

WEBLOGS AS A SUBGENRE OF POLITICAL COMMUNICATION / MARKETING

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Abstract: *The aim of this article is to describe the characteristics of weblogs (usually shortened to blog, but occasionally spelled web log), the latest genre of internet communication that has attained widespread popularity (Herring et al. 2005). I will focus my attention on those weblogs which contain any kind of political message during election campaigns. The paper situates blogs with respect to the dominant forms of digital communication and as a powerful tool for developing future election campaigns in light of their low cost and the speed with which news can be published. The generic variables will be studied in detail, taking into account Swales' general theory of genre (1990) and genre theories applied to electronic communication (Yates and Orlikowski, 1992). Register variables (Halliday, 1989; Martin, 2001) will also be thoroughly studied. The results of this study show the characteristics of weblogs with regards to vocabulary, syntactic structures and the use of pronouns among others. The findings are based on an investigation of 20 politically-oriented weblogs, randomly selected during the 2004 American and 2005 British elections.*

Key words: *Weblog, digital and political communication, genre, register.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Merriam-Webster, editor of dictionaries and reference texts, publishes each year a list of the ten most outstanding words. These are usually words which have been popular among people in the last twelve months. According to CNN, the top position in the 2004 list was given to *blog*. This word appears in the 2005 edition of the Merriam-Webster dictionary with the following meaning: "a Web site that contains an online personal journal with reflections, comments and often hyperlinks provided by the writer." The aim of this article is to describe the characteristics of weblogs (usually shortened to *blog*, but occasionally spelled *web log*), the latest genre of internet communication that has attained widespread

popularity (Herring et al. 2005). I will focus my attention on those weblogs which contain any kind of political message during election campaigns. The paper situates blogs with respect to the dominant forms of digital communication and as a powerful tool for developing future election campaigns in light of their low cost and the speed with which news can be published. The generic variables will be studied in detail, taking into account Swales' general theory of genre (1990) and genre theories applied to electronic communication (Yates and Orlikowski, 1992). Register variables (Halliday, 1989; Martin, 2001) will also be thoroughly studied.

1.1. Data collection and methodology

The findings are based on an investigation of 20 politically-oriented weblogs, ran-

domly selected during the 2004 American and 2005 British elections. I used the randomizing feature of the blog-tracking web site blo.gs. Of the blogs selected by the site during the data collection process, the vast majority were in English. To create a coherent corpus, I excluded blogs in other languages, those which were not politically oriented and those which did not contain visual elements. In order to establish the generic variables, I analysed the number of links, images, presence of a search feature and advertisements, the ability for readers to post comments to entries, and the presence of calendar and archives among others (Based on Herring et al., 2005). Register variables were analyzed qualitatively, taking into account vocabulary, technical vs. everyday and informal vs. formal language, and differences between spoken and written discourse (Eggins, 1994: 55ff).

2. POLITICAL CONTENT WEBLOGS: GENRE AND REGISTER

2.1. Genre

The terms genre and register are closely related to the concepts of cultural and situational context as introduced by Malinowski (1923). According to Malinowski, the communicative manifestations of a certain society can only be understood when there is a minimal knowledge of the culture and context in which they are produced. Therefore, genres are recognized as such in the community where they have been produced (Swales, 1990: 58). Swales' definition of genre (1990) is widely known:

A genre comprises a class of communicative events [...] which share some set of communicative purposes. These purposes are recognized 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.

According to these criteria, weblogs are good candidates for genre classification, as the word *weblog* and its variant *blog* are recognized by internet users and generally exhibit common structures and contents. In fact, Yates and Orlikowski (1992) define genre analysis as "an exercise in classification of 'typified acts of communication' based on their form and substance." Form and substance would be the equivalent to the schematic structure, content and style mentioned by Swales. According to these authors, recurrent electronic communication practices can meaningfully be characterised as genres having a socially defined and recognized communicative purpose with regard to their audience (Yates and Orlikowski, 1992). Their research draws on traditional models of genre from rhetoric, especially Miller's (1984) definition of a genre as "typified rhetorical action based in recurrent situation." However, it could be argued that "[genre] shows signs of becoming a general cultural buzzword, used in contexts increasingly remote from literary criticism, and applied to forms of writing and speech that have little or no relation to literary genres (Duff, 2000: 2)", as is the case of weblogs.

Orlikowski and Yates (1994; in Herring et al., 2005) further observe that genres exist, and are defined and modified, in rela-

tion to other genres in use within a shared domain. They introduce the term *genre repertoire*: “set of genres that community members use (and don’t use) to conduct their interaction.” Weblogs belong to a set of genres which is being used at an increasing rate by community members. These authors also maintain that:

In depth examination of a genre repertoire explores the nature and source of genres that are recognized and accepted by a community of practice as legitimate forms of working and interacting, and helps to explain why, how and if established norms and practices shift over time (Orlikowski and Yates, 1994 in Herring et al., 2005: 144).

2.2. Register

While genre is typically associated with context of culture, register is associated with the context of situation in which a certain communicative act takes place. Gregory and Carroll (1978) define register as an instance of language in action which can be described in terms of phonological, lexical and indexical markers (peculiar to a text) and common-core features (shared by texts). Martin (2001: 46) gives this definition: “register is a pattern of linguistic choices, and genre a pattern of register choices (i.e. a pattern of a pattern of texture).” According to Halliday (1985: 39), register can be defined as a configuration of meanings typically associated with a particular situational configuration of field, tenor and mode:

[...] field is concerned with systems of activity, including descriptions of the participants, processes, and circumstances these activities involve. [...] Tenor is concerned with social relations, as these are enacted through the dimensions of power and solidarity. [...] Mode

is concerned with semiotic distance, as this is affected by the various channels of communication through which we undertake activity (field) and simultaneously enact social relations (tenor) (Martin, 2001: 45).

As these three variables simultaneously influence each other, their distinction becomes artificial and the three will require combined study, as variation in one of them implies a change in the others.

Field is associated with the ideational function of language, so the differences between two texts in which the field is dissimilar will depend on the participants and processes involved. This is represented in the lexical content, as we can have everyday or technical words, full names versus acronyms and abbreviations, and abbreviated syntax versus standard syntax (Eggs, 1994: 74). The use of jargon and slang is significant:

Although they differ in so far as slang is used in spoken, colloquial, non technical environments, while jargon is typically found in written, formal and technical language, both are often used deliberately to include and exclude, and to either create or minimise interpersonal distance (Collins and Hollo, 2000: 191).

Tenor establishes the interpersonal relationship between the participants in a communicative act according to power and solidarity (Martin, 2001: 45). Three variables must be taken into account: power and contact relationships and affective involvement. The linguistic variations derived from these continua represent the distinction between formal and informal language (Eggs, 1994: 63-67; Moya, 2006, forthcoming).

Mode is the role language plays in a given interaction. This role can be seen as

involving two different continua: spatial/ interpersonal distance and experiential distance. At one end of the continuum in the spatial/interpersonal distance there would be visual and aural contact and the feedback would be immediate. At the other end, there is no visual or aural contact between writer and reader and thus no possibility of immediate feedback (Egins, 1994: 54; Moya, 2006, forthcoming).

3. ANALYSING THE CHARACTERISTICS OF GENRE AND REGISTER OF WEBLOGS

3.1. Weblogs: generic structure

Weblogs have traditionally been studied as a web genre, together with health sites (McMillan, 1999), presidential candidate sites (Foot and Scheider, 2002), political satire sites (Warnick, 1998) or personal home pages (Crowston and Williams, 2000). Other types of weblogs include friendblogs, topical, literary, travel, research, media, religious, collaborative, eclectic, educational, directory, business, advice and legal blogs among others (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blog>). According to Herring et al. (2005: 144), some of these web genres are reproduced from off-line genres which existed before the creation of the web. The question is whether weblogs are a reproduced or an emergent genre. They suggest that they are neither unique nor reproduced entirely from offline genres, but rather constitute a hybrid genre that draws from multiple sources. In fact, blog implementations run from individual diaries to arms of political campaigns, media programs and corporations, and may include technical advice columns, sports

chat, celebrity gossip, political commentary, or all of the above (Drezner and Farrell, 2004a).

As mentioned elsewhere, the aim of this paper is to analyze political content weblogs, especially those published during election campaigns, in which case they can be considered as a subgenre of political marketing. Political blogs are among the most common forms of blogs. Most of them are news driven, and as such political bloggers will link to articles from news websites, often adding their own comments as well. Other political blogs heavily feature original commentary with occasional hyperlinks to support the blogger's talking points. Many of these blogs comment on whatever interests the author, as befits the blogger's political leanings, personal knowledge base, and momentary interests (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Political_blog).

A *weblog* is both a web application used for entering, modifying and displaying periodic posts (normally in reverse chronological order) as well as the totality of content constituted by these posts, with minimal or no external editing (Drezner and Farrell, 2004a, b). This will become important in the case of election campaigns, especially in the USA. The posts often include hyperlinks to other sites, enabling commentators to draw upon the content of the entire World Wide Web (Drezner and Farrell, 2004b). Initially, weblog content was manually written on personal web pages, but soon after their appearance, weblogs began to be implemented from web-based software, and this is the norm today.

The format of weblogs varies, from simple bullet lists of hyperlinks, to article sum-

maries with user-provided comments and ratings. Individual weblog entries are almost always date and time-stamped, with the newest post heading the page, and reader comments often appearing below it. All blogs by definition link to other sources of information, including other blogs. The universe of blogs is conventionally referred to as the *blogosphere*. Because links are so important to weblogs, most blogs have a way of archiving older entries and generating a static address for individual entries; this static link is referred to as a *permalink*. The latest headlines, with hyperlinks and

summaries, are offered in weblogs in the RSS or Atom XML format, to be read with a feed reader. Visual and textual components are closely related, as organization of webpage textual elements center around the visual ones in order to make it reader-friendly. Not all such elements are compulsory. Daniel Drezner's blog, however, employs each of them, including comments from readers, which not all blogs accept. In the illustrations shown below, each of the aforementioned weblog aspects is represented.

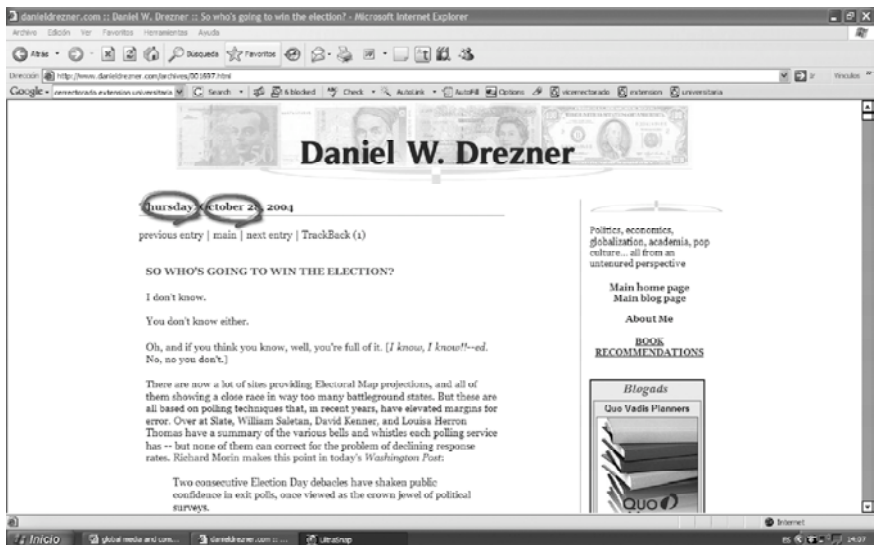


Illustration1. Daniel Drezner's blog.

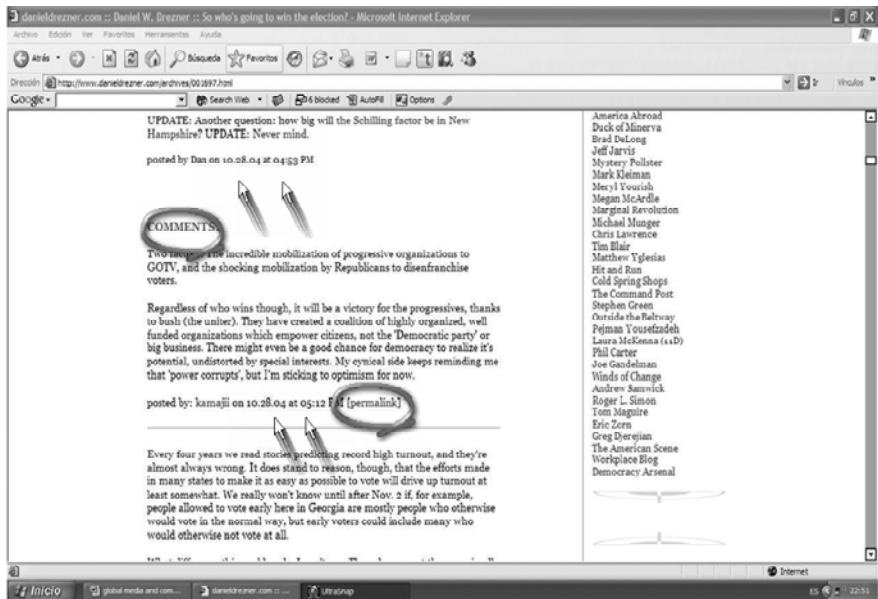


Illustration 2. Comment in Daniel Drezner’s blog.

The aspects mentioned in the previous paragraphs and represented in illustrations 1 and 2 are summarized in Table 1 where

the generic weblog structure regarding visual and textual component is shown.

Generic Structure		
Subgenre of political communication/ marketing: Weblogs.	Visual Component	Textual Component
	The typical visual items in a web page: banners, logos.	Time and date, normally at the top. Diary-like form.
	Typography, information value, framing.	Individual entries, with the newest post at the top of the page.
	Advertisements	Sometimes, article summaries on which bloggers base their comments.
	Images, generally from political acts or politicians.	Reader comments and ratings often, but not always, appearing below entries. Readers can be contacted in their e-mail addresses. Permalink.
	Colour contrasts, especially to mark hyperlinks.	Bullet list of hyperlinks.
		Recent entries.
		Blog archives.

Table 1. Generic weblog structure.

3.2. Weblogs: register variables

As stated above, the variety of weblogs is wide, ranging from individual diaries to arms of political campaigns or technical advice columns, sports chats or celebrity gossip. The generic structure will be basically the same in all of them. Register, however, will differ in some ways, especially in field and tenor.

Field in political weblogs is non-specialized and non-technical, even though it requires previous knowledge of the political activity occurring at the time. It is characterized by the use of standard syntax and clear language. The reason why people access weblogs looking for information on a certain campaign may be exactly that: clarity in language and facts. The topics dealt with may concern the election campaign or any other political issue of interest to citizens. The blogger normally uses every day words and colloquial expressions to explain sometimes rather complicated or complex issues, as example (1) suggests:

(1) SO WHO'S GOING TO WIN THE ELECTION?

I don't know. You don't know either. Oh, and if you think you know, well, you're full of it. (Daniel Drezner).

In this example, the blogger's aim is to introduce the topic of polling techniques and polling stations just a few days before the 2004 American election. He does so by introducing the topic with colloquial expressions, everyday vocabulary and a simple, standard syntax.

The rhetorical purpose of political weblogs is to share information with people about different aspects of political communication from an independent point of view,

which does not mean that the blogger is not ideologically biased.

To define tenor in political weblogs is not an easy task due to the inner nature of the genre. Tenor has been defined as what establishes the interpersonal relationships between the participants in a communicative act according to power and solidarity (Martin, 2001: 45). The sender of the message, the blogger, is clearly identified in the weblogs, since all the entries are signed. I would suggest that an unequal power relationship is established, since the blogger sends a piece of information –s/he may have had access to a piece of news or wants to comment on a particular topic– about which the receiver seeks to be informed. The unequal relationship may be downgraded when the weblog admits comments and so the reader can send his/her opinion about the topic under consideration. As for language use, although the blogger employs affective expressions, prototypical of the oral language, the relationship between s/he and his or her readers is not very close. In fact, as can be seen in (2), the language is informal, direct and colloquial. In addition, (3) is quite representative of the use of evaluative, critical and emotional expressions, such as *colossal*, *obviously*, *I doubt that*, *I believe*, etc. The relationship between the writer and reader, however, is not close due to the fact that each is entirely unfamiliar with the other and such contact is likely to be their first.

(2) I disagree with people who are saying Cronkite is nuts. I think he was joking. The point is, the bin Laden tape is so helpful to Bush that it is as if Bush partisans are behind it. posted at 10:46 AM by **Ann Althouse** (http://instapundit.com/archives/week_2004_10_24.php)

(3) IF BUSH LOSES, the press should expect a colossal backlash, as it's been very obviously in the tank for Kerry. As John Leo observes: *Isn't this journalistic malpractice?*

The open partisanship of big media organizations in trying to hurt Bush and help Kerry - a phenomenon that, as Leo notes, is not limited to CBS and RatherGate, but extends to places like *The New York Times* - is very troubling. The loss of credibility that results will come back to haunt the press in a lot of ways, no matter who wins. I doubt that, in retrospect, they'll think it was worth it, but I don't think it was ever calculated, exactly. I think they just can't help themselves. (http://instapundit.com/archives/week_2004_10_24.php)

The use of imperatives is also representative of this kind of weblog. Closely related to this is the use of the second person pronoun *you*:

(4) Keep this in mind when someone trumps a one or two point lead by their candidate. And check out Mark Blumenthal on the cell phone issue.

(5) UPDATE: Speaking of which, be sure to read this post by Tom Maguire on the unravelling "missing explosives" story. posted at 08:35 PM by **Glenn Reynolds** http://instapundit.com/archives/week_2004_10_24.php

(6) My advice to Americans: Vote for whoever you would have voted for anyway! posted at 09:55 PM by Ann Althouse. http://instapundit.com/archives/week_2004_10_24.php

Readers' opinions are directly called for as shown in the following example:

(7) (...) Readers are invited to suggest the biggest factor that is not showing up in the polling data but could decide the election -- as well as who you think will actually win (...) posted by Dan on 10.28.04 at 04:53 PM. <http://www.danieldrezner.com/archives/001697.html>

The use of first names, nicknames and diminutives is typical of an informal tenor, as well as swear words (example 11). This is the case for weblogs, where examples like (8) and (9) are typically found. Osama and OBL, of course, make reference to Osama Bin Laden. Example (10) refers to Blair's family after the election results were published.

(8) IT'S BAD NEWS EVERYWHERE for Osama. posted at 01:17 PM by Glenn Reynolds. http://instapundit.com/archives/week_2004_10_24.php.

(9) Isn't it just a bit curious that right when Prof. Reynolds leaves the country we get a new video tape of OBL? Seems to me that nobody has seen those two to in the same room before. Mighty suspicious if you ask me. Posted by: Rick Meyer at October 29, 2004 01:26 PM <http://www.michaeltotten.com/archives/000578.html>

(10) All say "Ah" - this is the first photograph of Tony, Cherie, Euan, Kathryn, Nicky and (not so little anymore) Leo since the 2001 election. By **Matthew Tempest / Labour** 04:48pm. <http://blogs.guardian.co.uk/election2005/>

(11) Bin Laden sounds like a f*ckin' politician running for the Senate. Posted by: Markus Rose at October 29, 2004 01:42 PM. <http://www.michaeltotten.com/archives/000578.html>.

The last part of the register section deals with mode. Mode has been defined as the role language is playing in an interaction. This role can be seen as involving the spatial/interpersonal and experiential distance continuum. Regarding spatial distance, there is no visual or aural contact; however, the feedback can be immediate, in the form of a comment on the same weblog or in any other media. There are characteristics of

spoken and written texts to be found. On the one hand, there is a single participant at the time of speaking, but simultaneously there might be somebody accessing the webpage, in which case it can become interactive, with a nearly immediate feedback in the form of a comment. Weblogs are typically linked to each other, which is another source of quick feedback. The language tends to be casual, informal and everyday and may appear to be spontaneous, even when planning exists in its global structure. However, weblogs are clearly closer to spoken discourse than written text, with the exception of the paragraphs they take from other sources. The syntactic structures are also simple and similar to those of spoken language. There is a predominance of simple and short sentences in most of the blogs analysed. Coordinators such as *and* or *but* are typically used as shown in example (12).

(12) There are now a lot of sites providing Electoral Map projections, and all of them showing a close race in way too many battleground states. But these are all based on polling techniques that, in recent years, have elevated margins for error. Over at Slate, William Saletan, David Kenner, and Louisa

Herron Thomas have a summary of the various bells and whistles each polling service has -- but none of them can correct for the problem of declining response rates. Richard Morin makes this point in today's *Washington Post*: posted by Dan on 10.28.04 at 04:53 PM.

Reported speech together with reported thought are also recurrent features of weblogs:

(13) My wife asked if it would be okay with me if she put up a John Kerry For President sign in front of our house. Of course, I said. Why should I have a problem with that? She lives here and she's voting for Kerry. I told her we ought to put up two yard signs, one for Bush and one for Kerry. It would have been the only way to reflect *my* position on the presidential race, let alone hers. (This was when I was still undecided.) It's still kinda sorta true even now that I've settled on Bush. I plan to vote a split ticket this year. The Republicans get my White House vote and the Democrats get the rest. (http://www.michaeltotten.com/archives/2004_10.html)

The following is an example of hesitation, typical of spoken discourse:

(11) I do have one question that may seem, um, out there. Posted by Geof Earthsea at October 31, 2004 07:35 p.m. <http://www.michaeltotten.com/archives/000578.html>

Register		
Variables		Linguistic implications
Field	Non-technical and non-specialized: RHETORICAL PURPOSE: Share information with people about different aspects of political communication from an independent point of view.	Vocabulary: • related to political communication and election campaigns. • Colloquial/technical.
Tenor	Bloggers who share their experiences with other people on the Internet.	Informal, direct and colloquial language. Evaluative, emotional and critical expressions. Ideological load. Use of imperatives. Readers' opinions are directly called for.
Mode	Written/Visual	Standard syntax. Predominance of coordinators.

| Table 2. Variables and linguistics implications of register

4. CONCLUSION

One of the primary aims of this article has been to situate blogs in respect to the dominant forms of digital communication and demonstrate how they may become a powerful tool for developing future election campaigns. The genre and register variables have been established and some examples have been given to illustrate the different points dealt with. Table 2 regarding genre are normally time- and date- stamped and contain individual entries with the newest post at the top of the page. Occasionally there are article summaries on which bloggers base their comments. In some blogs, readers can send their comments which will likely appear below entries. In response to submissions, readers can be contacted via their e-mail addresses. There are also bullet lists of hyperlinks and archives. Regarding register, field is non technical and non-specialized. The rhetorical intent is to share information with people about various aspects of political communication from an independent point of view. The vocabulary, while related to political communication and political campaigns, is colloquial and non-technical. Tenor refers to bloggers who share their experiences with other people on the Internet. The language is informal and direct, with evaluative, emo-

tional and critical expressions. The use of imperatives and the demand of readers' opinion are also linguistic implications of tenor. In relation to mode, standard syntax and the predominance of coordinators are the most distinctive variables.

According to Drezner and Farrell (2004a), as blogs become a more established feature on the political landscape, politicians and other interested parties will become more adept at responding to them, and, where they believe it necessary, co-opting them. As blogs become more politically influential, we may expect them to become more directly integrated into *politics as usual*, losing some of their flavor of novelty and immediacy in the process. Political leaders have their own weblogs, as well as the main newspapers. This paper has aimed to help establish weblogs as a genre of digital communication and to define weblogs' genre and register variables. As this is a relatively new phenomenon, however, further research is needed. It would be interesting to investigate, for instance, those similarities and differences that exist between non-official weblogs and those hosted by political parties. Since the differences in terms of language and content appear to be obvious despite the fact that the generic structure is basically the same, this is one area that will require detailed investigation.

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