

Understanding Weblogs: a communicative perspective.

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Abstract This research investigates what form of communication is made possible through the weblog and what its uses are for the future. Taking Habermas' theory, it will be investigated whether blogs offer a platform for what he calls the 'ideal speech situation'. Conditions for the ideal speech situation are that everyone has equal access to the communication, that there are no power differences between the participants and that the participants act truthfully towards each other. To answer the question whether weblogs can satisfy these conditions, the framework of communication capacities of Van Dijk (1999) will be used and extended with two concepts. Based on these communication capacities it can be concluded that weblogs do offer a platform for the ideal speech situation. Future use of weblogs lie in the three formal world perspectives Habermas distinguishes: self-expression (subjective), sharing knowledge (objective) and social criticism (inter-subjective). From these three domains networks will emerge from people with shared interests, who will reinforce social interaction by using the weblog as a communication hub, a fixed marker on the internet where multiple communication channels for dialogue will be offered. (N.B.: this paper is a summarized translation of my Masters Thesis for the University of Twente, The Netherlands, with the title: Een goed gesprek onder miljoenen ogen: het weblog als knooppunt voor on line interactie.)

1 Introduction

Since the turn of the millennium a new genre on the internet has gained a lot of interest, the weblog. In short one could say that a blog is a special kind of website which is updated frequently with new postings and published in reverse chronological order (the most recent posting is on top of the page). Since there is free software available, everyone with a connection to the internet has the ability to publish a weblog. That means that there is a wide variety of blogs that can be read on the WWW.

At first sight blogging, publishing on a blog, seems merely a way to show one's own opinions and ideas. What is different from a blog in comparison to traditional home pages on which people share their interests and hobby's, is that from a communicative perspective a weblog not only transmits information through the internet, but also takes on a receiving role. Many bloggers give their readers the opportunity to respond to the different postings and get involved in conversations through a weblog. That makes a blog a different way to communicate with others than traditional web pages do.

The rise of this new genre on the internet has triggered people into researching whether blogs can be a form of communication that complies with the vision of Tim Berners Lee when creating the WWW. "The vision I have for the Web is about anything being potentially connected with anything. It is a vision that provides us with new freedom, and allows us to grow faster than we ever could when we were fettered by the hierarchical classification systems into which we bound our-selves." (Berners-Lee & Fischetti, 1999) The WWW should be a place in which everyone can speak for him or herself without the boundaries that are set by traditional media. Ito (2004) describes that publication tools like weblogs could contribute to a new form of democracy in which consensus is no longer build by the mass media through broadcasting, but a process of conversations between people to reach consensus.

The weblog could be a way for building consensus according to Ito (2004). A highly regarded philosopher of our time, Jürgen Habermas, explicitly describes how people could build such

a consensus. Several researchers have connected Habermas' theory to what we call the blogosphere, the network of bloggers. (Thompson, 2003; Mortensen & Walker, 2002) These researchers question whether the blogosphere can comply with what Habermas calls the public sphere. The public sphere is a domain of social life in which public opinion can be formed according to Habermas. This domain is accessible for all people. Part of the public sphere is constituted by the conversations that take place whenever people meet and form a public. (Thompson, 2003). Habermas compares these conversations with the salons and coffeehouses from the 19th century. Not all social classes were represented in salons, which were mostly formed by the bourgeois. Habermas distinguishes three aspects on basis of these salons and coffeehouses which constitute the public sphere: "not equality, but a *total disregard of status*, the *problematization of areas that until then had not been questioned*, and the principal of the *public as inclusive, not exclusive*." (Mortensen & Walker, 2002: 258)

Like salons weblogs stand between the public and the private. Blogs are written by an individual that expresses its attitude and opinions which makes a blog subjective. At the same time a blog is part of the public domain through publication on the internet and concerning matters to the public (ibid.) To be able to create a public sphere through blogs it is important according to Habermas that people are willing to listen to opposing opinions, especially when we try to reach an agreement. Thompson (2003) points out the danger that bloggers focus on equal opinions which results in an isolation of people with a different opinion.

The comparisons from Mortensen & Walker (2002) and Thompson (2003) between blogs and Habermas' public sphere are not thorough enough to conclude that the blogosphere could be compared with it. They only regarded a small part of Habermas theory and therefore they don't do fully justice to his theory.

There is still not much scientific research done on weblogs, though the number of publications is speeding up lately. From all kinds of disciplines people write articles about blogs and the blogosphere, varying from conversation analysis (De Moor & Efimova, 2004) to psychology (Grohol, 2002). It is remarkable that most of the research explores the possibilities to apply blogs in a certain setting, for example in educational settings or organisational settings. One could conclude that people already have a common understanding of what a weblog is. From the turn of the millennium people have given descriptions of a weblog, but most of the time these were made by bloggers themselves (see e.g. Blood, 2000) The descriptions given were based on blogs in their environment, disregarding all other types of blogs around that didn't have the same features. Herring et al (2004) showed through an empirical study that several aspects given in definitions of a blog didn't count for the whole group of blogs since there are subcultures with different standards. Professionally oriented bloggers use their blog a whole lot different than teenagers do.

An important aspect of the weblog isn't regarded in the literature so far, namely the use of the technology. Weblogs are a form of computer-mediated communication and that means that communication through blogs comes with certain changes in comparison to face-to-face communication. In some ways communication will be poorer and in others the communication will be enriched. Through a textual conversation people will have a different experience than when the same people have a conversation in a bar. On the other hand, using the internet it is possible to communicate cheaply and simply with people at the other side of the world.

1.1 Research questions

This paper will look at the weblog as a form of communication. Central question is what form of communication is made possible through weblogs. This question will be answered through three sub questions. First of all it is needed to have a better understanding of what a blog is and this paper will give a definition of the blog based on the communicative aspects.

The theory of Habermas will be the basis for this research. Thompson (2003) and Mortensen & Walker (2002) discuss whether blogs can be a public sphere. This part of Habermas' theory is part of his greatest work from the early eighties, *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns* (Theory of Communicative Action). In that work Habermas formulates a rationally justified analysis of society. On basis of an analysis of speech acts he develops a theoretical framework which gives hold to societal progress. (Kunneman & Munnichs, 1998) Part of this theory is the building of consensus, which is needed to have a stable society. The only way we can build consensus is when people meet the rules of the 'ideal speech situation'. This means that all participants in social discourse enjoy an equal opportunity to initiate and sustain communication and the whole communicative exercise is transparent. Desirable features centre on the strength of good, well-grounded argument provided in an open forum, rather than authority, tradition, ideology, power or prejudices. (Heng & De Moor, 2003) These features of the ideal speech situation form the basis for what we called earlier the public sphere. So the second question in this paper is not whether blogs can meet up with the public sphere, but whether blogs can offer a platform for the ideal speech situation.

This second question can only be answered when we look at the technology that is used in blogs. Van Dijk describes in his book *The Network Society* the changes that new media bring to our society, based on various theories on the mediating role of communication technology. He has developed a framework of characteristics which can be used to compare old and new media. This framework will be used to analyse which characteristics of weblogs can influence the achievement of an ideal speech situation.

When we've analysed whether blogs can offer a platform for the ideal situation or not, we can look on the opportunities that weblogs offer for the future and in what areas they can be used. This is the third sub-question.

The outline of this paper is as follows: first it will be explained what a weblog is from a communicative point of view and a definition of the weblog will be given. Then a short explanation will be given of Habermas' theory of communicative action, ending with a description of the ideal speech situation. The next step is to describe the technological characteristics of this communication medium using Van Dijk's terminology. Finally, it will be analysed for what areas weblogs can be used in the future. At the end of this paper the most important findings will be summarised.

2 The weblog: a definition

A weblog could be seen as a form of a webpage to which lots of tools are added. Current descriptions of blogs focus on describing these tools. Weblogs use RSS (real simple syndication), comment function, trackback function (to track discussion between different blogs), blogrolls, archives. (Hourihan, 2002; Gill, 2004) Focusing on the technical aspects of the blog doesn't tell much about the thing that is the most important about blogs, namely that one communicates with others through them.

When we would compare blogs to something that happens in the real world, we could perhaps best compare them to 'Speaker's corner' in London. This is a corner of Hyde Park where people can meet up and discuss things that matter to them. (Wikipedia) What usually happens is that someone climbs on a box, starts talking about a subject and other people, passers by, can start a discussion with the person speaking. The place is freely accessible, anyone can start and join a discussion regardless of education or origin. Looking at blogs we could say that by blogging someone climbs on a virtual box to tell a story. This story attracts the attention of passers by on the internet, for instance by using a search engine. People read the weblog just as passers by at Speaker's Corner can stop for a while and listen to

what is being said. People who are interested can react on the things that are written through a comment function or by writing about the topic on one's own blog.

What happens in both cases, at Speaker's Corner and in blogs, is that through dissemination dialogue will be achieved. Peters (1999) explains what these two terms mean based on two visions about the question what good communication is. According to Socrates, the main character in Plato's dialogues, the only way in which people can truly communicate with each other is through dialogue. The melting together of two souls is the only way in which two parties can communicate with each other. Through dialogue one can 'scribe' onto each others souls. That is the reason why Socrates criticizes the written word. The written word will never be able to make a match between people as dialogue can. Text comes short since it will never be able to directly respond to the questions of the reader.

Dissemination on the other hand departs from the point-of-view that the best way to get ideas into the world is by scattering them around, like Jesus did with the word of God. By seeding the message in as much people as you can reach, the chances of reaching those that are interested and willing to receive get bigger. The discovery of the written word offers an opportunity to overcome physical distance so that it's no longer needed to meet all people face-to-face, as well as text can overcome time distance. The written word can be seen as the first type of mass communication, taking it's flight after the invention of the art of printing.

Through blogging one starts with dissemination on the internet. The author writes something and publishes it for others to read. There will be readers, varying from some to thousands, just as there are listeners at Speaker's Corner. Allowing readers to comment on the written entries makes it possible that conversation between the reader and the blogger, or between readers, can ensue.

Looking at weblogs in a communicative way we could therefore define a weblog as follows:

The weblog, or blog, is a webpage on which the author publishes pieces with the intention to start conversation.

This means that there are a few technical demands to be met to be able to speak of a weblog. First of all conversation must be possible. This is achieved through a comment function to enable dialogue within the same blog. To be able to track conversation through different weblogs one should have trackback functionality. To be able to use trackback every single entry needs to have an unique URL. Finally, to encourage people to read the weblog continuously one should offer a RSS or Atom feed.

Knowing that people have conversations through blogs, we can investigate to what extent the conversations that take place can be good communication. Therefore we'll have a look at the theory of Habermas.

3 Habermas' theory

Conversation can be more or less deep. When neighbours speak to each other over the fence the conversation that takes place will probably be nothing more than a little chat about anything between the kids and the weather. However when two professors of a university talk about the future of their research the conversation could have consequences for them or for co-workers. In blogging we can see the same difference. Chat style of conversation can be seen in diary style blogs. It's sort of a replacement for the chat with the neighbour. More deep conversation can be seen in blogs with a professional slant, for instance blogs about knowledge management. The latter form of blogs is where this paper will focus on.

As referred to in the introduction Ito (2004) sees weblogs as an instrument to reach consensus between people. Habermas states that a consensus can only be achieved when there is communicative symmetry between people, within the ideal speech situation. What the ideal speech situation is will be explained next.

In Habermas' theory the relation between people, the intersubjectivity, has a central role. Through communication it is possible to reach agreement between people and reaching agreement is in the interest of the continued existence of social society. Through communication people continuously reach agreement on what true knowledge is in the world which leads to a stable social order. The point where people reach agreement, in other words, what true knowledge is, will change over time as it is the result of inter-subjective discussions. Conditions can change over time, for example because of new possibilities created by technological innovation. Whenever conditions change a new discussion between people is required to redefine true knowledge.

In a discussion, consensus or agreement is aimed for by using arguments and counter arguments. Decisions based on arguments can be called rational. For Habermas rationality means reaching consensus by communication that is free of any form of coercion. Language is the means by which inter-subjective agreement is reached. To explain what language is Habermas uses the theory of speech acts. With this theory it can be determined when we can speak of communication.

Not all speech acts can be seen as communication. Habermas distinguishes three different types of action: instrumental action, strategic action and communicative action. Instrumental and strategic action both are goal oriented whereas communicative action aims for consensus. In terms of Habermas only communicative action can be called communication. In communicative action participants are not oriented to their own individual successes. They pursue their individual goals under the condition that they can harmonize their plans on the basis of common situation definitions. In this respect the negotiation of definitions of the situation is an essential element of communicative actions. (Habermas, 1984: 286)

With every speech act (e.g. command, ask, declare) we make certain claims:

- the aspect of the rightness that the speaker claims for his action in relation to a normative context (or, indirectly, for these norms themselves);
- the truthfulness that the speaker claims for the expression of subjective experiences to which he has privileged access;
- the truth that the speaker, with his utterance, claims for a statement. (Habermas, 1984: 307)

By introducing these three claims Habermas shows that common situation definitions that result from communicative actions relate to three realms of reality or world perspectives: the objective reality of things and occurrences, the social reality of norms (also called the inter-subjective reality) and the inner reality of intentions emotions and needs (also called the subjective reality). (Kunneman, 1986) With speech acts the speaker makes claims regarding objectivity (truth), intersubjectivity (rightness) and subjectivity (truthfulness). These three claims that Habermas defines have a verifiable character. One can retrace the reasons the speaker has for claiming something.

We already saw that Habermas defines good communication as communication for reaching understanding. Communicative action, as a form of communication doesn't mean however that a perpetual discussion is going on. In general all kinds of claims are accepted without discussion, against the background of shared frameworks of interpretation such as cultural background. Therefore we should distinguish between communicative action on the one hand, where validity claims are accepted at face value, and discourse where validity claims that have become problematic are challenged by argument and counterargument. (Kunneman, 1986: 219) If during communicative action questions arise with regard to

accepting one or more validity claims, three routes are possible: (1) those involved decide to break off communication; (2) those involved can switch from communicative to strategic action and try to manipulate each other; (3) those involved switch to another level of communication, discourse, where they try to re-establish consensus about the problematic validity claim. (Kunneman, 1986: 219-220)

Discourse is meant to reach consensus or agreement. The question is how to create a communication process in such a way that agreement is indeed reached. It is of crucial importance that all relevant arguments are included in discourse. Habermas postulates that the quality of communication can only be guaranteed if there is communicative symmetry between all parties involved. Communicative symmetry means that certain conditions have to be met. Habermas calls these conditions for an 'ideal speech situation'. The conditions are:

all parties involved have equal opportunity to start a discussion, and to bring forward arguments and criticize those of others;
there can be no power differences between parties involved, as that might prevent relevant arguments being put forward;
all participants should act truthfully towards each other, to ensure that manipulation does not take place. (Kunneman & Munnichs, 1998)

Only when these conditions are met, communicative symmetry is possible. It may be clear that in many ways this symmetry can be distorted. A participant can be acting strategically, unknown by others, and tries to manipulate others in order to reach his own goal. Or maybe unknowingly there are power differences between the participants. In order to achieve communicative symmetry it is important that all participants in a discourse can be trusted and behaves in terms of the ideal speech situation.

Habermas is theoretical in his approach and therefore doesn't offer any opinion with how this ideal speech situation can be achieved in real life. The coming of the internet has inspired researchers to think about settings in which an ideal speech situation can be achieved (see e.g. Drake et al, 2000; Froomkin, 2003; Heng & De Moor, 2003) To answer the question whether the blogosphere can meet the conditions for an ideal speech situation it is first necessary to look at the communicative characteristics from the weblog, how the technology shapes communication through blogs. It might be that certain aspects of blogs strengthen Habermas' theory and others weaken it. The next section will investigate the communicative aspects of weblogs.

4 The weblog as a form of communication

To analyze the aspects that can influence the communication through weblogs, Van Dijk's terminology will be used. Van Dijk (1999) formulates a framework to analyse new media based upon the many theories on media that have been used in the past.

4.1 Interactivity

According to Van Dijk new media are characterized by a shift from traditionally one-sided communication, like television and radio, to two- and more-sided communication that is potentially diverse and rich through the integration of sound, text and images. New media also are known to be interactive media. Van Dijk comes up with four levels of interactivity that indicate the quality of interaction. Important to note is that these levels are cumulative. The highest level can only be reached when the first three levels are met.

The first level of interactivity is the possibility of two- or more-sided communication. This is a spatial dimension, since there has to be a connection between the interacting parties that supports action and reaction between them. An example of the first level is e-mail. Basically we could call this type of communication asynchronous. The second level of interactivity is

synchronicity. Van Dijk thinks that succession of action and reaction without time intervals generally will do good to the quality of interaction, though some new media, like e-mail are especially popular for its asynchronicity. Asynchronous media can be used on multiple times and locations and there is more time to reflect before responding.

The third level of interactivity is the extent of control by the interacting parties. This extent is determined by the possibility for the people involved to switch from sender and receiver during the interaction. Conversations through the telephone can reach this third level. The final level Van Dijk distinguishes are actions and reaction that include understanding of context and meaning. This is a level of interactivity that is limited to humans and animals with consciousness. According to Van Dijk this level still hasn't been reached with interaction between people and machines or media.

Traditional web pages are mainly information based and are not meant to be a starting point for conversation. Often these pages have a purely sending role in the communication and are not interactive at all. The weblog, as described in this paper, does meet the first level of interactivity, namely two- or more-sided communication. However, no matter how many tools are added to encourage communication between the author and readers, the communication through a blog will be asynchronous. Since we can speak of two-sided communication we can look at the information patterns in the communication that takes place. The next section will address this issue.

4.2 Information patterns

When there is two or more sided communication, we can look at the patterns the communication could follow. Van Dijk uses the theory of Bordewijk and Van Kaam that consists of four information patterns. These are: allocation, consultation, registration and conversation.

- Allocation: the simultaneous flow of information to a collective of decentral units by a centre that is the source of the information and determines the topic, time and pace of the information. (e.g. radio and television)
- Consultation: the consulting of information at a centre by individual decentral units where the centre is the source of the information and the decentral unit determines the topic, time and pace. (e.g. newspaper, teletext)
- Registration: the collecting of information by a centre that determines the topic, time and pace, from one or more decentral units that could be the source of this information and can initiate information transfer. (e.g. questionnaires, electronic banking)
- Conversation : the exchange of information by two or more decentral units without a centre but through a medium, according to Van Dijk only through speech, where these units determine topic, time and pace together. (e.g. telephone)

In new media the communication pattern evolves in the direction of decentral units. The movement flows from allocation to consultation, registration and conversation. That means that for the first time in history media give us the opportunity to choose between face-to-face contact or mediated communication for a range of social activities.

Looking at weblogs this shift from allocation towards a mixture of consultation, registration and conversation becomes indeed visible. As weblogs are web pages they fit the pattern of consultation. Web pages are available at any time, and the pace of reading, as well as what is read, is determined by the reader.

The first appearances of weblogs were filters for the web, and are good examples of the registration pattern. The weblogger collects links to interesting articles and publishes them on his weblog. (Blood, 2000) Here the weblogger is the centre, and the collected links to other

sites the decentral units. These early weblogs functioned as a sort of news-collecting web pages. The sources that are referred to often are bloggers themselves, another centre, pointing to yet another set of (decentral) sources. Thus networks of bloggers emerge, who collect sources, point to interesting sites, with a certain measure of overlap. Although Hering et al. (2004) concluded in their research that the number of hyperlinks in weblogs is lower than webloggers themselves think, there are still a sizeable number of weblogs that can be called linklogs. Amongst professionally oriented bloggers linking to each other is also very common. There are for instance academics and higher educated people who use their blogs to sharpen and test their ideas. So these weblogs too, fit the pattern of registration.

The last information pattern Van Dijk (1999) mentions is conversation, the exchange of information by decentral units without a centre, but through a medium. According to Van Dijk this medium can only be speech, because the units determine topic time and pace amongst themselves. New media will strengthen this primarily because of the increased capacity digital networks bring compared to analogue networks for telephony. This definition of conversation as speech only, is very limited. This can cause problems in describing new media. How would one position 'chat' for instance? Chatting is a form of communication where those present in the chat at the same time, determine topic and pace. This means chatting is a form of conversation, even without speech. Furthermore Van Dijk assumes that conversation implies synchronicity. Can a conversation also be asynchronous? Are the discussions in internetfora conversations as well?

Donath et al. (1999) state that conversations can be asynchronous as well. One of the advantages they see in asynchronous conversation is the persistence of conversations, as the content for instance of newsgroups is archived. Donath et al. (1999) clearly define conversation in a broader sense, than the limited definition Van Dijk (1999) gives. The latter leaves too little room to understand the communication weblogs enable, as in his terminology weblogs only enable registration. By adding comment functionality to weblogs however, asynchronous conversation can evolve between the blogger and readers. To understand weblogs as a means of communication, from now on this paper will use the broader definition of conversation.

To make the position of weblogs clearer in comparison with other forms on the internet see figure 1.

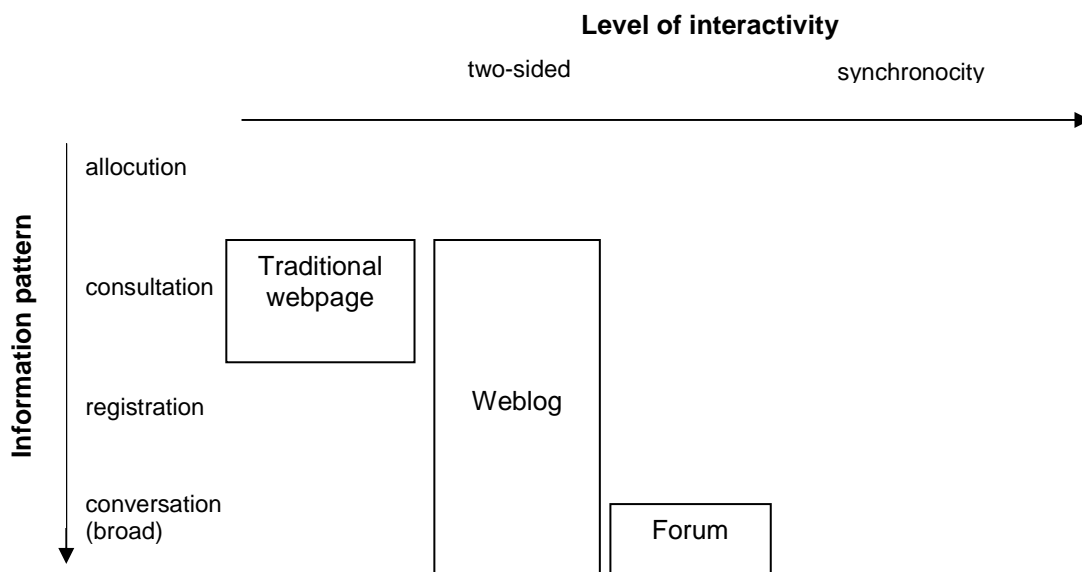


Figure 1. The position of the weblog regarding the level of interaction and information pattern in relation to the traditional web page and internet forum.

The figure shows clearly how weblog crosses the gap between a standard webpage and forums, like Herring et al. (2004) already concluded. They argue that the weblog technologically forms a bridge between conventional web pages and asynchronous computer mediated media like forums. The figure also shows that the weblog as a communication medium is really a new medium because it combines three information patterns in itself.

4.3 Communication capacities

Van Dijk describes nine communicational aspects of new media. He compares those capacities of new media in general with traditional media, like the telephone, print, and broadcasting. However new media is a very broad term, and within the spectrum of new media differences can be seen with regard to the communicational aspects. The nine communication capacities will be used to compare weblogs with other forms of communication on the internet. In order to be able to answer the research questions properly at the end, Van Dijks terminology will be extended in this paper with two new ones.

The nine capacities Van Dijk distinguishes are: speed, reach, storage, accuracy, selectivity, interactivity, stimuli richness, complexity and privacy. What all these terms mean will be discussed in the following.

Internet is the new medium in which chat, forums, web pages, and weblogs find their place. It is important to distinguish between the medium (internet) and the channel (chat, forums, web pages, weblog) in which communication takes place. As the medium for these channels is the same, a number of the capacities Van Dijk describes are the same for all channels. Speed, reach, storage capacity, and accuracy are equal for all communication channels, namely high, because they all use the internet and computer networks.

Speed is, according to Van Dijk, the primary reason new media is popular, as it allows worldwide communication instantaneously. The potential reach, socially and geographically, of the internet is global. In reality a lot of that potential is currently unused as only a minority of the world's population has connectivity. New media, based on digital information and communication technology have large, and growing amounts of storage capacity available, compared to paper media or human memory. The same digital technology also ensures a high accuracy of the information transmitted.

The other communication capacities differ for web pages, chat, forums and weblogs. They will be discussed in the next paragraphs.

Selectivity is the way communication can be exclusively targeted at one person or a group of people. Chat is highly selective, just like the telephone where you know exactly who you are targeting. Forums are less selective than chat, but as they deal with specific topics there is usually also a specific audience, and often registration is required. The selectivity of web pages is low. Everybody with access to the internet has access to the web pages. The same goes for weblogs, although there are examples where access to a weblog is password restricted.

The interactivity of the different communication channels has already been discussed extensively in previous paragraphs. Summarized, chat reached the third level of interactivity, where the first level is two or more sided communication, the second level is synchronicity, and the third level is control over the interaction. Forums, web pages and weblogs only reach level two, one or more sided communication.

The stimuli richness, the intensity of how all human senses are involved in the communication, of channels like chat and forums are low as they are completely text based, even when taking emoticons into account. Within web pages that richness can be far greater,

within the limitations of computer mediated communication. Apart from text, pictures, graphs, video images can be brought together on one and the same page, as indeed is done often. For weblogs the richness of stimuli can be high as well, as it is a form of web page. Research by Herring et al. (2004) however, has shown that the use of multimedia in weblogs is less than in conventional web pages. A high stimuli richness in weblogs makes it possible however to provide a more detailed picture of the personality of the author. A visitor of a weblog gets a different picture of an author, than from just a name attached to a comment in a forum (Wrede, 2003)

Complexity is defined by Van Dijk, as the capacity of a medium to coordinate action. New media in general are good for exchanging information, but less so for actions like negotiations or resolving conflicts. In this paper another form of complexity is introduced, information complexity. Complex information can be more easily transmitted if media for instance allow for graphical information next to text. So two forms of complexity are taken into account in this research, complexity of action, and information complexity.

The complexity of action possible through forums, web pages and weblogs is low. Because of the asynchronous character it is hardly possible to coordinate actions through these channels. Chat is a channel that allows some complexity, but not much, because it is synchronous.

The complexity of information possible through the different channels differs from channel to channel. Chat allows for low complexity only, as it is meant for short text messages. The interface design of chat software is geared to this as well, e.g. by the small editing window. Forums allow for a bit more complexity. Answers in forums can be longer, and because of its asynchronous character discussion can be carried out in more detail. However all communication in forums remains text based which limits the complexity of information that can be expressed. Web pages and weblogs, as they allow for visually represented information, make higher complexity possible. Illustrations, graphs, and video images can all be used.

Lack of privacy, the possibility to shield communication from other unintended parties, is the largest drawback of new media, in Van Dijk's view. Face to face communication, or telephone conversations can easily be kept private for instance. According to Van Dijk the level of privacy on the internet is medium. There can be differences between channels, depending on whether it is possible to use pseudonyms for instance, or whether registration is required. For web pages and weblogs, when using your own domain name, privacy is much less, as the names of domain name owners are publicly available. When hosting services like Blogger are used all that is usually required however is a working e-mail address. The characteristics of weblogs as a channel make it harder to maintain privacy though, because of the higher stimuli richness and information complexity that is possible. Publication of pictures for instance can give away more information than intended. It is up to the author how much information is being given.

The control an individual has to determine the content of communication is the last communicational capacity discussed here. Control is not one of the communicational capacities Van Dijk introduces, but it is introduced in this paper as it is a significant distinguishing factor. For chat the level of control is medium. One can decide who to chat with or not, and as it is synchronous communication the direction of communication can be influenced. For forums the level of control is lower, as it is not possible to determine who will take part in the communication or not, and the asynchronous character of forums makes it much harder to influence the direction a discussion will take. The author of web pages has absolute control over the information, and it is much the same for weblogs. If the correct software is used, control over comments and trackbacks is also possible, giving the author absolute control over the channel of communication.

Table 1 gives a summary of all communicational capacities and channels discussed.

Table 1. 'Communication capacities' for chat, forum, web page and weblog.

comm.capacity comm.channel	Selectivity	Inter-activity	Stimuli richness	Complexity of action	Information complexity	Protection of privacy	Control
Chat	+	+	-	0	-	+	0
Forum	0	0	0	-	0	+	-
Web page	-	-	+	-	+	0	+
Weblog	-	0	+	-	+	0	+

4.4 Key aspects

The weblog, using the model of Van Dijk, is a new medium. It combines the three information patterns, heretofore uncombined, of consultation, registration, and conversation. The strong communicational capacities of weblogs are the possibility of interaction, high storage capacity, large reach, high stimuli richness, and high complexity of information. Table 1 shows that weblogs are similar to web pages as well as forums. The biggest difference between web pages and weblogs being the possibility of interaction. Where web pages communication is usually one sided, weblogs invite to two and more sided communication. Comparing weblogs to forums, the stimuli richness and information complexity are added value in weblogs. This makes weblogs a means of communications that bridges the differences between web pages and forums.

The high stimuli richness of weblogs removes the limitation to stick to text. It is relatively easy to add photographs to texts, or even to only publish pictures (so called photoblogs). This makes weblogs attractive to a higher number of people. The high stimuli richness also has the effect that more of the author's personality can be made visible than e.g. in forums or chat. Control over the communications through weblogs is completely in the hands of the author.

The weblog is suited to discuss complex topics because of its high information complexity. Large numbers of people use weblogs to reflect on certain topics, such as knowledge management. The low selectivity of weblogs makes it possible to reach audiences that would have been unreachable otherwise. From that large potential reach asynchronous dialogue can follow. It is through this asynchronous communication that differences in time and space can be bridged with weblogs.

5 Analyzing the weblog

The last two research questions will be discussed in this chapter. By using the terminology presented in the previous chapter the question whether weblogs offer a platform for Habermas' ideal speech situation will be analyzed. Then the potential application of weblogs will be discussed based on the three formal world perspectives Habermas distinguishes (objectivity, subjectivity and inter-subjectivity)

5.1 Weblogs and the ideal speech situation

In section 3 it has been discussed that an ideal speech situation requires three things: all parties involved have equal opportunity to start and take part in a discussion or discourse; there are no power differences between the parties involved; all parties involved act truthfully. These three conditions ensure communicative symmetry between all parties involved. The next paragraphs will discuss each condition and how the communicative capacities from the previous chapter influence the realization of that condition.

5.1.1 Equal access

The first condition for the ideal speech situation is equal access. The first hurdle is access to the internet. Van Dijk (1999) rightfully concludes that only a minority of the world population has access to the internet. This means large groups of people are kept out of discussions that take place on the internet in general, and more specific in weblogs. The potential reach of weblogs is nevertheless vast. All those with internet access are potential weblog readers. In the Netherlands the number of people over 16 yrs of age with internet access is estimated at 9,2 million, which represents 72,4% of the population. (Nielsen-Netratings, 2003) This is the second highest internet penetration in Europe, after Sweden. The unequal distribution of internet access around the world is no small problem, but in the Netherlands there is almost no such inequality. To research the possibilities of weblogs further, from now on those who have internet access are taken as a given.

Blood (2000) describes how the number of weblogs increased dramatically after free and simple publishing software became available. This is probably the single most important step to increase the access to web publishing, as it became in reach also for those with almost no knowledge of HTML. Weblogs are used to discuss everything that is important for the author, ranging from personal diaries, professional interests, to politics.

Several communication capacities of weblogs have a positive effect on the access to communication through weblogs. In a face to face discussion all those who are not present, or do not know that a discussion is taking place, are automatically excluded. Only those present have equal opportunity to take part. The low selectivity of weblogs initially ensures dissemination of that which is communicated. Public publishing on the web makes the content potentially available to all those who might be interested. It has also been shown that weblogs provide asynchronous interaction, which means that same time and same place are not required to take part in a discussion. This combination of low selectivity and asynchronous interactivity increases the number of people that can take part in a discussion, and also heightens the chance that those who have a stake or interest in the discussion will be reached.

As weblogs use computer technology, their storage capacity is high. This allows for easy archiving. Search engines can be used to search for specific topics, resulting in related web pages. Archiving increases the access to communication between people significantly, when compared to face to face communication. Face to face meeting don't allow outsiders to exactly follow what went on. 'Listening in' on the web is possible however, because of the public nature of most of the web pages.

In conclusion access to communication through weblogs is high, because of the ease of publication, low selectivity, asynchronous interaction, and large storage capacity. The first condition of the ideal speech situation therefore can be met.

5.1.2 Absence of power differences

The second condition for the ideal speech situation is the absence of power differences between the parties involved in communication. There is one communicational capacity that

influences power differences in weblogs: the control over the communication. A significant difference between weblogs and forums is that final responsibility for a weblog lies with its author. Dependant on the software that is used, this means that the weblog author has the power to shape the two- or more sided communication to his own liking. Software like Moveable Type offer the possibility to edit or remove both comments and trackbacks. This means that there is no certainty that the visible communication in a weblog is the complete picture or not. This makes it possible to exclude parties from the communication that takes place in the weblog.

This concentration of responsibility within one person, also has beneficial aspects. Weblogs largely remain free of spam and advertising, where many forums are ultimately closed because they are overwhelmed by them. Mostly there is a person responsible for what happens in a forum, but the size of a forum can make it hard to oversee it all. The amount of interactivity in a weblog can be monitored reasonably by a blogger, even if the number of hits runs into thousands per day.

This position of power can be an important threat to the quality of the communication, because it allows the author to control access to the communication by others. This power however is reciprocal. Everybody has easy access to web publishing, and therefore also possibility to move a discussion to a place where one cannot influence the communication anymore. This makes the power difference insignificant, where access is concerned. The power difference is between author and reader, but because readers can easily be authors as well, this difference ceases to exist.

The second condition for an ideal speech situation can therefore be met, provided that all parties involved are themselves publishing on the internet. The access to publishing on the internet is high, making the potential power difference based on control insignificant.

5.1.3 Truthfulness

In an ideal speech situation all parties involved have to act truthfully towards each other. People should not pretend to be something they're not in their weblogs. An important aspect of the internet is that is very easy to keep (parts of) your identity secret, or even to pretend or lie about them. This on the one hand allows people in socially unequal positions, for instance women, a chance to take part in communication. On the other hand it can be a threat to the quality of communication. If people pretend to be something they are not communicative symmetry is destroyed. An example that shows how fake identities can be created in a weblog comes from Bausch et al. (2002)

Bausch et al. tell the story of Kaycee Nicole. According to her weblog she is nineteen yrs old and during the course of a year she writes about her battle against leukemia. People were witnessing her life, and friendships were made, reinforced by telephone conversations. On May 15th 2001 her death was announced on the weblog. Readers mourned and supported each other. Kaycee's mother also had a weblog and people expressed their sympathy there. Three days later someone asked if Kaycee had been real or not. Those who spoke to her on the phone were certain, others set out to find proof. Newspapers were searched to find obituaries, but nothing was found. Photographs on the weblog turned out to be from somebody else, and Kaycee's stories showed a number of holes. As the proof mounted Kaycee's mother Debbie admitted she had invented it all. Readers felt cheated, because they had been caught up in a fantasy. In an interview with the New York Times Debbie expressed her surprise how strongly people got involved emotionally by her story. She said that the whole point of on line diaries was that you could write anything you want.

In the case of Kaycee Nicole it took quite some time before the truth was found out. Her story apparently appealed to a large number of people, that made that no one ever asked whether it could be true or not. They wanted to believe the story. The example also clearly shows that

it is ultimately context that is important in determining if someone is acting truthfully or not. By searching for clues off line for the existence of Kaycee, it was found out that the girl never existed. The context of a person therefore is extremely important to judge the truthfulness of a person. Context in weblogs is created by their high stimuli richness.

The high storage capacity of weblogs makes it possible to judge consistency of statements in a weblog over longer periods of time. Consistency is an important clue to truthfulness. The archives of weblogs are generally available, allowing to read all weblog entries from the start. In forums it is much harder to find all comments and contributions of one person and test their consistency. In a weblog everything happens on one page, in one spot, and it is immediately clear that all entries are from the same author.

In face to face settings different kinds of signals are used to judge if someone is truthful or not. Body language can say something about certainty or uncertainty, handshakes can be firm or the opposite. It is also to communicate very directly. By asking questions one can better judge with how much certainty a statement was made. In weblogs we have to do without body language or direct communication, that could help in determining truthfulness. Its high stimuli richness however means that a weblog contains much more information about someone's personality than mere text, in for instance a forum. Lay-out, use of colors, photographs, all are signals of somebody's personality. A lot of bloggers also publish lists of books they recently read. Blogrolls are very common, showing the personal network of bloggers an author is part of. In other channels these type of clues are usually absent, leaving only the exchange of texts as a basis for judgement. Weblogs can provide a much bigger context of a person, because the author has complete control over the content of the communication.

As the example of Kaycee Nicole shows it is possible to sustain a fake identity over a longer period of time. There were people who even thought they had had telephone conversations with her, without finding out they actually talked to Debbie. The use of multiple channels of communication can however enhance the quality of the communication between two people. It has been documented that not all communication between webloggers takes place in the weblog itself. (De Moor & Efimova, 2004) E-mail, chat, and voice over IP are regularly used to get in touch. This means that not all communication that takes place is visible and accessible to everybody. However, when the things discussed in those other channels are of enough interest, they will find their way back into the weblog. This prevents that others are excluded from interesting arguments or topics. The use of multiple channels also has the effect that it increases interactivity between webloggers. The weblog in this case serves as a kind of communication hub. To start a weblog is a communication channel in its own right, but it also opens the way to start using other channels of communication. Creating a communication hub like that also improves access to communication. People who don't feel comfortable to enter into communication through weblog, comment or trackback have an opportunity to use other channels to get into contact with a weblogger.

The last condition of Habermas' ideal speech situation, truthfulness, can be met if sufficient context is provided to judge the truthfulness of a weblog author. An about-page is therefore necessary. Not to describe exactly who the author is, but to provide information about the kind of work someone does, educational background, and indication of age. A photograph of the author can provide a lot of detail without the need of mentioning the exact date of birth for instance. Untruthfulness will come out in the end, as the example of Kaycee has shown. The likelihood of that is increased when the weblog serves as a communication hub.

5.1.4 Does the weblog serve as an ideal speech situation?

Wrede (2003) is not right when postulating that discourse can only take place across different media, by which Wrede primarily thinks of traditional media. Especially the high access capacity of weblogs is a large gain compared to traditional media like television and

newspapers. Communication through these media is largely determined by a small group of people, television producers and journalists, and not accessible to others. Weblogs open up the opportunity for discourse to all.

The biggest threat for an ideal speech situation, a power difference between author and reader, can be reasonably neutralized by the fact that everybody can be a publisher on the internet himself. This equality in opportunity to publish heightens the probability that those who act untruthfully will be found out and stop to be serious discussion partners. Truthfulness in weblogs can be judged based on context: lay-out, blogroll, content, photographs etc. If the weblog functions as a communication hub the possibility to judge truthfulness is strengthened. In conclusion, weblogs can indeed serve as a platform for ideal speech situations, and form a better platform for discourse than traditional media.

5.2 Applications for the weblog

Now it is shown that weblogs can serve as a platform for ideal speech situations, their possible applications can be discussed. Based on the communicational capacities as discussed earlier, it was concluded that weblogs are a poor means to coordinate action. Therefore weblogs should not be used for that aim. To make appointments e-mail is better suited, to co-author a document other means are more useful, for instance wikis. Weblogs can handle a high complexity of information however. It is possible to publish longer pieces of text, combined with audio, video and graphics. This makes a weblog very useful for reflection and critical discussion. What is to be reflected upon or discussed is the decision of the author. This can be an account of day to day life, to chronicle events in Iraq, or to write about professional interests.

Both Nardi et al. (2004) and Bausch et al. (2002) have mentioned different reasons for blogging, varying from having an on-line journal to developing writing skills, sharing expertise and building community. These reasons can be divided into three groups according to the three formal world perspectives Habermas discerns. These three domains, objectivity, inter-subjectivity and subjectivity, relate to present knowledge, social cohesion between people, and self-expression and self-reflection by people respectively. Content-wise all three domains will probably be found in a weblog, but usually one of those three will be emphasized. People who share their expertise through their weblogs emphasize objectivity. Politicians blogging to involve people more into politics emphasize inter-subjectivity, and diarist emphasize subjectivity.

Weblogs can be used to express all three world perspectives. This shows the enormous potential for the use of weblogs in different situations. In the personal sphere self-expression is important. Photoblogs are a nice example that are used to quickly and simply share photographs. Digital photography has made this even easier, as digital photographs hardly need to be worked on before publishing. Photoblogs are primarily a form of self-expression but the same channel can be used to share knowledge about photography as well. Another use could be to practice writing in blogs, both expressive, prose or poetry, as well as for business use, to explore and sharpen ideas.

As a means of knowledge sharing there are possibilities in education. Blogs can serve to bring students in contact for in-depth discussions. Those students do not have to be enrolled in the same institution, but can be geographically dispersed, and have interdisciplinary backgrounds. To use weblogs within organizations for knowledge sharing is possible as well. However there is one difference with other situations. As organizations often have hierarchical structures power differences will play a role, which in turn can be a barrier to communication. Research into the use of weblogs in organizations will have to provide solutions to this threat to the quality of communication.

The most interesting use of weblogs is perhaps in inter-subjective settings. For politics weblogs can provide added value as a possibility for citizens to enter the discussion by commenting. This means that politicians, when blogging, have to provide comment possibility. In the Netherlands several politicians are blogging, for instance the Minister of Finance Gerrit Zalm (www.gerritzalm.nl), and the leading MP of the Socialist Party Jan Marijnissen (www.janmarijnissen.nl/weblog/). The former primarily writes diary-like entries without entering into discussion. There is no comment functionality and therefore in the definition of this research his pages are not a weblog. Marijnissen uses his weblog to defend and clarify political positions and his weblog is open for comments. The access to the political discourse of his party is easy for others because of this. Weblogs can bring citizens closer to the political process, something politicians say they have been striving for for decades.

When more people start blogging, according to the formal world perspectives of Habermas, it is a logical consequence that networks will form, sometimes globally, around interests and topics. Those who discuss their day to day life will find others who do the same. Those who write in their weblogs about Habermas will find each other through search engines and point each other to other sources. Froomkin (2003) describes how networks for discourse come into existence through internet. "Habermasian new spaces begin with individuals in 'pluralistic differentiated civil societies' who gradually unite in communities of shared interests and understanding. Using democratized access to a new form of mass media –the internet–these individuals engage first in self-expression, then engage each other in debate. In so doing, they begin to form new communities of discourse." (p. 857) In other words, through dissemination in weblogs, dialogues will follow, or better polylogues (Mortensen & Walker, 2002) between people who share interests. Ito (2004) describes democracy as emerging from individual self-expression. The initiation of communication by an individual in a weblog in a similar way causes networks to form that can lead to communities of discourse. Weblogs are therefore part of what is called 'social software', and is useful as a means of communication to support group communication.

6 Conclusions

In this paper the weblog has been defined as '*a webpage on which the author publishes pieces with the intention to start conversation.*' From this definition one can derive the technical tools that need to be added to a web page in order to become a weblog: comment and trackback functionality to cater for conversations, and a RSS or Atom feed to encourage others to read your blog.

The weblog is a form of communication that integrates three information patterns, consultation, registration and conversation which makes the weblog really a new medium. The weblog forms a bridge in the spectrum of communication channels on the internet between traditional web pages and an internet forum.

The main research question in this paper is what form of communication is made possible through weblogs. Combining the communication theory of Habermas and the communication capacities of Van Dijk, we have seen that weblogs offer a platform for the ideal speech situation. The high accessibility of the communication, the equal power distribution between publishers on the internet and the fact that acting truthfully can be judged on offered context, are the conditions that make this possible.

The weblog can be used for reflection on three domains: on the subjective domain for self-expression and –reflection, on the objective domain for sharing knowledge and on the inter-subjective domain for criticism on society. The weblog is an easy way of publishing on the internet and therefore it offers a good platform for self-expression. The weblog can be designed and written after one's own insights. The high stimuli richness makes that this

expression can go beyond text. Because of its high information complexity, the weblog can be used for sharing knowledge with others. For education and organizations weblogs can be much added value. Finally, the highest potential of added value in blogs will be in the inter-subjective domain since it offers the opportunity to increase political awareness. Weblogs offer people a chance to express themselves politically through their own blog or through weblogs of others.

From a communicative perspective the weblog can best be seen as starting point for discourse, a communication hub. The weblog is a fixed marker on the internet that offers readers multiple communication channels to choose from to enter into conversation and participate in or start a discourse. By using multiple communication channels, like chat and voice over IP, discussion will grow more intense and social ties will become stronger. Finally, from the different domains networks of people with shared interests will emerge, who will thus create a communal space for their discourses.

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