

A photograph of a person in a crowd, seen from the side, holding up a smartphone to take a picture. The person is wearing a grey sweater and a watch. The background is slightly blurred, showing other people and what appears to be a bookshelf or display case. The entire image has a blue color overlay.

Media Practice and Everyday Agency in Europe

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Too Easy to Say Blog: Paradoxes of Authenticity on the Web

Fausto Colombo

1. Introduction

The so-called blogosphere is a very complex and hard-to-define phenomenon. There are plenty of platforms (Twitter is also a micro-blogging platform), of very different genres (from more or less professional information to private conversations, to digital archives). However, there is no doubt that the most striking feature in blogs is that they are highly personal: a blog is a kind of notebook to write down thoughts, comments, impressions, opinions, simple moods. Its life largely depends on blogger's desire to cultivate it, exactly as a garden (and we know that gardens live depending on a gardener's constancy). A blog is a place to express the self, to perform identity, a private space that, although open to the public, is owned by the blogger who has the right to choose the topics, the constraints and their frequency.

However, things are much more complicated. Firstly, any blogger knows that in blogging, the public is at least as relevant as the private. Using various web analytics tools, it is easy to be informed about audience, more successful posts, trends of growth or decline, and cross-links with other blogs and ratings. In short, the authorship process is similar to that of the culture industry as a whole, which is a good argument in favour of Castells's (2009) definition of social media as "self mass communication". Secondly, although blogging is an exercise of authenticity, your homepage is still a public face, to quote Goffman (1959), either for bloggers or commentators. Therefore, this peculiar discursive context is also somewhat theatrical, and favours exhibitionism and voyeurism (Gotor, 2012).

Thirdly, any blog establishes a more or less virtual dialogue with its readers. Although this dialogue recalls a certain naturalness of speech (as opposed to the top-down style of traditional information, for example), it can also cause typical conflicts and misunderstandings of human communities. This dialogue is not equal, but it is one-many (or few-many in the case of multi-author blogs). Hence it brings into play a complex distribution of powers and authorities.

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I would therefore like to suggest here that it is useful to understand the origin of the personal re-appropriation of public discourse as a point of departure to build new relationships, being aware that we will come across many problematic issues. To highlight this point, I will consider a specific case study, which seems to me to contain almost all the major theoretical issues of the blogosphere, or we could say, of the dialogic universe of Web 2.0.

2. What we mean when we talk about blogs

There is an Italian blog called “Nonsolomamma” (translated: not just a mum). It’s a personal blog written by a journalist named Claudia De Lillo, and nicknamed Elasti or Elastigirl, (with reference to the mother Elastigirl in the animated Pixar movie *The Incredibles*, and to the superpowers needed by any woman to deal with everyday life). The blogger talks about her everyday life as a mother-wife-worker. The style is friendly and ironic. The blog has had huge success, which has been increasing since 2006 (the year of its birth), and has also allowed its author to gain a good reputation and significant public visibility, as well as awards of various kinds. Two books, collecting several blog posts, have been released (*Non solo mamma* in 2008 e *Non solo due*, 2010).

In spring 2012, the blog came under attack by trolls. Trolls are people fuelling hostility on the web. The name, which may come from either the Scandinavian mythological creatures or from the act of “trolling” to collect fish, first appeared on Usenet in the 1990s. Trolls may adopt many nicknames or profiles in order to appear as a mass of dissent or criticism (Donath, 1999). In this case, as is common, the attack was developed with unkind, aggressive, irritating, off-topic comments, with the intent of inhibiting, deviating the discussion and of provoking the online community, thus inciting flaming.

Trolls attacked the “Nonsolomamma” blog, growing gradually more annoying. The attack led to a series of responses and consequences which are interesting in explaining the complexity of blogging as a place of expression and discussion on the web. The attack on this blog helps us to understand darker sides of the web, and to reveal the weaknesses of democratic and free debate on the web. We will therefore use this example to look at some fundamental problems of the blogosphere, and more generally of the web itself.

The attack took place in two stages: first of all, suddenly in 2012, several cynical comments, mainly addressed to other commentators accused of being too sentimental, appeared in the blog; these first attacks tended to provoke other commentators. The attack was not initially aimed at the blogger, but at the emphatic commentators. However, due to increasingly aggressive and provocative comments, the blogger Elasti answered the troll(s). This started the second stage of the troll’s attack: at first the troll(s) justified themselves by

saying that even though there was a single IP address, the writers could be many. Afterwards one of the commentators, with the emblematic nickname “Chepalle” (translated: that sucks), addressed critics:

a) Accusing the blogger of merely being eager for money and success:

Cheppalle: Elastigirl does not watch television, she is against television, in practice, Elast-girl has nothing to do with television. However she is so selfish that she was not able to resist the temptation to raise her visibility on TV (blog, books and newspapers were not enough). (...), what better time to persuade your simple-minded fans? Elasti you are as cunning as a fox! :-D

and of being unable to manage the blog and to moderate blog comments:

Cheppalle!: (...) But don't you realize that Elasti “the Fox” never responds to critics? Do you think it is because she is in a good mood? Or because she thinks: “It isn't worth it”? of course not! :-D she has no interest in calming people down, because controversy and criticism increase the number of comments to her blog and she is only interested in this! :-D

b) Accusing other commentators of excessive flattery:

Cheppalle!: Your flattery ... it sucks ... no words!

c) Commenting on almost every comment, so as to provoke other commentators:

Tiziana: Cheppalle! Stop commenting! Don't you have anything else to do?

As tension increased, Cugino S. (translated: cousin S.) announced, in a long post, the decision to ban ChePalle! and the troll(s) hiding behind this nickname. There follows a long passage from this post, which is crucial to my analysis:

Cugino S.: Dear Cheppalle!, I'm a very marginal commentator in the world of Elasti, known as Cousin S. I have 13 years of experience in the web, it is my work. Thus I support my cousin when she needs a hand with the blog.

This off-topic post is exclusively addressed to you, Cheppalle.

I hate to do this, because in many cases some of your sarcastic comments make me smile, but your behaviour in this community has degenerated to an unsustainable point both for Claudia, who must moderate your comments, and for other commentators. To write aggressive comments, to unnecessarily flame, to change nicknames, to create fake dialogues, to provoke other blog readers ... these are recognised activities on the web and are well-known as trolling. And the troll within a community has only one fate: to be banned.

This place (...) continues to be a private space. It is not a product. It is not a commercial space. It is a space that Claudia has decided to keep clean, even from banners and ads. It is an environment that Claudia has managed for years with care and passion, even in respect of her blog users. If you want to stay in this environment, you are requested to follow a few rules that have existed since the 80s, the days of Usenet. Here are some links which will help you to better understand these rules and how you need to behave on the web: (...)

At present your IP address is ***. You have 285 approved and uncensored comments even when you commented with different nicknames such as: Cheppalle!, Mira, CUKI, Jersey, Sharlee, Alessia Nardini, Macy, Sarah, THE TROLL (and I could also report the (mostly fake) e-mail addresses with which you logged in (...)) However on 27 April, we had to cancel your 70 comments published from 9:51 to 11:08. ...

It is too much! Don't you think so? I would also let you know that there are now online services that allow us to geo-locate an IP address. Hence, to believe that you are totally anonymous is a big mistake. Postal and Communication Police, knowing an IP address, can easily use this and track your PC, even when the IP is dynamic.

Afterwards a discussion about the legitimacy of banning started. Meanwhile, the aggressive comments slowly started to disappear – this will be discussed later. Now I want to analyse this story in detail, as a good example for understanding how the blogosphere functions.

3. The “space” of a blog

I would like to start by taking into account the nature of a blog as “specific space”. This crucial issue is interestingly tackled in several works. Papacharissi (2010), for example, makes the link between blogging and post-modern narcissism, referring to Lasch (1979) and Sennett (1974). Later Lovink (2007, 2012) criticises the role of posts and then of comments, by examining links between blog comments and the ancient commentaries. But the analysis of our case study allows us to avoid vagueness and to address the problem of defining a blog as a “space” (public vs. private). We start by analysing a post by Elasti answering the troll attack:

This blog was born almost six years ago, because I wanted to write, and to be read, because almost no one writes to themselves (...)

This blog is a trace of my life, the trace I will leave to my children when they grow up, everyone leaves traces resembling it, this is mine (...)

This blog has always been my home: I keep it clean and I want it to look like me, always, when I'm happy and when I'm sad, when I'm excited and when I'm bored. This place is not a product, it is my home. (...) The space of comments (...)

It (the blog) looked like me...) because there was respect (...) now it is not like that anymore (...) I do not bother about criticisms but I do bother about aggression, bitterness, insults, provocation, it disturbs me to be in a place, in my home, that is not like me and that I do not like (...) from today all aggressive, insulting, provocative comments may be deleted and reported as spam. Because I want to continue to recognize my home and to love it. Elasti

A brief analysis: Claudia De Lillo's account is very clear: her blog (which is neither for information, nor directly commercial) is her "home", and as such, the law is that of the owner, which means that those entering are guests, but also that she wants to be able to express herself freely, and to be respected by her guests. Of course, the blog corresponds to a human being who has undergone several personal attacks by trolls (e.g. "Claudia de Lillo is fake and a hypocrite, I know her from high school when ..."). However, the house-owner is virtual, is an avatar with a nickname, Elasti, with a specific style and story (her characters are real in the blogger's life but they are always named with pseudonyms, although of course they can be recognised in real life). I want to argue that - although it may seem obvious - to identify a blog with a home is in fact a metaphor which (as a metaphor) cannot be taken literally. If we consider the different comments to this post in the blog, some argue that the metaphor of the sense of property should be accepted: the blogger pays for the domain name, and as such she has the right to act as if it were her home. On the other hand, there are those who, instead of the metaphor of the home, use that of the public space (square, street, balcony).

A blog is therefore a home, or square, or a visible and public area with private space. In the second and third cases, some commentators (not necessarily trolls) seem to suggest that the blogger should let others express themselves. Alternatively, the blogger should close comments, to avoid the problem. But if you expose yourself in a public space, then the only possible regulation is that of democracy where anyone has freedom of expression, can have their speaker's corner, as any "space" for discussion can be a space of democracy.

It is mostly striking that the metaphor is taken literally, forgetting that its origin, which refers to the physical space, has nothing to do with the nature of the web. In fact, the web is not a space, (it is, of course, in its infrastructure, but that is not the experience that we have, nor is it what enables various types of relationships) but a context in the sense that communication scholars give to the term. A context is a coded communicative situation, in which related subjects interact. A discursive context does not need space, although often a communicative relationship takes place in space. When we read a book, for example, the context is similar even though we are in different cities. The same happens in research or a consultation, a chat, a comment, a purchase or a bank transfer: all these actions happen at home, at work, on a bus, on holiday.

In spite of the many spatial metaphors we use (the medium as environment, web users as its inhabitants: Giaccardi, 2011), the web is not a space, but a set of relational contexts. Social media does not have a place, even if it is everywhere, as are their users. But it is human ubiquity which generates web globalisation, and not vice versa.

In other words, the space we are talking about here is that of discourse, of human communication, either online or offline, and with its own rules. We could talk about discursive space, or better still, in order to avoid the spatial metaphor, of “discursive context”.

The theme of the media has always been that of “openness”. In an experiment from many years ago Italian Radical Radio decided to broadcast any phone calls from anonymous listeners, which finally led to insults of various natures being broadcast. Was this a democratic space? Was this an example of freedom of expression? In the case of Elasti’s post, which compared her blog to her home, is she really talking about a possession? I don’t think so. I think she is rather referring to something else, which could be called a certain “care” for something that she has created and cultivated (with success, satisfaction and some indirect economic reward) in a wider potential discursive context that is the web, and more specifically a blogging platform. So what Elasti refers to is her “care for the discourse”, which implies a form, a style in the content she provides, as well as rules for decluttering (i.e. selection and clean-up of comments). This regulation, however, is born with discursive context, and is part of the rules which are accepted by most literate web users. In short, a blog is not a house, not a square, not a balcony or any other type of physical space, even though each of these metaphors can be applied to it. A blog is a specific discursive context enabled by web platforms that work and by those who care about its existence.

4. Conflict and discourse

In a discursive context, and even more, as a collective discursive context, a blog is a field of forces in which people collaborate on the one hand, and compete on the other. People collaborate for the pure pleasure of sociability, as analysed by Simmel (Simmel & Hughes, 1949). Therefore, for the sake of sociability itself, a phenomenon such as web homogeneity might occur, namely our proximity to those we think like us, to those we feel closer to our ideology, affinity, race, nationality, sexual preferences and so forth. It struggles for supremacy, greater visibility, and leadership, in the name of self-affirmation and of narcissism that is, according to some scholars, the true nature of the web. The story of a blog, and with no exception of the Nonsolomamma blog, takes place between cooperation and conflict.

We focus here on conflict, which is the main feature of the following blog sentence we are going to analyse, and which primarily focuses on leadership. From this point of view, we can observe three types of discourse strategies implemented by trolls, some of which we have already mentioned:

- a. The first consists of attacking other commentators, judging them as “better” commentators (smarter, better educated, wittier, or more cynical, more acidic, more aggressive ...)
- b. The second strategy consists of attacking bloggers, devaluing their quality, sincerity, and so on
- c. The third strategy is to challenge the leadership of the blogger, claiming a key role as commentator.

Are these three strategies efficient? We could argue that the final result (the decluttering and banning of the troll(s) from the blog) seems to say otherwise. However, we must firstly ask what the troll’s goal is. We could try to understand it by looking at the blog as discursive context.

We can observe that the troll does not work constructively. The troll’s task seems to be (whatever the personal, psychological or emotional motivations) to disable the existence of any kind of dialogue. So these strategies aim to cancel and contaminate other discourses. How do they do this? Precisely by having no respect for rules, by lying about identity, by making the message flow unreadable. Therefore, the strategy the troll(s) used was not inefficient, and refers to a dark side of discourse in the network, which is enabled by anonymity and by expressiveness. After all, a negative, mocking writing style belongs to the web, as it belongs to human expressiveness, and it is therefore crucial to take account of this feature so as to avoid a superficial judgment of the mechanisms of the web.

5. Trust and identity

Before coming back to consider the troll attack at Nonsolomamma blog, it is worth considering an issue which allows us to understand a crucial feature of discursive context in blogs and social media: trust and identity.

When examining trust in social media, we are talking, of course, about that aspect of trust that is not so much about listening to and trusting another’s words, but rather believing that it is worthwhile to trust and confide in each other. Trust in social media is not always really based on face-to-face interpersonal relationships. Trust and confidence in blogs or in social media are given to an unknown audience of people, which reacts through writing, but which remains hidden (or with a fake identity) to those giving their trust.

In this frame the role of the listener is not that of an “expert” in listening, or a member belonging to a socially legitimated or acknowledged category. On the contrary, in a sort of Wiki logic, confidence and trust are given by the blogger to the others, as self-expression can improve the blogger’s condition (as in the case of terminally ill bloggers). There is another crucial point: web platforms hosting user’s self-expression are in fact autonomous from the writer and the audience. A confession or a visit to a doctor in fact enjoys professional confidentiality, which are not required by either an audience or by web platforms. So our confessions on the web are there forever, available for a potentially unlimited audience.

The issue of trust allows us to understand the last point of our analysis. We have seen that self-expression in social media, and particularly in blogs, is based on trust given to readers and/or users, and to anonymous audiences as in the example of the blogger Claudia De Lillo/Elasti. One can hardly speak of exhibitionism or narcissism (there are examples of these trends on the web), but, in a blog such as the one we are analysing, it is perhaps more appropriate to emphasise the importance of trust given to “the crowd”. Moreover Nonsolomamma blog readers are also giving a fundamental trust. This is not of course the confidence in an institution. Albeit under a pseudonym, Elasti is a person who expresses herself. It is not the simple trust given to a novel author, or to a news journalist, but a curious mix of the two, which is probably the true characteristic of this type of blog. This means that Elasti is believed, followed and sometimes liked as a good “housewife” or better as a good creator of a sociable discursive context.

Therefore, identity becomes a crucial issue in the conflict, precisely because we cannot trust people who are not what they claim to be. If there is no trust, any communicative context is necessarily challenged. This is why understanding the reasons to reveal and attack another’s identity during a conflict is crucial to understanding trolling and, more generally, social media. In moderating received comments, Elasti revealed the multiple identities of some critical commentators to other readers. In response to a comment by Leila Bo, which suggested another commentator undergo psychological consultation, Elasti answered:

Perhaps a psychological consultation would be useful primarily to those who, in two days, have use different nicknames (signing) noemi b, leti.zia, aims and leila BO), despite being the same person.

Here conflict arises, after Elasti reveals the commentator’s identity as someone who appears to be a single entity hidden behind various nicknames. Elasti denounces something vital, namely the commentator’s reliability, through these multiple nicknames. In fact, if they hides their true identity, will they earn trust in the discussion? How can this person contest other commentators and attack

them personally (suggesting, in this case, a psychological consultation), after having lied about their own identity (in this case, in particular, about several identities)?

The arguments used by Elasti are interesting for considering the crucial issue of self-expression in blogging. We can try to summarise it: if one of the main features of social media is the opportunity for anyone to express themselves in front of an audience, what responsibility do those who express themselves have? I would say that of authenticity, namely a coherence between what is written and what is thought, between what is described and what is. Trust is based on this mechanism.

Of course, the use of nicknames shows that this unwritten rule is not always valid. None of these uses is considered illegal, or even sanctioned by the implicit rules which are more or less codified in netiquettes. Transparency and authenticity are one of the two poles of web ethics (because they relate to trust), while the other pole consists of the right of privacy. In short, we can express ourselves freely, but in return for this we have the right/duty to be authentic; authenticity may conflict with our intimacy.

At first, web anonymity is a pure discursive convention. In fact it does not exist, because our online behaviours are mostly traceable. We simply behave in discursive contexts as if we were unaware of this potential. In the case of Elasti's blog, it was a breaking of rules that served to prove the breach of trust made by the trolls.

One of the most problematic consequences of the correspondence between online and offline discursive context is that it can in fact turn against anybody: as in the recent case of a fifteen year old Canadian girl who committed suicide because a cyber-bully had published compromising photos of her online. The group Anonymous has sought to identify and unmask the cyber-bully. Similar phenomena have also occurred in Japan and other parts of the world.

Apart from any judgment about the legitimacy of these actions, I would like to point out that the issue of identity continues to remain crucial. In my opinion, this shows the deep link that discursive contexts have with online interpersonal trust, in a different way than they do in traditional broadcasting media. Social media communication should perhaps be called a mediated interpersonal relationship which is preserved with delicacy, fragility, and for this reason charm and risk.

6. Final remarks

I started my contribution referring to the blogosphere as a very complex and hard-to-define phenomenon, defined by the opposition between openness and privacy, authenticity and mask, naturalness and theatrical play. In order to go deeper in this complexity, I analyzed a single case: a blog attacked by trolls.

First, I considered the definition of the specific characteristics of the context given by the participants in the discussion. This definition is a semantic battlefield, where a metaphor like that of space is used by blogger, trolls and commentators in order to define the rules of the dialogue.

Secondly, I tried to individuate the different strategies of discourse used by the participants for winning the struggle. Albeit different, the strategies used by the blogger and by the trolls are both based on the identity role play: are the speakers really what they declare to be?

This focus on the strategies allowed me to introduce the last part of the analysis, referring to the role of trust, as linked to identity of the speaker. In the case we have seen, what is discussed is more or less true depending on the authenticity of the declared identity of the speaker. We can conclude that the dialogical context of the blog is dominated by the typical problem of the mediated relations in the web 2.0, where the conversation is not between people, but between representations people give of themselves. This paradox increases not only the opportunities, but also the risks in communication, and that's why the dialogical field of the blogosphere is characterized by strong attack-defence strategies, as a part of the everyday conversations.

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Biography

Fausto Colombo is full professor of Theory and techniques of media at the Faculty of Political and Social Sciences, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milan, Italy where he is Head of Department of Media, Communication and Performing Arts. He also teaches media genres and format at the USI (Università della Svizzera Italiana). He is a member of the Scientific Council of the CELSA (Université Paris IV, Sorbonne), where he was invited professor in 2014. He is coordinator of the Section "Cultural Processes and Institution" of the Italian Association of Sociologists (AIS), and a member of the Executive board of ECREA (European Communication Research and Education Association). He is also member of the editorial board of the journals "Comunicazioni Sociali", "ComPol – Comunicazione Politica", "Communication & Languages" and "CM. Communication Management Quarterly".+

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