Chapter 14

Analyzing Blogs: A Hermeneutic Perspective

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ABSTRACT

An operating public blog was selected as a case for a depth study blending mixed perspectives. The aim of the research was to compare the face value of the blog with social dynamics operating beneath the surface of the blog for which the investigator had special knowledge. The perspectives applied in the study converged from the general fields of communication, philosophy, and other social sciences. Specific theories from semantics, argumentation, and rhetoric were emphasized in the discourse analysis. Especially useful to this research was an analysis of preferred, negotiated, and oppositional readings (or interpretations) of discourse in general and blogs in particular. Blog posts were analyzed, interpreted, and assessed—particularly in light of what was not overtly communicated. The findings of this depth analysis were consistent with empirical studies that have found that blogs may not provide the optimal platform for the deliberative sharing of ideas but may serve to draw likeminded bloggers. Insofar as this study addressed an allegedly helping type of public blog, it may have heuristic value for similar instances. To the extent that this study addressed diverse levels of meaning in a particular public blog, it may contribute to understanding levels of meaning in blogs in general.

INTRODUCTION

In the poetic words of W. H. Auden (1970, p. 6), “To ask the hard question is simple, The simple act of the confused will.” Auden later decides: “But the answer Is hard and hard to remember.” In this study, a hard question is simply asked to confuse the will less, yet the question may be hard to answer because of its intricate vastness. While truth can be stranger than fiction, fiction can be more believable than truth. For many reasons, fiction can trounce history. Furthermore, art and life may complement each other, and fictional narratives may interact with real narratives. In televised crime dramas, a judge may take an insincere position on a public issue because of a
bribe or threat. Heroic detectives eventually correct the wrong perpetuated by the bribe or threat. In actual life, although a judge may be bribed or threatened into making a false statement, justice may never flourish or may follow decades from the actual public deception. A whole and true public understanding may be wrongfully assumed. A fictional script can give us insight into a real one and vice-versa (Burke, 1968).

Based on the discourse of a public blog (Urbanski, 2010), the researcher unveils, through interpretive research (Anderson, 1996, pp. 13-15; Griffin, 2003, p. 508), a struggle between truth and fiction as well as between what was expressed and suppressed in a blogging incident. As Keyes (2004) argues, in contemporary life, we seem to be in the post-truth era where dishonesty and deception constitute the norm. In fact, he asserts that dishonesty “inspires more euphemisms than copulation or defecation,” thereby helping to “desensitize us to its implication.” In the post-truth era, we have statements that constitute truth and lies as well as “ambiguous statements that are not exactly the truth but fall short of a lie.” He adds that through “such aggressive euphemasia we take the sting out of telling lies” (Keyes, 2004, p. 15).

Space only permits a summary with telling quotes of the blog’s content dealing with truth, lies, and euphemistic ambiguities. For this study, the researcher assembled a discourse hermeneutic to decrypt, in considerable complexity (Pagels, 1989), the institutionalized conventionality of blogs and discourse in general. It is held that blogs need interpretation or translation, are polysemic and possibly hyperreal, may camouflage controversial elements, and require extensive investigation into contextual factors to unveil a holistic meaning. To understand blogs more fully, the discourse hermeneutics formulated here considers manifest and cloaked aspects of blogs as well as their contextual relations. While no claim is made that the hermeneutic perspective developed in this study constitutes the Rosetta Stone (or the ultimate interpretive key) for blogs, it does assert that it provides a useful key for interpreting blogs.

In the movie The Gods Must Be Crazy, a Coca-Cola bottle is thrown from an airplane and lands unbroken in the Kalahari Desert. Xi, the protagonist, and his band of Bushmen, portrayed idyllically, must interpret its nature and value as a boon or curse from the gods. Their limited knowledge of the bottle makes it special in this tale. The meaning of the bottle is treated eventually as a problem. The solution follows with Xi concluding the bottle is evil since it caused trouble twice and his venturing to dispose of it. As for blogs, the suggestion in this study is that blogs might be safely understood initially as indeterminate or problematic phenomena.

The focus of this study is a public blog of approximately 40 pages that circulated in the blogosphere. A conflict (Hewitt, 2005; Perlmutter, 2008), actually a masked rivalry between blogging and lurking antagonists, is revealed as underlying the overt blogged discourse. Fictionalized narratives pose as sincere ones. Not without its investors (Blood, 2002; Cobb, 1998; Edelman Group, 2007; Negroponte, 1995), the Internet has cautioners (Bowers, 2000; Johnson & Kaye, 2004; Jost & Hipolit, 2006; Price, 2004), and this investigative researcher is one, who recognize the Internet’s double bind: that the Internet in general and blogging in particular embody advantages and disadvantages, the disadvantages being highlighted since participants tend to focus on advantages (Bowers, 2000, pp. 2 &177).

With blogs occurring in the complicated and unfathomable prism of global satellite contexts (Hachten & Scotton, 2007), challenged in this hermeneutic (or interpretive) approach to a case study is an unidentified blogging incident claiming to represent a full and factual account of an event. Motivated by the misuse and abuse of blog technology, transformative (Mertens, 2009,
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