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The Blog, the Blogger and “the Other” on the Net

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Abstract

This work describes a qualitative research, still in progress, about blogging. This experience is fully linked to the concept of "social presence": users feel "to be there" in the virtual environment. From a brief review of researches about blogging, we propose a work that, through a semi-structured interview (submitted on line), could analyze the mental representations of bloggers. Moreover, we have the purpose to read these impressions through a key pattern of interactions between blog, blogger and other users. The primary goal of this study, still preparatory, is to explore the psychological means of blogging.

1. Introduction: blog research

Today the blog represents an important new environment of the Net. It has been conceived in terms of usage and a series of classifications have been thought.

Our interest has been focused on personal blog, a virtual place where the individual can share experiences, thoughts and feelings related to the presence [16, 17] in which the psychological function of the blogging on its author is evident.

This aspect was less considerable than the interest about blog as a media phenomenon.

Many studies showed the revolutionary aspects of this tool, but few works discussed about the meanings of blogging, the relative sense of presence and the self-exploration in Internet.

The blog as an open page is far from the image of secret diary, protected by its padlock.

Thus the psychological relational values of this matter are clear: blogging represents an important tool to share with other people a virtual and mental space.

Several researches about blogs have a descriptive character. The initial aim for the researchers was to analyze a phenomenon which has quickly developed.

Nowadays there is a constant monitoring about the daily increasing of the number of blogs on the Net [20].

The blogosphere, the whole network of all blogs connected, has been considered in relation to its contents [1, 9] or listed with reference to the number of contacts that each blog receives. The actual trend of studies in this field is now

changing: from blog to bloggers, from digital text to its author, from technological tool to usage by users.

Some sociology-based studies tried to assess the blog population and their demographic data and to list possible users' profiles [9, 11, 12]. These studies agree that blogging is not just a teenager habit but it generally involves other age groups.

Further surveys investigated the reasons which lead a user to create a personal blog [16, 18].

Five main motivations have been found:

1. Talking about the blogger's life;
2. Expressing comments and opinions on topics;
3. Expressing emotions;
4. Organizing thoughts through writing;
5. Creating a community.

The above reasons refer to two main types of gratification:

- Satisfaction about the blog content, with reference to the need to talk about oneself, by exposing opinions and feelings.

- Satisfaction about the process, with which the blogger is satisfied by writing and gathering his thoughts. This kind of satisfaction is independent from the blog content.

Both these dimensions are connected with a third motivation typical of Internet: the socializing process.

More recent studies are focused on the possible effects of blogging about the development of identity and relational skills [13]. The blog, in this sense, should be a means to support identity growth, self-disclosure and empowerment in social skills [5, 17].

In opposition to these works about relational opening, other researches inform about psychopathological risk of blog-addiction, related to the abuse of this means of communication [22, 8, 2].

In this case blogging might be an escape from daily routine and a compulsive act.

2. Psychological approach to studies on blogging

Our brief review shows that psychological studies on this field are not many. The aim of this research is to mainly understand the relationship between a person and his blog, using the theoretical construct of presence and experience in the virtual space. Our research is focused on process of

meaning of the blog and especially the particular relationship between the blogger and the other people on the Net. The blog, although personal, will be read by everyone: this is the main difference with the traditional diary. This specific blog condition calls to mind the image of a diary without padlock.

Therefore, the blog experience is fully comparable with the concept of "presence": the blogger chooses contents and structure for his webspace considering other people's reactions..

In fact net environment is constitutionally shared and it is based on the users comments about author's post.

This process can be liken to an another meaningful image: the theatre, in which the protagonist wears its mask, walks on the stage and measures its skills depending on the audience.

Psychology finds in this field many opportunities of research about personality, self-disclosure, identity development.

Observing blog activity allows us to analyze personality-in-action and to understand some dynamics relative to the symbolizing process of experience.

This other aspect calls to mind the image of the mirror, where the blogger can see its reflected image and can choose to share it with the others. Looking at this image, he could see what he appears to the others.

3. Our previous studies before this research

This research is based on a previous quantitative study about personality and quality of interpersonal relationships of bloggers. The results of this study, have been showed at the 13th Annual CyberTherapy Conference in San Diego, demonstrating how blogging does not lead, even in some serious cases, to a risky use of the Net. It rather represents the opportunity for self-exploration.

The interviewed subjects, 30 Italian bloggers, did not obtain critical scores in relation to the two psychological tools used in this investigation: Internet Addiction Test [22] and Inventory of Interpersonal Problems, brief version, [10]. Indeed we enquired about the opportunity of going on with the study, investigating with qualitative methods the representation that bloggers have of themselves, as regards the use of a blog and the sense of presence on the Net.

4. The on-line interview with bloggers

So this work, using qualitative methods, tries to investigate the metal representation that the blogger has about himself and about his blog. Consequently we made an unstructured interview, focusing on three fields: the blogger, the blog, the other on the Net.

This type of interview has been created to be done on-line, during single chat sessions, using common applications of instant messaging (Msn, Gtalk, Yahoo Messenger). The on-line interview is a clinical practice, it is a new and different tool compared with the standard on-line assessment.

The researcher chooses a random sample of blog, then he contacts individually the bloggers and make an appointment on-line.

The questions, although limited to these three fields, can be changed and organized to lead the blogger to a reflection on its blog and on the meanings of this narrative practice.

The three fields of the interview are:

- Blogger/Other in the Net (relationship), this sphere analyzes the author's choice to show or to leave hidden some aspects of himself. This field contains the thoughts and the images related to the presence of the other, even if virtual. It is important to understand how this presence can influence the author, his chooses, his communications;
- Blogger/Blog (post), this field analyzes the motivation for writing and the effects of this practice on the author, referring to self-reflection and identity building. The chronologically order of posts and the continuance in writing support the symbolization of experience;
- Blog/Other on the Net, this field analyze the effects of comments on the interviewee. It is useful to understand the meaning of these feedbacks for the subject. If the blog is considered a virtual environment where users can create a community and socialize, it is important to understand the function of comments in these processes.

The interview contains also some instructions, for example the interviewee has to make a comment about some metaphors of the blog: the mirror, the theater, the refuge.

Each of these images recalls different aspects of blogging: the refuge as an escape from reality, the theater as a test for personal skills, the mirror as tool to reflect own image.

Leading the blogger through these metaphors we can explain these aspects of blogging. Moreover, during the interview, we ask subjects to find themselves a similarity for their diary: "my blog is like...". This simple instruction stimulates further projective movements about blogging. Interview is free: the subjects can choose images, suggestions, memories.

The blog, in the author's experience, is the "third element" between himself and the other in the Net. Thus it is very important to analyze the blogger's representations about their diary.

5. A scheme of interpretation of blogging

Taking into account these considerations about the necessity of a method and of a psychological approach to the study of blogging, we prepared a graphic representation of the three elements which we consider for this study: the blogger, the blog and the Other on the Net. Inside this triad, it is possible to underline the different dynamics on which we are investigating.

The interest is not specifically on single elements but mainly for their reciprocal interaction. The study of blog is

referable to a technical/data processing approach, the study on the Net to a sociological analysis and the study about the blogger to a nomothetic psychological point of view.

Our qualitative analysis focuses rather on the interaction among these three elements.

We find interesting how two of these intersections can be directly observable:

- Post, single action by the authors. It is the main element making the blog itself and is the result of motivations, needs and communicative intentions of blogger.
- Comments, feedbacks deriving from the Other on the Net, are a new element if compared with the traditional diary. The authors, through the comments, could find a different point of view, receiving comprehension, support and “mirroring”.

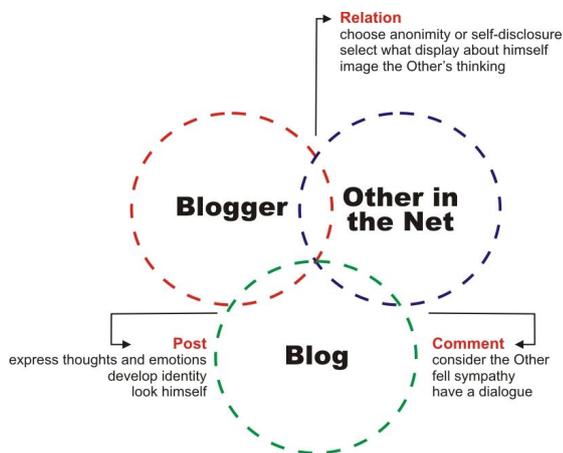


Figure 20 Scheme of blogging

The third intersection, resulting from the meeting between the blogger and the Other on the Net, is not instead directly observable, though it is a fundamental dimension in blogging. In this relationship, the choice between self opening and anonymity can be indicative. It is up to the other that the blogger chooses what to show about himself, what to reveal about its history, its own thoughts and feelings.

6. Considerations on methodology of on-line research

Arranging our research we have encountered some important questions about the methodology of on-line research.

This scientific field still lacks a reference model and therefore working with net users (and with bloggers), is a complex task: careful considerations on the method are necessary.

Using only quantitative tools, we risk to follow a descriptive approach on the phenomenon.

It is necessary, for example, to consider the characteristics of anonymity of the Net: the personal data “behind the screen” is always presumed, never certain.

This limit is at the same time a resource [15].

There are many opportunities using the blog as tool of research:

- The blog analysis is a low-intrusive method. The researcher observes the blog as any other user, he does not influence its author.
- Observing daily life through the use of on-line tools can result a partial and reducing choice, but studying Net users through the Net is a participative method, in relation to “field-research”.
- The contact (email, blog, account) is a key to user, it is a “bridge” between subject and researcher. It is a link which enables to make replies, to collect feedbacks, to increase indefinitely the research.

With reference to the last point it is possible to define a hierarchy among different Internet applications in terms of user involvement and transitory contact:

- Chat, it offers an instantaneous contact through a nickname. The choice of a pseudonym (easy and temporary) offers a high level of anonymity and important warranties about personal data. As regards as on-line research, chatlines offer a weak interaction; The researcher has the possibility to observe, interview, submit test, but he can just operate in a single session and he will be never sure to work with the same user another time;
- Email, it offers a steady and individualized contact. The email is an univocal address, a key to contact repeatedly the same user. Nowadays the email address is also an account for the service of instant messaging (Msn, Gtalk, Yahoo Messenger). It ensures a good traceability, oblige the user to abandon partially its anonymity and to give more personal data. For the on-line research it is an important tool: it allows several work sessions with the same user, it is asynchronous and less invasive. The researcher, through the chat, can complete the normal assessment using user’s feedback;
- Blog, it offers a complex contact with the user, it opens a window, a view on the story and on the characteristic of the subject. The user can express, show, narrate what he prefers. It can keep anonymity about personal data, but has meanwhile the possibility to tell his story, to open himself, to show himself more authentically. In the on-line research the blog is a little invasive tool as the researcher’s observation is the same done by any other user. Besides, the blog allows complex form of interaction with subjects and can be used as a tool for psychological assessment, as a text for comprehension of author’s skills and attitudes, as a sign of personality adjustment.

Conclusions

As regards Internet environment, it is difficult to achieve conclusions: the Net has continuous mutations, sudden changes. Yet we think to carry on with qualitative research on the relationship among blogger, blog and the other on the Net. For example it might be interesting to compare the answers (obtained during the interview) with the real contents of the blog. In this way we could observe the coherency between blog and mental representations of blog.

The traditional diary, an ancestor of blog, responds to needs of secrecy, intimacy and self-knowledge. The diary on the Net intercepts these individual needs and weaves them with the possibility of "being there" with the Other on the Net.

Probably these needs have promoted the spreading proliferation of blog: among the many possible developments the Net, it has evolved toward interpersonal modalities. This trend sustains a real isomorphism between Internet and the relational nature of mind.

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