required writers, regardless of the conclusions they might reach, to think and write historically, and to code their historical thought in a series of shared material references. This requirement can be understood as a version of Miller’s notion of a “typified situation” for all social utterances,

in which “successful communication would require that all participants share common types” (Miller 1984: 156–157). When taken together, however, the references to past media and social formations in these works appear divided between nostalgia and supersession: their writers do not achieve the forms of agreement that Miller’s model would predict. This pattern in historical narrative accords with Bolter’s and Grusin’s account of remediation as a double historical move. But the new media historiography of the 1990s also displays an internal logic that exceeds a media-based analysis. To chart the representation of nation and book in these meta-media writings is to observe a representative instance of Todorov’s notion of genre change through “inversion” (Todorov 1976: 161) or perhaps of Moretti’s iteration of shared form at a given historical moment as a “diagram of forces” (Moretti 2005: 64). It is to encounter—again, in a still-preliminary form—the intimacy “between social conflict and literary form” (Moretti 2005: 64).

### 3.2 New media: The net.goths and their websites in the 1990s

The slippage of nation and book that typifies the meta-media of the 1990s is even more apparent in new media practice itself: in the social networking websites produced by net.goths at the end of the twentieth century. The net.goths of the 1990s were self-identified participants in the technologically enabled sectors of what online historian and industrial music DJ Pete Scathe called “the goth... subculture,” whose corresponding modes of dress, literatures, and distinctive “musical movement” all make appearances on the Internet (Scathe a). In his history of goth culture, produced sometime in the 1990s, Scathe noted what was then the “surprising number of goths... involved with technology or computing,” adding that “there are a disproportionate number of them on the Internet” (Scathe b).<sup>2</sup> Studying the new media practices of the net.goths is made more difficult by what commentators such as Valovic, Bolter, and Birkerts have characterized as the ephemeral quality of computer-mediated writing and sociability. But it is also made more interesting: there have been several distinct waves of net.goth activity, and the wave of early adopters that was at its peak in the mid-1990s has subsequently and obviously declined, making its late twentieth-century character uniquely available for study. Many associated online materials now exist only in the Internet Archive, though it should be noted, against the impermanence of the Internet, that the Archive itself was founded in the middle years of that same decade in response to the widespread desire for a mode of preservation comparable to the amassing of books in a “library,” with a similar level of attention to material form (“About the

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2. Like most net.goths, Scathe does not date his writings. I first accessed them, along with the other late twentieth-century net.goth materials cited in this essay, in October 1999.

Internet Archive”). The reasons for the rise and decline of the net.goth activities of the 1990s mirror the conditions governing the emergence of new media historiography as a dominant genre of discourse about computer-mediated textuality and sociability, not least among net.goths themselves. They are also, in having been explicitly commented on by net.goths, more immediately and concretely traceable and available to assist in reconstructing the historical conditions for the genre’s broader coalescence.

Like Hayles’s “technotexts,” the late twentieth-century online productions of the net.goths brought “into view the machinery that gives their verbal constructions physical reality” (Hayles 2002: 26). Indeed, they did so unceasingly, obsessively, and in terms that mark the contemporaneity of the medium the net.goths were using. As Joseph Breitreiter, founder of the recently dismantled New Orleans gothic community networking website Nola-Goth.org, pointed out in 2004, “[M]uch has changed” since the 1990s (Breitreiter a). For Breitreiter, the changes centered on the availability and acceptance of computer-mediated communications, a situation he describes in laudatory and liberatory terms. “Ad-free web and email hosting have become inexpensive, reliable, and easy to use,” he declared in 2004, and “[s]ites like Livejournal and Yahoo allow users to build and manage online communities.... In short, the problems [gothic websites like Nola-Goth.org were]... built to solve are no longer relevant” (Breitreiter a). What is equally evident in Breitreiter’s brief meta-media account, however, is the embeddedness of Nola-Goth.org in the history of media change: its emergence amid the emergence of new media in the 1990s, its dissolution (and archival preservation) with the perceived establishment of those media, and the close relations it makes visible between narrative shape and historical conditions. Breitreiter’s pages exemplify Todorov’s insistence that users of genres, in engaging critically and complexly with the forms they use, are already on the brink of meta-genre from the start—already engaged with new media history.

Breitreiter is by no means alone in marveling at the effects of computer-mediated sociability on the goth community. The online commentaries of London DJ and ’zine publisher Sexbat, a founder of the now-defunct social networking website the Net.Goth Directory, are representative. Sexbat celebrated the power of electronically mediated communication in terms whose vestigial attachment to text-based forms of online communication marks their origin in the 1990s. “[I]t never really occurred to me all those years ago that such a thing [as the World Wide Web] would ever exist,” he writes in the archived introduction to the Directory. “There were only about eight of us, and we didn’t have [the text-based bulletin-board system, from which net.goth culture originated,] usenet—we just relied on empty bottles of passable claret and the tides” (Sexbat). As these remarks illustrate, late twentieth-century net.goths sometimes became extravagantly nostalgic

in their self-conscious attempts to ally contemporary media with the media of the past—as, too, in Sexbat's advice to goths seeking to establish an online presence:

If you want to find out more, stalk down to your local book shop, arrive alarmingly in front of the information counter and say:

"Forsooth, I desire a tome about the Internet which lists local service providers. Provide me with such a work or the minions of hell will strike you down!"

Pull out your quill and vellum and, using the blood of the bookseller as ink, copy out the relevant addresses and phone numbers. Replace the book on the shelf and repair to your waiting chariot. (or you could always go to the public library). (Sexbat 1994).

The generation of net.goths I am discussing here traced the origins of their subculture to Britain's literary and political "gothic inheritance," seeking legitimization in a canonical national history (see Smith 1987). (Romantic-period novelists and poets—even Samuel Taylor Coleridge, despite his being "too fat"—were "proto-goths.")<sup>3</sup> Yet, visible even in such retrograde posturings as Sexbat's, the net.goths' ambivalence toward their own historical longings was explicit, and the nostalgia, or use of forms typified by the use of specific nostalgic touchstones, is invariably exaggerated, often stretched to the point of parody. This ambivalence is equally visible in American net.goth discourse of the 1990s, where it centers, equally, on nations and on books.

Breitreiter's Nola-Goth.org, for example, advertised itself simultaneously as a virtual and a physical community: "an IRC channel on Undernet[,] ... available for online events" and "a volunteer project conceived at the New Orleans gothic community town meetings" (Zeph; Breitreiter b). As in Rheingold's account of the WELL, the participants in Nola-Goth.org envisioned their use of electronically mediated communication as a way to establish a form of direct democracy, which they described as a characteristic American public practice of the past and represented as having been lost. As in Doheny-Farina's more skeptical analysis, however, they conceded the technology's inadequacies by meeting in person to socialize and debate, and their electronic interactions remained nostalgic for the same material spaces: the town hall, coffeehouse, and tavern. This thread of ambivalence, the longing for a past by participants who suspect it may never have existed, persisted throughout Nola.Goth.org. On accessing the site—which was unusually beautifully produced for the period—the user downloaded a page illustrated by a detail from a nineteenth-century print of drinkers in a barroom ("Nola-Goth"). One man, foregrounded, was depicted drinking alone and silently, isolated against an uncertain backdrop of revelry. The site could be entered only by clicking on this

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3. For goths, the gothic, and the Romantic period, see Sexbat, *Take a Bite* 1.0 (Sexbat 1993).

image, which illustrated a lost conviviality while capturing the failures and limits of the object of nostalgia. In exploring this nostalgia, the participants in Nola-Goth.org brought together the nation and the printed book in the now familiar process of mutual metaphor.

The “Features” section of Nola-Goth.org began with a nineteenth-century illustration of a group of men gathered around a podium, to which the day’s newspapers were chained (Breitreiter c). One man appeared to be reading the daily news aloud to the group—a masculinized and implicitly hierarchical image that revealed failures of access and exchange even as it produced idealized forms of literacy and sociability in the form of a vanished past. The “About Us” section was headed by an image of late nineteenth-century men working at the printing press (Breitreiter b). The scene appeared nostalgic not just for a lost nation or a superseded form of literacy, but also for the means of production that created literacy and nation alike. Like analysts of electronic textuality such as Birkerts and Bolter and like commentators on computer-mediated sociability such as Valovic, the Nola-Goth participants compared their electronic activities with the best features of the printed word. But it is never clear from their productions if they envisioned the Internet as a force for the revival of print culture or if they were mourning the supersession of printed books by electronic media. Their parallel national nostalgia was equally complicated by its alliance with earlier communications technologies rather than with any avowedly unmediated kind of past. As in their rendering of nostalgia for American public space, the Nola-Goths’ ambiguous use of historical references registered the limits both of the technological present and of the traditions their present had replaced.

The same ambivalent nostalgia pervaded the Net.Goth Directory, Sexbat’s social networking site, though its objects, perhaps in response to the site’s unambiguously global nature, were more explicitly national in character. Against a background of antiquarian world maps printed in mercator projection, the main page of the Directory offered its users the choice of “using either a text-based listing or using the Map Interface” to “browse the entries” of net.goths around the world (Pan b). The Directory itself operated hypertextually—as a series of links experienced differently by each user and leading to wit, autobiography, history, and cultural commentary, all “open” to the user’s contributions (Pan b). But the site also operated socially, as a hub in cyberspace, a virtual meeting place for goths who might otherwise, whether from local scarcity or from transnational dispersal, have difficulty finding one another. Although Marcus Pan was named on the site as the first programmer of the Directory, by the end of the 1990s it had become the creation of hundreds of contributors, many of whom offered links to their own websites and so assembled an intricate lacework of mutual references and connections they used to socialize online.

The Directory embodied, practically and electronically, the coalescence of textual and social commentary that characterizes the printed accounts of the Internet and electronic textuality in the same period. Its navigation instructions blurred together print culture with geography, nations with books, emphasizing to users that its producers found the two categories inextricable. When users entered the map interface, a full-screen global projection dotted with live-linked names of nation states, the interchangeability became especially well marked. Here the user instructions read, “Click the continent name you wish to zoom in to. In addition, the Net.Goth Directory book in the corners of all images”—the image of a leather-bound volume, programmed, like the various national locations, to act as a live link—“will lead you back out to the very front of the site” (Pan a). The map was a series of gateways to autobiographical texts, commentaries, and contact coordinates that users had linked electronically to their national locations. The book was the master link, transporting users back to the opening map of the world. Its power was conferred by electronic technology. Yet it had the power to take the user “home” to an explicitly national space.

The ambivalence that marked the net.goths’ metaphoric coalescence of nations and books highlights the inclusion, in this single discursive formation composed of social networking websites created by a relatively homogeneous group of producers and users, of the competing approaches to new media that characterized the avowedly modernizing and conservative strands in meta-media commentaries of the same period. In the terms of media theory, the relationship, at once parasitical and parodic, between these net.goth sites and superseded social and media forms can be understood as a remediation of the nation and the book comparable to Birkerts’s or Bolter’s. It may also, however, at least in technologically literate cases such as Pan’s and Breitreiter’s, be conceived as a remediation of contemporary new media history, here understood as among the superseded artifacts of print. Whether or not we wish to commit to such an understanding of remediation as a process of generic transformation, or of medium as a feature of genre, the net.goths’ historicism and its metaphors position their productions as part of the same “diagram of forces” that unite Rheingold and Birkerts and their colleagues. Here, too, “social conflict” unites new media history as a “literary form” (Moretti 2005: 64). What might otherwise seem a paradoxical mix of heterogeneity and sameness is explained as a genre forming in reaction to a shared, and yet widely divergent, experience of change.

### 3.3 New media and meta-media, 1790–1820s: Walter Scott’s situation

Genre as a transcription of the experience of change: as this reference indicates, I would like now to begin a slow turn to the question of causality, both in the sense



of Jameson's "absent cause" (history) and in the more immediate sense of the subject's (narrative) experience (Jameson 1981: 102). To that end, I want to recall the slippage between nation and book in the new media history I have been discussing. I will suggest that this constant movement between tenor and vehicle that characterizes the mutual metaphoricity of books and nations is a formal register of causality and of conflicting responses to it. In order to begin the process of examining these responses, I also want to highlight the oldness of the book as it is represented in new media history from the net.goths to Birkerts and Bolter. The creators of the Net.Goth Directory and the new media scholars who write about electronic textuality and computer-mediated sociability alike place books among the causes of nations, and represent the decline of the book as a cause of national decay. This conjunction of (old) books with nations may well be an inherited expression of crisis, one that is not, however, transhistorical, but rather post-Romantic: a form of crisis founded at the historical moment when print becomes ubiquitous (St Clair 2004: 10–13). In this context, it may be seen that the old book that is an apparent generic requirement of new media history does indeed "come from" another genre, a precursor narrative of media change in which old books and new compete on the battleground of national community.

The "Net.Goth Directory book," in particular, is a visibly, even exaggeratedly antiquarian object. Whereas books for Bolter or Rosello are the index of a tradition whose length is considerable but unspecified, the Directory book is really, really old. Its title font is runic in a way that has become the universal sign of antiquity in popular culture; its squarish shape is more folio than octavo, recalling a time when books, and so figuratively their readers, were chained to reading desks; its covers are mottled and foxed, which is to say, antiqued. In these ways it resembles an earlier book: the "Mighty Book, With iron clasp'd, and with iron bound," belonging to "the wizard, Michael Scott" in Walter Scott's 1805 narrative poem *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* (Scott 1805: 2.21.8–9; 6.26.25). The antiquity of the Directory's book thus refers doubly to its history: to the hypermediated forms of Romantic nationalism associated with Scott as well as to the interlocking conceptions of literary and national tradition on which new media history from the turn of the nineteenth century to the turn of the twenty-first has drawn in its nation- and canon-making.

With Michael Scott's mighty book, too, the Net.Goth Directory book shares its function as a universal call-out for national affiliation. In Scott's account in the *Lay*, the unparalleled power of the antique book in the forming and maintenance of nations is the apparently inevitable climax of a series of unintended consequences: the work of the book is at once a figure for and an agent of a history represented as the experience of necessity. As the poem begins, the Scott clan of Branksome Hall are engaged in continuous struggle against the Cranstouns, their neighbors and rival

“moss-troopers,” or Border outlaws (Scott 1805: 1.19.5). Sir William of Deloraine is summoned by the widowed Lady Scott, who seeks his help in recovering the “mystic book” that was buried with her ancestor Michael Scott, a crusader rumored to be a “wizard of... dreaded fame” (Scott 1805: 2.24.5; 2.13.3). The Lady of Branksome warns Deloraine that he will read the book at his peril:

“Be it scroll, or be it book,  
 Into it, Knight, thou must not look;  
 If thou readest, thou art lorn!  
 Better hadst thou ne’er been born.” (Scott 1805: 1.23.3–6)

“‘Letter nor line know I never a one,’” Deloraine replies, his professed illiteracy his best protection (Scott 1805: 1.24.7). But as he is transporting the book back to Branksome, he is set upon by Lord Cranstoun and his mysterious foundling servant, the “Goblin-Page.” The Page reads the book and communicates its information to his master, in whose hands it becomes the ironic means of uniting the Scotts with the Cranstouns, and other border families, transforming this heterogeneous crew from feudal moss-troopers into self-conscious “Scots” allied against “English” invasion (Scott 1805: 4.6.2). This process, which makes even an unread book an unstoppable motor of nation formation, turns out to be the will of Michael Scott himself, who appears in ghostly form to recall the Page once national unity has been achieved. The book not only incarnates material bodies, then, but also produces an avowedly national one: it produces subjectivity and dictates its social forms.

The result is a relation between nations and books that closely resembles the mutually metaphoric relation that characterizes new media production and meta-media commentary at the end of the twentieth century. Scott’s poem intervenes, moreover, in a context that forms a striking parallel to the emergence and spread of new communications media in the 1990s: that of the widening of reading audiences and growth in periodical writing at the turn of the nineteenth century that William St Clair has termed the rise of the “reading nation” (St Clair 2004). While St Clair highlights the significant difference between the process of change that took root in the 1790s and its late twentieth-century counterpart, noting that the techniques of print production were not evolving especially rapidly, contemporary writers represented these years as a time of rapid technological change. The wooden frame of the press was replaced by iron, hand-fed broadsheets were succeeded by the mechanized feed of continuous paper, and, after 1811, the hand-worked press began giving way to steam (Steinberg 1959: 198–206). Still more influentially, advances in modes of inland and overseas transportation produced an understanding of transport and “communication” as mutually enabling technologies whose development was inextricably linked

(e.g. *History of Inland Navigations* 1779: 1–2). The representation of these developments in the new media history of the early nineteenth century demonstrates a growing, if polemically overstated, sense of a mass audience for print coupled with a marked intensification of the anxieties and debates that had surrounded print culture at various moments since its inception.<sup>4</sup> A central object of anxiety in these debates was the reading nation, now shown to be undergoing dismantlement or dispersal. The chief agent of this dispersal: new books, whose rapid production and widespread circulation was allowing them to supersede the old, both materially—in the heartland of the British nation—and ideologically, in the hearts and minds of British readers.

The writings of Samuel Taylor Coleridge about readers and nationhood in the *Biographia Literaria* (1817) offer a striking example of this tension between old and new books and an exemplary instance of its emerging narrative form. In a rhetoric of newness whose urgency springs from a breathless use of the present tense and a framing contrast between “then” and “now,” Coleridge marks the emergence of what he calls a “multitudinous Public,” a reading audience that has been simultaneously made mass and disconnected or dispersed (Coleridge 1983: 59). The category of “all readers,” once equivalent with “the Town” that was the command center of the reading nation, has become, at least potentially, fully fungible with “all men” (Coleridge 1983: 59). The second chapter offers an explicit narrative causality: of the new literary “language, mechanized as it were into a barrel organ,” of literature produced chiefly by the “manufacturing” of what has come to seem an anarchic as well as a mechanically autonomous press, and of what Coleridge calls the resulting “multitude of books and the general diffusion of literature” across the face not just of “the world of letters” but indeed of the world at large (Coleridge 1983: 38–39). As printed texts diffuse, as Coleridge has it, their readerships diffuse in their turn. The mechanized manufacture of new books and the neglect of old ones—here emblemized by a reference to the manuscript works of “Chaucer and Gower”—provides metaphors for the dispersal of the one and the amorphousness and deterritorialization of the other (Coleridge 1983: 38). As an antidote, Coleridge proposed a return from new to old books by means of a retreat into smaller, selective reading communities whose face-to-face meetings would be mediated by a single common Book of books: the Bible (Coleridge 1972: 36).

Another striking example of the argument, and the series of narrative representations that mediate it, can be found in Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution*

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4. For the growth of a mass audience, see Klancher, *The Making of English Reading Audiences, 1790–1830* (Klancher 1987: 76–97) and St Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (St Clair 2004: 103–121).

in *France* (1790), which similarly equated the contemporary proliferation of cheap print (significantly, in revolutionary France, for Burke the most rapidly decaying of nations) with the unchecked issuance of an unsecured national paper credit. Both are a “monstrous fiction,” products of “the great machine, or paper-mill,” of the period (Burke 1987: 45, 107). Together, they represent, for Burke, the etiology of revolution in France and thus of the “ruins of France” as he knows it (Burke 1987: 34). But while France has given up the “solid substance” of books and coin for “shallow speculations” in pamphlets and banknotes, Burke argues, the British have “not yet been completely emboweled of [their]... natural entrails” and “filled... with chaff and rags and paltry blurred shreds of paper” (Burke 1987: 75). As the antidote to French paper-making and a counterweight to the national decline it effected, Burke celebrates Britain’s landed estates for their old books, the “accumulation of vast libraries, which are the history of the force and weakness of the human mind” (Burke 1987: 142).<sup>5</sup> For Burke these estates and their books were more than metaphors for Britain: they were at once the cause and the expression of national character and thus the anchors of the nation itself.

As these examples suggest, new media debate at the turn of the nineteenth century shares with the new media discussions of the 1990s a governing opposition between materiality and dematerialization, substance and insubstantiality, in which the nation and old books serve as reassuring ballast. In the Romantic conversation, however, the lines of causality are clearer and more self-conscious. What will later appear as a slippage between tenor and vehicle, so that books stand in for nations that are figured by the book and so forth, appears here as an expression of etiology; to put it another way, it is possible to see metaphorical slippage as a formal artifact of the generic expression of causality. Moreover, in looking at Romantic new media histories, it is also apparent that the old books so figuratively prominent in the debates of the 1990s appeared here for a reason specific to the historical context as well as the discursive situation: the need to counteract new books. This opposition between old books and new media is more accurately understood as a way to deal conceptually and experientially with growing perceptions of an increase in popular readerships whose motives and reading processes would inevitably remain mysterious: by splitting the book between good old variants and corrupted new ones and thereby limiting reader agency to what the book itself could be represented as making possible.<sup>6</sup>

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5. On “the landed estate” as a popular metaphor for national literary property in reaction to changes in print production, see Rose, *Authors and Owners* (Rose 1993: 6–7, 56–7).

6. It is worth noting in this context Richard D. Altick’s caution, in *The English Common Reader* (Altick 1957: 276) about regarding the contemporary growth in readers as necessarily

This context of distressing or antiquing the book is especially germane as one hallmark of what Susan Stewart has called “distressed genres”—the creation of “new antiques” by means of which “the author hopes to author a context as well as an artifact” and, in the case of Romantic new media histories, succeeded in an especially lasting way (Stewart 1994: 67).<sup>7</sup> Seamus Deane has demonstrated in detail how Burke’s polemical pamphlets put forward a recognizably modern political program under the auspices of tradition. Burke, says Deane, was “a forger, an improver, somebody who distresses an object by making it look like an antique,” and couching a mass-produced ephemeral pamphlet in the traditionalist form of book history seems to have been an especially effective antiquing process (Deane 1997: 23). Ian Duncan describes Scott’s antiquarian invention of Scotland as a “gaudily up-to-date national spectacle that relied on... signs that gathered... meaning in public circulation and consumption,” a self-reflexive process of genre making that closely mirrors Stewart’s analysis of distressing, at once using and intervening in the experience of change (Duncan 2007: 4).

To take up the pre-eminent example of Scott once again is to notice that Scott continually deplored what he represented as the utterly contemporary effects of pamphleteering and the mechanical press on the laboring classes of Britain even as he used the same newfangled press and its ephemera to political advantage. In 1819, a year of political crisis in England and in Scotland, he wrote to various statesmen and landowners that British laborers are “debased & brutalized by the doctrines they have imbibed” and at the same time “alert in all shapes,” “circulating whatever doctrines they wish” (Scott 1934: 6: 101). He worried that “Radicalism is of the nature of a polypus cut off his head and it will find a tail which shall answer the business quite as well” (Scott 1934: 6: 101–102). The apparent pun links the diffuse genesis of popular politics to its boundless generation of new books: although it is transnational and inchoate, devoid of a concrete body or demarcated territory, and apparently “without visible heads,” this new version of the public is fathered by the press (Scott 1934: 6: 101). Yet Scott’s own *Description of the Regalia of Scotland*—also published in 1819—relies on this same ephemeral and mass-market medium to propagate an ideal of national cohesion. Taking as its occasion the discovery of “lost” antiquarian objects—the hereditary, though much refashioned, crown, sword, and scepter of Scotland—in a locked casket in Edinburgh Castle, the pamphlet insisted that

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influenced by, or related to, any contemporary increase in the availability of print. See also Raven, “From Promotion to Proscription” (Raven 1996: 179, 181).

7. See also Duncan, *Scott’s Shadow* (Duncan 2007: 4); Siskin, *The Work of Writing* (Siskin 1998: 79–99, 186–187); Buzard, “Translation and Tourism” (Buzard 1995).

the wise decrees of Providence, ... after a thousand years of bloodshed, have at length indissolubly united two nations, who, speaking the same language, professing the same religion, and united in the same interests, seem formed by GOD and Nature to compose one people. (Scott 1819: 34)

Yet the existence and circulation of Scott's new book (which became an official guidebook sold at Edinburgh Castle through the end of the nineteenth century) suggests his awareness that the readers of Scotland, at least, needed the forceful or seductive persuasion of pamphlets like this one if they were to accept Scott's vision of Britain and of British public life.<sup>8</sup> Such hypermediated works are the productions of as well as commentaries on media change: genre and meta-genre both at once. Scott's new and old books are a generic gambit: a requirement that conditions the genre of new media history and its users into the twenty-first century.

#### 4. The genre of new media history

In a significant sense, the fear of dematerialized and deterritorialized societies that Coleridge, Burke and especially Scott counter with old books (and, covertly, with the new book form they deplore) prefigures a similar uncertainty that is evident in net.goth narrative and its meta-generic counterparts at the turn of the twenty-first century. These distinct situations share not only a narrative arc and a metaphoric register but also, I would suggest, a set of causes. To read the writings of new media historians from the turn of the nineteenth century is to find an explicit argument about the dependency of nations on literacy and the subjection of nations to the vagaries of reading. To some extent this Romantic argument may have been self-interested, rooted in very personal anxieties about the fate of literature, and poetry in particular, in what seemed to be the coming age of mass literacy and ephemeral written forms (see e.g. Keen 2000; Siskin 1998: 130–152). In this way, it parallels the hinted but rarely voiced concern of late twentieth-century commentators, academic and otherwise, about their own displacement by new media and new content—from the depopulation of academic courses and the corresponding loss of intellectual property to the tabloidization and disappearance of newspapers in the new day of the blogosphere (see Noble 1998; Liu 2004: 30; Angwin & Hallinan 2005). Yet neither group of writers and neither set of anxieties is *merely* self-serving: they share, and their net.goth counterparts share, what seems to be a deep-felt sense of the broadly social as well as the highly personal effects of media change.

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8. At least three further printings of the pamphlet, marked "Printed at the Crown Room" or "Printed for the Warden of the Regalia," appeared between 1839 and 1890.

It is this shared understanding of the agency of media change, I want to suggest, that makes a genre of new media history. To put it another way, the emergence of genre is a behavioral response to change. It is the outcome of the mingling of purpose (a response to the experience of history) and of purposiveness (the subject's self-consciousness about his or her encounter with the forms in which history is understood and narrated) with a narrative response that, broadly, shares a common form, an arc, figure, or set of references. If we take seriously Moretti's theory that the situationally-based but lasting social selection of shared narrative features from a radically contingent range of changes in narrative form is the key to the emergence of genres, then we can also say that the moment at which Coleridge, Burke, and Scott use similar formal gestures to document the dangers of media change represents a moment beyond the origins of genre: a moment at which formal devices have started to seem predictably useful, and so to be used predictably; a point some way along the road to that selection and codification of narrative that will become the genre of new media history. We might set ourselves to watch the falling away of competitor narratives and alternative explanatory possibilities. It is not, for example, the subset of Romantic literary criticism that explored, in depth, the dangers of affective contagion through the wide circulation of print—a large and influential body of writing, flourishing from the 1770s through the 1820s, that theorized something looking very much like McLuhan's "hot media" *avant la lettre*—that has persisted to tell the story of media change with the advent of the mechanized press or, indeed, of electronic textuality and the Internet (McLuhan 1964: 23).

In looking retrospectively at the fate of Scott's and his contemporaries' new media histories, I want, too, to recall Moretti's claims about history and genre, in which changes in narrative form serve as the index of historical change, especially in the form of "social conflict" (Moretti 2005: 92). It is in this context that the most illuminating distinction emerges between the new media historiography of the 1990s and its turn-of-the-nineteenth-century counterparts. The earlier group of writers I have been discussing pursued the matter of causality overtly and persistently. The languages of emptying and refilling evident in my brief examples from Burke's *Reflections* emphasize the dire social consequences of trading "old" forms of mediation for "new," while Coleridge urges his readers to exchange new books for the One Book and so to make themselves substantial, the bulwark of the "state." Meanwhile Scott demonstrates the nation's emergence from encounters with old books and the ease with which it sinks beneath the enervating effects of new ones. No such historicizing of causality is visible in the late twentieth-century new media history I have quoted, which tends, instead, to draw parallels and use metaphors rather than engaging in causal analysis. Take for example Doheny-Farina's contention that online sociability is one among many registers of the decline in national public engagement, or Bolter's sense that the visual uniformity he finds in printed books metaphorizes the failings of the human mind in a print-mediated national



culture, or Valovic's complaint that the promoters of online textuality turn their backs on national history even as he never explains why the printed book is this history's only effective medium.

The explicitness of causes and outcomes in the nineteenth-century material, coupled with the narrative forms it shares with the twentieth-century discussions, strongly hints that the later writings are influenced by a similar understanding of causality—with the effects of new media on social formations, and especially the (American) nation—even as they present the book and the nation primarily as metaphors for the past. Yet the causal historical narrative of the earlier debates has fallen aside from the later, perhaps because its writers sense that the changes they note are irreversible, perhaps because they've already witnessed the failures of one set of media, social formations, or genre conventions to counter another set effectively, or perhaps because their strong sense of inherited and naturalized genre requirements does not require them to tell the story. If Jameson is right in defining history as "what hurts," the painful experience of social conflict and change that all narrative seeks to mediate, then Moretti's theory of genre as an index of change would nonetheless mean for new media historiography that changes within the genre code a sense of loss—indeed, that loss, and especially an experienced loss of agency, is coded in the emergence and persistence of the genre itself (Jameson 1981: 102).

Media theory is helpful here, though its blind spots about genre likely mean that this assertion would surprise its practitioners. Friedrich Kittler traces a process of change in writing and reading at the turn of the nineteenth century, in which the ultimate control of both was seized by "the state" in the form of public education and its bureaucrats and proselytizers (Kittler 1990: 18). At once naturalizing and compensating for this process, Kittler argues, a narrative developed in education, in criticism, and in poetry itself, that elevated poetry to a divinely creative act and extracted the word from its function within a regulated sign system to reconsecrate and endow it with pure meaning (Kittler 1990: 3–24). Poetry and commentaries on it—genre and meta-genre—cooperated, in Kittler's account, to provide a soothing counterpoise to the authority of the state. What interests me about Kittler's history of discourse is that, as so frequently in critical writing focused on media, a genre—poetry—plays a central role while the category of genre itself remains untheorized. Yet even as Kittler focuses on the attachment of Weimar Germany to poetry, Kittler's discussion attaches itself to genre as a category, not only as a source of historical explanation but also as a compensatory narrative, a supplement to historical changes that are experienced as an object of mourning, experiences that Kittler, likening them to the reading of the Bible by Goethe's Faust, describes as "the scholar's tragedy." To what extent can Kittler's claims be generalized; to what extent can it be suggested that genre as a category, at once a hallmark of continuity and a register of evolution, is a writer's (failed?) response to subjectively experienced agonies of change (as a loss of agency)?

## 5. Conclusion

Benedict Anderson has famously argued that the nineteenth-century nation began to be imagined through a cooperation between the territorialization of vernacular language and the developing conception of “homogeneous empty time,” both propagated through the mechanized production and commercialized spread of the printed word (Anderson 1991: 24). Reading the new media history of early nineteenth-century Britain, however, suggests a different relationship between the print medium and the nation. For Scott and for others, the nation and the book, whether figured as the traditionary objects of nostalgia or as threatened ideals in need of restoration or defense, serve as compensatory objects in the face of medial and social history. Both are always already superseded; the question is only whether they should or can return, and in what form. For these writers, as in Kittler’s account, however, genre itself—the shape of the mutually metaphorical narratives of nation and book and its function as a common ground of reference, conversation, even understanding—is the real recompense for change, even as it helps to make visible the workings and experience of history.

I began this essay with an observation about the coherence of new media and their histories, a story I told, in the first instance, by documenting the shape and work of narrative form, especially in its figurative registers. But revisiting the story in this way lets me re-read and retell the story of this genre and its emergence and persistence as supplementary to and inseparable from mediation and its social effects: specifically, from change experienced as loss. I want to conclude by suggesting that this story can also be told in broader terms, as a story about genre. What matters more to my own history than the particulars of mutually metaphorical nations and books is the emergence, selection, and persistence of the narratives that recur to them and the ways in which they make visible not only the conflicts and fissures of medial, and social, change but also the continuing evolution of the ways in which these changes have been experienced. These ways are indistinguishable from the selection and processing of narratives, the narration and reproduction of history.

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# Critical genres

## Generic changes of literary criticism in computer-mediated communication

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The genre of literary criticism has always strained under the antagonism of an inherently dialogical structure piercing its generic boundaries, and a strong monologizing tendency to gain more or less absolute critical authority. The generic markers of criticism create a distance both to their object and their addressee that tries to make answers/comments impossible. This is about to change drastically in the near future, as critical genres are migrating to the internet, and are now arguably evolving into new genres by processes of delimitation and iterative re-dialogisation. This article takes a close look at the generic changes that critical discourse experiences while being transformed by the possibilities of computer-mediated communication.

### 1. Introduction

If one thinks of a literary reviewer as someone trying to influence her readers to either buy or not buy a certain book (and maybe even to read it), there are reasons to assume that the most influential critic and reviewer of these days could be Harriet Klausner. She does not write for the books section of the *New York Times*, nor for the *Times Literary Supplement* or any other of the highest-ranking journals and newspapers for literary criticism. In fact, she does not write for any newspaper at all. She used to be an acquisitions librarian in Pennsylvania and wrote a monthly review column of recommended reads. But at the moment of writing, she is the Top Reviewer at the online shop Amazon. She is writing and publishing her reviews on any product she is interested in, at any time she wants, currently amounting to more than twenty thousand individual reviews, and she is trusting in the community of her readers – fellow consumers all in the world of Amazon – to secure her place as the most highly valued critic of this online world. She is a leading critic for tens of thousands of interested readers, but she will most likely never be acknowledged as such, for she is writing in a completely new genre, one



that hasn't yet been integrated into the order of genres, let alone achieved any kind of acceptance.

This article will take a closer look at the generic changes that critical discourse in the form of the literary review experiences when being transformed by the possibilities of computer-mediated communication. The fascinating example of the so-called consumer review as it can be found at Amazon will be used as a way to show how genres and their technologically induced evolution relate to our making sense of (and judgments on) our world.

When Alastair Fowler in his study *Kinds of Literature* enumerated the processes by which genres change over time, he focused exclusively on those processes that relate to the meanings a genre is already thought to contain, instead of the ways in which such meaning is being produced. Thus, he lists the processes of topical invention, combination or aggregation of repertoires, changes of scale and function, counterstatement, inclusion or mixture (Fowler 1985: 170–191), and gives detailed accounts of all of these. But he is largely ignoring transformations that have their origin in a change of media, and that only as a consequence of this change, transform the contents of that genre. In Fowler's account, content is primary, whereas more recent theories put their stress rather on the framing that enables a content, a meaning, and an authority: "The semiotic frames within which genres are embedded implicate and specify layered ontological domains – implicit realities which genres form as a pre-given reference, together with the effects of authority and plausibility which are specific to the genre. Genre, like formal structures generally, works at a level of semiosis – that is, of meaning-making – which is deeper and more forceful than that of the explicit 'content' of a text." (Frow 2006: 19)

Fowler's concept of genre is firmly based on a biological model, and he is applying this concept when thinking about cultural taxonomy. In my understanding of the term "genre" I rather want to follow John Frow in his theory that is strongly informed both by a Bakhtinian focus on dialogism and by Foucault's discourse analysis. Completely abandoning the Aristotelian taxonomic theories that he sees even Derrida still using (if only as something against which genres strain), Frow understands genre rather as "a set of conventional and highly organised constraints on the production and interpretation of meaning." (Frow 2006: 10) His focus is therefore on the way genres work as discursive practices, seeing them as something that a text performs, rather than that text "belonging" to it. This way of looking at genre will be especially rewarding when dealing with the genre of the literary review that could be seen as an exemplary case of a genre whose "[g]eneric structure both enables and restricts meaning, and is a basic condition for meaning to take place." (Frow 2006: 10) Reading a review can be seen as the formation of an evaluation, and therefore, of meaning, within the confines of a genre, and *through* certain generic features.

One of the consequences of seeing genre as a discursive practice is the ability to go beyond a one-sided description of the relationship between genre and its situational placing or framing. Thus for Frow “texts respond to and are organised in accordance with two distinct but related levels of information, that of the social setting in which they occur (a setting which is a recurrent type rather than a particular time and place), and that of the genre mobilised by the setting and by contextual cues.” (Frow 2006: 16) Setting and genre interrelate, rather than one being determined by the other in a simple one-sided kind of way. “The patterns of genre [...] are at once shaped by a type of situation and in turn shape the rhetorical actions that are performed in response to it.” (Frow 2006: 14) That is why genres necessarily change when being introduced into new media, like computer-mediated communication, for example.

Not only are genres social practises that are performed, since they are also linguistic practises, they can be seen, following one of the basic premises of Mikhail Bakhtin’s writings, as inherently dialogic in structure, or, to put it in other words, “genre is quintessentially intertextual” (Briggs & Bauman 1992: 147). Bakhtin’s main interest, of course, lies with the genre of the novel, which he sees as an exemplary case to show how one genre incorporates others, cites them or thematises them on a metageneric level. But even though the review is far away from the scale at which the novel does its incorporations, it is nevertheless interesting to think of this genre as well in terms of dialogism, since one of its main characteristics from the beginning is its dependence on another text, and not just this, but on other genres as well. A review that is not relating itself to another genre is not thinkable.

This means that reviews are not only always dialogic, but that they are always dialogic in two directions. Besides the dialogic nature of every utterance that is directed to someone, in this case someone reading that review, and that is always noticeable in the review’s rhetorical function of persuasion, there is an equally inevitable dialogue conducted with the text the review is about. It is exactly this doubled dialogical structure that reveals an inherent paradox within this genre.

## 2. The fundamental antagonism of literary criticism as a genre

Before taking a closer look at the changes that the transfer into a computerised environment brought to the genres of literary criticism, and more specifically to that of the critical review, it is therefore necessary to take into account something that could be called the fundamental antagonism of the literary review as a genre.

The genre of the literary review has always strained under the obligation to unite two different and in some ways opposed characteristics. As a genre that is

always *necessarily* containing references to another text, whose very *raison d'être* is the existence of another text it is commenting on, it has, as has been shown, an inherently and doubled dialogical structure. While sharing with all other speech genres the dialogical nature of every utterance, the second layer of dialogue, the dialogue with the reviewed text, is much more explicit than the general Bakhtinian dialogicity, and is constantly piercing its generic boundaries. Reviews make extensive use of quotations, and even though the quantity of quotations has constantly dropped since the beginnings of review writing in the mid eighteenth century, where it was not uncommon to have page-long extracts divided by one or two sparse sentences of commentary, the quote is still a vital part of a review, bringing with it some generic characteristics of the referred work. Through quotes, other genres have a direct presence in the review.

Quotes can thus be seen as an alien presence tainting the style of the review. This happens on a surface level, where long verbal quotations might simply take over the text, either in a positive or in a negative way. There are, for example, quite a number of reviews in which the quotes are by far the most interesting part, eclipsing the dull commentary by their sheer verbal and stylistic power. It is always tempting, especially when reviewing stylistically brilliant texts or those that contain surprising or witty insights aphoristically formulated, to supplant quote for description.

But the tainting of the review's style (and consequently, since this is always related, its generic characteristics), can also happen on a deeper level where it can be often observed how the reviewed genre and the style that follows with it leave their traces in the text of the review, even without a direct quotation. Students of literature in their first essays (a genre that shares the characteristics of being essentially devoted to reflections about another text) are especially susceptible to getting object-language and meta-language confused, even though they are writing in a critical genre that puts a lot of importance on very precisely differentiating the two. Critical reviews in journalistic publications are less afraid of this confusion and might even use it as a stylistic device in its own right, provided that it is done consciously. The most obvious example for this is the case of a review writer using parody to exemplify his judgment on a certain book. By adopting mannerisms or obvious absurdities from the style of a book under review into the writing about that text, by speaking in the assumed voice of the author, the critic might be able to condemn that author without even having to say so.

Though this might seem an instance of Bakhtinian heteroglossia at first glance, it of course shows as well the second force at work in criticism, the strongly monologising tendency, a tendency that is always striving to gain more or less absolute critical authority. Critical authority here means the level of acceptance that is conceded by the reader to an aesthetic value judgment, even though it cannot

be scientifically or logically proven ("This is a good book" or "The dialogues in this novel are hilariously funny"). Without a minimum of critical authority, without the critic's ability of simply stating his own opinion and voice as distinct from the text he is reviewing, criticism could not exist either. Without another text to refer to, criticism has nothing to be about, but without a critical opinion that is outside that text, it would be indistinguishable from it. Thus Jorge Luis Borges and Adolfo Bioy Casares could invent numerous books, some of them of a rather ridiculous or impractical nature, that they never intended to write, choosing instead to write reviews about those imaginary books.

Where the referring nature of the review opens it up for dialogism, though, the tendency for a monologic and distinct voice strives for closure. Critical authority only works if it is not questioned, if everything that needed to be said has been said and there are no more follow-up questions possible. Of course this can never happen, since it is an unchangeable condition of all aesthetic judgments that they can never be absolutely proven, but this only heightens the need to at least assume a monologic voice of authority as best as possible. This tendency relies heavily on generic conventions, since it is part of the expectations when encountering a species of the genre of the review that there will be an attempt to persuade the reader of a certain opinion. These attempts are realised within the text through a set of rhetorical structures that are also closely associated with this type of text. Besides the already mentioned citation of examples there will be a number of value judgments enforced by appeals to general standards of taste or literature, comparisons with other texts whose value has already been established, rational argumentation, and downright postulations made from a self-declared higher critical level of the critic, legitimised by what is called here his critical authority.

The review more than many other genres heavily depends on its generic framing to ensure the acceptance of this higher critical level and to supply its value judgments with authority. In contrast to beautifully styled declarations of love, or broodings on the meaning of life and death, statements on the literary value of another text need to be legitimised by framing devices. One could even say that the most effective strategies for creating critical authority usually work outside of the proper text. In print media, most of these devices have to do with the situational context of the review, its placement within the physical body and layout of the journal or newspaper it is printed in.

Placement within the medium decides on the visibility of a text, and consequently on the relevance that readers will attribute to it. Short notices hidden somewhere on the last pages of a journal cannot as easily command authority as a leading article on page one that is announced on the front cover and spreading over more than one page, with a large headline. In the perception of most readers, prominence equals importance (cf. Kress & van Leeuwen's concept of "salience" 1996: 30ff.), and

importance gives a text an advance in critical authority. The texts themselves adapt to these different levels of authority with which they start. A textual analysis would no doubt show that centrally placed reviews use much stronger evaluative statements and much less argumentative explanations of them than the ones that are placed in a less visible corner of the paper.

But the most important factor in many cases is the name of the paper a review is published in, together with that name's associated evaluation and standing with a certain group of readers. The name of the paper is usually of a higher significance for critical authority than the name of the reviewer, since very often one publication, even though written by a large number of different persons, is assumed to speak in one voice, as is expressed in statements like: "*The Times* said last Friday...".

An obvious illustration of the importance of the publication's name for the relevance of a review are the positive quotes from the reviews on a book that are usually printed on the back cover of that book's paperback edition. Instead of giving the name of the author who praised the book in the quote that is printed, in most of the cases there will be just the name of the paper, usually with the quotes arranged in the order of importance of the papers. In terms of its marketing value, even the most raving quote from a totally unknown and insignificant journal will most likely not be included if there are more prominent names available.

The same review will be read differently if it is published in a small provincial paper that scarcely keeps a cultural section at all, and, for example, in the books section of the *New York Times*. Of course, the amount of authority that a reader is willing to grant to a review even before starting to read it is not connected to size, fame, or institutionalisation of a newspaper in a simple way. Size doesn't always equal acceptance. While a reader taking pride in his education and intellectualism will probably scorn the provincial paper with its presumably provincial opinions, and its less sophisticated readership for which it will (again, presumably) write in a low and undercomplex style, someone familiar with his own provincial paper and suspicious of the *Times*' assumed air of superiority will treasure the knowledge that he will be reading opinions close to his own, and formulated in ways that relate to his own concerns. It is exactly this lessening of distance that will play an important role in the success and the effectiveness of the customer review.

With traditional print media, though, the tendency points to the other direction. Though retaining formal and rhetorical elements of a dialogue, the generic markers of criticism create distances both to their object and their addressee that try to make answers or comments impossible. Central value judgments might be repeated in headlines, the short summary section that some reviews have at the beginning, or in intermediate headings in the text, stressing the fact that they are not offered as points to discuss, but to take in. A number of papers include a short description of the reviewer, usually implying his competence in this field. All of

this works together with the rigidity and one-sidedness of print to put the reader exclusively at the receiving end of this critical conversation.

### 3. Criticism's migration to the internet

This is about to change drastically in the near future, as critical genres are migrating to the internet, and, after a period of more or less simple mirroring of print-forms, new forms emerge that make a complex use of the possibilities of computer mediated communication.

The first years of the Internet age for literary reviews were marked by a strong focus on channels of distribution. A deep-felt, and, as it turned out, rather utopian belief in the internet's ability to turn every writer into his own publisher spawned numerous projects for electronic literary magazines and review journals, personal websites about favourite books or authors, plus of course innumerable self-promoting sites of aspiring authors, most of them with a very short lifespan.

Consequently, this phase in most cases brought only those projects success that already had the backing of an established name from the print-world of literary criticism, such as for example the *New York Times* or the *Guardian* with their online-versions, and a handful of online journals that managed to establish themselves, such as Salon.com or Spike Magazine.

During this period of more or less simple mirroring of literary reviews from print media into electronic media, literary criticism did not lose too much of its generic specificity. Given that most of these online reviews were textually identical to the print versions, one could not have told the difference by simply looking at the texts. Still, something had changed already then. Generic expectations shifted, possibly even without any alteration to the actual text. Even a textually identical review on the web pages of a newspaper is not the same text anymore as on the printed pages of that newspaper. As an electronic text, its status changes, it is subject to being copied, maybe even changed, linked to and commented upon and unstable in a way a printed text is not.

And not only had the context of the review-text changed, but also the attitude with which the text is being published. A review in a widely distributed print publication is always voiced, either voluntarily or not, with an air of relevance that carries with it notions of centrality, but also of an equalizing of opinion. A normal reader would expect the opinion of the *Times Literary Supplement* on a book to be as close as possible to the "true" opinion rather than coming from a radically new or uncommon point of view. Therefore the expectations of differences of opinion between different well-established publications will be comparatively low. In an independent electronic publication on the other hand, critical voices can't help

but acquire an air of marginalisation, but with the attached (perceived) freedom to express viewpoints that differ more widely from the mainstream. This is not to say that one type of reviews expresses mainstream opinion and the other radical views, but the context can change the attitude of and the expectations on such a text before the actual reading of it.

Scientific research into literary criticism on the internet has not yet advanced further than to acknowledge this mirror-state and to conclude that neither the contents nor the generic specifications have changed so far (cf. for example Albrecht 2001: 26). Even the established (printed) literary review has a hard enough time finding appreciation as a literary genre of its own right. Current forms of (literary) criticism on the Internet as they happen in blogs and in the form of customer reviews are way below the focus of researchers. It doesn't help that their generic forms are still constantly, and sometimes rapidly, changing along with technical innovations. This is why, even though this article tries to address these questions, every description and argument here is offered in a very tentative way, as the object under consideration is subject to change further and even more radically in the near future.

For the changes described above to traditional reviews when imported into electronic surroundings were rather subtle. The same applies more or less to the first stage of a genuine computer-based literary criticism that came with the establishment of online-journals, sometimes also called webzines. Their basic model was as well still the print journals, even though webzines incorporated new features made available by electronic publication. The most important of these was linking and the inclusion of other media such as pictures, sound, and later video. But distances and barriers are only being torn down for real in blogs that work extensively with the principle of linking and commentary, and, most of all, in the elaborate (and, more than has hitherto been acknowledged, hugely influential) system of customer reviews on commercial portals like Amazon, that effectively establishes a new subset of the genre of the critical review.

Blogs (the commonly used short form of web log) are a relatively new but nonetheless very successful development in computer-mediated communication. They evolved out of online journals and diaries and are hourly growing by the number. Recent counts come up with numbers between two and four million (Ives 2004). Even though most of the blogs are politically oriented, there are quite a number that focus on books and literature, integrating personal reading experiences with quotations from, links to, and commentary on literary criticism elsewhere on the web.<sup>1</sup>

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1. On the genre and history of blogs, see Rodzvilla 2002, Koch/Haarland 2004, and Schmidt 2006.



A typical example of the self-made nature of blogs is “The Millions” a blog about books and literary life created by C. Max Magee in 2003, who is, according to his own page, writing “about the stock market for [indieresearch.com](http://indieresearch.com)”. The postings reveal the characteristic mixture of a very strong emphasis on personal experiences and viewpoints on the one side and an extensive practice of intertextual opening up by way of hyperlinks on the other. After anecdotally discussing his reading preferences at age twenty and the way they were changed by a friend in one post, the author’s next post might be a list of links to other blogs, webzines or commercial sites that offer any news or reviews the author thinks interesting. Thus in one post on the forthcoming new novel by Thomas Pynchon, there is a link to the pre-ordering page at Amazon, one to another blog with a personal comment why this blog’s author will not read the new Pynchon, and one to a blog announcing the arrival of a pre-publication copy at the blog-author’s home and giving some hints like chapter headings. Both these linked-to blogs again provide links to other blogs discussing Pynchon (and inevitably bringing the wheel full circle and linking back to the original post at “The Millions”), as well as to an online experiment in group-reading *Gravity’s Rainbow* and, of course, to Amazon. One can easily imagine that this special type of inter-blog discussion will considerably increase once the bloggers actually start reading the novel, reviewing it, and by constantly commenting on their own and the other’s opinions create something like a communal review of this book.

In this way blogs are taking literary criticism into the Web 2.0 era, with the side effect of totally dissolving established generic boundaries. Similarly to the novel, but with considerably more carelessness and playfulness, blogs can and do incorporate any genre into their format to create the metageneric type that is known as “blog”, and that is so hard to define for exactly this reason. Postings in a blog, though they historically evolved out of the genre of the diary or journal, can take the form of a letter, a news article, a poem, a short story, a list of links to other texts, a quotation from another text, a picture, animation, sound clip or video, and, of course, commentary of every possible type, with the review being just one among them.

But even though blogs are one of the more exciting recent developments, and not least for those interested in the evolution of genres, the remainder of this essay will concentrate on another type of literary commentary in computer-mediated communication, one that is slightly less unbounded than the medley of individually created blogs, since it is unified by a single site of publication, one that is less generically diverse than the blogs, where reviews play a rather minor part, and one that adds a feature that the anarchic blog world lacks: a straightforward system of ranking, of evaluating the evaluations.

This form of the review, one that is adequate to the opportunities offered by the Internet in a way that [www.nytonline.com](http://www.nytonline.com) or even [www.spikemagazine.com](http://www.spikemagazine.com) are not, happens on a site that is usually decried as the institutionalised decline of

virtual freedom by means of consumerism, the pages of the online-shop Amazon. It is only here that the technical possibilities of computer-mediated communication are being used to get the critic out of his ivory tower and to place him directly on the market place – by turning everyone into a critic. Here the genres of literary criticism, and especially the review, are now arguably evolving into new genres by two processes that could be termed delimitation and iterative re-dialogisation.

#### **4. From citation to link, from judgment to judgment**

As with basically all changes from text to hypertext, the always-inherent intertextual element in reviews, traditionally performed through direct or indirect citation, in its computer-mediated form gets enhanced to hyperlinking (cf. Landow 1997: 68ff.). Where a print review would normally have quotes from and a reference to the book that it is reviewing, online reviews have the potential ability to directly link to the complete book under review (in the rather rare case that it is freely available) or at least to a web shop where the book can be bought and extracts from it previewed. This is an especially interesting new development for all questions relating to the amount of influence that reviews have on the commercial success of books. It also means that the boundaries of the online-text are much more thoroughly pierced than in its print equivalent and that the text is effectively delimited. Quotations and references lead as hyperlinks outside of the text: what used to be a reference is now, at least potentially, replaced by the actual referenced text. This increases the presence of other texts in the original text and it includes, as the examples of the cross-linked blog postings have shown, the possibility of an unending chain of references.

But there are not only more paths leading outside of the text; at the same time there are also more leading into it. Whereas print media would provide “links” into the text usually only through a table of contents and maybe an index at the end of the volume, in computer-mediated communication the complete text itself can be reached or found through search engines. Amazon for example has a special search engine for their customer reviews apart from the general search engine for products. Additionally, reviews can be found by way of their author, the ratings it gives to a certain product and numerous other ways. Thus, the text is much less closed against other texts than it would be in a print surrounding.

#### **5. A look at the consumer review**

The product overview page for a recently published book at Amazon has by now grown to an almost overwhelming complexity. There is so much information available about a single book, especially if it is part of Amazon’s “search inside”

program, that taking it all in might easily take half the time that one would need to actually read the book. A look at the page generated for Zadie Smith's last novel *On Beauty* will show this abundance of information. After the initial information that is mostly related to the actual purchase of the book (its price, the availability, the details of delivery) as well as a picture of the front cover, there are a number of sections offering further information under these headings (a few of the minor options are left out here):

- “Customers who bought this item also bought”: this is a simple list of books where interest is created by the implied shared taste of different customers. This is one of the most important instruments of Amazon to introduce new products to their customers.
- “Editorial Reviews”: This is Amazon's relic of traditional forms of literary criticism and book presentation, a selection of previously printed reviews from other publications, headed by a review written by the editorial staff of Amazon. In the case of *On Beauty*, there are six more reviews or parts of reviews from journals such as *Publishers Weekly* or *Booklist*, as well as praising quotes from other reviews, taken from the book's back cover.
- “Product details”: These are chiefly the standard bibliographical data like page numbers, publisher, or ISBN-number, but also the title's sales rank at Amazon (currently number 349 in “Books”) and the average rating from the customer reviews based on a five star rating system (three of five in this case).
- “Inside this book”: Amazon scans books that are a part of this program completely, which makes it not only possible for customers to browse through the first pages, but also to create elaborate statistics on questions such as the average length of sentences in the book, the average number of syllables in a word or an automatically generated concordance list of the words that are used most often in the book.
- “What do customers ultimately buy after viewing this item?”: A more differentiated variation of the first feature, since it actually provides percentages of the number of customers that bought something. This way you can find out, for example, that five per cent of the customers that viewed the *On Beauty* page ended up buying Smith's first book, *White Teeth*.
- “Customers tagged this product with”: Customer tagging is a relatively new technique used by Amazon to both supply the product with more low-distance evaluations and to provide new links leading outside of this product to other ones. A tag can be any non-hierarchical keyword that customers associate with a given product. Every customer can create whatever tags he wants and can attach as many tags to a book as he wants to, collectively creating a system of social indexing that is sometimes being referred to as “folksonomy,” while Amazon will then automatically find other books with similar tags.

- “Spotlight reviews”: These are a part of the customer reviews that has been automatically selected either for the high rating of the reviewer or the high number of customers who rated the review as being helpful. There are two spotlight reviews about *On Beauty* that have been rated as helpful by 82 and 66 customers respectively.
- “Customer reviews”: This is the full list of all reviews written by customers of Amazon, in the case of *On Beauty* there are 128 in total. The customer reviews will be described in more detail below.
- “Listmania!”: This provides links to product lists created by customers that are somehow related to the product on display. Another feature for hinting at new products, this one relies strongly on the customer’s creativity and leads to much more unforeseeable results than the “customers also bought this” feature which tends to lead in circles after more than two suggestions. At the same time it is a very important feature for finding one’s “aesthetic avatar” (see below) out of the choir of critical opinion.
- “Look for similar items by category”/“Look for similar items by subject”: other than the tags created unsystematically and individually by customers, these two features are again rather standard bibliographic fare, an option that most library catalogues would provide, and that usually lead to too many results. Following the category of “family saga” on the *On Beauty* page for example leads to more than 5000 hits.

All of these features are important factors in Amazon’s elaborate system for creating, guiding, narrowing and broadening the customer’s opinion. They all interact with the feature that is going to be more closely analysed here, the customer review. This customer review itself consists of a number of standard elements:

- Reviewer: This can be a nickname or a real name (if it is a real name, there is even a badge indicating the fact that the reviewer uses this real name). The name serves also as a link to the reviewer’s personal profile, where readers can learn about his or her situation and preferences, other reviews she has written as well as her wish list or other lists.
- The star rating: Every reviewer can give the product under review a maximum of five stars as a quick hint for the general drift of the review. The average of all the star ratings can be displayed as well.
- Title: Each review has a title, usually compressing the central argument of the review into a short summarizing statement (“An intelligent, witty, and utterly readable masterpiece” or “well worth reading”).
- Date of the review: There is an exact date given for every review, which can be used as an ordering principle for the display of reviews.

- Text of the review: Texts are limited to 1000 characters, a generic rule more or less arbitrarily imposed by Amazon that nevertheless has a huge influence on the type and style of text that is produced.
- The “helpful” rating.
- Option for commenting on or rating the review.

Of course, the first important generic feature of this type of review does not show on this list of elements, since it is an unspoken one: the fact that there are no restrictions on who can write such a review. Restriction of authorship has always been implicit in the specifications of genres. Some genres have been gendered through certain phases of literary history, like letters, the journal, or political tracts, others are restricted to certain social or religious groups, like sermons, inaugural speeches or gangster rap songs. With traditional reviews, the restriction of authorship is a complex agreement between readers and a usually depersonalised editorial policy of a journal or paper that does a lot to secure critical authority. Readers will just assume that a journal they generally “trust” will only allow those authors to voice a critical opinion that lives up to that journal’s perceived standards.

With the customer review, the criterion of selection switches from exclusion to inclusion. According to policy, everybody is allowed to write, though this, of course, is an illusion as well. First of all, to qualify as a reviewer you have to be a customer, which means you have to have a personal profile at Amazon’s. In this world, you exist only insofar as you consume.

But inclusiveness of authorship is only the first step, and one that, left alone, would lead to a chaotic proliferation of voices that would render this feature more or less worthless. With the sixth instalment in the *Harry Potter* series, for example, customer reviews amount to no less than 3372, all of them available to read. When one chooses to display all customer reviews, there are therefore a number of ways in which to arrange the reviews. The main options for arranging are chronological (newest or oldest first), according to the rating that the reviewed book got, and according to the “most helpful”-score of the reviews. It is this score that takes the customer review one step further and initiates a process that could be called “iterative re-dialogisation”.

For it is arguably the most important feature of this computer-mediated sub genre of the customer review that, potentially, every value judgment can itself be subjected to another value judgment. This is made possible by the complex technological structure in which the customer review is embedded, and which is part of its special generic frame. At the end of every single review, the reader of that review has the opportunity to vote whether he found that review helpful or not helpful. At the top of the review the results of these votings are displayed, in the form of: “82 of 107 people found the following review helpful”. Depending on how

many “helpful” votes a review gets, it will be put more or less prominently on display. But the votes do not only determine the placement of the single review, they also influence the rating of the reviewer.

Amazon keeps a continuous ranking of their customer reviewers based on the number of “helpful” votes they get from other customers. This means that there are two closely related ways to fame among the Amazon reviewers: you could either write a very large amount of reviews hoping to collect at least some positive votes for every review, or you could write reviews that, first of all, a lot of people will read, which basically means products that are as popular as possible, and that many of those readers will deem helpful. So, while Harriet Klausner and Lawrence M. Bernabo, the current number one and two on Amazon’s Top Reviewer Ranking, are unquestionably prolific writers with ten and twelve thousand reviews respectively, Donald Mitchell manages to come in third place with “only” 2980 reviews, that is, 771 reviews less than number four, Gail Cooke, simply by having 51822 “helpful” votes compared to Mrs Cooke’s 29179.

If a reviewer has achieved such a high ranking, a badge indicating this fact will be automatically added to his name. There is one badge for the Top Reviewer, another for the top ten, and more for top 50, 100, 500 and 1000. Surely, such a badge will influence the way someone reads that person’s reviews. Thus, the paratexts of the review work as secondary value judgments, judgments upon judgments that reflect back on the initial judgment. In its overtness, this process is strongly opposed to the monologizing structures of traditional print media, where the processual nature of every legitimisation of critical authority is being hidden as best as possible.

This constant (and iterative, since the result of an evaluation is used as the basis for another evaluation) process of re-evaluation keeps the place of the single text within the situational frame fluid. Placing a text as a “spotlight review” right at the beginning of the customer reviews is not anymore an editorial decision, as deciding which review will head a literary journal was, nor is it fixed forever. It is subject to change with every single “helpful” vote that a reader might make.

The iterative nature of the customer review’s dialogism, where every judgment can and should be subjected to another judgment, demands a very high level of activity by the reader. Even though not every one will turn himself into a “wreader” by responding to his reading experiences with writing himself a commentary on a review, a feature that is currently only rarely used by Amazon customers, he is still asked to evaluate what he has just been reading. This demand for active – and critical – participation in the text can be seen as one of the main new generic specifications of the “customer”-type of reviews.

As a genre whose main characteristic is the fact that it is always dependent on another text it is about and on which it gives some kind of value judgment,

the literary review has the question of authority always inscribed onto its generic body. The generic framing is vitally important for this set of texts to fulfil their function. One part of the expectations that the genre of the customer review enacts and enforces is the double knowledge that the critical opinion voiced in the text is coming from within the community, and that it is approved by the community. The method of iterative judgments that Amazon uses, where every judgment can be subjected to another judgment and an order is automatically created by this process, makes visible the creation and restriction of meaning that has always been the task of genres.

Understanding genres as dialogical social practices helps us to see how the production and stabilisation of critical authority is being realised in a completely new way in the context of computer-mediated communication. While the generic framing of reviews in traditional print publication was, for the reader, only visible as a result, as a certain placement in a certain type of publication, in genres like the customer review it is experienced as a *process* leading to a result that is always only temporary.

## 6. Criticism and consumerism: You are what you consume

There were not intended to be values attached to this description of how the genre of the review changes by its application in a directly commercial as well as computer-driven context. Since this was intended as a theoretical engagement with this topic, there has been no individual textual analysis or even comparison between, for example, traditional print reviews and customer reviews as they can be read at Amazon. Such an evaluation might evaluate the (literary, stylistic, conceptual) quality of one text higher than the other, but that would rather miss the point. Setting up hierarchies of genres would presuppose the assumption of a taxonomy that would contradict the theoretical foundation of this essay. Genres are not classes that could be classified according to an order in the way that seventeenth century poetics did. As social practices, historically changing values like this are already part of their functioning, are part of the power relations that texts set in motion when they perform certain genres. What could possibly be evaluated, therefore, is the way in which authority to judge and criticise, and therefore power, is produced and distributed by this new genre, and to what ends.

You are what you consume. That is a very important credo of the new generation of digitally enhanced social applications that run under the name of Web 2.0. Social networking sites such as MySpace and commercial sites such as Amazon get closer and closer towards each other. On the one hand, MySpace or YouTube are providing advertisements that directly lead to commercial sites, and on the



other hand Amazon is now providing its own social network “Amazon Friends & Interesting People”. It is not at all unlikely that both spheres will in the future merge in projects similar to Allconsuming.net. This is a highly fascinating social networking site in which group and individual identity is defined purely through consumption. Users create a profile in which they declare what they have already consumed, are consuming, or intend to consume, using the categories Books, Music, Movie, Food & Drink, and Other. They can then comment on the products they have consumed, or interact with other users by making suggestions what the others should consume next. This is seen by the creators of that site, but also by its users, as a valid way of organizing one’s life and ambitions.

Even though it is not an integral part of its name as with the Allconsuming.net website, at Amazon as well identities, in the form of personal profiles, are constructed through consumption.<sup>2</sup> With consumption being the driving force of this world and its critical discourse, it is clear that value judgments cannot be formed on the basis of Kant’s concept of disinterested pleasure (“*interesseloses Wohlgefallen*”), but rather on one of agreeableness to specific interests. In a radical way therefore, Amazon does away with the notion that evolved with eighteenth-century critics like Addison or Lessing and their project of enlightenment, that it should be the critic’s task to elevate his audience onto his own cultural level. This is completely replaced by concepts of service and convenience, focused not on alerting to something new, but on matching already established patterns as closely as possible. Critical authority is not acquired by distancing, by persuading readers of the exceptionality of the critic’s taste, but by proximity. The customer, instead of having to make an effort to rise to the critic’s point of view, finds and selects something we could call an “aesthetic avatar”, that is a critical opinion out of the vast ocean of voices offered that seems to be closest to his own critical opinion.

The way to get to your “aesthetic avatar” is through customisation and the personal profile. For its full functioning, the genre of the customer review needs the creation of a personal profile by the reader. This will sometime be a conscious action by the reader, where he is choosing a name for his profile and maybe even including best-of lists, wish lists or other information on personal preferences. If the reader is also a review writer himself, he will necessarily already have a profile. But it might just as well be an automatised, and therefore unnoticed, process

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2. The archiving function of Allconsuming.net is provided by Amazon through their “tag” feature. Customers can, for example, organize their own libraries by tagging the relevant books with a tag saying “library” and add other tags for categories, such as “books I should read” or even “homework reading assignment”.

started by the provider of the customer review. With the help of so-called cookies,<sup>3</sup> a site like Amazon is able to remember what products a customer looked at, what he bought, what he was searching for and so on.

It is therefore a central paradox of this new form of computer-mediated criticism that, while expanding and automatising heteroglossia to a hitherto unrealised extent, the final effect is to get the customer as far away from dialogue as possible. In a perfect world of customer reviews the customer will, although reading text he has not authored himself, be talking only with himself. Jan Mukařovský defines dialogue as a chain of statements of two or more subjects, in which at least two contexts interact together. That is why he can say that two speakers that have exactly the same context (that is, the same frame of mind, language, opinion etc.) really conduct a monologue, since one is simply supplementing the statement of the other (cf. Mukařovský 1976: 116). What happens with the way a reader perceives the customer review is exactly this merging of contexts. By combining it with automatised and customised tools of selection, the extreme heteroglossia of, as in the case of *Harry Potter*, three thousand voices is used to enable the reader/customer to find out the one voice that precisely matches his own. Once he has found this voice he could, through the different product lists that this voice has generated, find products he does not yet know, but already knows he will like.

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3. According to Wikipedia, a cookie is "a parcel of text sent by a server to a web browser and then sent back unchanged by the browser each time it accesses that server. HTTP cookies are used for authenticating, tracking, and maintaining specific information about users, such as site preferences and the contents of their electronic shopping carts." ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HTTP\\_cookie](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HTTP_cookie)) 2006-10-25.

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# A model for describing 'new' and 'old' properties of CMC genres

## The case of digital folklore

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While genre theory has become one of the central paradigms for CMC studies, these approaches face a dilemma: while they are often firmly rooted in the functionalist framework of 'Swalesian' genre theory, they strive to describe digital genres as new, emergent or at least hybrid – positions that are not easily reconciled. This paper suggests a way out by proposing a two-level structure for genre ecologies: a function-based superlevel that will usually be established from traditional discourse which branches into emergent subgenres on a lower, form- and content-based level. This two-level model is established in detail around the test case of digital folklore; it is also shown how the model can be extended to other domains of CMC discourse.

### 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

In recent years, research on computer-mediated communication (CMC) has become increasingly attuned to the notion of genre. Indeed, an overwhelming number of CMC studies make implicit or explicit reference to the possibilities of discourse categorization and classification, to problems in defining and analyzing genres. While the analysis of digital genres is relevant for its own sake from a discourse-analytical perspective, it also has very material applications in fields such as library and information sciences, data mining, and corpus linguistics.

It seems that in the new millennium, the issue of genre has become as ubiquitous in CMC research as the question of orality vs. literacy used to be in the Nineties. Yet while a relatively broad consensus has been established regarding the

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1. This paper is an elaboration on ideas first presented in Heyd (2008), Chapter 7. The author is grateful to the editors for their insightful comments and suggestions.

oral or literate status of CMC – namely, that an intermediate mode of ‘digitality’ is emerging (Zitzen & Stein 2004) – the field of digital genre research is wide open as of yet. In a nutshell, investigations on CMC-based genre change revolve around the following questions: does the Internet engender genuinely new genres? Do existing genres migrate into the new medial environment? Or is it most fitting to speak of ‘hybrid’ genres in CMC?

While these questions are quite obviously of central importance for the analysis of digital documents, they present CMC researchers with a dilemma. On the one hand, our urge to proclaim and describe forms of CMC as genuinely new genres is very strong. The myriad of new “socio-technical modes” (Herring 2002; 2007) as well as their fast-paced advent support our intuitive grasp of the situation – how could such radical changes in the discourse universe not lead to new genres? In sum, the novelty of the medium as a whole seems to warrant new genre labels. At the same time, only a small minority of digital CMC studies actually claim to describe new CMC genres, and those that do (e.g. Watters & Shepherd 1997; Dillon & Gushrowski 2000) are at least debatable in their conclusions. Quite obviously, CMC researchers are reluctant to proclaim genuinely new genres. In this sense, there is a stark contrast between the perceived discourse reality of Internet users and the results of CMC research.

It is contended here that the conspicuous absence of claims about new genres in CMC theory is at least in part due to a methodological constraint. Genre theory today is strongly influenced by a functional understanding of genre that became the standard in the Nineties based on works such as Swales (1990) and Miller (1984). This ‘Swalesian’ approach is strongly focused on the communicative purpose that genres fulfil for discourse communities; Miller’s classic paper describes genre as “social action”. The theoretical advancements of this school of thinking notwithstanding, it is hardly surprising that such a functional approach should not have yielded a great number of new digital genre labels. Since communicative functions can be expected to be few and fundamental and, as a consequence, highly stable elements of discourse, they should be relatively robust against medial change – there is no evidence that a new medial environment fosters new communicative purposes. In sum, it is problematical to establish, or even argue for, the emergence of new digital genres on the basis of current genre theory.

The present approach aims to alleviate this conceptual problem by disambiguating different levels of genre status that may be inherent to one discourse phenomenon. Based on the well-established dichotomy of formal vs. functional criteria, it introduces a two-level genre ecology. In this model, genre bundles are defined, on the top level, by a function-based ‘supergenre’, which branches out into

a variety of associated 'subgenres' individuated through form and content specificities. It is contended that functionally defined supergenres are medially stable and have relatively clear genre antecedents in pre-digital discourse, whereas formally defined subcategories are more diverse, more prone to change, and may easily be generated within a changing medial environment. In this sense, a genre ecology is proposed that unites both formal and functional, both 'old' and 'new' characteristics of digital genres. In a larger sense, this dual model therefore serves as a powerful tool to explain the 'hybridity' that is often felt to be at the core of many CMC phenomena.

The outline presented here is based on a case study of one specific genre ecology, namely on that of Digital Folklore (DF); as a subcategory of DF, email hoaxes will receive particular attention. The data are presented in Section 3 after an overview on current genre theory and its approaches in CMC in Section 2. Section 4 develops the dual model sketched above in greater detail. While it is thus clear that the approach presented here is tailored to the specific genre ecology of DF, the model is expected to be well-applicable to other domains of digital discourse such as blogs, homepages or spam. These further possibilities of application are explored as an outlook in Section 5.

## 2. Genre and digital discourse: Recent research perspectives

### 2.1 Formal/functional, micro/macro, horizontal/vertical: Some parameters in genre theory

It is hardly surprising that genre theory should have become such a central field of inquiry in discourse studies. Categorization is a fundamental cognitive phenomenon that pervades human thought and behavior. In linguistics, this has led to a cognitive turn in semantics (prototypes and cognitive metaphors; see e.g. Lakoff 1987) and syntax (gradience and fuzziness; see e.g. Aarts et al. 2004). In this sense, genre theory could be described as the prototype theory of discourse analysis. Despite the conceptual closeness to linguistic theories, genre theory has evolved a research agenda of its own. Its major lines of inquiry can be subsumed in a row of parameters, of which the well-established form/function distinction is arguably the most fundamental.

What types of feature can constitute a salient genre marker? This is necessarily the fundamental question underlying any theory of genre. Freedman & Medway (1994) and Bhatia (1993) give a good overview on how the issue has been addressed with regard to the form/function dichotomy.

The first major contribution to modern genre theory is usually ascribed to the ‘Sidney School’ around M.A.K. Halliday (Halliday et al. 1965). In these accounts, the notion of categorization is termed ‘register’ rather than ‘genre’; the criteria applied are decidedly linguistic. As Bhatia (1993: 5) summarizes, “register analysis focuses mainly on the identification of statistically significant lexico-grammatical features of a linguistic variety”. With the advent of corpus linguistics, this view was expanded upon. Most prominently, Biber (e.g. 1993) has proposed a duality of terms, distinguishing between genres/registers and text types: “I use the terms genre or register to refer to situationally defined text categories (such as fiction, sports broadcasts, psychology articles), and text type to refer to linguistically defined text categories.” (Biber 1993: 244f.) This bivariate approach that includes both a decidedly ‘formal’ and a decidedly ‘functional’ dimension has been highly influential in corpus linguistics.

If the roots of genre theory have been in a formal tradition, its renaissance since the 1980s has gone hand in hand with a turn towards functionalism as the rationale behind genre categories. Indeed, Giltrow (forthc.) has described formal aspects as the “whipping boy” of recent genre theories. This tendency can at least in part be traced to the now classic study on genre analysis by Swales (1990) that identifies communicative purpose as the driving force behind genre categorizations.

A genre comprises a class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes. These purposes are recognised by the expert members of the parent discourse community, and thereby constitute the rationale for the genre. This rationale shapes the schematic structure of the discourse and influences and constrains choice of content and style. Communicative purpose is both a privileged criterion and one that operates to keep the score of a genre as here conceived narrowly focused on comparable rhetorical action. In addition to purpose, exemplars of a genre exhibit various patterns of similarity in terms of structure, style content and intended audience. (Swales 1990: 58)

The focus here is quite clear: genres are primarily defined by their purpose, which in turn is shaped by the ‘discourse community’ employing the genre. While linguistic features – “structure, style, content” – are deemed to correlate or at least coincide with genre categories, they are seen as secondary in this highly functional approach. In parallel, similar functional models emerged in the North American school of ‘New Rhetoric’ (Freedman & Medway 1994), in particular through Miller’s concept of genre as “social action” (Miller 1984).

Many recent studies acknowledge that the formal/functional distinction of genre markers is too rough to be of real analytical use; thus Kwasnik and Crowston simply declare digital genre to be “the fusion of content, purpose and form of



communicative actions" (2005: 76). Nevertheless, the functional turn of the past two decades has fundamentally shaped the discipline, so that the vast majority of genre studies have a strong functional bias. The study presented here, while acknowledging communicative purpose as the most central genre marker, proposes that formal and content-based aspects of discourse phenomena need to be taken into account at least at a lower level. While the disambiguation of a functional superlevel and a formal sublevel of genres may be simplifying to a degree, it is a powerful and highly applicable tool in actual genre analysis.

Many other factors play a role in current genre theories. Only those which are relevant to the present model are briefly sketched here, namely vertical as well as horizontal dimensions of categorization.

It is well-known from all kinds of categorizing efforts that description of entities can be more or less fine-grained in a vertical dimension: the 'packaging' of the world that categorizing effectuates can yield few large and more general entities, or a broad range of smaller and more specific entities. This continuum can be described as an opposition between holistic vs. atomistic concepts. In traditional semantic theory, this vertical continuum has been conceived as a hypernym-hyponym relation; in prototype theory, the concentric circles of typicality are organized into graded levels of specificity. It is therefore not surprising that approaches to genre are highly varied in terms of their holistic vs. atomistic conception (see Giltrow & Stein, this volume, for an overview). More traditional accounts have tended towards highly holistic genre taxonomies with a small number of 'supergenres'; by contrast, more recent approaches such as the 'New Rhetoric' school have increasingly focused on the close description of specific subgenres. These dimensions are not seen as mutually exclusive in the approach presented here; by contrast, it can be assumed that vertical connections exist between more holistic supergenres that branch out into smaller subgenres. From a cognitive perspective, it is worth noting that prototype theory focuses on a "basic level" of categorization that is assumed to be "cognitively and linguistically more salient than the others" (Taylor 1995: 48). This intermediate way may prove to be a viable description level for genre studies as well.

Beyond the vertical hierarchy of micro vs. macro, recent theories of genre have sought to describe the horizontal relations between genre labels. Again, in analogy with semantic theory, these interrelations can be thought of as networks of neighboring genres; they have been termed "sets" and "systems", "repertoires" and "ecologies".

The notion of genre systems was put forward by Bazerman (1994) in extending Devitt's (1991) concept of genre sets: both are concerned with the sequentiality of different genres, examining how the occurrence of one genre entails another

in relatively specific communicative situations. While this powerful approach has been highly influential, it is suited best to institutional and other highly formalized (or even ritualized) settings such as workplace interaction. By contrast, Orlikowski and Yates (1994) focus on genre repertoires as they group together in discourse communities (such as corporations, academic departments, etc.); they strongly emphasize the possibility of genre overlap and genre change.

It appears that the notion of genre ecologies is on its way to become the standard in CMC genre theory. The term was coined by Erickson (2000) who outlines a fusion of genre system and genre repertoire:

It seems useful to combine these two notions. Beginning with the idea of genre repertoires, that a community or organization can possess (and expand) a set of genres for engaging in collective activity, we add in (a softer) notion of the interdependence and triggering expressed in the concept of genre systems, which we express in terms of properties of conversational genres. This gives us what seems to be a useful conceptual framework for talking about CMC systems: genre ecologies. (Erickson 2000: no pagination)

Erickson's approach has been widely received in CMC research; the notion of genre ecology has gradually been extended to a more global theory of genre coexistence and gradience. Thus Kwasnik and Crowston propose in their programmatic paper on genres in CMC to

extend his apt metaphor because it captures succinctly how, like any organism in an ecological community, genres have effects on each other and depend on each other for their effectiveness. (...)The notion of genre ecologies becomes all the more salient for digital environments as we observe two phenomena occurring more or less simultaneously: the migration of traditional genres to the web, and the emergence of new genres unique to the web. These genres merge or divide, transform and evolve. The study of the issues ensuing from these processes is fascinating and revelatory. (Kwasnik & Crowston 2005: 81f.)

The concept of genre ecologies is adopted in the study presented here as it has been found to be highly pertaining to CMC and is used in many recent studies such as Herring et al. (2005) and Hendry & Carlyle (2006). Genre ecology is seen here as a way of describing neighboring genres; it thus refers to horizontal genre relations rather than vertical structures of super- and subgenres.

To summarize, the notion of a genre continuum put forward here relies both on a vertical axis of categorization, where functional entities tend to act as holistic supergenres and formal instantiations constitute the more atomistic subgenres; and on a horizontal level of categorization, where neighboring genres of a related

dimension fan out into a genre ecology. Section 2.2 further develops this model and shows in particular how these modules of a genre continuum may be made accountable for the question of new vs. old genres.

## 2.2 Genre studies in CMC: The old/new dilemma

While the parameters discussed above have been central to genre theory for decades, it is the advent of the Internet that has introduced an additional dimension, namely that of genrefication, genre change, and possibly even genre death. Although the phenomenon is by no means endemic to CMC, the fast-paced advent and evolution of language on the Internet, as well as its close interrelation with socio-technical factors, have put the issues of genre birth, genre change and genre migration in CMC in the spotlight. In a nutshell, investigations on CMC-based genres invariably are attracted by the old vs. new, reproduced vs. emergent, hybrid vs. native divide.

It can frequently be observed that case studies investigating a specific CMC phenomenon are implicitly or explicitly based on genre theory – they are, at least in a general sense, genre studies. Some approaches only graze the topic or simply take genre status as a given (see e.g. Barron 2006); however, many studies are explicitly designed to determine the genre status of a given discourse phenomenon and discuss openly the question of old vs. new. Table 1 gives an overview on the impressive bandwidth of genre candidates to be found in the existing literature.

**Table 1.** Case studies on forms of CMC that adopt a genre perspective

|                        |                                 |                                                             |
|------------------------|---------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|
| Homepages:             | Personal websites               | Dillon and Gushrowski 2000                                  |
|                        | Top-level documents of websites | Askehave and Nielsen 2005                                   |
|                        | Domain-specific websites        | Stein 2006                                                  |
| Blogs:                 | Corporate blogs                 | Puschmann 2008                                              |
|                        |                                 | Herring et al. 2005; McNeill 2006                           |
| Online communities:    | Bulletin board systems          | Collot and Belmore 1996                                     |
|                        | Conversation systems            | Erickson 2000                                               |
|                        | Chat                            | Zitzen and Stein 2004                                       |
| Information resources: | Online newspapers               | Watters and Shepherd 1997;<br>Ihlström and Henfridsson 2005 |
|                        | Wikis                           | Emigh and Herring 2005                                      |
|                        | Bibliographies                  | Hendry and Carlyle 2006                                     |
| Email:                 |                                 | Orlikowski and Yates 1994;<br>Gains 1999                    |

From the early beginnings of the discipline, CMC researchers have been eager, and sometimes possibly over-eager, to identify discourse phenomena as new genres: due to the new socio-technical setting, any kind of discourse necessarily appears new and innovative at first sight. Indeed, suggestions for genuinely new genres have repeatedly been made. Thus an early paper by Watters & Shepherd (1997) declares the “digital broadsheet” to be an “evolving genre”. Dillon & Gushrowski (2000) treat the personal homepage as the “first uniquely digital genre”. Yet overall, claims about genuinely new or “emergent” (Crowston & Williams 2000) genres have not been the standard. Thus many case studies have come to the conclusion that digital genre candidates are really hybrid or “bridging” (Herring et al. 2005) genres: in other words, they are medially migrating genre instantiations that are typically based on antecedents in the traditional spoken or written media. In certain cases an argument may even be made for “transmedial stability” (Zitzen & Stein 2004) or the occurrence of “reproduced” (Crowston & Williams 2000) genres on the Internet: certain discourse phenomena can be expected to migrate into the new medial environment with little or no adaptation necessary. This argument can be made, to a degree, for academic publishing: while the publication of journal articles has now largely migrated to the WWW, their linguistic and structural makeup is essentially identical to those of paper-published articles; only specifically conceived e-journals deviate from these established patterns and may eventually establish hybrid genres in academic publishing.

In sum, the number of digital genres identified as genuinely new is low, and this fits in well with the theoretical grounding of CMC research: considering the high popularity of Swalesian genre theory and a focus on functional understandings of genre, anything else would indeed be highly surprising. Communicative functions or purposes are understood in this framework as something quite fundamental; it is not to be expected that such functions change easily. Of course, it has been put forward that the technicality of the Internet as a medium provides so many new pathways of communication that it may ultimately engender new purposes/functions, and thus new genres. However, such a process might be expected to take considerable time. It is therefore not so surprising that many CMC theorists have adopted notions such as ‘bridging’, ‘hybridity’ or ‘evolution’ – current CMC research is witnessing “genre under construction” (McNeill 2005).

Figure 1 gives a schematic outline of how the various parameters introduced here may work together in CMC genre ecologies: it unites vertical and horizontal genre relations, incorporates a formal/functional divide, and allows for non-digital genre antecedents. In Section 4, this model is returned to and filled in with the genre ecology of digital folklore.

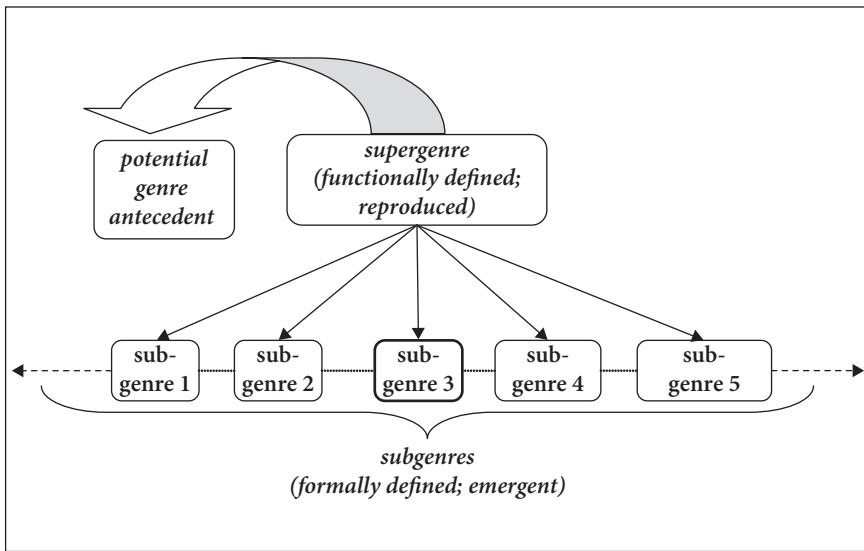


Figure 1. A schematic outline of potential genre ecologies

### 3. The case study: Email hoaxes as a candidate for genre status

The model presented here was developed in the course of a larger study on email hoaxes (EHs). Hoaxing is a form of email communication that was particularly important during the early days of the WWW but remains a relevant form of CMC ten years onwards (see Heyd forthc. for an overview). In short, EHs are messages containing false or at least problematic information that are passed along within digital social networks via the forward function of email programs. The corpus that was constructed for the purpose of this project, containing 147 items, is differentiated into five content-based subcategories:

- virus hoaxes (warning of technology-related dangers),
- giveaway hoaxes (promising remuneration for the dissemination of the message),
- charity hoaxes (claiming to support sick or otherwise needy people, most often children),
- urban legends (relating sensationalist stories supposedly taken from everyday life)
- hoaxed hoaxes (overt parodies of the discourse phenomenon; with only six items in the corpus, this subcategory plays a marginal role only).

The following example displays a typical instance of the phenomenon – in this case, a giveaway EH:

I thought this was bullocks, but they got back to me within a week!!!!!!!!!! I contacted the London BA office- THIS IS REAL!!!!!!!!

Due to the SARS and the recent war in Iraq, the number of passengers flying world-wide has fallen dramatically. We at British Airways have launched an international media campaign which aims to fill our aircraft once again. A part of this campaign is direct email advertising. This is where YOU come in! British Airways, along with Microsoft are tracking this email, and for every 5 people you forward this to, you will receive a flight to London return from any destination in the world (if your in the UK, you can fly to any Asian destination return). Send this email to 10 people and you are eligible to fly ANYWHERE in the world return to your depature point! Simple as that! However, that only catch is you MUST travel BEFORE 31st October 2003. You will be contacted via email within 5 working days for your full contact and booking details.

Note: one flight per person only.

Example 1: a giveaway hoax.

The above item gives a good impression of what EHs typically look like, containing as it does a number of text chunks simulating reliability (e.g. the initial testimonial, references to real events and dates, and the businesslike disclaimer at the bottom), a mishmash of pompous jargon and typographic errors, and a directive speech act soliciting the dissemination of the message.

The issue of genre status and potential genre neighbors pervades the discussion of EHs at virtually all levels. Thus it is usually felt by communicants that EHs are most tangibly defined by their deceptive stance (or, to be more precise, their ambivalent pragmatic status). As a consequence, EHs have to be carefully disambiguated from related CMC phenomena that equally incorporate a non-sincere element, such as spam, Nigeria emails, or trolling. While existing analyses have tended to conflate these categories (see e.g. Blommaert 2005; Barron 2006), a feature analysis has revealed distinct differences in their communication channel, communicant structures, and message scope and makeup.

Similarly, a number of potential genre antecedents are frequently evoked in the discussion of EHs. Most obviously, pre-digital hoaxes are often assumed to have a high conceptual closeness to EHs. The pre-digital genre term 'hoax' subsumes phenomena such as newspaper canards, scientific pranks, and sometimes even literary forms of parody and satire (see Walsh 2002; Walsh 2007 for an overview). However, a close analysis has revealed considerable differences between the pre-digital phenomenon and hoaxing via email: whereas pre-digital hoaxes strive to emulate a target genre and are thus a form of genre mimicry or "genre parody" (Secor & Walsh 2004), EHs have evolved into a self-contained discourse form with its own rhetorical and content-based norms. Pre-digital hoaxing and EHs are thus a striking case where the discourse label suggests a genre interrelatedness which is in fact non-existent. It is likely that similar patterns exist for other discourse phenomena: thus a conceptual closeness between diaries and weblogs was assumed in the early days of blogging but has now largely been refuted.

Beyond traditional hoaxes, other pre-digital genres are conceivable as genre antecedents of EH. Thus phenomena such as rumor and gossip, tall tales and urban legends, or even scams and frauds, may be said to be reminiscent of EHs in certain domains. However, a closer examination invariably reveals that the differences are more substantial than the similarities to EHs for any of these categories. Thus rumor and gossip, as well as tall tales and urban legends, are purely oral and lack the written material of EHs; scams and frauds usually have a financial or other material goal that is invariably absent from EHs. Similar restrictions can be made for a broad range of further discourse phenomena that may be associated with EHs.

In sum, while a rich genre continuum surrounding EHs is self-evident, it is a surprisingly complex task to locate this discourse type with regard to its vertical and horizontal genre. Most of all, it appears difficult to align EHs with a plausible non-digital precursor genre: while it is clearly tangible that hoaxing is not a genuinely new phenomenon in human communication, the more obvious candidates – such as non-digital hoaxes – are too far removed in their linguistic makeup to be plausible genre antecedents. An alternative framework therefore had to be found.



It is contended here that the solution to this problem lies in the folkloristic angle that EHs exhibit. The connection between EHs and folklore was evident at earlier points in this discussion: thus the subcategory label ‘urban legends’ is not chosen at random, and popular discussions often describe EHs as “netlore”. Traditionally, folklore research has had a strong bias towards oral traditions of rural, native, or other ‘non-urban’ communities. However, a small but highly relevant research tradition exists that strongly pertains to EHs. In recent decades, publications such as Dundes and Pagter (1992) have uncovered the phenomenon of urban folklore or ‘officelore’: written (or, at least, paper-based) artefacts such as jokes, narratives, and drawings that are passed along in workplace communities such as offices and institutional departments. Importantly, their dissemination usually works through technical means such as Fax or photocopying. In their study, Dundes and Pagter (1992) focus particularly on two properties of officelore, namely *multiple existence* and *variation*: officelore items usually exist in several instantiations at once; and these instantiations tend to show minor variations due to editing, transmission errors, or other external factors. The project outlined above has revealed these two factors to be strongly the case for EHs as well: through the technicality of the email communication mode, multiple existence is a *sine qua non* condition of EHs; the textual variation and change of particular items over time can be seen in the message archaeologies of individual EHs. It is therefore concluded that urban folklore provides an apt explanatory framework for EH and can be seen, in addition, as the most convincing genre antecedent of EH.

This perspective engenders further conclusions regarding the genre continuum surrounding EHs. Hoaxing is by no means an isolated form of online folklore. Many other phenomena exist that share the functional properties of EHs – strengthening social networks through forwarding, providing easily available narrative material – yet have a distinct linguistic and structural shape. It is therefore proposed to see EHs not as a self-contained genre but as one element, or subgenre, within a much richer genre ecology. The supergenre pertaining to this ecological system has tentatively been called Digital Folklore; in echoing a suggestion by Kibby (2005), the items it subsumes can also be described as “forwardables”. The following section outlines how DF may be characterized and briefly sketches some neighboring subgenres of EH. In particular, it elucidates the interplay of various genre parameters within such a two-level approach.

#### 4. Digital folklore: Outline of a genre ecology

The category of DF is conceived here as a supergenre that forms the upper level of a genre ecology. As such, several criteria are expected to hold true:

- DF is a functional category, defined primarily through its communicative purpose in a Swalesian sense;
- DF being a functional entity, relatively clear-cut parallels can be traced back to a pre-digital genre antecedent, in this case officelore;
- branching out from this upper domain, a large number of structurally and linguistically defined subgenres can be described.

These qualities of the proposed supergenre are briefly discussed here.

#### 4.1 DF as a functional category

DF is a purely functional concept: that is, it can be defined solely through aspects such as communicant motivation, communication pathways, and pragmatic effects. In the absence of further specifications, DF does not make any claims about the structural or linguistic details of its pertaining entities. By contrast, the functional properties that can be ascribed to DF are relatively few and fundamental. Basically, the functional dimension of DF can be summarized in four assertions.

##### 4.1.1 *DF exploits the technicalities of its socio-technical mode*

DF is disseminated through the forwarding function of email. This basic insight has wide-reaching implications that go far beyond the fact that DF is medially written in contrast to traditionally oral folklore. The technical options of standard email programs – storing messages, maintaining address lists, and particularly multiple-addressing and forwarding messages – are ideally suited to the propagation of folkloristic material. The technicalities of email as a socio-technical mode can therefore be said to afford the phenomenon of DF. This intricate link between the medium and the contents is tangible in the many metadiscursive statements that tend to be added to items of DF: the process of forwarding is not merely a means of dissemination, but part and parcel of the communicative act.

##### 4.1.2 *DF reinforces the digital social networks through which it is transmitted*

The technicality of DF and its socio-technical mode has direct consequences for the communicative purpose of the discourse phenomenon. Since DF is passed along from mailbox to mailbox, it exploits existing social networks. Unlike spam and similar phenomena, DF is only sent between reciprocal acquaintances and is not used to establish new contacts. If DF exploits such networks for its successful dissemination (from a text-based perspective), this has reverberations for the social networks themselves: thus participating in DF chains is a highly efficient way of staying in contact. Digital social networks are highly precarious and prone to attrition; it is not surprising, then, that DF is an easily available and highly welcome vehicle for 'keeping the lines open'.

#### 4.1.3 *DF provides easily available material of a reportable nature*

In addition to merely keeping the communication channel open, DF almost invariably serves a purpose of entertainment or diversion. In accordance with narrative theory, it can be suggested that DF has a built-in quality of tellability (Labov 1972) or, to adapt the term to the new medium, forwardability. Telling good stories is an important factor in online communication, as previous studies have shown (Sack 2003; Georgakopoulou 2004); however, the acquisition and propagation of narratives of personal experience requires considerable time and energy. DF thus constitutes narrative ready-mades: since being a good narrator is endowed with considerable psychosocial prestige, DF is highly valued as narrative material.

#### 4.1.4 *DF creates and reinforces split audience patterns*

However, this network-inforcing tendency of DF is not one-dimensional. Not all users endorse the forwarding of DF or its contents: while some communicants are highly enthusiastic about such material, others tend to view it as nocent, cumbersome, or at least 'kitschy'. The study by Kibby (2005) on forwardables strongly emphasizes such negative reception patterns. For a more balanced view, it is suggested here to speak of a split audience pattern. Audience splitting is arguably most tangible in EHs, which always have a deceptive quality. However, the formation of an ingroup/outgroup schema is also distinguishable in pragmatically less complex forms of DF.

### 4.2 Officelore as an antecedent of DF

As has been hypothesized above, communicative functions that are as massive as those of DF are unlikely to have evolved simply through the advent of a new medial environment. For DF, it is claimed here that a genre antecedent exists whose proximity is evident even in its genre label, namely urban folklore or officelore. The functional overlap between the pre-digital genre and the CMC instantiation is considerable. As a first point, just like DF, officelore is a written or at least paper-based form of communication. Even if its socio-technical environment is not as ideally suited as that of email programs, officelore can still be said to exploit the technical givens of its surroundings, in that case the photocopying and fax machines of the typical office workplace. Secondly, the network-reinforcing and solidarity-creating capacity of officelore is very tangible. As Dundes & Pagter (1992: 222f.) summarize, "urban folklore is one of the relatively few phenomena in the modern world that helps provide a sense of solidarity and group identity. While urban life may produce alienation, it also generates urban folklore to help make the ills and pressures of modern society just a little more bearable". Without a doubt, the sharing of officelore items has a significant effect on the social networks found at work (that is, primarily, teams within departments). In this sense, the third functional

aspect of DF described above holds equally true for officelore: such items provide easily available and reproducible material that promises entertainment, diversion, and a high tellability factor. Providing officelore for one's workplace peers may thus be seen as a strategy of bolstering one's narrative prestige. Finally, the split audience pattern identified for DF may be a particularity of CMC communication, where differing levels of digital literacy between users are a very salient feature. However, split attitudes to the dissemination of officelore material might well be present within workplace communication. However, this aspect regarding workplace psychology would need further empirical verification.

The obvious parallels between pre-digital officelore and DF in CMC foreground once again the central question of 'new' vs. 'old' in CMC genre research. Indeed, with such conceptual closeness between the pre-digital and the digital phenomenon, it might be argued that DF constitutes a case of transmedial stability – once again, a digital genre candidate would prove to be old wine in new bottles. The foreword to Dundes and Pagter's study, added in 1992 to the original 1970s work, seems to underline this point and sounds almost prophetic in retrospect: "(...) the technological development of improved means of rapid communication such as telephone facsimile ('FAX') or electronic mail ('E-mail') has resulted in the increased dissemination of these and other materials. Such inventions have surely stimulated the creation of 'new' xerographic folklore and made it plausible to speak of 'folklore by fax'" (Dundes & Pagter 1992: x).

Despite these early claims, it is contended here that DF is more than the migration of an existing genre into a new medium. For one, a slight shift in functionality has been noted, in that DF strongly foregrounds metadiscursive aspects of message management and dissemination (a mechanism that is typical of CMC communication). More importantly, it is claimed that DF has evolved genuinely new characteristics in a domain that has scarcely been touched upon so far, namely formal aspects of linguistic and structural shape. This is the point, then, where the formal-functional divide employed here becomes most evident: whereas the genre functions of officelore and DF have been seen to be largely transmedially stable, the rhetorical instantiations of DF are genuinely new and unprecedented. A first glance at some of these formally defined subgenres is given below.

#### 4.3 Formally defined subgenres of DF: A glance at the genre ecology

With EHs, a first (and maybe the most tangible) subgenre of DF has already been discussed at large. To briefly reiterate, EHs are formally defined through markers such as recurrent narrative schemas, distinct speech act patterns, and a deceptive core. Yet beyond EHs, a broad bandwidth of DF subgenres exists. Most of these forms have received decidedly less public attention than EHs; as a consequence, most of them have no readily available (sub-)genre labels. This may be taken as

further indication that DF is truly a rich and messy domain of folkloristic creativity. However, first attempts at systematizing this field are being made: thus websites exist that collect and categorize such instantiations in a manner reminiscent of the more well-established anti-hoax sites. One of these sites, namely [www.forwardgarden.com](http://www.forwardgarden.com) (“a collection of all the funny emails that get forwarded around the internet”) has partially been drawn upon for this overview.

First, humor is the driving force for many subgenres of DF. This often involves surprising or humorous visual material. Thus ‘photoshopped’ images with optical illusions have been circulated since the Nineties; in recent years, “image macros” that provide cognitively salient formatting have become popular, such as the ‘LOL-cats’ phenomenon (see Knobel & Lankshear 2008). Examples of these phenomena are given in Figure 2.

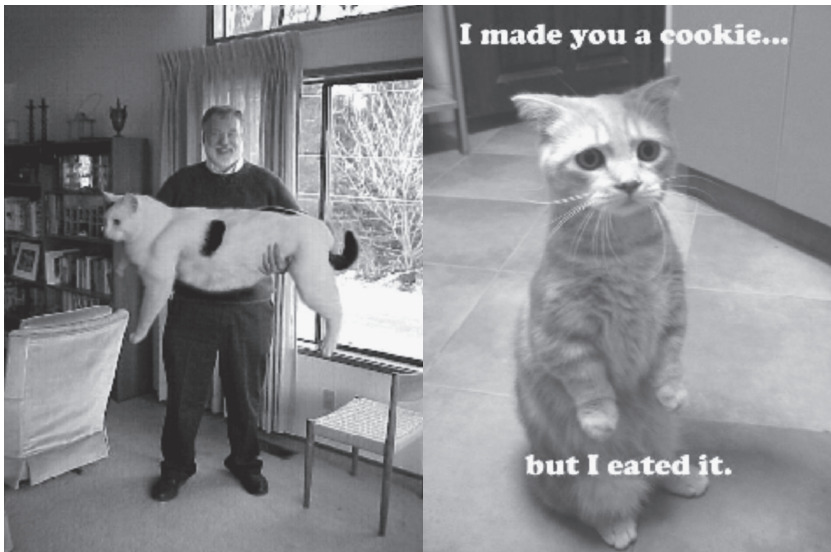


**Figure 2.** Visual material found in humorous DF. Left: Snowball, the giant cat from Ontario; photoshopped picture, early 2000s. Right: a typical example of the ‘Lolcat’ image macro; <http://icanhazcheesburger.com>, 2007

Text-based forms of DF equally make use of humor. In its most conventional form, jocular content may be found in the format of joke lists, where pre-digital jokes (often with a thematic focus such as the lawyer joke) are collected and passed around. Other types include short humorous narratives, lists of funny quotes, pick-up lines, ‘yo mama’ jokes (the scatological sounding rituals already described in Labov 1972); and many others. In general, the ‘list’ format appears to be an important structural template in DF. Enumerations can be found for virtually any conceivable subject or purpose. One list type that has become particularly

conventionalized is the 'You know you are [from] x if y' list. These humoristic enumerations play on perceptions of social, ethnical or cultural groups; usually, their purpose is identity-creating rather than defamatory. Example 2 shows just one variation of this structure:

You Know You Were Born In The 80's When You...

1. Remember Mr. Belvedere
2. Rolled your socks down
3. Wore leotards to school
4. Remember liking The New Kids On The Block
5. Had crush on Zach or Kelly from Saved By The Bell
6. Wore nylons underneath your shorts
7. Can sing the theme song to Fresh Prince Of Bel-Air
8. Wanted to be a member of the Baby Sitters Club and attempted to start your own
9. Know the theme song to Duck Tales
10. Begged your parents for plastic streamers on your bike

Example 2: an excerpt from a 'you know you are' list. Source: [www.forwardgarden.com](http://www.forwardgarden.com).

It seems likely that the rigid and repetitive discourse format actually contributes to the attractiveness of these subgenres, as it provides a cognitive template. Furthermore, it can easily accommodate for variations and additions by other users. Interaction with the texts has been shown to be a major allure of EHs, this may be a reason why list formats are so extraordinarily popular in DF.

However, not all forms of DF have a humorous scope; "inspirational" messages make up another important category. Inspirational folklore can include textual structures such as prayers, poems, prose narratives, and again visual material (such as the 'motivational poster', yet another image macro). A prominent subtype of text-based inspirational DF is the 'prayer chain', where spiritual support is requested for a person in need. Prayer chains strongly resemble charity EHs in that they usually include the life story of the person in question; indeed, a few charity EHs are corrupted or faked prayer chains. Another distinctive subtype is the 'good luck chain', where the communicant is invited to make a wish, or is promised good fortune if he or she forwards the email to a certain number of

recipients – again, the conceptual closeness to EHs is self-evident. An excerpt of a good luck chain is given below:

```
>Subject: FW: Fwd: Good Luck Totem (fwd)
>MIME-Version: 1.0
>
>      \\\|||\\|/
\\|||\\|/
>      .  =====
=====
>      / \ |  O   O |      / \ |  O   O |      / \ |
O   O |
>      \ /  \v_ '/      \ /  \v_ '/      \ /
\v_ '/
>      #   _ |  | _      #   _ |  | _      #
_ |  | _
>      (#) (      )      (#) (      )      (#)
(      )
>      #\\|/* *|\\|      #\\|/* *|\\|
#\\|/* *|\\|
>      #\\/( * )/      #\\/( * )/
#\\/( * )/
>      #   =====      #   =====      #
=====
>      #   ( \ / )      #   ( \ / )      #
( \ / )
>      #   ||  ||      #   ||  ||      #
||  ||
>      .#---'| |---.      .#---'| |---.      .#---
-'| |---.
>      #---'  ---'      #---'  ---'      #---
--'  ---'
>
>This message has been sent to you for good luck. The
original is in New
>England. It has been sent around the world nine times. The
luck has now
>been
>sent to you. You will receive good luck within four days of
receiving this
>message - provided you, in turn, send it on. This is no
joke. You will
>receive good luck in the mail - but no money
```

Example 3: a good luck chain. Source: [http://www.silcom.com/~barnowl/chain-letter/e-archive/e1995-09\\_dl\\_diana-li\\_q10.htm](http://www.silcom.com/~barnowl/chain-letter/e-archive/e1995-09_dl_diana-li_q10.htm).

The power of emotional and pro-social contents in forwardables is a strong feature in charity EHs; in this sense, it is no wonder that inspirational materials are an important part of DF in general.

Finally, a number of DF subgenres display a political orientation by making a comment on social, economic, or ecological issues. One distinctive form of political



DF is the email petition, where communicants are asked to sign their name under a petition text before forwarding the message. While the originators of online petitions usually mean well, these texts are almost always 'fictitious' in that they are not part of a principled larger political effort or campaign, and therefore remain without consequence. Serious political organizations or initiatives do not use this tool – even if the information contained is accurate, such forwarded texts easily become out of date or get changed through textual interaction.

DF has also shown to be a good breeding ground for all forms of conspiracy theories. The informal forwarding process is a good environment for unsubstantiated claims and radical assertions. This was especially apparent in the 9/11 aftermath, when the urge to make sense of the horrible events prompted all kinds of online responses. A well-known example is the "Wingdings prophecy":

Subject: FW: Scary

One of the planes that hit the trade centre towers was flight number : Q33NY

- 1) Open a new Word document and type in capital letters Q33NY
  - 2) highlight it
  - 3) enlarge the font to 48
  - 4) click on Font Style and select "Wingdings"
- You will then will be amazed!!

Example 4: The 'Wingdings prophecy'. Source: <http://urbanlegends.about.com/library/blwingdings.htm>.

Finally, a subtype that is structurally not very salient but nevertheless popular in this spectrum is the 'political rant', where political claims and opinions are uttered in an often populist or radical manner. Some of these rants have become highly popularized items of the Internet; a case in point is the 'I am a bad American' manifesto, which is often falsely attributed to the late comedian George Carlin. Incidentally, is organized over large parts into a list format. Example 5 gives a brief excerpt of the text:

I Am Your Worst Nightmare. I am a BAD American.

I believe the money I make belongs to me and my family,  
not some mid level governmental functionary, be it  
Democratic or Republican!

I believe that owning a gun doesn't make you a killer,  
I believe it makes you a smart American.

I believe that being a minority does not make you noble  
or victimized, and does not entitle you to anything.

I believe that if you are selling me a Big Mac in the USA,  
do it in English.

I believe everyone has a right to pray to his or her God when and where they want to.

My heroes are John Wayne, Babe Ruth, Roy Rogers, and whoever canceled Jerry Springer.

I don't hate the rich. I don't pity the poor.

Example 5: Excerpt from the “Bad American” rant. Source: <http://texasfred.net/archives/963>.

In sum, political materials and messages appear to thrive in DF – the forwardable format offers communicants the opportunity for that effortless altruism that has been termed ‘armchair activism’.

This brief sketch of the genre ecology of DF is anything but exhaustive; case studies would be warranted for many of the discourse phenomena introduced here. In particular, the tendency for lists in all kinds of subtypes appears to reveal an interesting case of intuitive text design; more research is needed in this direction. Nevertheless, this analysis should have revealed a first glance at this fascinating genre ecology. Most of all, it should have made clear how strongly relevant the horizontal subgenre dimension is for a comprehensive picture of DF.

#### 4.4 Summary: DF as a hybrid genre

This analysis has pursued a twofold aim. For one, it has given a first glance at a genre of CMC that has received little scholarly attention so far. More importantly, it has suggested a model to describe CMC genres and take into account their new and old properties. In the above outline, DF is a hybrid genre: while it has a tangible genre antecedent in officelore that was shown to share most functional properties with DF, its rhetorical instantiations are clearly unprecedented and indigenous to the new medium. With such a dual model, the hybridity that is often felt to be present in CMC genres can be explained and attributed to clear-cut aspects of the genre in question. To be sure, the formal/functional dichotomy employed here is artificial to a certain degree; but since it provides a viable way to model genre ecologies, such generalizations appear justified. The genre ecology proposed here is summarized in Figure 3.

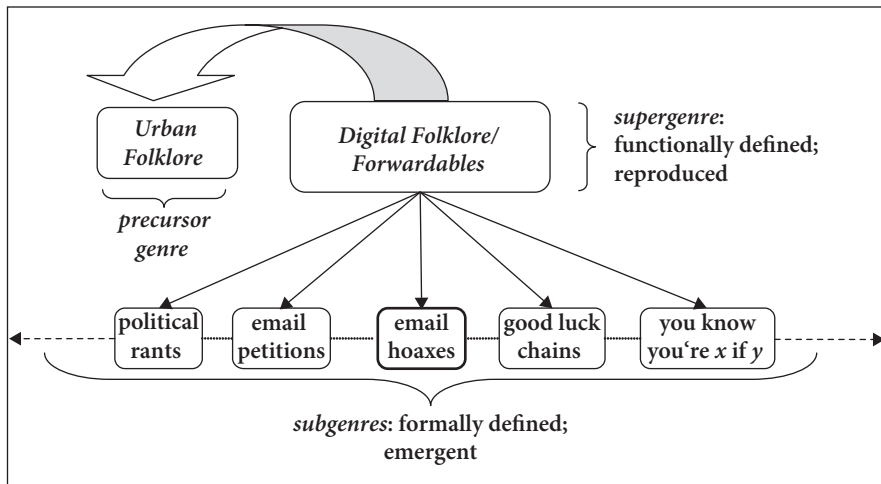


Figure 3. Model for a genre ecology of DF

## 5. Outlook: Extending the analysis

The dual model introduced here has been tailored to the specific categorization needs of DF. It is therefore conceivable that different instantiations of CMC will make different demands on a genre model, or will at least necessitate certain modifications. Further case studies will have to prove in how far this holds true. However, it can at least be hypothesized that the model employed for DF might be well-suited for further CMC domains. Thus spam (and maybe even related forms of email marketing) appears to be a good candidate for such an analysis. Spam is arguably one of the more distinct phenomena of email communication, and may therefore be felt to be genuinely new. At the same time, studies on spam unanimously agree that the phenomenon bears strong functional parallels to pre-digital promotional communication such as advertising or direct mail (cf. Schmückle & Chi 2004; Barron 2006), which rather suggests a case of transmedial stability instead. In addition, the existing approaches emphasize the existence of content- and form-based subcategories of spam: thus Schmückle and Chi (2004) conduct a linguistic analysis of different types of spam, whereas Barron (2006) focuses on one specific content-based type. The presence of these criteria suggests that spam might well prove to be a hybrid genre in the sense established here: with a relatively clear-cut functional antecedent (promotional or other advertising letters) that accounts for a certain transmedial stability, yet with formally distinct and new subgenres that account for the dimension of newness.

An even more fundamental candidate for the application of the model presented here may be blogging (see also Puschmann, this volume). As Herring et al. (2005) outline, blogs have been acclaimed as a radically new discourse phenomenon in many public discussions; nevertheless, careful analysis reveals that blogs have very distinct genre antecedents. In addition, Herring et al. describe a taxonomy of “identifiable sub-types which can be traced to multiple off-line antecedents” (2005: 160). Blogging is a case where the model in use here might be adjusted – as is evident from Herring et al., blogging may stem from more than one pre-digital genre antecedent. Nevertheless, the overall impression suggests that blogging may be well-suited for a dual genre model that captures its hybridity (or, as Herring et al. put it, its “bridging” quality).

Many other CMC phenomena may be amenable to such an analysis that cannot be further discussed here – cases as diverse as personal homepages, pop-up advertising, or automatically generated emails might be promising targets. For future studies, the model provided here may be considered useful wherever a horizontal taxonomy of instantiations is needed, and where a conflation of the old/new dichotomy appears to be in operation. With the fast-paced development of the CMC discourse universe, the advent of new genre candidates is quite likely to remain equally fast-paced for a long time.

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# Questions for genre theory from the blogosphere

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The blog illustrates well the constant change that characterizes electronic media. With a rapidity equal to that of their initial adoption, blogs became not a single genre but a multiplicity. To explore the relationship between the centrifugal forces of change and the centripetal tendencies of recurrence and typification, we extend our earlier study of personal blogs with a contrasting study of the *kairos*, technological affordances, rhetorical features, and exigence for what we call public affairs blogs. At the same time, we explore the relationship between genre and medium, examining genre evolution in the context of changing technological affordances. We conclude that genre and medium must be distinguished and that the aesthetic satisfactions of genre help account for recurrence in an environment of change.

## 1. Introduction

The weblog, or “blog” as almost everyone has come to call it, illustrates well one of the pervasive qualities of the electronic media—constant and rapid change. The blog burst upon the contemporary discursive scene in 1999 and quickly became the *genre du jour*. For the next several years, the number of blogs grew exponentially, the amount of commentary about blogs in other media and genres proliferated, and new blogging technologies were rapidly developed and adopted. The astonishing uptake of the blog suggested that this genre was addressing a recurrent exigence that was widely and deeply felt. But the growth of blogs wasn’t simple or linear: blogs began to change and adapt, to speciate, as it were. Shortly after everyone thought they knew that a blog was an online diary, we started to hear about j(ournalism)-blogs, team blogs, photo blogs, classroom blogs, travel blogs, campaign blogs, and more. The forms and features of the blog that had initially fused around the unfolding display of personal identity were rapidly put to use for purposes of political advocacy, corporate tech support, classroom interaction, and public deliberation. With a rapidity equal to that of their initial adoption, blogs became not a single discursive phenomenon but a multiplicity.



Change is one of the issues that Giltrow and Stein highlight in their introduction to this volume. Indeed, they note, the new media invite attention to change because they “reconfigure the conditions to which pragmatic features of language respond.” Thus, internet genres have been “volatile,” they have proliferated, they have differentiated into multiple “sub-species” (9). Giltrow and Stein also alert us to the multiple issues involved in the process of genre change: how do new genres arise? how are they related to antecedent genres? why do they proliferate? how do they differentiate or speciate? how do genres migrate from one setting or medium to another? how do genres decay and die? what is the relationship between change in forms (that is, in linguistic or other symbolic features) and change in function (that is, in the action performed or the need served)?

Nevertheless, there’s something problematic about the very idea of genre change. Genre change problematizes precisely what makes genre generic. Our understanding of genre as a recurring, typified, reproducible, “stabilized-enough” (Schryer 1993: 204) symbolic action requires that it resist change. If a genre is a mark of recurrence, what is it that recurs, especially in a setting of dizzying volatility like the internet? how do communities create collective typifications when neither technology nor culture will hold still? what is it that can be reproduced sufficiently to create genre identity in varying instantiations? can there be a stable or identifiable dimension of a genre as it is adapted from one medium to another?

Early scholarship on rhetorical genres was at pains to justify its focus on the general and the recurrent. Against the prevailing neo-Aristotelian critical regime that focused closely on unique rhetorical events, Edwin Black in 1965 and then Campbell and Jamieson in 1978 advocated criticism that examined the relationship between such events and the history and traditions in which they were rooted, as well as comparable events that might illuminate them. But the immediate reception of this work warned that a focus on genres rather than individual texts would lead to reductionism, pointless taxonomies, and blindness to the qualities of particular achievements. More recently, Dorothy Winsor expressed concern that genre theory “underplays the role of agency and change” (1999: 201), and Judy Segal found “an excess of enthusiasm for the generalizing move” at the expense of attention to the local and the particular (2002: 172). In response to these concerns, genre critics and theorists began emphasizing the dynamism, flexibility, and change inherent to genres. Drawing in part on Bakhtin’s insights into discourse as a field of both centrifugal and centripetal forces, in part on social theory that explores the relationship between agency and structure, and in part on linguistic studies of variation, this body of work reminds us that genres are continually in flux.

Case studies have examined the birth and differentiation of a variety of genres, as well as their diachronic development and their relationship to sociocultural institutions, for example, the scientific research article (Bazerman 1988, Ch. 3;

Berkenkotter & Huckin 1995, Ch. 2), the presidential inaugural (Campbell & Jamieson 1990), the apologia (Downey 1993), the business memorandum (Yates & Orlikowski 1992), the drug autobiography (Zieger 2007). And others have formulated ways to conceptualize change more generally. In Berkenkotter and Huckin's sociocognitive approach, for example, genres constantly and gradually change "in response to the sociocognitive needs of individual users" (1995: 6). Change is initiated materially, and genre change is part of the sociocognitive adaptation to such change. Amy Devitt adds a mechanism to this model of change, pointing out that genre change is both synchronic (genres are "flexible") and diachronic (they are "changeable"), with the former quality enabling the latter. Because rhetorical situations are never identical, she argues, the genre "through which people act in [a] situation and out of which people construct a recurring situation" must be flexible, capable of varying and therefore of "adapting over time to changes in contexts and uses" (2004: 89, 90). Genres originate not only from changes in situation, context, and culture but also from other genres, in an evolutionary process, and occasionally from the conscious effort of individuals to fill a previously unmet need. Campbell and Jamieson's work on the genres of the U.S. presidency illustrates this dual characterization well. They see the presidential genres as both constitutive and flexible, such that they define and sustain the presidency over time and through the temperaments of many presidents, allowing each to affirm his (or her) particular place in the succession of leadership (1990). And Catherine Schryer describes genres not only as dynamic, evolving sites of action but also as ideological sites of power and therefore as contested; such contestation, presumably, is what both requires and allows for change. Drawing on the work of Bourdieu, Schryer proposes that genres are "regulated improvisational strategies" that are "triggered" by the interaction of agent and social structure (2002: 84).

If we can now take it as given that genres change over time and that such change is enabled by the variation inherent to any socially typified construction and provoked by differing complexes of social, psychological, economic, and technological change, then it may be time to start the pendulum back in the other direction and have a careful look at the nature and sources of stability and recurrence. Berkenkotter and Huckin tell us that genres "are always sites of contention between stability and change" (1995: 6), but at this point, stability and recurrence have perhaps been underconceptualized, an oversight made all the more urgent by the digital environment of the internet. In fact, given the proliferation of change that the internet represents and makes possible, it's remarkable that anything as stable as a genre has arisen there at all. But the general agreement that there are already multiple genres that are "native" to the internet, as well as replicated or "remediated" versions of print or other genres, is indicative not only of relentless change but also of some kind of recurrence. What recurs?

How do we construct or “determine” recurrence (in Schutz’s sense) and reproduce it (in Giddens’s sense)?

In what follows, we explore the short but increasingly complex history of the blog for what it can reveal about the phenomena and dynamics of genre change and recurrence.<sup>1</sup> Blogging makes a good case example because it arose suddenly and apparently spontaneously and has evolved continuously. We first review the initial appearance of the blog, the cultural moment in which it arose, the technology that made it possible, its major rhetorical features and forms, and the recurrent exigence to which it was understood to respond.<sup>2</sup> This early form we call the *personal blog*, in view of its major features and the motivations expressed by the participants. We then explore the rise of what we will call *public affairs blogs*, asking when and how the distinction between personal and public oriented blogs arose, what it is based on, and who recognizes it, again sketching out the kairos, the technology, rhetorical features, and the exigence for comparison with the personal blog. Our contribution to genre theory aims to clarify the relationship between the centrifugal forces of change and the centripetal tendencies of recurrence and typification, stability and cultural reproduction. At the same time, we explore the relationship between genre and medium, examining genre evolution in the context of changing technological affordances. These conceptions may have particular traction as we contemplate the phenomenon of digital genres, but we hope they can help in understanding oral and print genres as well.

## 2. Re-examining the personal blog

We can divide the history of personal blogging into three phases. Prior to 1999, blogs were used primarily by web-savvy individuals, generally designers or programmers working in the technology industry, to share information with each other. These “filter” blogs had three primary features: they were chronologically organized, contained links to sites of interest on the web, and provided commentary on the links. These early bloggers not only had to be able to locate information on

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1. Our account here is limited to the United States. We should note, though, that recent Technorati data indicate that blogging is an international phenomenon: more blog posts are in Japanese (37%) than in English (36%), with 27% in other languages, including Chinese, Russian, and Farsi. The data also show that blog posting goes on around the clock and thus, presumably, around the world (Sifry 2007a). Nevertheless, the situation in the U.S. is complex enough that we necessarily restrict our focus to the American context.

2. These issues have all been explored in more detail in our earlier study (Miller & Shepherd 2004), and the next section summarizes and updates that study.

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-hosting sites (including Blogger, LiveJournal, and Xanga) were started, all offering easy-to-use editing tools that require no coding.<sup>3</sup> These changes in technology opened the way to the second phase of blogging, with a new kind of user, younger and less technically adept, and a new emphasis on personal commentary rather than links, self-disclosure rather than information sharing. As McNeill found in her study of “blog narratives” on a popular blog-hosting site, the personal blog “incorporates ‘trademark’ diary features, with regular, dated entries that focus on the diarist/narrator’s experiences and interests” (2003: 29). In her widely cited blog entry on the history of weblogs, Rebecca Blood noted that bloggers seemed to engage in “an outbreak of self-expression” (Blood 2000). McNeill takes this a step further, positing that, by publishing online with a mechanism for interaction with readers, bloggers created “diary conversations” in which responses are not “just imagined but actual” (2003: 29). Once hosting sites emerged, the popularity of blogs grew quickly. A 2003 Perseus Development Corporation survey on eight leading blog-hosting services found that new blogs increased by more than 600% between 2000 and 2001, with over four million blogs by the time of the survey (Henning, 2003).

Technorati’s “State of the Blogosphere” also shows significant growth, with the number of new blogs doubling about every six months between March 2003 and July 2006. The consistent, continuing growth marked by Technorati occurs alongside another technological development, social-networking services, which allow users to connect with one another. The three most popular social-networking sites, Friendster, MySpace, and Facebook, all launched between 2002 and 2004. The advent of social-networking marks the third phase of blogging. In April 2005, an update of the Perseus survey estimated 31.6 million blogs on twenty popular hosting sites (Henning 2005). By March 2007, Technorati was tracking 70 million blogs (Sifry 2007b). Though the numbers are impressive, neither Perseus’s survey nor Technorati’s tracking includes blogs on these popular social-networking sites. According to MySpace’s blogging home page, that site included more than double that number, over 150 million blogs as of June 2007, and after its launch in 2003, MySpace became one of the most popular sites on the internet. By July 2006, it had topped Yahoo! in page views, outpacing MSN, AOL, and Google, as well (Sacco 2006). Though Myspace’s popularity has waned

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3. In October 1998 OpenDiary launched, the first site that included tools for reader comments. It claims to be “the oldest online interactive diary community” (Open Diary 1998: <http://www.opendiary.com/about.asp>).

somewhat, in March 2008 the number of blogs on the site still outpaced those tracked by Technorati by 57 percent.

The primary change in this third phase of personal blogging is the way in which readers access a blog. On a blog-hosting site, the reader lands on the blog's most recent entry and may click a link to read more about its writer; blogs on social-networking hosts are accessed via a link on the user's profile. However, the features and uses of these sites show a strong continuity with those of the phase two blog hosting sites. In our earlier study, we noted two major themes in the generic social action of blogging: self-expression and community development. Both can be achieved by the self-disclosure that blogging permits and seems to encourage.<sup>4</sup> Compared with the blog-hosting sites, social-networking sites have more features that enable community development. Users create a profile that includes a personal description, basic demographic data, and information on their interests, hobbies, and personal tastes. They can then request that other users become their friends, and a list of those friends is displayed on the profile page. In addition, users can search other user profiles, create or join groups, share photos, and post blogs. However, much user interest remains focused on the self-expression capacities. In the case of MySpace, users' lack of interest in the search function (Olson 2006) suggests a greater interest in self-expression and identity creation than in connection and community. Some social networking sites limit networking, with user-defined zones of privacy or with limits on chain length (Boyd 2004). But even for the completely open networking capability of MySpace, development has centered on user expression—on “building a site that easily allowed users to create their own little online treehouses, adding photos, music, and blogs” (Levy & Stone 2006). Facebook, a social-networking site that initially restricted networks to actively enrolled college students, is described by the site's spokesperson, Chris Hughes, as a vehicle that allows students to “fashion [themselves] in a new way in a new space ... emphasizing different aspects of [their] personalit[ies]” (Cassidy 2006: par. 32). The *New Yorker* writer who interviewed Hughes summarized his interviews with Facebook users by noting that the site “quickly became a platform for self-promotion, a place to boast and preen and vie for others' attention as much as for their companionship” (Cassidy 2006: par. 11). Social-networking sites quickly became known as “me media.”

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4. In our earlier study, we connected these themes to the social psychology of self-disclosure as summarized in Clay Calvert's discussion of mediated voyeurism and exhibitionism. Self-disclosure is said to serve four purposes: self-clarification and social validation support self-expression, and relationship development and social control support community development (Calvert 2000).

Formal features of blogs have evolved relatively slowly across these three phases. Blogs are still identifiably composed of dated, time-stamped entries, organized in reverse chronological order; most also include a link for reader commentary and the author's name. The reverse chronology and time-stamping of posts create an "expectation of updates" (Hourihan 2002) and thus a motivation for readers to return. The use of the present tense in the dated entries creates a semantic immediacy, as in diaries. Although there has been no longitudinal research on pronoun use, one study found in a 2004 sample that diary-like blogs characteristic of the second phase show "much greater use" of first-person pronouns than filter-like blogs characteristic of the first phase (Herring & Paolillo 2006: 448). First-phase bloggers noted the combination of links and accompanying commentary (Hourihan 2002) and the frequency and brevity (Mortensen & Walker) of postings as significant formal features, but in a 2003 random sample of 203 blogs, only one-third of blog entries contained any links and the average interval between entries was 5 days (Herring et al. 2005). Perseus's 2003 survey concluded that of the estimated 1.4 million active blogs, about 80% include external links (Henning 2003), though the study does not distinguish between home page and entry-specific links. The Perseus survey reported 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). The picture of the average blog contrasts with that of celebrity blogs, those read by tens of thousands of visitors each day, which are almost without fail updated at least once a day and sometimes more frequently. The Perseus report concluded that these widely read and frequently updated blogs were "the tip of a very deep iceberg" and not characteristic of the iceberg as a whole. Though it is difficult to determine link usage in current high-profile blogs, posting frequency appeared to remain consistent in 2006, with most on Technorati's Top 100 list of the web's most linked-to blogs updated at least daily (*Technorati* 2006).<sup>5</sup>

The cultural moment in which second-phase blogs took off was a *kairos* of confession, celebrity, and commercialization. It shifted the boundary between the public and the private and the relationship between mediated and unmediated experience (Miller & Shepherd 2004). Sherry Turkle has described this *kairos* as a "culture of simulation," which includes not only virtual environments but also mediated aspects of contemporary life such as Disneyland, shopping malls, and television, all of which ultimately devalue direct experience, making it seem less compelling and ultimately less real (Turkle 1997). The "reality" movement in the

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5. We periodically reviewed Technorati's Top 100 for the frequency with which they were updated. Consistently, at least ninety of the sites had been updated that day.

media has seemingly supplanted the reality IRL (In Real Life), and validation increasingly comes through mediation, that is, from the attention and intensification that media seem to offer. Viviane Serfaty's study contributes an understanding of how the computer medium potentiates the probably unprecedented interweaving of the public and the private in the personal weblog, a phenomenon that motivated our original study. The computer screen, she says, serves bloggers as both a mirror and a veil, mirroring the self (including the blog readers who reflect the writer back to herself) and veiling the "gaze of the other," thus encouraging self-disclosure and the pretence of privacy (Serfaty 2004: 13).<sup>6</sup>

During the third phase of blogging, the reality trend on television and in publishing continues. By June 2007, Yahoo! TV's programming page lists nearly 1000 reality series, almost 10 times more than two years before, and *American Idol* remains one of the top-rated television series. One significant change is the trend toward celebrity reality programming. New series feature celebrities competing in talent/reality hybrids, such as *Dancing with the Stars* and *Celebrity Fit Club*, or offer seemingly unfettered access to their private lives, as with *Kathy Griffin: My Life on the D-List*. In book publishing, memoirs and autobiographies remain popular. For example, three of the bestselling nonfiction hardbacks in 2003 (*Living History*, *A Royal Duty*, *Kate Remembered*) were memoirs of and about celebrities (Hillary Rodham Clinton, Princess Diana, and Katherine Hepburn, respectively), Bill Clinton's autobiography was a 2004 bestseller, and in 2005 James Frey's controversial memoir of drug abuse and recovery, *A Million Little Pieces*, was second only to *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* in overall sales. Both celebrities and "regular" people remain willing to expose their private lives to public scrutiny, continuing the intricate relationship between mediated voyeurism and exhibitionism.

The third phase of blogging also gained strength from another of the internet's recent trends, user-generated content. The social-networking phenomenon has been accompanied by technologies that empower users to produce and share information, a development that takes interactivity to new levels. This movement was epitomized by *Time Magazine's* selection of "You" as the 2006 "Person of the Year" (Grossman 2006). Flickr (launched in February 2004) and YouTube (launched in November 2005) allow users to upload, tag, and share photographs and videos, respectively; the content of both of these sites, including the tags used to organize information, is almost completely user generated. YouTube, which carries the tagline "broadcast yourself," bears a striking resemblance to MySpace. Users may set up an individual "channel," much like a MySpace profile, with "subscribers" taking the place of "friends." Two other popular sites, Craigslist,

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6. Two other studies published since we originally wrote have foregrounded the issue of public and private in the weblog (Keren 2004; McNeill 2003).



the online classified-advertising hub and virtual town square, and Wikipedia, the online encyclopedia, rely on their users both to supply their own content and to police content supplied by others. Sites like Amazon and Netflix, founded in 1994 and 1997, respectively, have increasingly relied on customer input. Both allow users to enter reviews and ratings and to share information with friends, through wishlists or queues. These features exemplify what Christine Rosen of the Ethics and Public Policy Center has called “egocasting, the thoroughly personalized and extremely narrow pursuit of one’s personal taste.” Rosen also points out that “people who use networks like Facebook have a tendency to describe themselves like products” (quoted in Bugeja 2006). Users who allow increasing access to their personal purchasing information so that retailers might serve them better have ultimately facilitated the creation of online identity based solely on consumption and taste.

In our earlier study of the second phase of personal blogging, we identified the exigence of these blogs as a widely shared, recurrent need for cultivation and validation of the self that emerged at the intersection of the private and public realms, where questions about identity are most troubled. 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.<sup>7</sup> Phase three blogging is essentially no different. The advent of the interactive technologies within the *kairos* of celebrity and commercialism has served mainly to enhance the connection between the self-expression and community-building functions of self-disclosure, rather than to displace the former with the latter. The multiple motivations for both voyeurism and exhibitionism, according to Calvert, share one quality, which is the need for connection, the desire to be part of the world around us, whether that world be material or virtual. This need seems to exemplify the relationship between celebrities and their publics, reality television participants and their audiences, personal bloggers and their readers. The need persists—recurs—and to such an extent that multiple new technologies are being made to serve it: blogging has been joined but not replaced by social networking and media sharing sites.

### 3. Exploring the public affairs blog

The recent visibility of blogging derives less from these diary-like personal blogs, however, than from the increasing presence of blogging in political life and public affairs. While the personal blog takes advantage of internet technologies of

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7. This analysis is compatible with the later one of Michael Keren, who finds in blogs an impulse toward “emancipation,” both personal and political, that is ultimately defeated by what he calls “political melancholy,” characterized by both solitude and political passivity (2006).

interaction and connection in the interests of identity construction, these same capabilities have been put to other uses, which have action and social change as their goals. As the *Columbia Journalism Review* put it, blogs can be both diaries and soapboxes (Jensen 2003). The question we will be exploring here is how to think about the genre status of these more public blogs. The genre status of personal blogs seemed unproblematic, because of the rapid and fairly uniform agreement among early bloggers about what they were doing and why. But the proliferation of uses and motivations over the past eight years has complicated the picture and raised the question of what can be recurrent, or generic, within this multiplicity. Because our original study began with the question of how the public and the private were intermixed in the early blogs, we turn here to the blogs that seem most different on this dimension from the personal blogs. And in order to capture the broadest scope of blogging that is arguably concerned with public affairs, we include in our exploration here blogging that resembles journalism as well as blogging that is closer to political speech, aiming to leave open the question of what or where a genre or genres might be.

The Pew Internet and American Life report on blogging, based on telephone interviews with 233 bloggers in 2005–06, helps document a distinction between personal and public blogging. The most common topic that bloggers reported covering was “my life and experience,” at 37%, with politics and government second at only 11% (Lenhart & Fox 2006: ii). Slightly more than half of bloggers say they blog mostly for themselves, and one-third mostly for an audience. Also, 52% said that a major reason for blogging is to express themselves creatively, and 50% to document and share their personal experiences; many fewer identified as main reasons motivating other people to action (29%) or influencing the way others think (27%). Approximately one-third identify their blog as a form of journalism. The Pew report concludes that relatively small numbers of bloggers consider blogging to be “a public endeavor” (Lenhart & Fox 2006: iii, v).

Despite their smaller numbers, public affairs bloggers have apparently had significant public effects. They are given credit for (or claim credit for) the resignation of Howell Raines as Executive Editor of the *New York Times* after the Jayson Blair scandal, the resignation of Trent Lott as Senate Majority Leader after his remarks about Strom Thurmond (both in 2002), the early success of the Howard Dean presidential campaign in 2003, the 2004 resignation of Dan Rather from his anchor position at CBS News after the controversy about the George W. Bush National Guard documents, the failure of the Bush plan to privatize Social Security, the indictment of Jack Abramoff in 2005, and Congressional hearings on the firings of U.S. Attorneys in 2007 (Bahnish 2006: 141; Jensen 2003; McDermott 2007; Perlmutter 2006). Public affairs bloggers exert their influence indirectly; they focus public attention by noticing and linking to obscure reports (as in the case of the

firing of the U.S. Attorney for Arkansas), accumulating information provided by readers, linking to related information on the internet, checking and challenging facts and interpretations, and, importantly, being read and linked to by many others, including the mainstream media (McDermott 2007).<sup>8</sup> Perlmutter attributes to politically oriented blogs “the powers of instant response, cumulative knowledge, and relentless drumbeating” (2006: B6).

Although there are many fewer public affairs bloggers than personal bloggers, they have far more readers. Influential public-affairs blogs have tens of thousands of daily readers. For example, TalkingPointsMemo, which gets credit for the U.S. Attorney firings story, has 100,000 daily readers (2007). The site meter for the DailyKos, one of the most popular political blogs, shows nearly 500,000 site visits per day through most of 2007 and double that in early 2008 (presumably because of the presidential election cycle) (Moulitsas Zúniga 2002: <http://www.sitemeter.com/?a=stats&s=sm8dailykos&r=33>). Technorati’s analysis of inbound links from other blogs showed that in April 2007, 22 blogs were among the 50 most popular internet sites (most of the remaining sites were mainstream media, with the *New York Times* at the top); this figure was up from 12 six months before (Sifry 2007b).

Observers of public affairs blogs have discerned several recurrent categories by comparison with traditional news media. Axel Bruns identifies three: what he calls “micro-news,” or participatory journalism on local affairs; eyewitness reports on unfolding world events such as 9/11 and the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami; and republishing and commentary (2006). Nicholas Lemann produces a similar three-fold classification: “citizen journalism” by “supposedly inspired amateurs who find out what’s going on in the places where they live and work,” republication of information originally published elsewhere, and political opinion (2006: 44). Along these same lines, Matt Welch names four contributions that blogging has made to journalism: “personality, eyewitness testimony, editorial filtering, and uncouneted gigabytes of new knowledge” (2003). Beyond these journalistic functions, blogs have also been put to use in party politics, where they have been compared to the party caucus system, fund-raising strategies, campaign literature, campaign rallies, “meet the candidate” events, tv ads, and talk radio (Perlmutter 2006). In fact, the blurring of the categories “news” and “politics” in the blogosphere is what led us to use the vaguer label “public affairs.” As we head into the 2008 U.S. elections, it remains to be seen whether blogs will primarily serve traditional political and journalistic functions or will be able to perform some genuinely new public rhetorical action.

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8. One of the frequently repeated mottos, attributed to blogger Ken Layne, is, “we can fact-check your ass” (de Havilland, Lukas, & Amon 2002; see also Chaudry 2006).

Major changes in political discourse often occur in national election years, and the evolution of politically oriented blogs is tied to this cycle. The internet became a major factor in political campaigns when it played a key role in the successful gubernatorial election of Jesse Ventura in 1998 (Milbank 1999). The first politically oriented weblog, Josh Marshall's TalkingPointsMemo, appeared in November 2000, during the divisive election recount in Florida. TalkingPointsMemo followed exclusively the issues surrounding the recount, with a single-mindedness and a political orientation quite unlike personal blogs. The DailyKos was founded by Markos Moulitsas in May 2002, during the congressional midterm election cycle (Anderson 2006). Howard Dean's campaign blog served as the "nerve center" of his challenge to the Democratic party establishment in 2003 (Price 2004: 772). Building on the success of Dean's campaign, Democratic nominee John Kerry was able to raise over \$80 million through his website and the attendant blog. Because of the success of the Dean campaign and the rising popularity of such political commentary blogs as Glenn Reynolds's Instapundit, national parties could no longer ignore the role of blogs and provided press credentials to a number of bloggers during their 2004 conventions (Adamic & Glance 2005: 1–2), marking a new level of legitimacy.

But the evolution of public blogging was related not only to national politics in the U.S. but also to world events. In 2001, according to Welch, "Like everything else, blogging changed forever on September 11" (2003). Reynolds started his blog in August 2001 and by September 10 had around 1600 readers; his readership, he says, tripled the next day (2006: xi). Many others were motivated to begin blogging at that time, including those who were present at the sites of the attacks and those who were dissatisfied with mainstream media coverage (Welch 2003). Andrew Sullivan, a journalist who had started blogging about a year earlier, says, "Suddenly, it felt as if this event were not just happening to me—but to all of the little community the weblog had pioneered. I started writing about my feelings, and readers responded with an intensity I've never felt in any other journalistic form. ... People sent in poems; stories; first-person accounts, until the site became a clearing house for September 11 reflection. The blog almost seemed designed for this moment." Sullivan's audience "doubled literally over night" (Sullivan 2002: par. 7). With the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan that October and the subsequent invasion of Iraq in 2003 came "warblogging," and in December 2004, eyewitness blogs provided "raw and immediate" accounts of the Indian Ocean tsunami, leading the *New York Times* to conclude that "For vivid reporting from the enormous zone of tsunami disaster, it was hard to beat the blogs" (Schwartz 2004; see also Outing 2005). Bloggers also helped organize aid efforts for the victims. Similarly, blogs played a role in national awareness of and response to Hurricane Katrina in August 2005, with blogs to document the

events, collect donations, and connect displaced persons and pets with families (MacManus 2005).

These disasters apparently served as rhetorical exigences for large numbers of people, as did the political election cycle. Our questions must be whether there is a recurrent element of these specific exigences and, if so, why blogging was a fittingly typified rhetorical action. These questions require an examination of the *kairos*, the cultural moment in which these events unfolded in the early 21st century. Why did the public affairs blog appear when it did? Why did it arise after the personal blog? Was there some recurring condition that motivated the turn to public affairs, or are we looking at a coincidental set of unrelated exigences? We can find clues to some answers in the commentary of bloggers and those who have made close studies of blogging, and although we cannot be assured that our information is comprehensive, the themes we found are repeated so often that we believe they have explanatory value.

One strong and recurrent theme in these sources is dissatisfaction with the mainstream media (MSM). Reynolds claims that he, like many, was “unhappy with the mass-market journalistic product” (2006: xi). In their book, *Crashing the Gate*, bloggers Jerome Armstrong and Markos Moulitsas also attribute the movement they celebrate to the perceived failings of the MSM: “Readers increasingly doubt the authority of *The Washington Post* or *National Review*, despite their grand-sounding titles and large staffs. They know that behind the curtain are fallible writers and editors who are no more inherently trustworthy than a lone blogger who has earned a reader’s respect” (2006: xv). Sullivan explains that in the crisis of 9/11, “the very personal nature of blogs had far more resonance than more impersonal corporate media products. Readers were more skeptical of anonymous news organizations anyway, and preferred to supplement them with individual writers they knew and liked” (2002: par. 7). Chaudry’s analysis for the *Columbia Journalism Review* claims that “The galvanizing cause for the rapid proliferation of political blogs and their mushrooming audience was a deep disillusionment across the political spectrum with traditional media” (2006: par. 9). Similarly, Michael Keren points to “deep frustration” with political communication and a general “culture of deceit” as motivations for bloggers and readers of blogs (2006: 149). These dissatisfactions and frustrations have accumulated into what Stephen Cooper characterizes as significant and legitimate media criticism on the part of bloggers, focusing on the topics of “accuracy, framing, agenda-setting/gatekeeping, and journalistic practices” (Cooper 2006: 18).<sup>9</sup>

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9. Interestingly, Cooper calls these “genres” but means by this something quite different from what we do.

Bloggers express their dissatisfaction with the mainstream media in two distinct and recurring ways. First, corporate media are voiceless and impersonal, whereas “blogs are personal” (Armstrong & Moulitsas Zúniga 2006: xv), a quality that is commented on repeatedly: the intimacy of connection with readers (Welch 2003), the “intensity” and “resonance” that Sullivan highlights (Sullivan 2002: par. 7), the “interactivity” that enables participation (Bruns 2006; Chaudry 2006; McDermott 2007). Rosen calls the MSM “voiceless,” (Rosen 2005: par. 20), and Reynolds calls them “thin and flavorless” (2006: xi). Blogs and blogging communities, by offering a variety of viewpoints, fill this void: “In a media world that’s otherwise leached of opinions and life, there’s so much life in [blogs]” (quoted in Welch 2003: par. 18). Armstrong and Moulitsas comment on their own motivations in these same terms: “Both of us started our blogs because we wanted a voice in our nation’s politics. We had hundreds, then thousands, of readers, as we somehow tapped into a greater need for strong progressive voices—voices that had been shut out of the corporate media outlets. And the online medium allowed a level of participation nonexistent in traditional media. It wasn’t us talking down to our readers. It was all of us collectively having a conversation” (2006: xv). Because of these changes in voice, and an attendant loss of faith in the ethic of objectivity, Rosen sees “conditions resembling intellectual crisis in the mainstream press” (Rosen 2005: par. 20).

The other way in which dissatisfaction with corporate media is frequently expressed is by reference to the First Amendment freedom of the press, possibly because many public affairs bloggers have, or had, careers as journalists with traditional media. Rosen, who is on the journalism faculty at New York University, puts the point this way: “Freedom of the press belongs to those who own one, and blogging means practically anyone can own one. That is the Number One reason why weblogs matter. . . . With blogging, an awkward term, we designate a fairly beautiful thing: the extension to many more people of a First Amendment franchise, the right to publish your thoughts to the world” (2005: par. 42).<sup>10</sup> Journalist Matt Welch has noted that the blogging movement means that “Freedom of the press belongs to nearly 3 million people” (2003: par. 16).<sup>11</sup> Sullivan has also thought in these terms. He finds blogging to be “a publishing revolution more profound than anything since the printing press,” a development that enables people to “seize the means of production.” He goes on, “It’s hard to underestimate what a huge deal this is” because it bypasses the gatekeepers, editors, publishers, and advertisers, who are part of the traditional media (2002: par. 2). Much other commentary touting

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10. See also Rosen’s blog (2006).

11. See also Welch’s blog (2001).

the value of “citizen journalism” stems from this same kind of dissatisfaction with the mainstream press.

This current of dissatisfaction with the media has a specific source in the Telecommunications Act of 1996, the result of intense lobbying on the part of the media industry. The Act “rewrote the regulatory regime” for communications media, eliminating most regulation on media ownership (McChesney 2004: 51). Although ostensibly designed to foster competition, the act instead “unleashed a stampede of media consolidation,” according to the dean of journalism at the University of Maryland (Kunkel 2004).<sup>12</sup> Accelerating a process of deregulation begun in the 1980s, the 1996 act focused on the goals of economic efficiency for broadcasters at the expense of localism and diversity (Phillips 2004). The result has been a dramatic reduction in the number of media companies, consolidating not only traditional broadcast media but also cable, internet, film, music, and print publishing. The number of companies holding a controlling interest in North American newspapers, magazines, television stations, and book publishers has declined from 50 in 1984 to 10 in 1996 to 6 in 2002 (Moyers 2002). At about the same time, media critic Ben Bagdikian put the number of conglomerates owning most of the media sources in the U.S. at five (2004). In 2003, *CQ Researcher* reported that five media corporations controlled up to 80% of prime-time programming and that one company, Clear Channel Communications, owned more than 1200 radio stations (Hatch 2003), six times its closest competitor. The corporatization and consolidation of media ownership has led to downsizing of journalistic staffs, repackaging of news from one medium to another, and underinvestment in the news capabilities of new technologies—trends that have likely contributed to public dissatisfaction with the media (Klinenberg 2005). Federal Communications Commission proposals for further deregulation of media ownership in 2003 were vociferously resisted by over two million Americans who protested to the FCC and to Congress (many of them galvanized by the internet advocacy group MoveOn.org). Senate Commerce Committee Chairman John McCain said it was the greatest spontaneous outpouring of citizen reaction he had ever seen (Blethen 2004), and media scholar Robert McChesney called it an “extraordinary uprising” (2004: 254). This reaction corroborates our belief that media consolidation was widely perceived as a public exigence.

Yet another part of the kairos in which public affairs blogging developed is technological. The technologies that made personal blogging popular—server-side capabilities that allowed users to produce web-ready material without doing the

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12. McChesney characterizes the drafting and passage of this bill as shot through with “collusion” and “corruption” (McChesney 2004: 52).



coding—were in place by 1999 when the blog hosting services were launched. Later developments that enhanced the ease of connection between blogs and launched the third phase of personal blogging include permalinks (developed at Blogger, early 2000), web syndication (RSS, adopted by the *New York Times* in 2002, and Atom, adopted by Google in 2003), TrackBack (an acknowledgment for a link, developed at Movable Type in 2002), blog search engines (Technorati was the first in 2002), and tagging (user-provided categories that can be searched and linked, implemented at Flickr in 2004).<sup>13</sup> These features are part of what is perceived as a transformation of the web from a static to a dynamic medium, a transformation that is sometimes referred to as Web 2.0 or as the “live web” (O’Reilly 2005; Searls 2005), and they all appeared or were made widely available in the same years as the political events and media dissatisfaction that we have tracked above. Around this same time, one additional technical development, the blogad, made it possible for people like Andrew Sullivan and Markos Moulitsas to devote themselves full time to blogging. First proposed in 2003 to Josh Marshall of TalkingPointsMemo by Henry Copeland, blogads were a way to broker advertising to bloggers, who then acquired a revenue stream that for some provided a reasonable profit; the ads were supporting Marshall within six months (McDermott 2007).<sup>14</sup>

These new technological capabilities, or affordances, helped make blogging a *fitting* rhetorical response to the recurrent exigence we have identified. For an exigence characterized by the corporate commodification of news, perceived loss of authentic public engagement, and a shared sense of political impotence, blogs provided ways to engage issues, to participate in discussion, to undercut corporate media homogeneity, and to turn audiences into participatory communities. These

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13. There is, to our knowledge, no single authoritative source for the history of these technologies. We have relied on a variety of online sources, including Wikipedia (as of June 2007), and in every case have corroborated the dates with at least one additional source including history pages at Blogger.com, Flickr.com, and MovableType.com (Carvin 2007; Jensen 2003).

14. Interestingly, blogads highlighted the online blending of politics and journalism when the Federal Elections Commission introduced rules that made bloggers, unlike traditional journalists, subject to the rules governing campaign finance. The FEC “excluded all Internet communication from the definition of public communication” (Stevenson 2007: 77). This exclusion made it difficult for individual bloggers to attain the requisite “press exemption” that allows the media to “report and comment on political campaigns and elections without having to disclose the cost of this activity to the FEC” (10). The revenue stream from blogads apparently made bloggers subject to these regulations. Several blogging networks challenged the FEC rules based on a 1997 Supreme Court ruling, that the protections in the First Amendment not only applied to online material, but that “online content is subject to greater protection than that found in other more traditional media.” The FEC eventually concluded that such activities were entitled to the press exemption.

effects addressed directly the growing unease with public discourse. The interactive capabilities, the immediacy of response, and the ease of access all contributed to the hope that blogging could support what Benjamin Barber has called "strong democracy," which he characterizes in rhetorical terms as "a democracy that reflects the careful and prudent judgment of citizens who participate in deliberative, self-governing communities" (1999: 585). Those engaged in public affairs blogging have seen the fulfillment of this technological promise in the bottom-up involvement of ordinary citizens on the internet, which they call the "netroots" movement, (Armstrong & Moulitsas Zúniga 2006: 146). Sullivan, for example, claims that blogging "harnesses ... the true democratic nature of the web" (2002: par. 15), and Moulitsas maintains that "the word 'blog' still implies a certain level of citizen involvement, of giving power to someone who is not empowered" (qtd. in Chaudry 2006: par. 14). Barber himself was more cautious about the new communication technologies, recognizing that as much potential as they have for strengthening democracy, they can also support the "vices of politics as usual," the trivia of popular culture, and the anarchy and irresponsibility of user-controlled media. To return to an image we opened this section with, a blog may aim to serve as a town meeting but can also be just a soapbox. However, the influence that blogging has already had on public affairs suggests that the democratic potential is real, and the professed motivations of public-affairs bloggers certainly promote this potential.

The picture that we have been able to put together here suggests that public-affairs blogging became a recognizable social typification and is thus a candidate for genre status. This typified rhetorical action was enabled by a kairotic confluence of technological capabilities and widely felt, pervasive dissatisfaction with the political condition arising out of changed media regulation, commodified political discourse, and shared concern about disastrous global events. All this occurred against a continuing backdrop of the culture of celebrity and self-disclosure that motivated personal blogging. Blogging was a fitting response to the exigence that this confluence represented because it provided a way to address specific features of the exigence with specific capabilities of the medium. If genres are indeed rooted in recurrent rhetorical situations, and if we understand exigence as the defining feature of situation, then we might decide that the exigences of public-affairs blogging and personal blogging, and the shared motivations of these different groups of bloggers, are different enough that they underlie two different genres, or perhaps two clusters of closely related genres.

Of course, the situation continues to change, with increasing penetration of the blogosphere by the mainstream media and other commercial interests. Mainstream media have created their own blogs. Independent bloggers have signed contracts with MSM (for example, Andrew Sullivan is no longer blogging

independently, having moved his blog to *The Atlantic Online*) or have entered into other commercial arrangements with publishers or other media groups, selling ads through their blogs, marketing books about blogging, and generally vitiating their own claims about “seizing the means of production” to create a democratic discourse.<sup>15</sup> The distinction between the MSM and public affairs blogging may not be sustainable. With the current turmoil in the configuration of the media business, the public affairs functions of journalism, and the conduct of party politics, the kairotic coupling of exigence and affordances that we described above does not last long. The lack of a common user-generated name that distinguishes personal from public affairs blogging, an absence that brings genre status into question (Miller 1984), may simply reflect the speed at which these situations have changed. It’s telling that Moulitsas has reportedly claimed that the word “blog” may have outlived its usefulness (Chaudry 2006: par. 12).

Many questions about the blog as genre remain, even as they are rapidly becoming historical questions. Did the public affairs blog develop *from* the personal blog, or does it have completely separate roots? Can we distinguish citizen-journalism, journalistic opinion, political campaign, and political-movement blogs as genres or sub-genres? Should we distinguish public affairs blogs that feature a strong central voice from those with multiple voices or authors? We do not intend to answer these questions here, and they may well be unanswerable in any objective, empirical sense. However, such questions about the evolution of blogs are interesting theoretically because they require us to understand the process of genre birth and differentiation, and the forces of recurrence and change, better than we do.

#### 4. Discerning genres on the internet

In using these two brief explorations of blogging genres to think generally about the phenomenon of genres on the internet, we wish to take up two issues that now seem central: the nature of recurrence and the relationship between genre and medium. We will address this latter issue first, because it can inform our thinking about the former, although our arguments in both cases will have to be preliminary, as both issues deserve extended historical and observational research. In

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15. In 2004, the listing of j-blogs on the Cyberjournalist site showed 116 published independently, 86 published on professional news sites, and 62 on journalists’ personal sites. The corresponding figures in 2007 were 96, 199, and 51 (Cyberjournalist 2007). Sullivan’s online biography chronicles his move to the *Atlantic* without commenting on the irony of it, given his earlier “manifesto” about the power of independent blogging (Sullivan 2007: [http://andrewsullivan.theatlantic.com/the\\_daily\\_dish/bio.html](http://andrewsullivan.theatlantic.com/the_daily_dish/bio.html)).

looking at blogging, we have emphasized the pace of change, which problematizes the phenomenon of recurrence, and we have also looked at some of the affordances, the technical capabilities of the medium that distinguish blogging from other genres, as well as making possible such rapid change. Blogs are generically distinct in part because they are “native” to the internet, and specifically to the web, which is to say that they could not exist as they do in another medium, such as print or even stand-alone digital form. They are inherently linked, public, and malleable. So the nature of the medium is bound up in the genre, and our question here is whether that is a rhetorical relationship.

What makes a genre “native” to one technology or medium rather than another depends in part upon what the medium allows for, or its affordances. “Affordance” is a concept originally developed by psychologist James Gibson to describe the interaction of an animal with the natural environment (1986), then applied by Donald Norman in his discussion of how humans interact with the designed environment (1989), and later taken up with some enthusiasm in the field of human–computer interaction. It is a useful way to think about the rhetorical potentialities and constraints specific to a medium of communication. One of Gibson’s early definitions is still suggestive: “The *affordances* of the environment are what it *offers* the animal, what it *provides* or *furnishes*, either for good or ill” (Gibson 1986: 127, emphasis original). For example, a given natural environment affords materials and locations for birds to build certain kinds of nests but not others. In the context of the internet, affordances take the form not of material properties or ecological niches but rather properties of information and interaction that can be put to particular cognitive and communicative uses. Links, instant distribution, indexing and searching, interactivity, and other features of the internet constitute affordances that differ from those of print media, and a specific configuration of affordances is what constitutes the blog as distinct from other internet media.<sup>16</sup> Gibson’s definition suggests further that there is a *suasory* aspect to affordances, in the same sense that “artifacts have politics” (Winner 1980). An affordance, or a suite of affordances, is *directional*, it *appeals* to us, by making some forms of communicative interaction possible or easy and others difficult or impossible, by leading us to engage in or to attempt certain kinds of rhetorical actions rather than others. The affordances of blog hosting sites led many people to believe that they really did want to create public online diaries, a conclusion that few might have reached in the absence of the technology.

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16. Some have suggested or implied that print media do not have affordances, or “functionality” (for example, Shepherd & Watters 1998), or that the medium is a factor in web genres but not (by implication) genres in other media (for example, Askehave & Nielsen 2005). We believe it’s more useful to compare media on the basis of their differing affordances.

The affordances of communication media have informed several relevant lines of thinking. Meyrowitz, for example, has characterized work by scholars such as Harold Innis, Marshall McLuhan, Walter Ong, and Katherine Hayles as “medium theory,” which describes the general cultural and psychological effects of orality, scribal literacy, print, and electronic media. Early observations about electronic media, for example, note that in contrast to print media, they reprise several qualities of oral cultures, including simultaneity of action and reaction, widespread access, an emphasis on feeling over analysis, and a weakening of centralized authority (Meyrowitz 1994: 57–58). Another line of thinking that has connected genre and medium through affordances draws from Vygotskian activity theory, which examines goal-directed activity as a process involving objects, instruments, actors/collaborators, divisions of labor, domain knowledge, and communities. In much of this work, genre is explicitly treated as an instrument or tool within the activity system and is identified primarily with the medium in which it is manifested—a piece of paper, an interface, even a writing implement (e.g., Russell 1997; Spinuzzi 2003).

None of this work, however, has explored the rhetorical relationship between medium and genre, that is, the way that the suasive aspects of affordances “fit” rhetorical form to recurrent exigence.<sup>17</sup> The migration and adaptation of established genres into the new internet medium, as well as the emergence of “native” genres, suggests that affordances are not determining but rather that they interact with exigence, as objectified social need. Sometimes a new suite of affordances fits an exigence in much the same way as an old medium did, and the genre then simply adjusts, meeting the same recurrent exigence in a somewhat new, possibly better way; the distribution of peer-reviewed research articles in PDF form is an example. But sometimes, as seems to have been the case with the blog, the new suite of affordances potentiates an exigence that had not yet been met, had not yet perhaps even crystallized. The medium, in this case, serves a maieutic function for the exigence, coaching—or coaxing—into being a latent social motivation that, when available, is instantly recognizable to large numbers of people. For the personal blog as we described it in our earlier study, that exigence was the postmodern destabilization of the self, the endless play of subjectivity in a time of mediated voyeurism, widely dispersed but relentless celebrity, and challenges to the boundaries between

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17. In her rationale for the adaptation of rhetorical criticism to the internet, Warnick argues that online texts can be examined with traditional rhetorical concepts but that the medium itself requires new critical methods to comprehend a variety of changes introduced by the new medium, but she does not consider genre (2007).

public and private (Miller & Shepherd 2004). This is not to say, necessarily, that the medium creates the exigence, or that the exigence develops in direct response to the medium, for in an important way the social needs develop also in interaction with a larger cultural moment, though they may be inchoate and unsatisfied. But it might be fair to say that the new genre arises from the combination of exigence and affordances, along with the modeling of forms and topoi offered by antecedent genres.

In the case of what we've called the public affairs blog, a different exigence arose in the wake of the events and influences we've described above: a frustration with corporate news media and political communication as usual against the background of political events, natural disasters, and international terrorism. As noted above, the affordances offered by blogs—interaction and connection, immediacy, instant access, low overhead—fit the exigence in rhetorically compelling ways, and because a great many people construed the exigence in about the same way at the same time, these blogs gained multiple adherents very rapidly. A dynamic interaction between medium and exigence much like that for the personal blog focused a diffuse set of social motivations in a distinctive way, even as the technology and the conventions continued to change, with multiple authorship, syndication, tagging, and advertising. Influence from antecedent genres, which we have not had time to examine here, probably came from traditional journalism and political uses of older media, including talk radio and tabloid journalism, as well as from older genres of vernacular political communication such as the eighteenth-century pamphlet and broadside and the nineteenth-century penny press.

*The* blog, it seems clear now, is a technology, a medium, a constellation of affordances—and not a genre. When blogging technology first became widely available through hosting sites, it was perceived to fit a particular exigence arising out of the late 1990s, even helping to crystallize that exigence, and the personal blog multiplied its way into cultural consciousness. The genre and the medium, the social action and its instrumentality, fit so well that they seemed coterminous, and it was thus easy to mistake the one for the other—as we did. As the cluster of affordances multiplied repeatedly, recurring again and again on the screen, reproducing and creating expectations, the blogging medium itself seemed to be the motivation for all that rhetorical action. And as the technology evolved, and as multiple users engaged in ceaseless experimentation and variation, the suite of affordances called blogging was discovered to fit other exigences in different ways, so other types of blogs proliferated, other genres—public affairs, corporate, tech support, team, etc.—and the coincidence between the genre and the medium dissolved. We suspect that something like this process may have happened with earlier media, such as the letter, the book, the memo, the radio broadcast, and email: when

they were new, the medium *was* the genre; but adoption and experimentation led to differentiation and the multiplication of genres anchored in the same medium.<sup>18</sup> In this process, what persists is not only the medium but also the recurring rhetorical forms that it enables, or even requires (such as, for blogging, reverse chronology, links, comments, present tense, brevity), as well as the audience expectancies that these forms promote (such as frequent updating, connection, authenticity).

The persistence of form over time and across changing situations and cultural conditions, which Kathleen Jamieson calls the “momentum of form,” brings us back to the question of recurrence, which is the focus of Jamieson’s early study of antecedent genre as rhetorical constraint. Her essay provides a useful counterpoint to our inquiry, based as it is on two institutions—the papacy and the presidency—that have endured for centuries and are quite the opposite of volatile (1975: 410). In Jamieson’s Darwinian approach to genres, influential or habitual or status-bearing forms represent the “chromosomal imprint of ancestral genres” (1975: 406) that resists change. Such imprints can produce genres that are not optimally adapted to current situations: the papal encyclical carries imprints of Roman imperial documents, even today, and the early state of the union addresses and congressional responses were strongly influenced by the relationship between the British monarch and the parliament, a model of governance that had in fact just been rejected by the new nation. The antecedent genres in both cases led to specific rhetorical performances that were, in Jamieson’s judgment, not ideally adapted to the contemporaneous situation. The persistent forms also produced genres that *realized* the exigences, and indeed the entire rhetorical situation, in ways that could have been otherwise, generating expectancies and conventions that reflexively helped define the institutions and the genres.

Such persistence of inappropriate form might be due either to oppressive institutional constraints or to the inadequate inventional powers of a rhetor. In either case, such recurrence can be attributed, paradoxically, to what we might think of as an excess of decorum, an over-deference to precedent or to authority. Kenneth Burke might call such deference a kind of “piety” toward form, a sense, however misplaced, of “what goes with what” (1965: 75). “Piety,” he says, “is a schema of orientation ... The orientation may be right or wrong; it can guide or misguide.” In his example, the flock of birds that rises with the flight of one that senses danger was right if the danger was real, but “If the danger was not real, the flock was wrong. In either case it had been pious” (1965: 76).

Schemas of orientation, or what Alfred Schutz called the types that constitute our social stock of knowledge, are built up over time from birth, through experience both

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18. For a suggestive description of this process with respect to the letter, see Bazerman (2000).



direct and indirect, and are strongly resistant to change (Schutz & Luckmann 1973). These typifications are sedimented and reified in language, socially reinforced, and put to use as interpretive and pragmatic resources. Through the process that Anthony Giddens has called “structuration,” such types serve as both resources for and outcomes of social action (1979); that is, we rely on them for mutual recognition and we produce and reproduce them as we engage in mutually comprehensible social action. The phenomenon of recurrence, then, relies on typification for its material, both psychological and sociological, and on structuration for its self-perpetuating process. But piety, as Burke discusses it, is the motivation, the engine of recurrence. It derives from “the yearning to conform with the ‘sources of one’s being’” (1965: 69). Our pieties are deeply psychological, “since in childhood we develop our first patterns of judgment, while the experiences of maturity are revisions and amplifications of these childhood patterns” (1965: 71). But pieties are also fundamentally sociological because they are also, as Burke says, proprieties, connected to the needs, interests, and moralizing of the flock.

Piety toward form may help explain recurrence on the internet, that is, our ability to find, or construct, stability within volatile or chaotic environments, to resist change even as it continually washes over us. The volume and volatility of information, fragmentation of attention, speed of dissemination, multiplicity of connection that characterize the internet are accompanied by the facile replication of form, sometimes imposed by a technology, sometimes habitual, sometimes deliberate. These features produce what some have called a “viral” circulation of discourse but also a kind of stability through the increased possibilities for recurrence. Our pieties would incline us to notice and cling to these possibilities.

Piety toward form is not sufficient, however, to explain the recurrence that underwrites genres, if we understand genre not centrally as form but as social action, as appropriate response to recurrent exigence, which is in turn a socially objectified—and thus a repeatable—motive. We must also have pieties toward exigences, yearnings for shared schemas of motivation. But if, as Burke also tells us, “motives are shorthand terms for situations” (1965: 29), then such pieties will necessarily summarize the typifications of situations already necessary for social action. Piety toward political frustration or toward the destabilization of the self is a kind of identification, a recognition of and sympathy for a shared situation, a validation of one’s own and others’ shared “yearnings”—for the rightness of the familiar and the familiarity of that which is right.

But if shared pieties become proprieties, then we are in the realm of decorum, which is the rhetorical representation of piety, the “fittingness” of form to action to exigence. In the Ciceronian tradition, as Michael Leff reminds us, decorum points in two directions (1990). It directs us outward toward the situation extrinsic to the rhetorical act, toward the accommodation of substance, form, and style to audience, tradition, material conditions. And it directs us inward toward the

intrinsic qualities of that act, toward the accommodation of substance, form, and style to each other. The former is a pragmatic criterion, the latter an aesthetic one.

As the crystallization (and sometimes, as Jamieson reminds us, the fossilization) of decorum, genre operates both extrinsically and intrinsically. Extrinsic accommodation is what recent genre studies have paid most attention to, the ways that the conventions of genre help typify a situation and serve as resources for invention, constraints on form, improvisational routines for addressing the situation. Intrinsic accommodation has received less attention, and we have thus seen genres largely in functional terms, without concern for the satisfactions—even the pleasures—they may provide through the merging of substance, form, and style into an aesthetic whole. The personal weblog, because it is almost invariably a voluntary activity, requires us to think about generic satisfaction and pleasure, unlike the professional and academic genres that have been frequently studied. But if we look, we may discover that these official genres can also provide their compensatory pleasures.

Together, the intrinsic and extrinsic dimensions of decorum comprise what Leff calls an “architectonic force, the point at which thought and action, form and content, and wisdom and eloquence coalesce” (1990: 112). Generic decorum thus comprises precisely the “internal dynamic” that Campbell and Jamieson describe as “binding together” a genre’s constellation of forms with its situation (1978: 21). Such a dynamic reflexively serves as a focus for our rhetorical pieties. And it explains the power of both types of blogs we have examined, personal and public, to replicate and proliferate, to create communities, to inspire widespread rhetorical passion. The way the blogging medium fits these recurrent (and evolving) rhetorical situations, producing a model of social action that is both functional and pleasing, is an achievement that can only be understood as aesthetic. That aesthetic power produces a situated decorum that helps stabilize the churning volatility of the internet—if only briefly—thus making genres possible.

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