How Conversational Are Weblogs?

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Abstract

Popular and scholarly accounts describe weblogs as conversations. But how conversational are weblogs? The communication theory and model proposed by Jakobson offers one way to unpack this question. Weblogs are embodied in ambiguous relations of addresser and addressee. These ambiguous relations make it possible for weblog readers and writers to adopt a conversational mode of address even when they are not in conversation with each other. However, weblogs and conversations clearly differ in their forms of contact and in how participants use that contact to constitute a context for meaningful and effective reference. Furthermore, while weblogs deploy some of the performative conventions of conversation and non-standardized writing, the use of such conventions does not make them conversations. To conceptualize weblogs as conversations mistakes and obscures the distinctive message and code relations of both weblogs and conversations.

Introduction

Weblogs are heralded as a new medium of communication, as a site where real conversations are taking place in communities, and as a revolutionary new force reshaping journalism, commerce, and public discourse. Self-proclaimed "blog evangelists" Scoble and Israel (2006) trumpet blogging as "naked conversations" and "storytelling and conversation on steroids" (p. 232). They take up and amplify the earlier *Cluetrain Manifesto* view (Levine, Locke, Searls, & Weinberger, 2000) that "markets are conversations" and that the Internet enables "conversations among human beings that were simply not possible in the era of mass media." Weil (2006) instructs corporate executives to "blog or be blogged. Either you join the conversation in the blogosphere or you're deaf to it" (p. 22). These authors, along with a raft of recent websites and how-to books, mark what Lovink (2008) calls a surging "blog hype" in contemporary popular culture.

The nomination of weblogs as conversational is not limited to popular culture. Webloggers themselves often describe their activity as a "sort of conversation" (see Herring et al., 2005; Langellier & Peterson, 2004). The Technorati (2008) annual report on the "State of the Blogosphere" uses similar terms when defining the blogosphere as "the ecosystem of interconnected communities of bloggers and readers at the convergence of journalism and conversation" (n.p.). Similarly, academic researchers, such as Efimova and de Moor (2005), approach weblog interaction as conversation. Even authors with more critical views on this new form of communication have conceptualized weblogs as a digital extension of informal conversation and oral traditions. For example, Lovink (2008) writes that "through blogging, news is being transformed from a lecture into a conversation. Blogs echo rumor and gossip, conversations in cafes and bars, on squares and in corridors" (p. 10). In this way, research on weblogs participates in what Peters (2006) calls "the age of conversation." As he points out, conversation is taken to be "one of the unquestioned goods of the moment and a normative ideal of how the media are expected to work in a democracy" (p. 115). Thus communication in weblogs is generally, and unproblematically, understood as conversation.

In order to position weblogs as conversations, scholars often contrast them with other communication practices such as writing diaries, reading newspapers and magazines, and watching television. The contrast between these practices is heightened to emphasize weblogs as distinct and different: more social and public than solitary diary writing, more interactional and dialogic than mass media practices of reading newspapers and watching television. For example, Rettberg (2008) claims that "blogs are part of a fundamental shift in how we communicate" (p. 31). As part of the support for this claim, she contrasts weblogs with diaries: "Blogs are a social genre. Bloggers don't simply write to their 'Dear Diary', they write into the world with a clear expectation of having readers" (p. 57). However, this kind of generalized contrast is misleading insofar as it ignores the fact that diaries have been part of social interaction, as public and published documents, for over 400 years in England and the United States (Steinitz, 1997).

Both weblog and diary writers share an expectation that they are writing for an audience. Thus, weblogs cannot be distinguished from diaries on this basis. If the contrast between weblogs and diaries does not hold, then how valid is the complementary equation of communication in weblogs with conversations?

Rather than begin by asserting the unique identity of weblogs as a cultural object or weblogging as a singular communication practice, I approach the task of analysis in the interrogative mode. I ask "how conversational are weblogs?" as a way to leave open the possibility of variable and combinatory answers (weblogs are somewhat and in some ways conversational) rather than a choice between digital alternatives as prescribed by classical logics of identity (a weblog is or is not a conversation). What is needed here, as Herring (2007) points out, is an analysis scheme that is sensitive to variability in the constitutive factors of communication that takes place across a wide range of contexts and involves changing numbers and kinds of participants. Jakobson's theory of human communication provides just such a rigorous and comprehensive framework for investigating communication in weblogs.

Roman Jakobson on Communication

Jakobson was a pivotal figure in the development of communication theory during the 20th century. He brought together, as Lanigan (2000, 2007) notes, contemporary research in phenomenology (see Holenstein, 1974), semiotics (especially Ferdinand de Saussure and C. S. Peirce), and linguistics with a classic concern for the study of communication as "an integrated practice of thought, speech, and inscription, i.e., logic, rhetoric, and grammar" (Lanigan, 2000, p. 93). Jakobson (1960) focuses on the "constitutive factors in any speech event, in any act of verbal communication" (p. 353). His work is particularly appropriate for understanding computer-mediated discourse in which "participants can speak, text chat, and manipulate a common interface (such as a whiteboard) at the same time" (Herring, 2007, p. 14).

Jakobson begins with the traditional model of language and its three constitutive factors or elements of communication: "the first person of the addresser, the second person of the addressee, and the 'third person,' properly—someone or something spoken of" (p. 355). These three elements or factors correspond respectively to emotive, conative, and referential functions of communication. Jakobson develops this traditional model by drawing on phenomenology and semiotics to emphasize the importance of communication as the embodied conduct of speaking subjects—both addressee and addresser—to distinguish his theory of communication from

theories of information and signal processing concerned with sources and destinations (Jakobson, 1971, p. 575). Any study of communication must take into account the position of the observer (addresser and/or addressee functions) in relation to the content of communication (referential function). Any two functions are reversible (addressers can become addressees, and addressees can become addressers), reflexive (the addresser can become the reference, and the reference can function as the addresser), and complementary in the sense that each function is distinct and cannot be reduced to the other (addressers and addressees do different work to accomplish reference, for example). As complementary, addresser and addressee are "noninterchangeable" (Anton, 2010).

To these first three constitutive factors Jakobson adds three more: contact, message, and code. He notes that when communication focuses on establishing, maintaining, and discontinuing contact between addresser and addressee, it emphasizes a phatic function. Furthermore, attention to the message for its own sake, what he calls "the palpability of signs," demonstrates the poetic function of communication. Finally, communication also involves a metalinguistic function evident in the coding of messages. As Jakobson (1960) summarizes, "the ADDRESSER sends a MESSAGE to the ADDRESSEE. To be operative the message requires a CONTEXT referred to ("referent" in another, somewhat ambiguous, nomenclature), seizable by the addressee, and either verbal or capable of being verbalized; a CODE fully, or at least partially, common to the addresser and addressee (or in other words, to the encoder and decoder of the message); and finally, a CONTACT, a physical channel and psychological connection between the addresser and addressee, enabling both of them to enter and stay in communication" (p. 353, emphasis in original).

In his analysis of the message and the poetic function, Jakobson locates two basic modes of arrangement used in all communication: selection and combination. Any message must be understood as a complex structure—as ambiguous, to use Jakobson's language—of selection and choice (paradigmatic relations) and of combination and contiguity (syntagmatic relations). The reversibility of these relations is emphasized in Jakobson's (1960) famous formulation: "*the poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination*" (p. 358, emphasis in original). The repetition of the fricative "f" in the phrase "famous formulation" illustrates the paradigmatic and syntagmatic reversibility that Jakobson identifies. Furthermore, the selection and repetition of this initial consonant as a unit is taken to be meaningful; that is, it operates reflexively as code for understanding the message as a rhetorical device–in other words, the message is an example of the phenomenon to which it refers. The relation between message and code is complementary in that message construction (encoding) "goes from meaning to sound" while message interpretation (decoding) relies on "moving from sound to meaning and from features to symbols" (Jakobson, 1971, p. 575).

In this essay, I explore how communication functions in weblogs by examining all six constitutive factors or elements. Following Jakobson's theory, I conduct this interrogation in three phases: First, I examine how weblogs are embodied in particular addresser/addressee relations or modes of address. Second, this description of modes of address provides the basis to distinguish different forms of contact in weblogs that are used to constitute a context for meaningful and effective reference. Third, I examine a specific weblog post in more detail as a way of illustrating the regularities of discourse in messages and codes that order weblogs. This

weblog post serves as an empirical exemplar, and not a representative sample of all weblog discourse, in that it illuminates the operation of Jakobson's constitutive factors. Taken together, consideration of these six communication elements and their respective functions suggests that characterizing weblogs as conversation is not only a troublesome description but also a problematic approach to weblogs in general.

Addresser and Addressee in Weblogs

From their beginnings, weblogs—especially in their journal variation—have been celebrated and condemned for their emphasis on the emotive or expressive function in communication. Blogging is "writing aloud," to use Sullivan's (2008) phrase. The orientation toward the addresser is emphasized when weblogs are celebrated as being immediate, intimate, and honest—and, simultaneously, when they are criticized for exhibitionism, self-indulgence, and narcissism. Following Jakobson, the emotive stratum in weblogs can be seen in the use of interjections to express amusement ("Ha!" or "LOL") or outrage ("WTF?"), the use of emoticons to express irony, and the use of grammatical features such as ellipses to build suspense ("and then . . . . it all fell apart") or the prolongation of vowels for emphasis ("it was a looong meeting"). Similarly, filter weblogs, which are typically seen by readers and critics as less personal and less self-oriented, are revered and reviled for their partisanship, characteristic voice, and singular sensibility. The emotive or expressive function in filter blogs can be seen in the use of tags, the selection and labeling of links, and the comments that accompany them. Whatever their form, "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" (Schmidt, 2007, p. 4).

Setting aside for the moment the conflation of writing and speaking, this description of writing a weblog as "speaking in one's own personal voice" reveals ideological commitments to individualism and subjectivism which obscure the historical and material development of expressive practices—what Lannamann (1991) calls "the ideology of interpersonal communication" (p. 186). Individualism positions the individual as the origin of meaning and "personal voice" as a natural possession of "one's own." The commitment to individualism neglects social constraints on the constitution of meaning and voice, a position explicitly challenged by Jakobson's phenomenological emphasis on social embodiment. Subjectivism defines expression as the subject's "open" and unconstrained production of experience—a view also illustrated by *The Cluetrain Manifesto* thesis that "the human voice is typically open, natural, uncontrived" (Levine, Locke, Searls, & Weinberger, 2000, Thesis 4). The commitment to subjectivism neglects the material and historical constraints on the production of subjectivity and experience, a position challenged by Jakobson's semiotic emphasis on the distinctive features operating as social conventions in human communication.

Scannell's (1996, 2000) analysis of the directionality of expression suggests an alternative approach which emphasizes the importance of social and historical constraints on the addresser. Scannell examines the historical development of the expressive function in radio and television to argue that radio and television programs are not merely messages broadcast "for anyone" to hear or watch; nor are they addressed to a single or particular person, the "for someone" of conversational interaction. The dilemma facing early broadcasters was that they could not rely on the enforced listening of an audience gathered in a specific location, such as a theater or music

hall; nor could they rely on the civility or politeness conventions which ensure continued attention in conversational interaction. With little effort and consequence, radio and television audiences can switch channels or turn off programs. To counter this possibility and encourage continued participation, broadcasters combined "for anyone" and "for someone" communicative structures to address the anonymous audience as a particular someone—what Scannell calls the "for-anyone-as-someone" communicative structure. "In short, radio adopted a conversational mode of address that spoke to listeners as if each was a person in his or her own right" (Scannell, 2000, p. 10).

Scannell's (2000) point that "how to talk to absent audiences was something that had actually to be discovered and learnt" (p. 10) is also appropriate for the development of the expressive function in weblogs. Nardi, Schiano, and Gumbrecht (2004) speculate that intimate forms of address found in diary weblogs were developed more as "a lure for readers than the private record of the writer it so invitingly resembles" (p. 231). Weblog writers adopted conversational practices, what Fairclough (1995) describes as "conversationalization" (p. 14), in order to attract and engage readers. At the same time, early bloggers learned that personal and intimate expression could not be guaranteed to be kept as private communication "for-someone" because weblogs are posted to an Internet-based site and are easily replicated and linked. The very fact that weblogs may be password protected suggests the potential "for-anyone" to read them. For this reason, the initial how-to guides that sprang up on the Internet and then in print stressed both the importance of writing in a personal voice to engage and encourage readers (expression for-someone) at the same time that they cautioned against posting anything the writer would not be comfortable defending to family, co-workers, a boss, the press, or a court of law (expression for-anyone). These guides demonstrate that the expressive function in weblogs—learning how to write as a blogger—is not natural or individual but the accomplishment of a particular historical and social practice.

Scannell's analysis can be extended to the reverse directionality by turning attention to the addressee. If webloggers had to learn how to write for absent audiences then, conversely, weblog readers had to learn how to read weblogs written by absent authors. Whereas addressers learn to write weblogs for-anyone-as-someone to read, addressees learn to read weblogs as written by-someone-for-anyone. Even when the weblog "author" is a collaborative construction of several writers—as in some corporate CEOs' and politicians' weblogs—readers take them as written by someone. Jakobson illustrates the orientation to the addressee, the conative function, with the use of vocative and imperative grammatical categories that constitute "you" as addressee. An example of the imperative in weblogging is the heading attached by the editor to Jenkin's *Technology Review* column in March, 2002, entitled "Blog This: Online Diarists Rule an Internet Strewn with Failed Dot Coms." As Jenkins describes what happened: "'Blog This,' I said, and not unexpectedly, the blogging community followed that instruction. I simply wasn't prepared for the consequences" (Jenkins, 2006, p. 178). Part of their response to the imperative was a vociferous objection to an editor-inserted subheading which posed an "analogy between bloggers surviving following the dot [com] bomb and cockroaches surviving a nuclear holocaust" (p. 178). Understandably, weblog readers objected to being positioned as cockroaches. They attributed the analogy to Jenkins, even though it expressed a perspective contrary to the one he takes in his entry. In this example, the addressee is the implied "you" interpellated by the imperative "blog this!" which is taken as coming from the addresser, as written by an authorial

"I." Readers interpreted this imperative on the basis of habitual practice as written by-someone-for-anyone to read, a command or invitation *by Jenkins*—not just anyone—to respond. The interpellated "you," the verbal second person, is thus doubled and ambiguous, both plural (anyone) and singular (someone), as is the verbal first person, the "I" (singular) and "we" (the plural work of Jenkins and his editor) that writes.

The ambiguity and doubling of *both* addresser and addressee, what Jakobson refers to as a "split addressee" and "split addresser" (1960, p. 371), makes it possible for weblogs to be read and written in a conversational mode. However, adopting a conversational mode of address is not the same as engaging in conversation. Gregg (2006), in an argument for blogging as conversational scholarship, provides two examples that illustrate the importance of this distinction between conversation and a conversational mode of address. The first example illustrates how the ambiguity and doubling of addressee and addresser can result in forms of identity theft, "sock-puppets," and malicious interaction by "trolls." She writes: "I never expected that someone would use my blog for a personal vendetta, writing under my name and also using the names of other regular contributors to disrupt the dynamics of the blog and seek to expose me as some kind of fraud" (p. 155). Other writers can manipulate or appropriate the conversational mode of address for their own purposes: That is, by shifting their ambiguous status as "anyone" (in both for-anyone-as-someone and by-someone-for-anyone structures), they can move from the "someone" reading and take over the "someone" writing the weblog. In a larger sense, this is the problem of trolls or "hostile jerks taking over your online community" (Doctorow, 2007; for a rhetorical analysis of a case of trolling, see Herring, Job-Sluder, Scheckler, & Barab, 2002). Trolls are already accepted as dialogue partners in that they are part of the "anyone" included in the for-anyone-as-someone conversational mode of address. In a conversation, however, particular "someones" work to exclude others or "anyones" in their mode of address (through volume and direction of speech, for example) and they rely on those others to abide by the social conventions (such as Goffman's civil inattention) which grant their conversation this exclusivity.

In Gregg's second example, the ambiguity and doubling in addressee and addresser shows up in the slippage from as- and by-someone to for-someone. She writes: "I never seriously thought that meeting people offline in public, group events would lead to volatile situations with readers assuming intimacy and 'entitlement' to friendship because of shared interests online" (p. 155). In this case, weblog readers may confuse "being friendly" and the intimacy encouraged by the conversational mode of address in weblogs with "being friends" and the intimacies lived together in conversation. In other words, they read a weblog as a pseudo-conversation, as if it were written by- and for-someone ("you" and "me") rather than for-anyone-as-someone and by-someone-for-anyone. The confusion of intimacy in modes of address with lived intimacy is described in media studies as para-social interaction (Horton & Wohl, 1956/2006). To call weblogs pseudo-conversations or para-social interaction is to recognize *both* that they are not conversations *and* that they are not *not* conversational—a double negative that suggests their ambiguous status. To rephrase this point, the confusion of social and para-social interaction, of conversations and pseudo-conversations in weblogs, makes sense only if both possibilities emerge from the ambiguous combinations of addressee and addresser. That is, weblogs are both conversational and not conversations. Thus, weblogs are misleadingly described as a digital choice between private and public or between intimate and non-intimate modes of address—often posed as an exclusive choice between one-to-one, one-to-many, many-to-one, or many-to-

many options – when they rely on the combination and conjunction of these modes.

These examples take interaction among strangers as their starting point. But what about weblogs in which the participants are already established friends or familiar with each other? Examples of this possibility can be found in work-group weblogs or in family and friendship weblogs that are password protected or closed to "anyone" from outside the group. In this instance, weblogs share a potential for conversational status or "dialogicity" (Rooksby, 2002) with other forms of epistolary exchange such as letters and email. The difference here is that when someone posts to a work-group blog and asks for co-workers to "take a look at this and tell me what you think," that post is directed for-someone and for-someone-as-anyone and not for-anyone or for-anyone-as-someone to read. Admittedly such cases are fairly rare as weblogs go, but their existence suggests the importance of clarifying differences in the expressive and conative functions that constitute "I" and "you" in communication. Thus, while it may be possible for family, friends, or co-workers to extend and develop conversations in weblogs, the use of a conversational mode of address alone does not constitute the weblog as a conversation.

As Rooksby (2002) argues, "whether a text is or has been dialogic depends not on the *text* itself, but on the relations that obtain between the particular people who send and receive it, and the strategies in which each person engages when writing or reading it" (p. 78, emphasis in original). Dialogicity in weblogs is found not in texts, but in particular addresser and addressee relations and the communication practices and habits they perform. The following sections examine what relations obtain in weblogs as the communication elements of contact and context and what strategies are engaged as the communication elements of message and code.

Weblog Contact and Context

The relations between people as they speak with and write to each other can be taken up under an analysis of the constitutive elements of contact and context, and the respective phatic and referential functions, articulated by Jakobson. The phatic function is illustrated by messages that attend to the channel of communication ("Is this thing on?") and maintain continued attention by the participants ("yes," "uh-hum") rather than focus on the subject at hand (referential function) or the message itself (poetic function). In face-to-face conversation, much of the phatic function is handled by gesture and minimal response cues such as eye contact and head nods by the participants to indicate attention. However, in weblogs contact is made by writing and reading posts. As Lovink (2008) summarizes, "the act of posting is constitutional in blogging. If we blog, we post" (p. 32). But what kind of physical connection and psychological contact does posting constitute? Discussions of communication in weblogs both invoke and distance themselves from descriptions of face-to-face contact by referring to weblogs as disembodied, as online conversations carried out in writing rather than in speech, as "slow conversations" and "secondary orality," and as digital rather than analog interaction.

The doubling and ambiguity of addressee and addresser finds its equivalent in these contradictory descriptions of the constitutive element of contact. Weblogs can be considered disembodied only if one ignores their expression and perception as bodily practices. Weblogs are always already embodied, whether in the practices of a writer at a keyboard composing and editing a post or in the practices of a reader using a web browser to open and take up a favorite weblog or a new one. Weblog writers and readers have not taken leave of their other senses when

they focus on gestures of the hand (keyboarding) and sight (writing and reading) to communicate in posts (Peterson, 2008).

Conversely, the expressive and perceptual possibilities of writing and reading posts move to the periphery of bodily practices in face-to-face interaction. One of the problems in adopting a conversational model for weblogs is this tendency to position weblogs as an impoverished and incomplete form of face-to-face contact and to neglect those aspects which are not emphasized in such contact (Orgad, 2005, pp. 33-35). Couldry (2008) writes: "Rather than seeing mediation as a dialectic or implied conversation, it may be more productive, I suggest, to see mediation as capturing a variety of dynamics within media flows" (pp. 47-48). Couldry describes computer-mediated discourse as emphasizing non-linear, discontinuous, and asymmetrical contact rather than linear, continuous, and symmetrical contact featured in dialogue.

Bloggers value the non-linear form of contact found in weblogs, because they literally do not have to come face-to-face with the addressee as they would in conversation. The writer cannot reach out to shake hands, embrace, or touch the reader, nor can the reader reciprocate. Weblog writers and readers can share the weblog as a textual artifact; what they cannot share are the particular bodily practices of writing and reading a particular post or comment. As Nardi, Schiano, and Gumbrecht (2004) summarize from the analysis of their interview data, "bloggers were free of conversational partners' reactions to what they said, though there was still an audience listening, which they desired. And bloggers did not have to deal with interruptions to the flow of writing" (p. 228). Unlike the joint participation or "we-operation" required of conversational partners, bloggers can "hide" behind their posts and comments to avoid "talking directly" with someone. The argument here is not that weblogs are a more or less pure and authentic form of communication than conversations, but that weblogs and conversations involve different ethical relations of risk and responsibility (Rooksby, 2002), because they rely on different forms of physical contact. The phatic function is thus socially embodied in intersubjective practices and not merely the "subjective state" of an addresser or addressee (Nardi, 2005).

Weblogs also emphasize discontinuous contact, in that they employ written entries that are spatially and temporally discrete. The continuity of contact in conversation makes it possible for speakers and listeners to adapt and adjust to each other as they are speaking and listening. When a speaker sees confusion in a listener during their conversation, the speaker can elaborate and revise what she or he says as it emerges in speech. In a weblog, however, a writer's or reader's contribution is discrete and separate from the activity that produces it; the writer or reader must engage a software operation such as hitting the "send" or "post" button before the contribution becomes part of the weblog. Any confusion on the part of the participants, therefore, can only be addressed across multiple posts (for further discussion of this point, see Langellier & Peterson, 2004, pp. 163-168). Even micro-blogging services, such as Twitter, reduce but do not eliminate this discontinuity of contact. Rather than see the emphasis on discontinuity in contact as a drawback or weakness, webloggers rely on contact across discontinuous posts to make weblogs work. The *spatial* discontinuity in contact offers bloggers "a kind of preserve, a refuge from the intense interaction" and the "immediate feedback" of other forms of communication (Nardi et al., 2004, p. 228). The *temporal* discontinuity in contact between writing and reading makes it possible for weblogs—as well as other forms of textual representations such as diaries and

literature—to act as a kind of "memory machine" (Steinitz, 1997) that brings experience to consciousness in a movement among past, present, and future. Like a temporal version of a Möbius strip, which makes a continuous surface from discontinuous sides of a band of paper, weblogs move from the reader's present act of reading in what was to be the writer's future to an experience in the reader's past inscribed by what was the writer's present act of writing a post.

Weblogs feature an asymmetrical form of contact that is valued precisely because it does not allow for the symmetry found in face-to-face conversation. For the addresser, weblogs prevent immediate feedback, thereby creating space for expression that is made possible by "the avoidance of dialogue and conversation" (Miller, 2008, p. 395). As Nardi, Schiano, and Gubrecht (2004) comment: "[B]loggers wanted readers but they did not necessarily want to hear a lot from those readers" (p. 227). Webloggers use this asymmetry in contact to control the kinds of participation they make available to readers; they determine the possibility and form in which comments are posted on the weblog, they decide which comments are worthy of reply, they determine what to archive and in what fashion, and so on. Conversely, for the addressee, the asymmetry of weblogs makes it possible for weblog readers to participate by "lurking," to read without responding. Conversational partners cannot lurk in face-to-face interaction without being challenged ("are you paying attention?"), invited to respond ("what do you think?"), and dismissed or excluded ("I wasn't talking to you!"). In weblogs, addressees determine the extent of their participation as readers in what can range from close and regular reading to distracted and intermittent scanning.

Readers and writers maintain this non-linear, discontinuous, and asymmetrical contact in weblogs because they find such interaction meaningful. Their participation, in other words, is constrained and shaped by the choice of context—the referential function—which positions some postings as meaningful and others as less so. Lovink (2008) illustrates this move from contact to context when he claims that "blogs arise in an environment in which useless bickering has become the rule and entropy has reached maximum levels. […] What is significant for me is nonsense for you" (p. 32). Weblogs represent something meaningful for webloggers; in Jakobson's terms, they function as a shared system of signification for talking about someone or something. Lovink suggests this referential function when he describes the blogosphere as "a closed and self-referential environment" (p. 20) which creates "communities of like-minded people" (p. 21) by routing around discordant voices and by switching off the possibility of response–the "zero comments" that he considers to be the limit of blogging. Cynicism aside, Lovink's observations suggest two aspects of the referential function to consider: the problem of how shared are the practices of signification in weblogs (or, to use Jakobson's language, how social is cognition in talking about something or someone?); and, second, the problem of how open or closed are these referential systems (or how does signification function to denote or represent someone or something)?

The first aspect of the referential function is illustrated by Wittel's (2001) argument concerning the shift from community-based sociality to an Internet-based network sociality. The key difference between face-to-face and online communication, according to Wittel, is found in the orientation toward context, the referential function. As Wittel summarizes: "Any online communication lacks a common and mutual perception of the context. Online sociality cannot rely on exogenous (external) or contextual forms of structuration. Thus any structuration of

sociality has to be produced endogenously (internally) by the participants" (p. 63). One way context is produced internally in weblogs is through the reliance on the cumulative history of weblog posts shared by writers and readers rather than the shared history lived together by conversational participants. For example, in reply to a reader's critical comment posted on *Scott Rosenberg's Wordyard,* Rosenberg (2009a) defends himself by invoking the history of his posts on the subject, a context established over time and recorded in the weblog's archive. He writes: "the thing is, this exchange is not taking place in a vacuum – it comes after what (for me at least) is a nearly *fifteen year long* conversation on this subject" (http://www.wordyard.com/2009/ 03/17/berkeley-chronicle-panel/#more-1903). Rosenberg's modifying comment, "for me at least," reveals that context is not given or guaranteed but must be produced by the participants. Similarly, Rettberg (2008) notes that weblog readers must work to establish a shared context: "to really understand blogs, you need to read them over time. […] Because blogging is a cumulative process, most posts presuppose some knowledge of the history of the blog, and [how] they fit into a larger story" (p. 4). Thus, both writers and readers must work to produce a context for reference, for meaningful representation in weblogs to occur.

The reliance on a history of cumulative exchanges suggests a diachronic approach to the referential function. A complementary approach, and one which invokes the problem of the selection or openness of signifying systems, would be a synchronic emphasis such as that achieved by surfing or sampling a wide range of weblogs. In this case, weblog writers and readers establish a context–that is, they make sense out of what is happening —through regimes of surveillance. Rosenberg (2009b) points to this aspect of the referential function when he notes that "what bloggers mean when they claim that 'blogging is a conversation' [is that] every post exists in a context of post-and-response that stretches across some patch of the web, link by link, blog by blog" (p. 325). What is important for establishing context through surveillance is not the in-depth familiarity with selected or "favorite" weblogs, but a wide-ranging acquaintance with a multitude of weblogs. However, empirical research suggests that this claim may be overstated. As Herring (2005) and her colleagues summarize, "the much-touted textual conversation that all of the blogosphere is supposed to be engaged in involves a minority of blogs […] and sporadic activity even among these blogs" (p. 10).

Wittel argues that because it cannot rely on a common narrative or shared experience, network sociality emphasizes a multitude of ephemeral but intense and focused relations. The problem here is that increasing the quantity of relations alone, such as that achieved by using a search engine, cannot determine the meaningfulness of reference and establish a shared context (Dreyfus, 2001, pp. 8-26). How much to read and write, and what and whom to trust, become enduring problems for weblog readers and writers. Wittel suggests that under conditions of network sociality trust depends more upon iterated relations of short duration and less upon continuous relations of long duration, such as those established in long-term friendships, and community and work relationships. The emphasis on iterated relations in weblogs to determine the meaningfulness and relevance of reference can be seen in such tactics as the ranking of reader comments by moderators and readers (e.g., *slashdot*), the reliance on high profile weblogs (e.g., the "A-list") or weblogs associated with an established institution (e.g., *The New York Times*), and the value placed on a weblog or weblogger's resources or position (e.g., knowledge weblogs). Both weblog and conversational participants work to produce a context for meaningful communication, but they do so by using different referential strategies and tactics.

Ordering Discourse in Messages and Codes

A weblog can be taken up and analyzed as both a message, a particular post, and a code, a particular style or system of rules for constructing messages. Examining a specific weblog post illustrates this focus on message and code, as well as how message and code operate in conjunction with the other communication elements. The following post was selected because it explicitly focuses on the ambiguity of communication in interpersonal relationships, but the same analysis of message and code relations could be applied to other weblog postings. The opening section of this weblog entry by *mangledoll* (date stamped 2:20 a.m., June 27, 2001) is entitled "faithless dry erase" and concerns interactions among the author and her two housemates, carolann and samantha.

> upstairs the dry erase board sits in silence above the sink in the shared bathroom and reads:
>
> "Communicating ones feelings is often comprising anothers life and do we really want to hurt another? some things are better left unsaid."
>
> i really have no idea what the fuck the above statement is supposed to mean, but i have a feeling that it has something to do with the LACK OF COMMUNICATION that is currently gushing throughout our household. carolann doesn't like living with us, and she even tells us so via her latest diary entry. thanks. she won't tell us in person, because she just... won't... but she WILL write about it online and on a dry erase board in the bathroom. i guess there needs to be some background first. the dry erase board asked a simple question this morning, something along the lines of "why is communicating ones feelings so hard to do?" the answer that started off this entry was carolann's answer to the situation. so, she doesn't like hanging around us. or communicating the truth with us. us = samantha and i. i'm guessing that's the reason why she's always locked inside her bedroom when sam and i are home. she doesn't like living with us. i love this whole "non-communication" thing. it has such a republican feel to it.
>
> (http://mangledoll.diaryland.com/dryerase.html; retrieved July 18, 2001; punctuation, spelling, and format as in the original)

In the remainder of the entry, mangledoll speculates on possible reasons for carolann to not like her housemates, describes her efforts to reassure samantha and herself, and rants about social expectations for communication among housemates.

The message of this portion of the post appears to be about the interpersonal relations of three housemates. Mangledoll begins her description by posing it as a conflict between the referential and metalinguistic functions of communication. The statement on the dry-erase board is supposed to mean something, but mangledoll says she has "no idea" what that meaning is. She reads the message of "the above statement" as referring to something else, what it is "supposed to mean." Despite the sarcasm of her claim to have "no idea" as to its meaning, mangledoll recognizes its metalinguistic function when she states that "i have a feeling that it has something to do with the LACK OF COMMUNICATION that is currently gushing through our household." In other words, the comment that "some things are better left unsaid" reveals the double articulation of discourse; it is only by saying something that it becomes possible to leave

something unsaid.

The weblog emphasizes the difference that choice of contact makes in understanding the message, or what Jakobson (1960) calls the "palpability of signs" (p. 356). The housemates may not talk *with* each other in person, but household members talk *to* each other in writing on the dry-erase board and talk *about* each other in their respective weblogs. They cannot avoid being in contact with each other and finding significance in everything the other person does or does not do. But the problem of reference—what the message "means" and what it "leaves unsaid"—depends upon the construction of a message-code relation. Mangledoll takes the position of the addressee and describes the message not as an answer to a *question* posed on the dry-erase board (where the message refers to an earlier message), but as "carolann's answer to the situation" (where the message refers to a code). Given this particular situation or context—that is, what carolann writes about both in her weblog diary and on the dry-erase board—mangledoll takes the use the dry-erase board (the choice of contact) as code for the unwritten and unspoken message that "she doesn't like living with us."

Following Jakobson's (1971) suggestions on the reversibility of decoding and encoding, we can construct a parallel process to describe how the addresser of the message works to convey meaning. How, in other words, does the addresser's choice of contact to respond on the dry-erase board to an existing question (context) work to convey her answer (message) in writing (code)? This formulation would avoid anthropomorphizing the dry-erase board; dry-erase boards do not ask questions nor do they talk and sit in silence. Instead, the weblog entry positions both mangledoll and carolann as the addressee in order to displace responsibility for "communicating the truth." That is, mangledoll constructs herself as responding to an existing situation, as "just answering" something that happens to show up on the dry-erase board. After all, if mangledoll (and samantha, the "us" of the diary) thinks that "communicating the truth" means talking with each other "in person," then why does she (or samantha) use the dry-erase board to ask carolann a question in the first place? For carolann, the message "why is communicating ones feelings so hard to do?" can be read as an accusation (you are not communicating your feelings) rather than a statement ("I have a hard time communicating my feelings"), a question (do you have a hard time communicating feelings?), or an appeal ("please share your feelings with me"). If the message is read as an accusation, then her responding question (or pseudo-question/accusation) is a symmetrical match for the prior one. Making a few more paradigmatic substitutions for the place of the subject in the expression reveals other possible messages for what is "really" being said, such as: "you are trying to hurt me by communicating your feelings," or "if I communicate my feelings I would hurt you," or "you do not really want to know how I feel."

The tension over communication and the reversibility of addresser and addressee is captured by the ambiguity of the phrase that "communicating ones feelings is often comprising anothers life." This situation illustrates the differential and complementary use of codes in decoding and encoding. Jakobson (1971) points out that "for the receiver, the message presents many ambiguities which were unequivocal for the sender" (pp. 575-576). Both addresser and addressee can fill the discourse positions identified as "one," "another," and "we"—yet they are used here as a reduction to either one or the other, either "us" or "them." Another ambiguity concerns the word "comprising" and whether or not it is seen as a word selection error for "compromising." That is, the phrase can be understood as a claim that communicating feelings is reckless behavior

that may endanger another person. However, taken literally, the phrase suggests that communicating one's feelings comprises (from the French *comprendre*, comprehend) or consists of another person's life and vice versa. The interpersonal dysfunction that mangledoll describes is not indicative of, as the common saying might suggest, a "failure to communicate" but, rather, a reduction of a shared communication relationship among housemates (a both/and condition of multiple discourse possibilities) to an opposition of information about individuals in writing and speech (an either/or differentiation of "feelings" and "truth"). At best, the language-error or slip-of-the-tongue suggested by "comprising" can help to disturb the reification of encoding and decoding sedimented in this weblog excerpt.

At the same time, the focus on analyzing the poetic function of "comprising" and on the weblog post as a whole is also constrained in that it positions the analyst/reader as an addressee, as someone who "sees" what is "really" going on. The analyst/reader is in danger of replicating the same stance toward interaction that mangledoll adopts in her weblog. That is, the reader risks assuming that her or his reading can sort out what is really going on because it appears to be direct and unmediated, while ignoring how that reading participates in performing as both addresser and addressee. Even though the reader is removed from the experience mangledoll relates, the weblog is strategically constructed as a message that "speaks for itself," just as the dry-erase board does. In a manner similar to the construction of junk-mail narratives that Shuman (2005) analyzes, "you, the reader, are asked to agree with the judgment offered or to make your own judgment based on the presentation of firsthand evidence" (p. 146). The message of mangledoll's emotional engagement—her anger, sarcasm, emotional upset—is coded as "truthful" and "direct" through the use of informal diction, sentence fragments, lack of capitalization, and grammatical errors—all of which constitute the firsthand evidence for "our" judgment. The problem is that, as Jakobson (1971) warns, "attempts to construct a model of language without any relation either to a speaker or to the hearer, and thus to hypostasize a code detached from actual communication, threaten to make a scholastic fiction out of language" (p. 576).

The positioning of weblogs as authentic, direct, and truthful messages because they are more like conversations than writing is just the most recent version of arguments about frank speech and truth-telling that Foucault (2001) traces back to the concept of *parrhesia* or "fearless speech" in Greece of the 5th Century BCE. Truth-telling speech, typically found in dialogue, is contrasted with the rhetorical or ornamented speech, typically found in longer monologues. Foucault clarifies that the opposition of truth-telling and rhetoric in Plato's *Phaedrus* "is not about the nature of the opposition between speech and writing, but concerns the difference between the *logos* which speaks the truth and the *logos* which is not capable of such truth-telling" (p. 21). By the time of Seneca, Foucault continues, "one finds the idea that personal conversations are the best vehicle for frank speaking and truth-telling insofar as one can dispense, in such conversations, with the need for rhetorical devices and ornamentation" (p. 21). The claim that weblogs are more truthful or authentic because they are conversations (an exchange of messages) or they perform a conversational style (the variable application of a code) is an extension of this idea. But the form of discourse is no guarantee of truth-telling, as Foucault points out in a comment that seems particularly appropriate for weblogs: pure frankness as a verbal activity can result in "ignorant outspokenness" as well as truth-telling (p. 73).

Weblog messages do not resemble conversations, despite the many recommendations in self-help and how-to books for bloggers to speak conversationally, such as Scoble and Israel's (2006) suggestion to "use a human voice. Don't get corporate lawyers and PR professionals to modify your speech" (p. 191). An easy illustration of this point is to take an exchange of posts from a weblog and perform them by reading aloud as if they were lines in a transcript from a conversation. As Crystal (2006) points out, webloggers routinely disregard H. P. Grice's maxims concerning the quality, relevance, quantity, and manner of conversational speech. Crystal goes on to point out that weblogs also violate normative expectations for writing. He likens weblogs to forms of spontaneous letter-writing of the late Middle Ages and of some manuscript accounts of law-court proceedings. He notes that this style of writing "was once the norm, for all kinds of writing, but […] went out of public use once the standard language was institutionalized in manuals of grammar, punctuation, and usage, beginning in the second half of the eighteenth century" (p. 245). Crystal predicts that, with the emergence of editorial control by commercial and corporate organizations, weblogs will move away from such "free prose" and toward greater standardization. The violation of normative expectations for both speaking and writing lead Crystal to conclude that computer-mediated discourse is neither "spoken writing" nor "written speech" (p. 272).

The challenge in understanding the coding of weblogs is two-fold: both to locate the rules and regularities which order them as discursive events and to attend to their importance for persons and for society. Clearly weblogs are a popular and increasingly pervasive part of interpersonal, political, commercial, and cultural life. Why has it been important to think of weblogs as conversations? What problems does thinking of weblogs as conversations solve? As Herring (2005) and her colleagues put it, "while they may not be prototypically conversational or frequent in absolute terms, blog conversations appear to be a perceptually salient phenomenon" (p. 10). That is, there are practical and ideological benefits to conceptualizing weblogs as conversations: for example, weblog writers can use the intimacies of a conversational style to attract unknown readers; readers can use the familiarity of conversational style to understand messages and develop relationships with strangers; corporate and commercial weblogs can use the linguistic flexibility and interactivity of conversational style to position themselves as "authentic" and "sincere" for otherwise cynical and disaffected readers; researchers can import and apply methodological techniques from conversation analysis to study weblogs. What is important for understanding the communication elements of messages and codes in weblogs is to elucidate the regularities and ruptures in discourse practices, habits, and institutions—in other words, to articulate the internal and external rules which order weblogs in a series of discourses and discourse genres while not short-circuiting analysis by locating them as conversations (messages) using a conversational style (codes and sub-codes).

Conclusion

How conversational are weblogs? At present, weblogs demonstrate little of the conversational potential claimed for them in popular and scholarly accounts. Using Jakobson's analysis of the six constitutive factors of communication and their respective functions, we can confirm, first, that both conversations and weblogs emerge as expressive possibilities in the communication of embodied participants. In this sense, weblogs have the potential to be conversational in some ways. But we should not mistake an expressive possibility for the probability of its accomplishment. As the previous analysis of addresser and addressee relations reveals, it is

possible for weblog readers and writers to adopt a conversational mode of address even when they are not in conversation with each other. Jakobson's key contribution on this point is his insistence on distinguishing between communication and information theory. To focus on weblogs solely as the expression of an addresser reduces communication to an exchange of messages and ignores the interpretive participation of the addressee (the conative function). As Catt (2010) summarizes: "communication occurs when my expressions become your perceptions and your expressions become my perceptions simultaneously. This reversibility of consciousness and experience goes to the very heart of the recurring problem of communication in our lives" (p. 133). Thus communication in weblogs may entail an exchange of messages between addresser and addressee, but no exchange of messages is sufficient to constitute weblogs as conversation.

Second, the previous analysis confirms that weblogs and conversations clearly differ in their forms of contact and in how participants use that contact to constitute a context for meaningful and effective reference. Jakobson's emphasis on the paired elements of contact and context are an important clarification and advance beyond what Couldry (2006) calls "the myth of the mediated center" with its reductive focus on "channel" and its limited view of "context." Media-centrism, according to Couldry, adopts a reductive "functionalist" perspective that *explains* contact as a function of the channel or medium rather than investigate how the practice of different forms of contact function in daily life. In other words, the meaning of "computer-mediated" contact in studies of weblog conversation "needs to be empirically investigated, not *assumed,*" to use Couldry's words (p. 16, emphasis in original). In a similar way, functionalist perspectives in weblog research reduce context to the immediate situation and use it as an explanation for the variable order and coherence of the social terrain. Rather than assume the supposed naturalness of sociality (online or offline) as an explanation, Jakobson's theory of communication emphasizes the importance of questioning the variety of ways that weblog and conversational participants work reflexively to maintain contact and produce meaningful contexts.

Third, the previous analysis confirms that while weblogs deploy some of the performative conventions of conversation and non-standardized writing, the use of such conventions does not make them conversations, nor does it make them more authentic or truthful. To conceptualize a weblog as conversation mistakes and obscures the distinctive message and code relations of both weblogs and conversations. Certainly, an important beginning point for research is to describe, as Hutchby (2001) recommends, the specific "communicative affordances" of both weblog conversations and "ordinary" conversations. However, Jakobson's consideration of ambiguity and complementarity in message/code relations requires that the researcher do more than locate the "structured set of practices underpinned by describable normative conventions" (Hutchby, 2001, p. 193). To leave research at this point is to ignore the operation of the other four communication functions and to make, as noted by Jakobson (1971) in a comment quoted earlier, "a scholastic fiction out of language" (p. 576). The location of conventions utilized by particular message/code relations must be accompanied by questions about what constitutes and positions some as "normative" and others as not. The question, therefore, is not merely whether weblogs are conversations, but what does thinking about weblogs as conversations do for individuals, researchers, and society? Jakobson's theory and analysis of human communication offers one way to conduct that investigation.

Acknowledgment

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