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A Multimodal Analysis of an American Personal blog*

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**Come citare / How to cite**

RIZZO, R. (2018). Mediating the Voice of Social blogging: A Multimodal Analysis of an American Personal blog. *Culture e Studi del Sociale*, 3(2), 141-150.

Disponibile / Retrieved from <http://www.cussoc.it/index.php/journal/issue/archive>

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**Articolo pubblicato online / Article first published online:** December 2018



- Peer Reviewed Journal

INDEXED IN  
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# *Mediating the Voice of Social blogging: A Multimodal Analysis of an American Personal blog*

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## **Abstract**

Social blogs and social blogging are terms used to describe second-generation Internet publishing tools that blend features of both traditional blogging and social networking. The lines between blogging and social media continue to blur, making blogging more social, according to blog search engine *Technorati*'s report on why people blog. The weblog phenomenon raises a number of rhetorical issues, and one of the more intriguing of these is the peculiar intersection of the public and private that weblogs seem to determine. The confessional nature of blogs has redrawn the line between the private and the public dimensions of our lives and blogs can be both public and intensely personal in possibly contradictory ways. They are addressed to everyone and at the same time to no one and they seem to serve no immediate practical purpose, yet increasing numbers of both writers and readers are devoting increasing amounts of time to them. With an overview of the different definitions of the blogs, this study takes the reader through a journey of understanding the importance of blogs, how they work, who are the voices and who reads them. The study concludes with a brief note on some of the ethical considerations of using blogs as sites for actions and as a form of emotional and informational release for a growing proportion of the population.

**Keywords:** Blog, Multimodality, Social media.

## **1. Blogs: An Introduction**

A great number of definitions have been given to the blog. It is a discussion or informational site published on the World Wide Web and consisting of "posts" typically displayed in reverse chronological order (Bortree, 2005; Herring, Scheidt *et al.*, 2005; Buckingham and Willet, 2006; Jerz, 2003; Turkle, 1997). It is a web-based system of communication (Burke, 1965; Clark, 2002; Sindoni, 2011) which contains periodic, reverse chronologically ordered posts on a common webpage (Kelleher and Miller, 2006; Schmidt, 2007): such a web site would typically be accessible to any Internet user. It is a hierarchy of text, images, media objects and data, arranged chronologically, that can be viewed in an HTML browser (Calvert, 2000; Embrey, 2002). It is a journal that is frequently updated and intended for general public consumption (Frazer, 2000). It is a meandering, blatantly uninteresting online diary that gives the author the illusion that people are interested in their stupid, pathetic life (Gyford, 2003, 2004; Mortensen and Walker, 2002; Steinitz, 1997).

Beside these dictionary definitions, there are also a great number of scientific studies referred to the generic aspects of the blog (Safire, 2002; St. John, 2003). The early days of this genre appear to harken back to 1996 as a format and to 1997 as "weblog" (Miller and Shepherd, 2005: 3), a term coined by John Barger, editor of the Robot Wisdom blog (Blood, 2000): since those early days the phenomenon has been developing in twenty years infact today we count millions of

blogs and hundreds of them flourish in the web daily. The development of free-blogging software (*Blogger*, *Wordpress* are the most widely used) made it possible for virtually everybody to have a blog (Rodzvilla, 2002; Turnbull, 2002): blogs can be looked at as alternative sources of news and public opinion, as environments for knowledge sharing (in education), as vehicles for self-expression and self-empowerment (for individuals), as tools for personal development (the blogger becomes more thoughtful and more articulate about the surrounding world). Schmidt (2007) lists various types of blogs such as political blogs, corporate blogs, expert blogs and personal knowledge blogs. There are also educational blogs, creative writing blogs, journalism blogs, medical blogs, drug blogs, travel blogs and some others. In fact, any subject which creates interest among a group of people has the potential to be a blog. Although, other blogs are defined by their content such as *WarBlogs*, *LibBlogs* (Qian and Scott, 2007), most of them tend to be personal journals by single authors (Qian and Scott, 2007; Schmidt, 2007; Stark, 2003; Vivian, 2000). Rebecca Blood (2000) highlights that there are a lot of weblogs such as topic-oriented weblogs, short-form journals, free-style blogs that empower people on different levels. According to Blood, blogs were born to share information about the same interest: they were a mixture of links, personal thoughts, essays and images and later, they became a short-form of diary who recorded the blogger's thoughts updated daily. In 1999, she states only twenty-three blogs were known to exist (Blood, 2000); in 2006 *Technorati* counted thirty million bloggers on the internet, a number that increased to ninety million the following year (Pedersen and Macafee, 2007) and it estimates there is a doubling of blogs every six months (Macdonald and Ounis, 2006); Flynn (2006) highlights that a new blog is opened every second. The proliferation of blogs is related firstly to the accessibility of the internet that gives an opportunity for people to record and broadcast their personal thoughts and opinions (Wang, Fix et al, 2005; Woodard, Emory, 2000); secondly the availability of social software assists bloggers of almost any skill level to create blog (Zucchermaglio and Talamo, 2003).

A well-known researcher of the genres of the Internet communication is Susan Herring (2004) who offers a very pertinent genre analysis of the weblog. This study is based on an analysis of a random sample of 203 blogs collected from March through May of 2003 using the randomizing feature of the blog-tracking website *blo.gs*. In the Introduction, the author explains that their analysis "suggests that the blog is neither fundamentally new nor unique, but that it - along with other emergent genres driven by interactive web technologies - occupies a new position in the Internet genre ecology.

Blogs allow authors to interact socially while maintaining their control on what and how they want to communicate (Nussbaum, 2004; Powazek, 2002). The extraordinary opportunity they offer ordinary people to express themselves, the vast range of purposes they may serve, the easily accessible software, their interactive aspect make them a very compelling tool which predicts their growing popularity among the Internet users. Moreover, due to the flexible hybrid format, the weblog can give birth to a wide range of genres to meet the communicative needs and purposes of their users. Blogs have common features: they are updated frequently and usually daily; they can be formal or informal; they can be grouped by date with links to archives of older posts; they are informative and/or inspiring, frequently linked to other sites that inspired the blog and addictive for those who blog. One more feature can be added: this genre can be used for communicating anything and, as social blogging tools, tend to favour text posts that are longer than tweets yet

shorter than the typical professional blog post. The social function studied by Miller and Shepherd (2005) who notice that the generic features of blogs lie less in the need for information than they do in the need of establishing relations between selves highlights that “we must characterize the generic exigency of the blog as some widely shared, recurrent need for cultivation and validation of the self; furthermore, in these particular times, we must locate that need at the intersection of the private and public realms, where questions about identity are most troubled.”

A later study of the weblogs (Herring and Paolillo, 2006) reveals the fact that, although some variation may have occurred as, for example, a tendency to use longer text-writing and less images, and also with regard to the age, gender, occupation of the authors, this genre proves to have become a stable one, another feature is added: the response of the bloggers to exterior events, without turning themselves into ‘citizen journalists’ (as some research claims). Gender studies reveal the fact that although women and young people such as teenagers are key actors in the history and present use of blogs, and that although the journal-type of blog is the most frequent, little regard is shown to them, both by the press and by research in the field.

The genre of the weblog and the terminology related to it still determine debates, both within user’s accounts or explanations of the genre and their actual practices of this newer discourse type (Miller, 1984). Laurie McNeill (2005, p.2) analyses the webtexts and the ways in which both writers and readers of such text “build on and diverge from print culture practices in establishing expectations and ‘rules’ for weblogs”. Web diaries appeared in 1995 as a form of personal home pages, two years later the weblogs made its appearance as annotated links to other webpages without comments or personal narratives and free software allowed many to create their blogs. The number of blogs increased over the last decades but with new writers into the blogging communities allowed users to change this genre and the latest generation of users stir personal stories with critical commentary about the Web and its content (McNeill, 2005, p. 3).

There have been voices against overlapping blogs and diaries arguing that the two are different genres with different practices and different audiences. A feature that distinguishes the classic written genre of the diary and the new online genre of the web-diary consists in the structural nature of the two: the written dairy is monologic and the web-diary is dialogic. The diary is a private text which has not rules to comply with while the web-diary entries engage actual conversations between writers and their audience whose participation in the real practices of the genre goes as far as cooperating with the authors in the settling of the rules and the standards of the genre. Researches on blogging practices analyze blog format and a study made by Schmidt (2007) highlights that blogging is framed by three structural elements: rules (adequacy rules and procedural rules), relations, and code. The adequacy and procedural rules focus more on the blogger and less on the blog revealing the social and power relations established in the blogosphere: it looks at the blogger as a reader, writer who has to deal with such aspects of blogging as information management, identity management and relationship management that is it looks at the blogger as socially involved in the computer-mediated-communication (CMC). Kumar, Novak, Raghavan and Tomkins (2004) studied a million and more bloggers in an endeavor to profile the blogosphere and they found that almost 80% of bloggers were aged 16-24 years who tended to focus on topics within their age groups: Tab. 1 shows the group of interests found in US blogs.

Tab. 1 - Group of interest found in US blogs

AGE	%	BLOG TYPES	THEMES
1-3	0.5	Diary	Mommy, Daddy, Nappies, Catnip, Purring, Playing, Mice
13-15	3.5	Diary, Interests (Celebrities)	Jeremy Sumper, Emma Watson, TV, Web designing, Mall
16-18	25.2	Diary, Interests (TV shows)	Dream Street, High School, Talking on the Phone, Brave New Girl, Drama Club
19-21	32.8	Diary, Interests	Dorm, College Life, My Tattoo, Pre-med
22-24	18.7	Interests (Entertainment), Diary	Dumbeldore's army, Long Island iced tea, Bar hopping, Fraternity, He-Man
25-27	8.4	Interests (Various), Diary, Consumers' Critique	Catherine Wheel, Dive Bars, Grad School, Good Beer
28-30	4.4	Interests (Various), Diary	Hal Hartley, Geocaching, Motherhood, SQL
31-33	2.4	Diary (Family), Interests, Consumers' Critique	My Kids, Parenting, Doctor Who, Geocaching, Good Eat, Herbalism
34-36	1.5	Diary (Family), Interests	Parenting, Role-playing games, Bicycling, Shamanism, Thelema, Tivo
37-45	1.6	Interests	Pagan, Gardening, Star Trek, Hogwarts, Machintosh, Zen, Tarot
46-57	0.5	Interests, Consumers' Critique	Science Fiction, Travel, Cooking, History, Poetry, Reading, Walking, Hiking, Wine
>57	0.2	Interests	Death, Cheese, Photography, Cats, Poetry

The relations established within the blogging activity are hypertextual through a mechanism as “permalinks”, a fixed URL for each single blog entry, and track-backs sent back from the cited post to the original post, and the use of comments and aggregating links; the code, referring to the blogging software, consists of blog services easy to use with limited control of the blogger, blog script packages that offer the blogger more freedom (Wordpress). These three features of the blogging practices are complementary, they shape expectations for particular communicative purposes, they lead to the development of communities of blogging practices and the success, or not, of the blog depends on how their writers have appropriated the knowledge and management of them.

Why bloggers blog? Motivation for blogging remain stable over time, as blogging satisfies basic human needs such as need for self expression, need for recognition, need for social contact, need for introspection, academic needs for knowledge and interests, need for documentation and need for artistic activity. Self expression is a strong human need which leads individuals to share their opinions, thoughts, experiences and views with others. This need for expression is part of an individual's “need to publish” (Graham, 2002), it is a recurring theme and encompasses various topics for self-expression such as letting the others know about you (Turgeon, 2004), expressing felt emotions (Nardi, Schiano *et al.*, 2004). So, it becomes a means of catharsis and a type of communication permitting people to express their feelings with the hope that someone will listen to them or understand their problem. Blogs became a means to explore issues the writers felt obsessive or passionate about. Blogs were the place to shout or express themselves by writing to an audience sometimes strangers, sometimes friends and/or colleagues, family members (Nardi, Schiano *et al.*, 2004: 44). An example of this type of blogs are blogs by people who are suffering an illness or who have significant member of their family suffering and illness, as well as telling the story of a traumatic experience. Talking about the painful issue, blog becomes an important channel of support and mutual condolence.

## 2. A semiotic framework for an American blog analysis

The blog chosen for this study shows how the author, Kristen McRedmond, used the blog as an exposure of the painful issue sharing their feelings in a particular moment of her life. Through her blog (<https://krisreeneenc.wordpress.com>) and Facebook, as well as a guest speaker to medical organizations across the country, the American young lady, a New York City teacher, never stopped educating others about the disease.

In 2012, Kristen McRedmond was diagnosed with Stage IV colorectal cancer and was initially told she had a few months to live: she, who ended up living for five more years, died on February 22, 2017 in New York at the age of 38. By the time she received her real diagnosis in Italy, McRedmond's cancer had metastasized: she left Italy two days later to seek treatment in New York where she could also be close to her family in Yonkers. The news didn't stop the "warrior woman", her nickname, from setting out to make the best care plan she could over the next five years of her life. She met three different surgeons before her initial surgery; she researched and took part in clinical trials and cutting edge technologies around genomic testing and attended acupuncture twice a week. She also continued teaching and she planned her chemo appointments on Fridays, so that she could recover over the weekend and not miss time with her pre-K students. She went for radiation treatment early in the morning or after the school ended: for the first two years at her school, the elite Chelsea private school, only McRedmond's supervisor knew about her illness because she didn't want to be known as the teacher with the cancer.

McRedmond documented her experiences over the next five years, 2013-2017, on social media: social media wasn't just a way to distract herself from cancer treatment but it may have saved her life (Newburger, 2001; Nunberg, 2001). She shared everything from specific gene mutations in her body to her joy in still having the ability to strike a yoga headstand on her paddleboard in summer.

The data offered by this blog is not easy to investigate as it may contain rich phrasing, it is lengthy but it provides an insider view of what the author feels and thinks about the situation. In other words, this blog is a self-made, improvised collection of personal pieces of writing, it makes the posts more similar to personal and "home-made" blogs and more similar to a diary in which the author tried to help people understand this disease and give a gift: she made it easy to relate to her.

The framework proposed here uses Halliday's three metafunctions to the analysis of interactive sites/signs and the interactive meaning of their configuration in a text (Halliday, 1978). According to Halliday, language is used to perform three different functions: to say something about the world, an ideational function; to say something about those involved in the communicative event, an interpersonal function; to say something about the text, a textual function. Kress and van Leeuwen, in their "grammar of visual design" (1996) have adapted Halliday's framework to the analysis of multimodal texts and the three functions as Representational, Interactive and Compositional. In his framework for the analysis of hypermodality, Lemke (2002) uses the labels Presentational, Orientational and Organizational while Zammit (2007) uses Kress and van Leeuwen's naming, adding a fourth Logical function. An analysis of various combinations of the three metafunctions, mapped onto the two-dimensional functioning and the two-fold nature of interactive sites/signs, can provide insights into the social semiotics of the interactivity of a text. The ideational function of an interactive site/sign corresponds to what the interactive site/sign is and does, for example what it represents and performs in the world; the interpersonal function corresponds to the relations/identities projected

by the site/sign about the author and the user of the text; the textual function corresponds to how the other two are presented within the text, for example to the shaping of the ideational and interpersonal meanings produced by the textual configuration of interactive sites/signs.

In the light of the two dimensions along which interactive sites/signs function in their meaning-making, the three metafunctions need to be mapped out distinctively, but connectedly, for the syntagmatic and the paradigmatic plane. On the syntagmatic plane, the ideational meaning of an interactive site/sign corresponds to what the sign is and means in terms of its signifier and signified; on the paradigmatic plane, it corresponds to what action activates it and what effect it produces. The interpersonal meaning deals syntagmatically with whether the sign addresses directly or indirectly the user and in which terms (whether by offering or demanding etc.), and which kinds of expectations it raises, while paradigmatically it deals with who is at play towards whom and with which directionality (e.g. is the user forwarding the author's text to others? Is the user in putting his/her own content to the author's text? Is the author's text directing to some third parties' text?). The textual metafunction would map, syntagmatically, the positioning of the interactive site/sign within the page thus accounting for the informational value and salience of its ideational and interpersonal meanings and their relation with the other elements in the text, while, paradigmatically, it would map the site/sign ideational and interpersonal meanings in a before-after perspective, i.e., the meaning made through the relation between the text where the site/sign appears - as the Given - and the text as changed after the site/sign is activated - as the New.

### 3. A multimodal analysis of blog's homepage

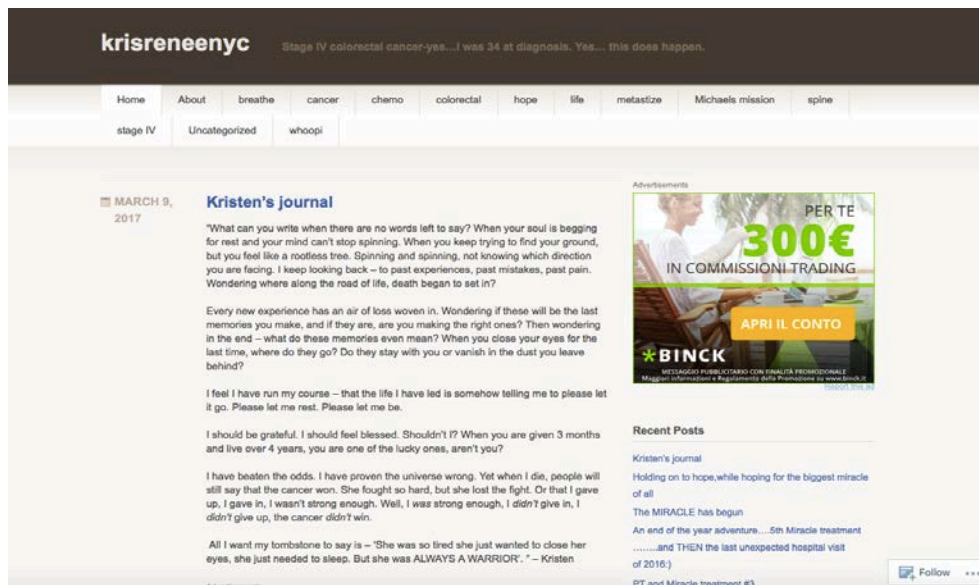
To exemplify the analytical potentials of the framework mentioned before, it is here applied to the homepage of krisreeneenc blog (<https://krisreeneenc.wordpress.com>). The discussion here focuses on the description of the interactive meanings integrated through the use of the multimodal tools of analysis of a webpage as outlined in Kress & van Leeuwen (1996) especially for the syntagmatic plane, as well as those in Lemke (2002) and Zammit (2007), for the paradigmatic plane.

The post below is taken from the Home's section and it was written by the author and published after her death, on March 9, 2017.

Figure 1 shows the top portion of the home page of Kristen's blog published via Wordpress ([www.wordpress.com](http://www.wordpress.com)) as it appears on a 14'' screen, with medium viewing size selected within the browser setting. The top header, above the horizontal bar, presents three interactive sites/signs, one placed at the top left and two at the top right. Syntagmatically, the top left one, a written "Krisreeneenc" is the title and the header of the blog; paradigmatically, through a click, it redirects to the homepage of the blog. The top right section presents syntagmatically two round shapes containing symbols identifying two different online networks, RSS and Twitter: the social networks's logo is represented only through their symbols, while colours comply with the (red and blue) symbols colour palette used in the blog. Paradigmatically, by clicking the RSS symbol, the user can search the web feed to access updates to online content in a standardized, computer-readable format; by clicking the last icon the users can access the blogger's profile pages on Twitter.



Fig. 1 - Home page of Kristen's blog



Just below the header, a menu bar, with a whitish background, appears presenting fourteen interactive sites/signs represented by fourteen words separated by a vertical line, indicative of the headlines of fourteen different pages of the blog. Paradigmatically, a click on the first redirects to the home page of the blog while a click on each of the words in the bar redirects to the related page of the blog. The central section is a static “banner” and presents a verbal text from right to left, from the top to down: paradigmatically it is the body text. At the extreme right ends, below the banner, an interactive site/sign framed in a square and preceded by the writing “Advertisement” links to an advertised page. Below that, a list of Recent Posts, Categories and Archives appears, with the same interactive pattern: typed title and body text syntagmatically and click to redirect to the blog post paradigmatically preceded by a non-interactive square with the date of posting.

Syntagmatically, the two icons on the top right header of the page signal the reader that the blog is connected with recent networking options. Some missing features of the page, such as the various colour palette, the modular layout, for example contribute to shape identity values of the blog (and blogger) that is not professional. These values might be reinforced by the preference given to verbal language over symbols as signifiers of sites/signs. As for the paradigmatic plane, although presenting the full range of actional possibilities (click, type+click, and hover), with the sole exception of the advertisement, all interactive sites/signs on the page (not only the portion visible on the screen) enable the user only to access further text; even more, all hyperlinks redirect to further text within the blog itself or directly related to it (its profile page on the social networking sites), while only the advertisement gives access to a third party website which is not related directly to the blogger. Interpersonally this shapes a very clear directionality, centered towards the blogger, with a high degree of recursiveness, and a significant self-referencing on the part of the blogger. The blog configures itself as quite closed to the outside web; although it is open to other social network platforms, all pages linked to there refer to the blog or blogger’s persona.

Syntagmatically, the top right position of the two icons in the top header is New in respect to the blog's name. Together with it, they appear at the very top, as 'header', as part of the 'masthead' of the website, i.e., the ideal presentation of the

blog/blogger (as very well connected through all networking options). The core information, which is updated, i.e., the 'contents' of the blog, comes below. The banner appears in a very salient position, at eye's level but is not further made salient by its dynamism and colour palette and textually, the banner confers a salient position to the value of dynamic interactivity within the page.

## Conclusions

Links, buttons, icons and fields in digital texts are not only signs on a page to be interpreted, but also sites for action and as such they require an apt description. The framework outlined here provides the main tools to describe, interpret and explain the meanings of interactive sites/signs and the structure of websites. It is intended to be used together with other multimodal analysis tools to complement the text analysis of blogs. Far from being complete and detailed, it requires testing and refining. Each metafunction requires the identification of sub-categories and analytical tools both for the syntagmatic and the paradigmatic level. These, as well as their naming, require testing onto different types of digital texts. The whole framework needs to be tested when applied in combination with the multimodal analysis of all sign-complexes of a text. This could not be done within the limits of a single study. It is hoped nevertheless that the extant stage of development of the framework as presented here might serve to provide insights into the nature and meaning-potential of interactive sites/signs and to suggest further attention to the phenomenon within studies in multimodality and text analysis.

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