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Specialized discourse on blogs: Focus on digital (inter-)textuality

The talk picks one of the strands of the conference – specialized discourse and digital textuality – and discusses the impact of digital affordances on the way we use digital texts in relation to the contexts within which we use them. We look at blogs, and academic blogs in particular, as a case in point. Starting from the wider context, i.e. the rapid expansion of digital means of communication and the global extension of the participation framework in Web 2.0, we look at the impact it has had on academia. Academic discourse has become a massive commercial industry: the increasing marketization of knowledge has created intense debate on the notion of visibility, self-promotion, ranking and assessing impact. Outreach (engagement with stakeholders and the public) has become a major strand. The expansion of international publishing in English has posed problems of communicative inequality and highlighted the need to favour access to knowledge (for example with open access publishing and education). Digital means of communication have also determined a general need to be “always on”, and its inevitable consequence: the omnipresence of work (“fast academia”). The expansion of technical affordances has originated new communicative formats and radically changed traditional ones.

Blogs and social media are often seen today as ways of promoting research and facilitating public access to knowledge creation and dissemination. If the social media have eroded the role of blogs in other fields, this is not the case in academia. Blogs help scholars promote their research and engage with wider audiences as well as with other academics. Both blogs and social media increase the possibility to make use of multimodality, they allow interactants a relative degree of anonymity (or multiple and dynamic identities), they potentially reach a vast audience (with different social and cultural understandings and practices), they allow the creation of user-generated content (with the general dynamics of talk in interaction), as well as different degrees of participation and types of communities. When compared to other social media, however, blogs offer greater opportunity to engage with more complex forms of textuality and intertextuality. What still makes blogging very popular in academia may also be the fact that it consents some “slow thinking”, allowing participants to progressively develop their ideas in forms that are less structured than traditional publications but more open to the development of an argument than other social media. Different fields may also have further reasons. It has been claimed, for example, that one of the reasons why there are so many economics blogs is that blogging, as a form of public communication, allows more room for policy matters and even brings policy back to the centre of the academic debate.

Using different empirical case studies from the field of economics, we will look at questions like: are there recognizable discourse structures in blog posts and comments? How far are the style, the organization and the presentation of the text influenced by the affordances of the medium? What are the dialogic features of blogs and posts? How far do they collapse oral and literary traditions, or public and scientific communication? How does their argumentative development compare to more established forms in academia or in the media? How are different semiotic modes and different textual voices integrated in the text? Linking to other texts adds content (or background information) and at the same time authenticity and veracity to what is presented. In academic contexts it also recalls the key role of academic dialogue in the construction of knowledge. This may explain the centrality of reflexive, intertextual activity in both posts and comments, as comments often just contribute personal perspectives or beliefs, but they can also provide supporting or refuting evidence and even parallel argument, with its own intertextual links. The nature of textuality can thus be studied in its realisation in texts and interpreted in the context which defines the cultural structures and the social activities involved.