Common Visual Design Elements of Weblogs

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Abstract

Weblogs (blogs) have been heralded as a new space for collaborative creativity, a medium for breaking free of the constraints of previous forms and allowing authors greater access to flexible publishing methods. This generalization seems extreme: genre studies done by Crowston and Williams (2000) and Shepherd and Watters (1998) lend credence to the notion that weblogs are evolutionary descendents of other visual media, such as newspapers and pamphlets.

Previous work on weblogs has largely focused on the nature of weblogs as textual artifacts. Authors such as Dave Winer (2001), Meg Hourihan (2002), and Rebecca Blood (2000; 2002) have focused on "voice," essayistic style, "community," and a pantheon of other concepts drawn from preexisting rhetorical, journalistic, sociological, and linguistic frameworks. This focus, while admirably productive, does not fully map the potential landscape of weblog research. In particular, such textual foci slight visual factors that may contribute almost as much "style" to weblogs as the particular textual practices (c.f. "voice") of individual authors. To our knowledge, very little work has been done to date that examines either the visual elements of weblogs or the relationship between the visual and textual elements of those same sites.

The availability of visual design elements - division of the screen into columns, image use, color and typeface choice (Hagerty, 1996) - along with the placement of elements on the page permitting meaning to be suspended in the visual (Lacan, 1998), allows for non-textual self-expression. Visual design inhabits "the field of vision, which is much wider arena than a sphere for the circulation of images or question regarding the nature of representation" (Rogoff, 1998, p. 31). An informal survey of weblogs reveals that new users of the medium have adopted fewer "innovations" than their forbears: as notions of what constitutes a "weblog" concretize, the creative use of visual and hypertextual features seems to be in decline. Design innovations breaking out of a certain "acceptable" visual style are increasingly rare, while weblogs that conform to expectations - three-column, smaller text down the side, prominent header and footer, some links and sparse image use (Herring, Scheidt, Bonus, & Wright, 2004) - continue to be created. Detailed analysis suggests that adult males are most likely, for example, to use unique templates, with teenage females ranking second in their use of customized templates. New weblogs often appear simpler than older weblogs.

In this study, we apply content-analytic methods (Bauer, 2000) to a random sample of weblogs as a means of exploring current visual trends within the blogosphere. Detailed coding for the presence of common structural, visual features allows correlation of those trends with the demographics of content producers.