The Organizational Blog as a Boundary Object: The Roles and Dilemmas of Government Agency Bloggers

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ABSTRACT

This article looks at organizational blogger roles and how they both reflect and affect the way knowledge is communicated across department boundaries in a corporate blogging context. The blog is approached from a sociotechnical perspective, addressing and looking into the various roles in a community of practice and the enactment of the bloggers in a transparent context. Empirical examples of discourses at work in an organizational blog are highlighted, and the diverging roles and dilemmas of the blogging employees are discussed. People within the same organization have different goals in relation to the same technology, and the content of the blog and the blog comments are managed differently by the internal bloggers which feel empowered or disempowered. The article pinpoints roles of enactment in a socio-technical perspective through pointing out conflicting goals, roles and the resulting counter discourses and shows examples of how the group of bloggers with the shared narrative tradition is able to mobilize its members and create subgroups for appropriate blog behaviors and changing behavior.

Keywords: Communities of Practice, Cultural Discourse Analysis, Enactment Theory, Organizational Blogging, Sociotechnical Design, Transparency, Web 2.0

INTRODUCTION AND OBJECTIVE

Social media – internet-based applications such as (we)blogs, social network sites, online chat forums, text messages, micro blogs, and location-based communication services used from computers and smart phones - have diffused profoundly as platforms of interpersonal communication and sociality in everyday life (Lomborg, 2011) as well as in business communication. The nature of the core concepts of web 2.0 is a new set of web applications that have significantly changed the way information is distributed. Sites like Wikipedia, Blogger, Wordpress, Twitter, del.icio.us, Flickr, YouTube, Facebook, MySpace, Orkut, LinkedIn, etc. appeared and soon stood at the very top of rankings of sites with the most page views around the globe (Görtz & Bohl, 2009). What these applications have in common is a principle that broke the paradigm of the Internet as a web of computers mostly generated by professional information suppliers, and a shift
towards a participative web by setting the focus on using the web as an interconnected platform with the aim of enabling users to interact, share, and collaborate with each other (Görtz & Bohl, 2009). The functional definition of weblogs (blogs) classify them as frequently modified webpages, either as part of an existing webpage or as a separate webpage (Herring et al., 2004, p. 1), usually maintained by an individual (a blogger), that contains mainly narrative with regular entries of commentary, description of events, or other material such as graphics or video (Pitt et al., 2011). Blogs started out essentially as informal online diaries, loosely maintained by individuals as a way of recording events in their lives, mainly to keep friends and family members informed and amused. However, a large and growing number of blogs have more formal agendas (media coverage of politics, facilitating communication processes among individuals and organizations (Kelleher & Miller, 2006). A simple working definition of a corporate blog is that of Puschmann (2010): “A (primarily textual) blog used in an institutional context to further organizational goals” (Puschmann, 2010, p. 15). Many organizations use blogs to keep their audiences and stakeholders informed of their activities, gaining a more immediate and interactional contact with their readers. Consumers of blog content value blogs more current and more credible than most mass media (Pitt et al., 2011). A new communicative environment in which it is increasingly the norm for any participant to make a contribution challenges the usefulness of existing public-facing genres of external Corporate Communications, which have in the past been communicatively unidirectional almost without exception (e.g., press releases, advertisements, static corporate websites, etc.) (Puschmann, 2010). Corporations do not blog, people do and hence, in this article, the boundaries of blogs are approached as socially constructed, not technologically defined (Efimova, 2009, p. 23), and blogs are located as a situated communicative practice, manifested in the user’s engagement in the production of ‘text’ and in the practices of interacting with fellow users. In the present case study, the blog is considered a discursively and narratively constructed open ‘room’ within a corporate setting, in which the sense making and context of this room is what leads us to a higher degree of understanding of the phenomenon.

The aim of the paper is to show and discuss blogs as social action in a corporate context by discussing the different social implications of the cultural discourses and the culturally discursive analytical implications in a corporate blog and how corporate cultural tensions can emerge when implementing an organizational weblog. When an organization as the Danish Patent and Trademark office set out to manage their communications in accordance with the corporate ideal of transparency (Christensen, 2002) and you make the users co-producers (i.e., produsage) (Bruns & Jacobs, 2006, p. 6), they are transparent not only to their publics but also to themselves (Christensen, 2002, p. 162). Corporate culture in this sense refers to those activities critical for the implementation of strategy and for generating widespread understanding and commitment among the organization’s members. The analysis is done through an analysis of a government agency’s internal blog-community by looking at a specific case of a Danish government agency, the Patent and Trademark Office (DKPTO) (http://www.dkpto.org/), and its blogging activities towards external publics, looking at and reflecting on theory of Communities of Practice (Wenger, 1998), Enactment Theory (Heath, 1994), and cultural discourse analysis (Carbaugh, 2007).

The article will start out by defining a socio-technical perspective and understanding, followed by a brief introduction to the theory of Communities of Practice (COPs) and the roles within this COP as regards reification and participation, and how knowledge is negotiated communicatively between the employee bloggers, introducing the three key elements of COPs – mutual engagement, shared repertoire, and joint enterprise, and how they encapsulate the socially constructed nature of the corporate blog. Next, an introduction to enactment theory is given where the people and culture of the organization and the empowerment and disem-
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