Corporate weblogs: the role of a new genre in shaping institutional ethos

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Corporate weblogs: The role of a new genre in shaping institutional ethos

by

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A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Major: Rhetoric, Composition, and Professional Communication

Program of Study Committee:
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Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa
2006

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Signatures have been redacted for privacy
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Abstract

Weblogging, or "blogging," once considered a hobby for individuals, is being adopted at a rapid rate by small businesses and large corporations eager to reach new audiences via the Internet. The first corporation-sponsored weblogs appeared in 2002; four years later, a Google search for the phrase "business blog" returns 6.7 million results, and a cottage industry of consulting companies has emerged to create and maintain weblogs for large corporations. These business blogs are taking on the functions previously performed by press releases, annual reports, shareholder memos, and customer support forums. The impact of weblogs on the long-term communication strategies of companies remains to be seen, but blogs have the potential to change the way businesses interact with employees, customers, the media, and other companies.

This thesis applies a rhetorical approach to corporate weblogs, examining the differences between corporate weblogs and personal weblogs and analyzing the ways in which weblogs shape the ethos of the corporations that use them. Chapter 1 reviews the history and evolution of blogging. Chapter 2 reviews the academic literature on the concept of ethos and applies that concept to hypertext communication. Chapter 3 reviews various methods for evaluating ethos on the Internet and proposes specific criteria for evaluating the potential effect of weblogs on the institutional ethos of large corporations. Chapter 4 consists of five brief case studies of Fortune 100 companies that use weblogs. Chapter 5 speculates on the future of blogging in the corporate environment and suggests avenues for further research on this subject. This thesis is one of the first in-depth academic analyses of corporate weblogs. As such, it will be far from all-encompassing, but it seeks to initiate a conversation
about the corporatizing of weblogs and the impact of blogging on professional communication.
Introduction

In May 2002, *Wired News* reported that Macromedia, the company behind such software programs as Dreamweaver and Flash, had assigned five of its lead developers to create weblogs to accompany the launch of its new MX product line. At the time, weblogs were the province of individuals, not companies, and Macromedia’s announcement was viewed with suspicion by bloggers, who pride themselves on their independence and their distrust of corporations. Aware of the potential backlash in the blogging community, Macromedia took one significant precautionary measure: the company asked its bloggers to set up their websites on independently run servers. Tom Hale, the company’s vice president in charge of developer relations, commented that the weblogs weren’t being hosted on Macromedia’s servers for a reason: “Would it have been a true blog if we put it on Macromedia.com? Not really” (Manjoo).

The five Macromedia blogs—widely acknowledged as the first “corporate weblogs”—were astounding successes: they received extensive media coverage, featured active discussions among visitors, and, most significantly, spawned a new breed of weblog. Other companies quickly began launching weblogs of their own, but in the rush to embrace the latest technology trend, many companies didn’t bother establishing policies governing official or employee-hosted weblogs. This unstructured approach to implementing weblogs has created a number of thorny issues, at least one of which continues to prick Macromedia itself. Matt Brown, one of the five original Macromedia bloggers, left the company in early 2003 and abandoned—but didn’t take down—his *Dreamweaver MX Blog* (see Figure 1). Because the weblog isn’t hosted on a Macromedia server, the company cannot remove it from the Internet. And Brown has apparently vanished; one comment on his website notes
that he may have moved to New Zealand, but Brown has never responded (Brown). Three years later, a Google search for “Dreamweaver blog” still returns Matt Brown’s dormant site as the second result (see Figure 2). Because Brown has been either unable or unwilling to delete the site, search engines like Google still index the page. As a result, unsuspecting visitors may see the site as evidence of poor customer service on Macromedia’s part.

Figure 1. Matt Brown’s Dreamweaver Blog was last updated in February 2003.
The case of the Dreamweaver blog is an isolated incident, but it raises several questions with broad implications for the field of professional communication. For instance, how does a company keep official weblogs “on-message” without carefully monitoring what is being posted to the site? Who should run a company’s blog? Should companies create blogging policies? Should companies encourage—or rein in—employees who blog on their own time? These questions represent a small sample of issues that should be of interest to academics and workplace practitioners, and the field of professional communication—grounded in rhetoric, yet with an open eye to the future—is uniquely qualified to claim this rapidly expanding academic territory.
The transition of business blogging from novelty to necessity is already underway. In the period of six short years, blogging has evolved from the hobby of a few individuals into a global phenomenon. In early 2006, David Sifry, CEO of Technorati, a company that tracks weblogs, reported that the blogosphere is currently composed of 27.2 million weblogs and that it doubles in size every 5.5 months. Every day, 75,000 new weblogs are created. On average, a new weblog is created every second of every day. Technorati tracks about 1.2 million new blog posts each day, or about 50,000 per hour (Sifry). Even after taking into consideration the prevalence of “spam blogs” (computer-generated sites designed to promote quasi-legitimate businesses), Technorati’s staggering numbers signal a trend that shows little sign of slowing in the near future.

While the increase in the sheer volume of weblogs has garnered a great deal of media attention, a more subtle shift in the world of weblogs is occurring. Once viewed as intensely personal and focused almost solely on the lives and web-surfing habits of individual bloggers, blogs now come in a variety of flavors. Hopeful politicians attempt to connect with potential voters using weblogs; mainstream media news outlets now commonly feature weblogs both as the subject and the vehicle of their coverage; and celebrities keep their fans apprised of their daily activities using blogs. Regardless of subject matter, content, or design, all of these varieties of weblogs have something in common: they aim to reach an audience that relies on the Internet as its primary source of information. As teenagers and young adults mature, their power in the marketplace will grow, paralleled by the growth of the weblog, a familiar format for an Internet-immersed audience.

Of course, it was only a matter of time before corporations would appropriate the practice of blogging for commercial use. Although large companies are latecomers to the
blogging phenomenon, they are quickly making up for lost time by attaching weblogs to their corporate sites and hiring full-time bloggers to do nothing but interact with customers in these public forums. The marketplace for business blogging has exploded in the past two years: Numerous consulting companies now exist with the sole purpose of helping corporations understand how to create and maintain weblogs and extolling the virtues of the blog as a public relations and marketing vehicle (Bruner); the past year has seen the publication of several how-to books on business blogging (e.g., Wright; Weil; Byron, Broback, and Kissane; Scoble and Israel; Holtz and Demopolous); and at least two dozen of the Fortune 500 companies now host blogs on their corporate servers (Socialtext).

The discipline of rhetoric and professional communication is concerned with all types of electronic communication, and journals in the field have published thorough academic research on email, websites, chat rooms, and instant messaging. Weblogs have begun to receive similar attention in the academy, but the majority of academic research on weblogs has focused on the use of the blog as a pedagogical tool (e.g., Williams and Jacobs; Brooks, Nichols, and Priebe; McNeill; Miller and Shepherd; Ganley; Oravec; Baumgartner). To date, no one in the field of rhetoric and professional communication has conducted an academic study of corporate weblogs.

This thesis argues that corporate weblogs constitute an emerging genre and that a rhetorical analysis of corporate blogs will provide insight into the practice of blogging as professional communication. This thesis addresses two primary research questions: First, how do corporate weblogs compare to personal weblogs, and what do the similarities and differences reveal about the two closely related genres? Second, how might corporate weblogs represent the institutional ethos of the corporations that use them?
To answer these questions, I will review the terminology, history, and ongoing evolution of blogging; explore the function of ethos in this emerging genre; propose criteria for analyzing corporate weblogs; and apply the criteria to the weblogs of the five largest corporations currently using them. I will conclude by summarizing my findings on the subject and suggesting topics for additional research.

This thesis is one of the first in-depth academic analyses of corporate weblogs. Hence, it will be far from all-encompassing, but it seeks to initiate a conversation about the corporatizing of weblogs and the impact of blogging on professional communication. As more companies adopt the practice of blogging, professional communicators, by virtue of their skills and job descriptions, will likely find themselves playing a central role in developing and maintaining their companies' weblogs. Practitioners involved in business blogging, as well as the academics who study professional communication and educate future professional communicators, should carefully consider the short- and long-term implications of blogging before embracing it.
Chapter 1: The History and Evolution of the Weblog

In less than a decade, weblogging—a form of hypertext writing characterized by a collection of short entries arranged on a website in reverse chronological order—has moved from obscurity to ubiquity. Once the playground of technophiles and e-diaryists, weblogs are now at the center of political, social, and academic conversations. Technorati.com, a search engine that tracks only weblogs, currently monitors over 30 million weblogs, and mainstream media sources now regularly use the terms weblog, blog, and blogger without providing any context or definitions. The explosion in popularity of weblogs can be attributed to several factors: a growing number of Americans have high-speed Internet access; most blogging software is either free or relatively inexpensive; and little, if any, technical skill is required to create and maintain a blog. Jeremy Wright notes that “the collective number of blogs has grown so rapidly that no one service has been able to keep up with it, which is one of the reasons that nobody is entirely sure how many people are actually reading blogs” (12).

However, a recent study of Internet users published by the Pew Internet & American Life Project estimates that approximately 32 million Americans are regular blog readers, and more than 11 million have created their own weblogs (Lenhart, Horrigan, and Fallows).

Despite the popularity of weblogs—or perhaps because of it—the practice of blogging is anything but stable. The lexicon of blogging is constantly in flux, and the history of blogging is still being written. With these caveats in mind, I will briefly review the origins of blogging, discuss the typical components of a weblog, examine the emergence of blog genres such as the business blog, and consider the future of blogging.
ORIGINS AND DEFINITIONS

Blogs have become so ubiquitous that many people use the term blog to describe any personal website (Safire, “Blargon”). Others define a blog as any site created with blogging software, such as Blogger, Movable Type, WordPress, LiveJournal, or Xanga. However, neither of these definitions accurately captures the essence of the weblog. In its simplest form, a weblog is a type of website comprised of short entries (or “posts”), arranged in reverse chronological order (i.e., the most recent content appears at the top). The website may be generated by a content management system or coded by hand, may be intensely personal or focused on a narrow topic, may consist purely of text or include pictures, audio, and video, but these two features—the reversed chronology and the idea of discrete posts—separate weblogs from other types of websites.

The originator of the term weblog is widely recognized as Jorn Barger, who first used the term on his website, Robot Wisdom, in December 1997. Barger described a weblog as “a webpage where a blogger ‘logs’ all the other webpages she finds interesting” (Blood, “History and Perspective”; Safire, “Blog”; Turnbull). Indeed, this is exactly what Barger and other early bloggers did; many early weblogs consisted of nothing more than a list of links to other websites (see Figure 3). In fact, blog historian Rebecca Blood sees links as integral to the weblog format, warning potential bloggers, “if you are not linking to your primary material when you refer to it—especially when in disagreement—no matter what the format or the update frequency of your website, you are not keeping a weblog” (“History and Perspective”). Peter Merholz, a longtime blogger, is credited with shortening the term weblog to blog in May 1999 (Blood, “History and Perspective”). Today, the terms weblog and blog
are used interchangeably. Although the terms are still considered slang by many, in March 2003 the Oxford English Dictionary added the terms weblog, weblogging, and blogger.

One who writes a weblog is referred to as a **weblogger** or a **blogger**. Weblogs can be written by a single individual or a group of individuals, and entries may be credited to a specific person, a company, a collective group, or no one at all. The content of weblogs varies, from simple lists of hyperlinks, to commentary on other websites or weblogs, to personal journal entries. Individual weblog entries are almost always date- and time-stamped and can vary in length from a single sentence to a fully developed essay. Because links are central to the genre, most weblogs archive older entries and generate static URLs (or web addresses) for individual entries. Hypertext links to the permanent locations of weblog entries that no longer appear on the weblog’s main page are often referred to as permalinks.
Archived entries are usually organized by date or topic. Many weblogs allow readers to add comments to individual entries.

Although some bloggers seek to narrow the definition of weblog to exclude online journals and diaries, company-sponsored blogs, and other emerging formats, most such websites use blogging software and have by default become associated with the blogosphere, or the shared intellectual space inhabited by bloggers. (This conceptual space is alternately, but less frequently, referred to as Blogland, Blogistan, and Blogspace.) Because the debate about what qualifies as a blog is central to this thesis, a short discussion of the various types of weblogs may prove useful.

**EMERGING GENRES**

Both bloggers and academics have made attempts to classify the blogosphere into a set of categories or genres. Blood suggests the division of the blogosphere into three categories: (1) the somewhat confusingly titled "blogs," which Blood defines as "short-form journals"; (2) "notebooks," which feature "longer pieces of focused content"; and (3) "filters," or sites "organized squarely around the link, maintained by an inveterate Web surfer" (Weblog Handbook 6–8). Kevin Brooks, Cindy Nichols, and Sybil Priebe build on Blood's classification system in categorizing a group of student weblogs written at North Dakota State University. They retain the "notebook" and "filter" designations, but substitute "journal" for Blood's "blog." Brooks, Nichols, and Priebe note that these blog genres mirror print genres that students are already familiar with, and that students gravitate toward the journal weblog because of its similarities to the traditional journal. The staggering growth of blogging communities like LiveJournal, MySpace, and Xanga confirms the data collected at
North Dakota State University. A cursory review of these online communities reveals that most teens and young adults prefer the journal blog over the notebook and filter blogs.

Categorizing every weblog into one of these three simple genres would prove impossible, and Blood herself admits that “most weblogs do not strictly follow the roles I’ve outlined above. … The weblog is infinitely malleable and may be adapted to almost any end” (Weblog Handbook 8). In fulfillment of Blood’s observation, several weblog genres have emerged in the past two years. Photoblogs and videoblogs feature digital photography and video; blogs maintained by educators are known as edublogs; sites run by lawyers are often called blawgs; and weblogs run by corporations are sometimes referred to as biz blogs. Other self-explanatory genres include tech blogs, war blogs, and pundit blogs.

The use of the word “genre” to describe these categories is somewhat problematic, given the long debate in the field of rhetoric about what constitutes a genre. In “Blogging as Social Action: A Genre Analysis of the Weblog,” Carolyn R. Miller and Dawn Shepherd argue that the weblog is a new genre, noting, “[W]hen a type of discourse or communicative action acquires a common name within a given context or community, that’s a good sign that it’s functioning as a genre.” As the blogosphere grows, however, we must ask what value comes from lumping all weblogs into a single genre. The off-line parallel to this massive new genre would be to place everything printed between two covers into a single genre known as “books.” A more productive approach, it seems, would be to acknowledge the emergence of multiple genres operating within the weblog format. This model would group blogs not by technical function, but by content and purpose. Hence, the confessional journal may constitute one specific blog genre and the recipe catalog another. Throughout this thesis, I will use the term genre to describe a particular type of weblog and format to describe
weblogs in general. I acknowledge that my use of these terms is somewhat inconsistent with earlier articles in our discipline, but the rapidly expanding blogosphere has rendered even three-year-old articles outdated.

THE RISE OF THE BUSINESS BLOG

The focus of this thesis, of course, is the genre of business weblogs. Definitive figures about the number of company-sponsored weblogs do not yet exist, but a cursory review of the blogosphere suggests a correlation between the growth of corporate blogs and the growth of weblogs in general. A Google search for the phrase “business blog” returns over 1.6 million results, and Microsoft alone aggregates the weblog posts of more than 2,600 of its employees (Microsoft.com). The parallels between the genre of corporate weblogs and its sibling genres do not extend, however, to the reasons for their popularity. Corporate executives may not be interested in the personal and creative aspects of blogging, but many are beginning to realize that blogs can be used for both internal and external business communication. As early as 2002, Blood suggested that “a weblog is the perfect format for the top page of a company intranet. The weblog’s reverse chronological arrangement ensures that everyone visiting the page will see the newest information because it is always on top” (Weblog Handbook 33). Internally, weblogs can be used to distribute information to employees, archive workplace documents, and build company unity. Externally, weblogs can be used to announce new products, invite customer feedback, tout a company’s charitable deeds, and—perhaps most important—put a human face on a corporation. The impact of weblogs on long-term communication strategies of companies remains to be seen, but blogs have the potential to change the way businesses interact with customers, shareholders, the media, and other companies.
But the business of blogging is not without risk. Inadvertently revealing trade secrets or allowing employees to act as unofficial spokespeople could come back to haunt a company, and publicly held corporations have the added burden of worrying about disclosure rules. Companies that operate weblogs must become accustomed to an increased level of scrutiny, misinterpretation, and criticism than they would otherwise encounter. As Macromedia learned, having employees maintain semi-official weblogs on non-company servers raises complicated issues regarding content ownership. More practically, if blogs are to be dynamic, compelling outlets for communication, containing more than press releases and boilerplate advertising copy, business executives face a serious dilemma: How can corporations control weblog content while maintaining the rapid rate of posting that keeps blogs interesting?

These risks have prompted a few critics to bemoan the rise of corporate weblogs. An anonymous chief information officer who writes the “Secret CIO” column for *InformationWeek* under the pseudonym Herbert W. Lovelace warned other executives about weblogs in mid-2002:

Perhaps, as some writers are saying, blogs are a new source of business intelligence, capturing the knowledge of key personnel for the benefit of all members of a company. However, if technology history is any guide, take the hype with a grain of salt. I sense that blogs will wind up in the same category as Internet chat rooms—a potentially interesting diversion if you don’t have a whole lot to occupy your time but not a particularly reliable or efficient source of information. The reason is threefold: quality of data, time expended versus value received, and the reality of litigation.

(Lovelace)
While Lovelace clearly does not embrace technology—he labels email and the Xerox machine the “two worst inventions of the past hundred years”—he raises legitimate issues for professional communicators and corporate executives.

Naysayers like Lovelace, however, are a voice in the wilderness when it comes to business blogging, and several signs suggest that business blogging is moving from infancy to adolescence. A new breed of consulting firm is emerging to help companies set up and maintain weblogs. One such company, BlogCorp, writes on its website,

Let’s face it. Blogs are increasingly becoming a part of your company and you have no idea who to turn to. BlogCorp is here to help.... Not only do we build custom blog solutions for Fortune 500 companies, we also build online community and blogs for businesses large and small. We help you understand blogs and will work closely with you and your staff to create the best blog experience for your money. (Blogcorp.com)

In addition, several small companies have successfully used blogs to build their businesses. For instance, Coudal Partners is a seven-person design firm in Chicago specializing in television and print advertising, brand development, and web design. The Coudal.com website functions alternately as a professional portfolio, an eclectic online art gallery, and an ongoing weblog. According to founding partner Jim Coudal, “The idea is to showcase the agency’s abilities, provide a forum for creativity and experimentation in writing, design and commerce and to test new technologies and tools” (Coudal.com). The Coudal weblog may have started as a way to communicate with clients and potential clients, but its popularity has generated a wider audience that visits the site solely to read the weblog. In fact, the primary function of the Coudal.com website is the weblog; at first glance, that’s
all the website appears to be. The site contains links to design portfolios and lists of clients, but the weblog dominates the site.

Another example covered heavily by the media is Stonyfield Farm, an organic dairy located in Londonderry, New Hampshire. The company makes yogurt and ice cream and prides itself on its certification as a USDA-approved organic company (Stonyfieldfarm.com). The Stonyfield website hosts four themed weblogs under the titles “The Bovine Bugle,” “Strong Women Daily News,” “Creating Healthy Kids,” and “Baby Babble.” Each of the four weblogs focuses on a different topic, but the overarching audience for all of the blogs is Stonyfield customers. The posts on all four blogs are signed by “Blogger Chris,” a writer hired by the company to operate the company’s weblogs. Many of the posts are unrelated to the business of the company and range in subject from the Boston Red Sox to home weatherization. Despite the varied focus of the posts, the five blogs are central to the company’s overarching web strategy, which is designed to humanize the company.

These two companies, and hundreds of others like them, have been using blogs long enough to have worked out the kinks. While operating in different industries and serving different demographic groups, these “early adopters” have one thing in common: they are trying to reach computer-savvy consumers whose opinion of a company may be enhanced simply by knowing that the company embraces blogging. Rarely are the weblogs of these small companies central to the companies’ business, and none may have a traceable effect on the companies’ profits. Instead, weblogs like these appear to be a means of developing corporate ethos with a particular segment of a company’s customer base. The consumers who discover a company’s weblog are most likely devotees of the company who have already
taken the first step of visiting the company’s website. Once those customers are aware of the
corporate weblog, they may be more inclined to return to the company’s website often.

The practice of business blogging is moving from infancy to adolescence, and at this early stage, predicting the future of the business blog is a perilous endeavor. However, Wright, an admitted blogging evangelist, speculates that blogs ... may eventually completely replace most typical corporate websites. Instead of having an “About Us” page that stays the same, companies will have an “About Us” category on their blogs that gets updated at least once a month with new company-related information. Instead of having an “About the CEO” page, the CEO will have his or her own blog. (292)

One thing is certain: the future of the adolescent business blog is inextricably tied to the future of its parent: the weblog format.

**THE FUTURE OF THE BLOG**

In 1964, Marshall McLuhan argued that “once a new technology comes into a social milieu it cannot cease to permeate that milieu until every institution is saturated” (177). McLuhan was writing about typography, but he was writing during television’s meteoric rise to ubiquity, and it is safe to assume that the popularity of that new medium influenced his thinking. The parallel here should be evident: what television was in 1964, the Internet—and specifically the weblog—is today.

As McLuhan wrote, print culture, which had dominated society for 500 years, was being supplanted by electronic culture. In McLuhan’s view, the central medium of this final era is television, to which he returns time and again in *Understanding Media*. But in “The Printed Word,” he turns his attention to the impact of electronic culture on written texts:
In bringing the ancient and medieval worlds into fusion … the printed book created a third world, the modern world, which now encounters a new electric technology or a new extension of man. Electric means of moving information are altering our typographic culture as sharply as print modified medieval manuscript and scholastic culture. (171)

While most people would agree that television is still the dominant medium in our society, the Internet is poised to assume that role, and we are witnessing the rise to dominance of the blog and its numerous subgenres.

This shift brings with it both positive and negative effects. The primary positive effect of the personal-publishing model is a heightened sense of artistic fulfillment for individual members of society. The open nature of the web encourages greater production of content by a greater number of people. Second, the weblog has put power in the hands of the people more fully than at any other time in civilized history. Finally, this new, open publishing model increases communication and literacy. McLuhan notes that movable type “brought in … universal literacy and education” (172); likewise, the Internet has helped the practice of reading regain ground it lost to television during the second half of the twentieth century. Of course, arguments can be made about the quality of material being read online, but I assert that an increase in reading—of any variety—is a positive step for society.

But the blogging era and its abundance of content is not without its drawbacks. The most obvious negative effect of this new model is a sense of information overload. While nearly any piece of information can be obtained via the Internet, the exponential growth in the number of weblogs has created a glut of information with which readers cannot keep pace. As a result, our reading habits as a society are becoming more fragmented. Hence web
commentator David Weinberger’s twist on Andy Warhol’s most famous aphorism: “On the Web, everyone will be famous to fifteen people” (104). Even accounting for new technologies designed to funnel specific pieces of information to those who are interested in them, the problem of finding and absorbing content on any given subject is still a monumental one. As chapter 4 will show, sending a signal through the ever-increasing noise of the web poses special challenges for businesses attempting to communicate with customers by using weblogs.
Chapter 2: Ethos in a Hypertext Age

In his landmark 1977 essay “What Is an Author?”, Michel Foucault revives Beckett’s question and asks, “What does it matter who is speaking?” (1). A cursory glance at contemporary rhetorical criticism forces us to respond that it matters a great deal. As Donald W. Foster notes, “The questions ‘Who wrote it?’ and ‘Who said it?’ are no less important to literary scholars than to respondents taking the SAT subject tests or the TV game-show quizzes where such queries are most likely to be encountered” (374). Foucault’s prediction about the end of the author-function—“I think that, as our society changes, at the very moment when it is in the process of changing, the author-function will disappear”—seems ill-timed (11). A quarter century later, the role of the author in popular and scholarly criticism is stronger than it has ever been, as witnessed by the rise of the blog.

In essence, the blogosphere has responded to Foucault by declaring that who is speaking may actually matter more than what is being said. Individual and collective ethos on the web are undeniably influenced by our perceptions of a text’s author or authors. The ideas of authorship and ethos have always been inextricably linked, and as the Internet grows to an unfathomable size, ethos will become an increasingly important factor in evaluating hypertexts. This chapter traces the origins and development of ethos as a rhetorical concept and briefly reviews several methods for evaluating the ethos of websites.

MODERN CONCEPTIONS OF ETHOS

Over the course of two millennia, the word ethos has lost its meaning. Its Greek origin provides just enough sophistication to make it a favorite of political pundits, marketing gurus, and corporate executives. We speak of the ethos of an advertisement, the ethos of a political party, or the ethos of an entire company. Used in these ways, ethos takes on a vague
definition, something akin to “personality,” “character,” or “spirit.” Figure 4 contains the results of a cursory Internet search, demonstrating that the concept of *ethos* has been appropriated by numerous disciplines, all of which have translated the term in a manner that suits their purposes. While these definitions may not stand in direct opposition to one another, their dissimilarities undermine any efforts to establish a baseline from which scholars in different fields can discuss a common topic. Furthermore, such popular uses of the term, while having little to do with *ethos* as a rhetorical concept, are slowly changing the public’s understanding of *ethos*. As the public’s understanding of the term evolves, so does its actual definition. Hence, a contemporary definition of *ethos* must differ significantly from the definition we used just twenty years ago. A broad definition of *ethos*—one that can be used in politics, business, sociology, and other fields—may serve the general public, but it lacks the precision needed for scholarship. In the midst of this rapid change, it would be comforting to know that at least one group—scholars of ancient rhetoric—still defend the original definition of *ethos*.

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**Figure 4: Contrasting Definitions of Ethos**

*Ethos*: “The internal social context of a work of literature, comprising the characterization and setting of fictional literature and the relation of the author to his reader or audience in thematic literature” (www.sil.org/~radneyr/humanities/litcrit/gloss.htm).

*Ethos*: “The distinguishing character, beliefs or moral nature of a person, group, or institution” (gbgm-umc.org/umw/corinthians/glossary.htm).

*Ethos*: “The esprit d’corps or spirit of the group” (www.imb.org/CPM/Glossary.htm).

*Ethos*: “A persuasive, or rhetorical, appeal depending on the trustworthiness or reliability of the communicator as well as his or her credibility. All corporations have an ethos. The ethos consists of the values and beliefs of a corporation that determine what persona the corporation assumes when communicating to listeners, viewers, and readers” (www.bhsu.edu/artssciences/asfaculty/rochse/eng379/glossary/glossary_2.html).

*Ethos*: “The code of conduct of a business and the way in which it treats its staff, customers, environment and legal responsibilities” (www.business2000.ie/html/resources/glossary/e.htm).

*Ethos*: “Characteristic manner or spirit, either of a community, or individual. This is a word that indicates a certain ‘attitude’ or sense of comportment towards others, and generally associated with questions of character or moral selfhood, where character or moral selfhood disclose a bond with others” (www.texascollaborative.org/Urban_Module/glossary.htm).

*Ethos*: “The distinctive spirit of a culture or an era; ‘the Greek ethos’” (wordnet.princeton.edu/nerl/webwn).
If only it were that simple. When we disregard the emerging use of the term *ethos* in nonacademic contexts, or even in academic fields unrelated to rhetoric, we still face a significant challenge in trying to define the term. Some of the confusion surrounding the definition of *ethos* stems from the long and troubled academic history of the term. The English word *ethos* comes from the Greek word ἔθος, which can be translated into English in numerous ways. Some possibilities are "the place of living," "starting point," "to appear," "disposition" and from there, "character." From the same Greek root originates the word *ethikos* (ἐθικός), meaning "theory of living," and from there, the modern English word *ethics* is derived ("Ethos," Wikipedia.org). Indeed, our modern understanding of *ethos* relies heavily on the ideas of Plato, Isocrates, Quintilian, and Cicero, who see a direct connection between a speaker’s words and his personal ethics. The link between speaking well and being good is now firmly entrenched in modern rhetorical criticism, and any discussion of a text’s *ethos* will almost certainly contain references to external elements (the reputation of the author, the place of publication, the physical properties of the printed work, etc.). But it wasn’t always so.

**Origins of Ethos**

The field of rhetoric generally traces its conception of *ethos* to Aristotle, who offers a precise, narrow definition in his *Rhetoric*, arguing that "persuasion is achieved by the speaker’s personal character when the speech is so spoken as to make us think him credible.... This kind of persuasion, like the others, should be achieved *by what the speaker says, not by what people think of this character before he begins to speak*" (1356a, emphasis mine). *Ethos* and its companions *pathos* and *logos* constitute the three *pisteis*, or "proofs"—the "modes of persuasion furnished by the spoken word" (1356a). While *ethos* "depends
upon the personal character of the speaker,” the persuasion that results from this proof must reside in the text itself; it “should be achieved by what the speaker says, not by what people think of this character before he begins to speak” (1356a). Hence, the rhetor succeeds not when he is genuinely credible, but when he “make[s] us think him credible” (1356a; emphasis mine). In book 2, Aristotle reiterates his point by writing that the speaker “must also make his own character look right” (1377b; emphasis mine). The distinctions here are subtle, but important. As Michael J. Hyde notes, Aristotle “directs our attention away from an understanding of ethos as a person’s well-lived existence and toward an understanding of ethos as an artistic accomplishment” (xvi). For Aristotle, the pisteis are clearly elements of the text, and their effectiveness is dependent on the careful construction of the speech, not on the personal attributes of the speaker. The author’s credibility as it established in the text is what I will refer to here as textual ethos. Likewise, any evaluation of a text’s credibility that relies on elements not found in the text itself is concerned with extra-textual ethos.

Most other writers on rhetoric broaden the definition of ethos to include the overall moral character and history of the speaker. Today, we are much more likely to interpret ethos in the manner espoused by Isocrates in Antidosis:

The man who wishes to persuade people will not be negligent as to the matter of character; no, on the contrary, he will apply himself above all to establish a most honorable name among his fellow-citizens; for who does not know that words carry greater conviction when spoken by men of good repute than when spoken by men who live under a cloud, and that the argument which is made by a man’s life is more weight than that which is furnished by words? (278)
The emphasis here rests on the actions, not the words, of the speaker. Isocrates makes it clear that the efficacy of a speaker’s words will be greater if the speaker is of “good repute.” Although Isocrates predates Aristotle, his ideas find their greatest proponents in Rome, several centuries later.

These Roman teachers of oratory, especially Cicero (106 B.C.E.) and Quintilian (35 C.E.), adopt Aristotle’s classifications but ally themselves with Isocrates on the matter of ethos. In the Institutes of Oratory, Quintilian insists that in order to be an effective speaker, one must first have a good character. Indeed, the title orator “can be conceded only to good men” (II.vx.1). He translates the Greek ἔθος into Latin as mores, or “manners,” and expands the definition of ethos, noting that he “must develop more precisely the force of the term ethos, as it seems not to be sufficiently intimated by the word itself” (VI.ii.12). It is here that ethos takes on its moral overtones:

All this species of eloquence, however, requires the speaker to be a man of good character and of pleasing manners. The virtues which he ought to praise, if possible, in his client, he should possess or be thought to possess himself. Thus he will be a great support to the causes that he undertakes, to which he will bring credit by his own excellent qualities. But he who, while he speaks, is thought a bad man, must certainly speak ineffectively, for he will not be thought to speak sincerely; if he did, his ethos or character would appear. (VI.ii.18)

By this time, ethos had already acquired multiple connotations, as demonstrated by Quintilian’s chapter on ethos and pathos, which shows that “ἐθος, as a rhetorical term, had acquired a range of connotations” (Wisse 65). Jakob Wisse blames Aristotle for some of the confusion, pointing out that Gorgias and his followers used another Greek phrase—not ἔθος.
to refer to the "reputation of the speaker" (62), and Craig R. Smith notes that Aristotle himself uses ἡθος differently in his Rhetoric and Nicomachean Ethics (3).

Recently, a group of rhetoricians has argued for a return to a pre-Aristotelian definition of ethos. Smith claims that "Aristotle’s notion of ethos as a mode of proof presupposes earlier concepts of ethos as dwelling place" (Benson ix), and Michael J. Hyde traces ethos to writers as early as Homer and Hesiod (xvi). Smith, Hyde, and several other scholars all make thoughtful arguments for a rehabilitation of the original "dwelling place" denotations of ethos in The Ethos of Rhetoric, a collection edited by Hyde. Given these contemporary arguments, along with the uncertainty inherent in the ancient Greek and Roman texts, a succinct, universal definition of ethos will most likely never emerge. Instead, specialized definitions will continue to evolve in disparate ways across various disciplines and even within the field of rhetoric itself.

I should pause here to acknowledge that my central argument rests on a close reading of a single passage of Aristotle's Rhetoric. However, this relatively short passage is the fountainhead for 2,500 years of evolving discussion and debate about the nature and role of ethos in discourse. I admit that our modern-day understanding of ethos differs greatly from what Aristotle originally proposed, and urging others to abandon their conceptions of ethos would be, at best, a quixotic endeavor. Be that as it may, Aristotle's use of ἡθος established its meaning as a persuasive appeal that relies on the character of the speaker as it is established within the text.

If Aristotle is the father of ethos, why has his focus on the content of the text (as opposed to the author of the text) been so consistently ignored? Two reasons seem most likely. First, as a practical matter, divorcing a text from its author is nearly impossible. Even
if we set out to perform a careful textual analysis of a work, we inevitably are influenced by what we know about the text’s author, the circumstances surrounding its writing, and previous scholarly criticism. These extra-textual elements color our analysis of the text and influence our perception of the text’s ethos. Second, and more important, carefully studying extra-textual elements enriches our understanding of a text. What would Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech be without at least some knowledge of the civil rights movement? What would Nixon’s “I am not a crook” plea be without Watergate? The scholarly benefit we gain from connecting a text to its surroundings is immeasurable, and rhetorical criticism will continue to benefit from applying a broad, inclusive definition of ethos to texts, their authors, and historical contexts.

Why, then, should Aristotle’s narrow definition of ethos deserve to be revived? When we encounter anonymous texts or texts with which we are unfamiliar, our evaluation of the text’s ethos must rely solely on the text itself. In the age of hypertext, documents of this sort are increasingly common, and rhetorical criticism would benefit from a return to the Aristotelian concept of ethos, in which we examine artifacts for signs of ethos being established in the text itself. Because we approach these texts with little or no knowledge about the author’s personal character or the circumstances surrounding the creation of the text (or extra-textual ethos), as readers and critics we would be served by a method for identifying textual ethos. Such a method holds direct application for analyzing and evaluating online genres like the corporate blog. Unfortunately, the task of developing useful models for analyzing the role of ethos in hypertexts is fraught with challenges, as a brief review of several models will show.
MODELS FOR EVALUATING ETHOS IN HYPERTEXT

Most scholarly criticism depends heavily on tying texts to specific authors, and such critical approaches becomes problematic when applied to hypertexts, especially those with uncertain authorship. Authorship is viewed as an essential element in understanding a text, and for some scholars, as long as a text's authorship remains in question, "criticism will stand at an impasse" (Foster 375). Foucault argues that "an author's name is not simply an element in a discourse.... it performs a certain role with regard to narrative discourse, assuring a classificatory function" (4). The human desire to impose order on chaotic systems has fueled a centuries-long effort to classify documents, and there is no simpler method of classification than the author's name. When we encounter anonymous texts, we are unsure how to approach them; even if we cannot pinpoint the cause of our discomfort, we feel something is missing. As a result, anonymous and collectively authored texts are generally under-studied by students and have never received the same scholarly attention that authored texts have enjoyed. Although the dearth of extra-textual information found in many hypertexts can be seen as a barrier to scholarship, it can also be seen as a boon. If the only thing we have to study is the actual text—or, in this case, the actual website or weblog—we cannot get lost in tangential pursuits; hence, hypertexts can serve to focus our inquiry on the merits of the text itself. As we approach such texts, we would benefit from having at least a general framework for identifying and evaluating hypertextual ethos.

Researchers in various disciplines have advanced models for analyzing websites, but no consensus exists on the most effective of these methods, and it is doubtful that such a consensus will ever be reached. The very nature of websites complicates any attempt at creating a model for analyzing and evaluating online communication. The free-form nature
of the web makes it incredibly difficult to establish any sort of convention about what is or is not effective, what is or is not persuasive, what is or is not credible. However, these models can be helpful if they are viewed not as multiple-choice matrices or yes/no alternatives, but as heuristics designed to initiate discussion about the potential affects of writing and design choices on the web.

In chapter 3 I will propose a model for analyzing corporate weblogs as a specific genre; this model builds upon several existing models for evaluating the ethos of websites or weblogs in general. Because some of these models originate outside the discipline of rhetoric, they use the terms credibility, trustworthiness, or believability where we would use ethos. Returning to Aristotle’s original definition, I will use the terms ethos and credibility somewhat interchangeably throughout the remainder of this thesis; I do so not to discount the value of the term ethos, but to acknowledge that many disciplines are addressing very similar issues, albeit with different terminology.

Perhaps the most prolific academic source of research on Internet credibility is the Stanford Persuasive Technology Lab, directed by B.J. Fogg. Although the Stanford researchers do not share a background in rhetoric, the models they put forward for assessing credibility online will prove helpful as rhetoricians grapple with the idea of ethos in hypertext. Fogg’s work revolves around the term credibility, which he equates with the Greek ethos (3). “Simply put,” Fogg writes, “credibility can be defined as believability. Credible people are believable people; credible information is believable information” (3). Fogg argues that when an Internet user evaluates credibility, “the person makes an assessment of both trustworthiness and expertise to arrive at an overall credibility assessment.” He defines trustworthiness using the terms well intentioned, truthful, and
unbiased, and expertise using the terms knowledgeable, experienced, and competent. Websites that are credible display high levels of both trustworthiness and expertise.

The Stanford-Makovsky web credibility study collected data from 1,481 subjects using a survey instrument to assess perceptions of online credibility. Respondents were asked to rank factors that affect web credibility, such as whether the site lists a physical address and phone number, whether the site is linked to by another site the respondent feels is credible, whether the URL for the site ends in .org, whether the site is professionally designed, whether the site requires you to register and log in, and how quickly the site downloads (Fogg 8–9). The study suggests six overall design implications, each of which will help boost a website’s credibility. These suggestions include separating advertising from editorial content, ensuring a simple navigation system, eliminating broken links, and getting other well-respected sites to link to you (13–14).

In an effort to help its students conduct academically rigorous online research, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill has published “criteria for evaluating online information.” The site suggests eight specific criteria: credibility, bias, accuracy, currency, relevance, significance, intended audience, and usability (1–4). Again, the term credibility comes closest to the concept of ethos, and these guidelines include three factors for assessing a website’s credibility: credentials (encompassing academic background, institutional affiliation, or previously published work), arguments (“Are arguments for the author’s point of view logical and well reasoned?”), and documentation (“Are facts and arguments supported by references to existing scholarly literature by reputable authors?”). These suggestions are far less theorized and tested than those developed by the Stanford Persuasive
Technology Lab, but the commonalities between the two sets of criteria indicate a developing pattern in the field of Internet studies.

Within the field of rhetoric and professional communication, Laura Gurak suggests seven criteria for evaluating websites. Gurak and a research assistant compiled nineteen lists of criteria created by their colleagues, universities, and high schools and identified seven common themes in these lists. Because these criteria influence the criteria I propose for evaluating corporate blogs in chapter 3, I will discuss each criterion individually:

1. Authorship. Gurak warns against anonymous sites and encourages researchers to identify the author’s credentials and contact information. The idea here seems to be that an anonymous or institutional author is less credible than one who identifies herself and her background. This confirms the dominance of extra-textual ethos in all forms of communication, including hypertext.

2. Currentness. Several lists stressed the importance of searching for a “last updated” date, and Gurak notes that “websites with more recent dates are probably more reliable” (94). The importance of currentness is unique to the web; in more traditional media, age and stability are valued, but online, the power of the “new” is undeniable.

3. Purpose. Somewhat confusingly, Gurak uses the heading “purpose” to discuss the importance of evaluating a site’s intended audience (95). By determining the intended audience of a website, readers can better understand whether the site contains credible information in that particular instance.

4. URL. Gurak notes that “nearly half of the guidelines considered a Web site’s URL, or address, as a criterion for credibility” (95), with the understanding that sites ending in “.edu” are generally more credible than those ending in “.net” or “.com”.
However, Gurak challenges this notion, pointing out that many “.edu” sites belong to students, and contends that each site must be evaluated on its own merits.

5. **Links.** The importance of links is twofold: first, credible websites contain hyperlinks to relevant and credible sources, and second, the hyperlinks should be “workable.” Websites with “dead” links indicate that “the site is not well maintained and therefore is perhaps not a good source of information” (95).

6. **Accuracy.** Several factors can influence the “accuracy” of a website. Citations found on the site should be appropriate to the subject, should contain factually correct information, and should not merely “reference other sites that share the original site’s opinion” (96). To bolster the *ethos* of a website, visitors should be able to independently verify information presented on the site.

7. **Design.** Gurak notes that a well-designed website gives the impression of credibility, but such an impression can be misleading: “the best-looking Web site does not mean the best information. It means only that the organization spent time and money to design a good site” (96). In spite of this warning, the practical effect of good visual design is enhanced credibility.

These three models for evaluating websites provide a useful foundation for this study, but all three models deal with websites in general and are not specific to the weblog format or the genre of corporate weblogs. To date, no one in any academic discipline has proposed a methodology for studying corporate weblogs, to say nothing of studying them through a rhetorical lens. However, in “Blogging as Social Action: A Genre Analysis of the Weblog,” Miller and Shepherd make one of the first forays into rhetorical analysis of the weblog.
format. Miller and Shepherd discuss *kairos*, audience, and exigence as they operate in blogging, and briefly review criteria used by an online site to evaluate blogs. They note that almost across the board, bloggers seem to agree that content is the most important feature of a blog. *The Weblog Review*, a blog reviewing site, evaluates three features on a 5-point scale: design, consistency, and content, with the lion’s share of the rating’s weight, 80–90%, dedicated to the blog’s content. Although it is difficult to generalize about the content of blogs because they are so varied, there have been several attempts to classify blogs according to their content. (Miller and Shepherd)

This admittedly nonacademic approach is telling in that it confirms the oft-repeated blogosphere mantra: Content is king. Although criteria like design, currentness, and authorship are important, if a weblog does not consistently produce interesting content, it cannot maintain its *ethos* in the blogosphere. Blood advises potential bloggers, “The best thing you can do to gain readers is to provide them with interesting, varied content. No matter what kind of site you maintain, readers will return when they find something on your site that they won’t find anywhere else” (*Weblog Handbook* 122).

In examining the genre of corporate weblogs, content must certainly be taken into account, but while average weblogs visitors may be most concerned with content, a serious rhetorical analysis of weblogs requires examination of a number of elements that may not concern average visitors. Building upon the models discussed in this chapter, chapter 3 will propose a model for analyzing corporate weblogs that attempts to bridge the gap between popular models for evaluating credibility and traditional rhetorical approaches to assessing *ethos*. 
Chapter 3: Methods

This chapter proposes criteria for evaluating corporate weblogs, discusses the methods I used to select research subjects for this study, and details the procedures I employed in collecting and analyzing the data. In chapter 4, I will apply the criteria established here to five weblogs, review broad trends among all of the weblogs, and conduct short case studies of each of the five weblogs.

EVALUATION CRITERIA

The criteria I use in this study have many similarities to the models discussed in chapter 2, but are designed specifically to analyze the narrow genre of corporate weblogs. These criteria were originally developed using an inductive method during a preliminary study of small-business weblogs conducted in 2004, in which I analyzed three of the first and most prominent business weblogs: Groove Networks, Coudal Partners, and Stonyfield Farm. The six criteria discussed below are a natural outgrowth of this study, but they have since been revised and expanded for application with the blogs of large corporations, since each blog genre raises slightly different questions about audience, purpose, and rhetorical devices, and therefore merits specialized analysis.

For the case studies in chapter 4, I will apply six criteria to analyze the weblogs of the five largest American corporations currently operating company-sponsored blogs. The paragraphs that follow articulate the relationship of each criterion to the institutional ethos of a corporation and define the specific questions used in conducting the case studies.

1. Content. The websites of business-blog consultants are ripe with suggestions about what type of content belongs on a company-sponsored blog, but there seems to be a general
consensus that the content on the weblog must differ from the information available via other communication outlets. Wright summarizes this idea with a new coinage:

Most companies must first determine what type of blog to establish, who should write the blog, and other important issues. Unfortunately, the “safest” thing that many companies choose to do is to establish the blog as a *YAMO—Yet Another Marketing Outlet*. A copy writer is hired to turn company news into glib posts, highlighting words such as *innovative* and talking only about the company’s strengths. (58)

In attempting to avoid having their blogs seen as YAMOs, corporate bloggers must present unique material that customers can’t find anywhere else. At the same time, they must also convince their audience that there is a real person—not a team of public relations staffers—writing the weblog. Bloggers can accomplish both of these objectives and build *ethos* for their corporations in numerous ways. For instance, they can discuss nonwork-related topics, use slang expressions or informal speech, and—if they make mistakes—follow the standard blogging practice of leaving the original, erroneous, text intact on the site with a strikethrough line rather than removing the error completely. All of these little signs indicate a company’s efforts to recast itself in the image of its intended audience.

In applying this criterion, I asked the following questions: What topics dominate the weblog posts? Do the posts relate directly to the company’s business, or do they discuss other topics as well? How long are the posts? Do the length and substance of the posts vary greatly from entry to entry? Do the posts contain nontextual items, such as pictures, videos, or audio files? Do the posts contain links to other websites? If so, what types of sites do the posts link to?
2. **Interaction.** Like most media used in corporate communications, websites are a form of asynchronous communication, unlike synchronous modes of communication such as the telephone and face-to-face interaction, which involve “real-time” interaction. However, weblogs begin to approach synchronous communication more closely than their web-based predecessors by allowing interaction on the site itself. When a company’s customers use email and web-based contact forms, they can’t see what other customers have already written to the company. Blog commenting systems, however, make public the customer’s interaction with the company, allowing other customers to “listen in” on—and even join—the conversation. The blogosphere places a high value on the idea of transparency, and as companies make more of their interaction with customers visible to the public, they may enhance their *ethos* among blog-savvy consumers.

In applying this criterion, I asked the following questions: Can the intended audience be determined by reading the weblog? Does the blog explicitly identify its audience, or is the audience assumed? Does the company allow readers to comment on the blog posts? If so, how much interaction is there between the blog’s author(s) and readers?

3. **Authorship.** Anyone can create a weblog, but in order for a weblog to enhance the institutional *ethos* of its corporation, the audience must perceive that the blog’s author(s) have authority to speak for the company. Hence, a corporate blog is likely to feature the job titles and biographies of its authors and make frequent references to their roles within the company, especially if those authors are senior-level managers or executives. We could easily hypothesize that there is a positive correlation between the status within the company of a weblog’s author and the *ethos* of that weblog among its readers.
In applying this criterion, I asked the following questions: Who writes the weblog posts? What is the author’s role in the company? Do the posts use first person singular, first person plural, third person? Are the posts signed by an individual, signed by a non-human entity (the company or a division within the company), or unsigned? Do multiple authors contribute to the same blog, or does a single author maintain the blog?

4. Integration. Companies can take one of two approaches when it comes to integrating the weblog and the parent corporate website. First, they can host the blog at the same URL, i.e., blog.companyname.com or companyname.com/blog. This strategy makes it clear to readers that the blog is endorsed by the company. Alternately, the company may decide that it will benefit from keeping the blog at arm’s length from the corporate website. In this case, the blog’s URL would be something like companynameblog.com. Some corporate blog consultants believe this distance will result in greater “link-ability” for the blog (Spencer), meaning that other bloggers will be more likely to link to a corporate blog if it seen as being different from the corporate website. Other issues related to integration include the visual design of the weblog and the placement or location of the blog on the corporate website (if applicable).

In applying this criterion, I asked the following questions: Is the weblog hosted on the company’s website, or at a unique URL? If the blog is part of the corporate website, where is it found in relation to the homepage? How prominently publicized is the weblog on other parts of the corporate website? How easy is it to get to the weblog from the homepage of the website? Do the weblog and the main corporate website share visual elements?

5. Frequency. This criterion is a simple quantitative measure designed to monitor how regularly new content is added to the weblog. The relationship between frequency and
ethos lies in the blogosphere’s passion for the new. As is the case with many mainstream media formats, in the blogosphere it is almost as important to be first as it is to be right. If readers are rewarded with new content each time they visit a blog, they are more likely to return regularly. On the other hand, a company can negatively affect its ethos by letting excessive time elapse between posts.

In applying this criterion, I asked the following question: How often are new entries added to the website—several times a day, daily, weekly, monthly?

6. Archiving. For a company’s weblog to be truly transparent, posts must be archived so readers can access them even after they no longer appear on the blog’s main page. Many bloggers employ multiple archiving methods to facilitate a reader’s search for content. Hence, a truly transparent blog will indefinitely archive posts by date and topic. A less transparent blog would allow old posts to simply “disappear” once they are no longer current.

In applying this criterion, I asked the following questions: What criteria are used to archive posts (date, topic, etc.)? How long are the posts archived? Are archived posts readily accessible? Can readers comment on archived posts?

These six criteria are by no means exhaustive, but they provide a heuristic for assessing the ways in which corporate weblogs represent the institutional ethos of the companies that operate them. I believe the most productive method for initiating a conversation about corporate weblogs is to apply the six criteria to a small sample of companies that have embraced blogging.

SELECTING THE RESEARCH SUBJECTS

I began my research with the 2005 list of the Fortune 100 companies and visited each company’s website, looking for any mention of the words “weblog” or “blog.” I also
consulted the “Fortune 500 Business Blogging Wiki,” an open-source list that tracks the weblogs of the Fortune 500 companies (Socialtext). To the best of my knowledge, only twelve companies in the Fortune 100 currently operate weblogs. If we accept the Fortune 100 as the 100 biggest public corporations in America, then the following twelve companies are the largest corporations currently using blogs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fortune 100 Rank</th>
<th>Company Name</th>
<th>Reasons to include or exclude the blog in this study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>General Motors</td>
<td>Included: The weblog is the sole weblog for the entire company.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Ford</td>
<td>Excluded: The site is now dormant.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>IBM</td>
<td>Excluded: The site is an aggregator site that lists 27 blogs hosted on IBM servers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Hewlett-Packard</td>
<td>Excluded: The site is a collection of 16 blogs (8 “executive” blogs and 8 others).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Boeing</td>
<td>Included: The weblog is the sole weblog for the entire company.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>Dell</td>
<td>Excluded: The site is focused solely on Linux users and appears to function as a tech-support weblog.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41</td>
<td>Microsoft</td>
<td>Excluded: The site is an aggregator site that lists thousands of employee blogs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>49</td>
<td>Motorola</td>
<td>Excluded: The site is now dormant.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>67</td>
<td>Sprint</td>
<td>Included: The weblog is the sole weblog for the entire company.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>69</td>
<td>Viacom</td>
<td>Excluded: The weblog focuses solely on the “Real World,” a television show produced by MTV, a subsidiary of Viacom.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>91</td>
<td>Cisco Systems</td>
<td>Included: The weblog is the sole weblog for the entire company.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>95</td>
<td>EDS</td>
<td>Included: The weblog is the sole weblog for the entire company.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In order to select five blogs for case study analysis, I excluded the following types of weblogs: dormant sites that are not being currently updated (Ford and Motorola), sites that aggregate the data from numerous employee blogs (IBM, Hewlett-Packard, and Microsoft), and blogs whose focus is peripheral to the company itself (Dell and Viacom). After applying these criteria, only five of the twelve Fortune 100 blogs qualify as true corporate weblogs:

1. *FastLane Blog* at fastlane.gmblogs.com (General Motors — #3 on the Fortune 100)
2. *Randy's Journal* at boeing.com/randyy/ (Boeing — #25 on the Fortune 100)
3. *Things that Make You Go Wireless* at businessblog.sprint.com (Sprint — #67 on the Fortune 100)
4. *Cisco High Tech Policy Blog* at cisco.com/gov/blog/ (Cisco Systems — #91 on the Fortune 100)
5. *EDS' Next Big Thing Blog* at eds.com/sites/cs/blogs (Electronic Data Systems — #95 on the Fortune 100)

Although I briefly discussed several types of business weblogs in chapters 1 and 2, the scope of this particular study excludes weblogs that are businesses unto themselves and weblogs that are focused on one narrow aspect of the company. The unifying feature of all five weblogs studied here is their function as the official blogging presence of the company. By narrowing the selection criteria, I have increased the likelihood of finding meaningful results in the collected data.

**DATA COLLECTION METHODS**

After selecting the five research subjects, I collected three months' worth of blog posts from each of the five sites, archiving the full content of each weblog entry and any
comments added to the entries by visitors to the site. All entries were collected in a database
and simple numerical analysis was applied to determine the average number of words per
blog post; the average number of hyperlinks in each post; the presence of nontextual items
such as pictures, audio files, and video files; and the number of comments left by visitors to
the site. A table displaying this data for all five sites can be found at the beginning of
chapter 4.

The case studies in chapter 4 will analyze each weblog using the six criteria
established in this chapter. Although simple numeric data is certainly useful in comparing the
weblogs to one another, a rhetorical analysis of each weblog’s text and visual elements will
prove far more valuable in understanding the relationship between each company’s weblog
and its institutional ethos.

A NOTE ABOUT CITATION METHODS

Citing individual blog entries using a standardized format such as MLA or APA
becomes problematic, especially when numerous posts have the same author and year. In
such a circumstance, MLA guidelines would require lengthy titles and/or URLs to be cited
parenthetically, which would significantly hinder readability of the text itself and clutter the
Works Cited pages with dozens of redundant entries. For these reasons, in chapter 4 I will
cite blog posts using a simplified parenthetical reference consisting of a company code and
abbreviated date. I will use the following codes to identify the five corporate blogs studied
here:

- GM for General Motors’ FastLane Blog
- Boeing for Boeing Corporation’s Randy’s Journal
- Sprint for Sprint’s Things that Make You Go Wireless blog
- *Cisco* for Cisco Systems’ *High Tech Policy Blog*
- *EDS* for EDS’ *Next Big Thing Blog*

For instance, the post entitled “In the connected world, it’s never too late to ask your question,” posted to EDS’ Next Big Thing Blog on 30 January 2006 and located at http://www.eds.com/sites/cs/blogs/eds_next_big_thing_blog/archive/2006/01/30/8365.aspx would be referenced in text as (EDS 01/30/06). Each blog is listed only once in the Works Cited pages, and these citations reference the URLs of the weblogs’ main pages. I acknowledge that this citation format differs from the format used throughout the rest of this thesis, but it enables readers to locate the original posts online without significantly impeding the readability of chapter 4.
Chapter 4: Case Studies

The case studies presented in this chapter follow a clear formula. Each begins with a brief description of the weblog in question, moves to a discussion of the six criteria established in chapter 3, and concludes with a short analysis of how the weblog may represent the institutional ethos of the corporation hosting it. Some of the criteria merit a more thorough discussion than others, and some sections consist of little more than the presentation of quantitative data. It is my hope that, taken on the whole, the application of the six criteria to each weblog will paint a portrait of that company’s efforts to understand and use this new genre.

The case study approach employed here is not without precedent in our discipline. Gurak contends that “it is only by building on individual case studies that we can create a base of understanding from which to design communication systems of the future” (xii). I would argue that the more fundamental task of comprehending new communication systems is also best accomplished using case studies. In the absence of specific examples, a discussion of a genre as narrow as corporate weblogs would be nearly impossible. However, by examining five specific blogs, we can begin to see patterns that establish the corporate blog as an emerging genre and can open the door to more in-depth analysis of the role corporate blogs are beginning to play in the professional communication workplace.

The table on page 42 summarizes the quantitative data gathered during this study. Immediately following the table, I begin the individual case studies, organized here in order of the company’s rank on the Fortune 100 list, from largest to smallest.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Blog</th>
<th>Total number of posts during study</th>
<th>Average number of words per post</th>
<th>Average number of comments per post</th>
<th>Average number of hyperlinks per post</th>
<th>Average number of nontextual elements per post</th>
<th>Total number of authors posting to the blog during study</th>
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</thead>
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<tr>
<td>General Motors</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>335 (σ = 388.2)</td>
<td>123.78 (σ = 139.19)</td>
<td>1.89 (σ = 2.27)</td>
<td>1.11 (σ = 0.9)</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boeing</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>556 (σ = 211.61)</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>4.43 (σ = 2.62)</td>
<td>1.07 (σ = 0.73)</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sprint</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>390 (σ = 334.37)</td>
<td>1.75 (σ = 3.62)</td>
<td>3.25 (σ = 3.01)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cisco Systems</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>315 (σ = 137.63)</td>
<td>1.33 (σ = 1.73)</td>
<td>.33 (σ = 0.71)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>EDS</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>211 (σ = 165.64)</td>
<td>1.96 (σ = 1.87)</td>
<td>3.66 (σ = 2.84)</td>
<td>.02 (σ = 0.13)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>21.2 (σ = 20.41)</td>
<td>300 (σ = 126.65)</td>
<td>25.72 (σ = 61.05)</td>
<td>3.15 (σ = 1.62)</td>
<td>.34 (σ = 0.59)</td>
<td>2.8 (σ = 1.92)</td>
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CASE STUDY 1: GENERAL MOTORS

General Motors began operating the FastLane Blog in January 2005, and the blog quickly garnered the attention of the mainstream media and loyal GM customers. GM Vice Chairman Bob Lutz’s first post to the blog garnered over 100 comments from readers (GM 01/05/05), and a Google search for “fastlane blog” returns approximately 122,000 results, more than double the number of its nearest competitor in this study. Wright calls the launch of the FastLane Blog a “milestone event” in blogging history, noting that Lutz was “the first executive leader of a non-tech Fortune 100 company to be a primary contributor to a blog” (73).

The blog’s “About” page includes a code of ethics, adapted from Charlene Li’s “Sample Blogger Code of Ethics” (Li), which lists five rules for the FastLane Blog:

1. We will tell the truth. We will acknowledge and correct any mistakes promptly.
2. We will not delete comments unless they are spam, off-topic, or defamatory.
3. We will reply to comments when appropriate as promptly as possible.
4. We will link to online references and original source materials directly.
5. We will disagree with other opinions respectfully. (GM “About”)

Although it is debatable how strictly GM has followed this code of ethics (see, for example, “Interaction,” below), the mere act of posting such a statement on a corporate website represents a serious attempt by GM to adhere to the spirit of the blogosphere, where the greatest sin is not to be wrong, but to hide evidence that one was wrong in the past. The existence of the FastLane Blog, operated by the third largest public corporation in America, is perhaps the clearest sign that large corporations are beginning to understand and embrace blogging.
Content

Bob Lutz’s first post to the FastLane Blog begins as follows:

After years of reading and reacting to the automotive press, I finally get to put the shoe on the other foot. In the age of the Internet, anybody can be a “journalist.” This is the first of many commentaries I will make on this forum, and I’d like to begin with, surprise, some product talk—specifically, Saturn products. (GM 01/05/05)

Lutz may miss the mark with his terminology (“forum” instead of “blog,” “commentaries” instead of “entries” or “posts”), but he succinctly expresses the focus of FastLane Blog: “product talk.” All eighteen of the posts in this study are directly related to GM products, and blog authors never discuss their personal lives or topics unrelated to GM’s business. Eleven
months after Lutz’s first post, he writes, “at the risk of sounding like a broken record … I can’t recommend a test-drive strongly enough!” (GM 12/08/05). Indeed, Lutz and his coauthors do not just recycle their sales pitches, they never deviate from them.

The average length of each post is 335 words, compared to the five-blog average of 300 words, but post length varies wildly: the shortest post is fifty-five words (GM 11/07/05), while the longest is 1,628 (GM 12/01/05). Fourteen of the eighteen posts include hyperlinks (with an average of 1.89 links per post), but with only three exceptions (GM 12/01/05, 12/16/05, 12/22/05) the links all point to other FastLane posts or to product pages on GM’s corporate websites. GM’s use of nontextual items is noteworthy: thirteen of the eighteen posts included nontextual items, including three audio “podcasts” (GM 11/07/05, 11/11/05, 12/16/05) and two video feeds (GM 01/09/06, 01/12/06).
Although the *FastLane Blog* posts are written in a conversational style, they are so carefully worded as to arouse suspicion that the posts have been vetted by GM’s legal, accounting, and PR departments. In fact, in one post discussing the horsepower of a new car model, Lutz mentions that he is “forced to add the word ‘estimated’ because the final numbers aren’t in yet” (GM 01/06/06), which raises the question, Forced by whom? Comments like these clearly indicate that the content on the *FastLane Blog* passes through several filters before it is posted, but occasionally the blog’s authors break the proverbial fourth wall and speak directly to the audience. For instance, after repeating the brochure copy for the 2007 Chevy Tahoe—“When you drive them, you’ll find vastly improved handling, comfort and quiet. They offer best-in-class fuel economy, and they’re priced reasonably”—Lutz self-consciously notes, “But you can get all of that information, and the long list of standard and optional features, elsewhere on GM’s web pages. I’m just here to tell you that you have to see these trucks in person, and you have to drive them” (GM 01/27/06).

**Interaction**

As is the case with all five blogs in the study, the intended audience of the *FastLane Blog* is loyal GM customers. Unlike the other blogs in the study, however, the *FastLane Blog* boasts an astonishing level of feedback from its readers. The blog averages 123.78 comments per post, more than quadruple the five-blog average of 25.72. More telling is the fact that if the *FastLane* posts are excluded from this average, the remaining blogs in the study average only 1.68 comments per post, a fifteen-fold decrease from the five-blog average. One post to the *FastLane Blog*, unveiling a new Chevrolet Camaro concept car, received 545 comments from readers, an astonishingly high number for a single post on any type of weblog.
More surprising than the sheer number of posts, however, is the way in which readers’ comments are treated. Although the site warns visitors that off-topic and defamatory comments will be deleted (GM “About”), the blog’s editors have allowed negative, even harsh, comments to remain on the site. One reader writes, “Stop making the Malibu. It’s so ugly and embarrassing [sic] to drive. GM would be better served making bicycles or lawn mowers in the Malibu factory” (GM 12/08/05). Another comments, “[Some] of us care about actual engineering. How about telling us about how you’re going to make a car in the $12-$25k range that a reasonably intelligent American won’t feel stupid for buying?” (11/07/05).

The long-term effects of allowing this type of criticism to remain on a GM-owned website are unknown, but in the short term, the FastLane Blog may win points from customers who see ethos as being directly tied to the notion of transparency. If GM were to begin removing negative comments from its blog, a surge of bad will in the blogosphere would almost certainly follow.

Although the FastLane Blog is, in many ways, a model of effective business blogging, the site falls short when it comes to true interaction between its authors and readers. In a post thanking readers for their comments during the blog’s first year, Bob Lutz writes that the site has “published close to 6,000 comments ... and GM leaders have read each and every one” (GM 12/22/05). While this claim cannot be verified, the study data show that even if GM executives are reading the comments, they aren’t responding to them publicly. Not a single author responds to a single reader comment on any of the blog posts, and even when authors refer to readers’ comments, they do so in a new post and respond to hundreds of comments with a single line, e.g., “OK, Fastlane [sic] bloggers, you’ve gotten my attention. I’ve seen your blog entries and wanted to respond” (GM 11/21/05). This failure
to acknowledge specific comments and respond to them using the comments section of the weblog gives the impression that the blog’s “authors” aren’t actually reading the comments at all.

**Authorship**

Six authors added posts to the *FastLane Blog* during the study. With one exception (four posts are attributed to a nameless “editor”), these authors all hold high-profile positions at General Motors. Most prominent among them is Bob Lutz, chairman of GM North America (seven posts), who is perhaps the most senior executive in any company credited with maintaining a blog today. Other authors are Jim Taylor, manager of the Cadillac brand (two posts); Elizabeth Lowry, vice president for environment and energy (one post); Mark NaNeve, vice president for vehicle sales, service, and marketing (two posts); and Jack Keebler, director of the Advanced Concepts Group (two posts).

The posts added by the “editor” use first-person plural pronouns when referring to the company, but all other authors on the site make heavy use of first-person singular pronouns. I can only speculate about the legitimacy of the authorial claims on the *FastLane Blog*, but it difficult to imagine a group of executives at this level dedicating their time to writing posts for the company weblog. And evidence exists on the site to confirm that the authors certainly aren’t physically adding posts to the blog: the content management system used on the site adds a byline to each post with the username of the individual who added the post, and only two usernames are in use on the site: “Editor” and “Lutz.” All posts by the guest authors listed above are attributed to “Editor,” and even if Bob Lutz is writing his own blog posts, it is probable that “Lutz” is a username used by one of his employees to add his posts to the blog.
Integration

The *FastLane Blog* is hosted at http://fastlane.gmblogs.com rather than as part of General Motors’ corporate site (http://www.gm.com). The fact that the *FastLane Blog* is a subdomain of gmblogs.com indicates that it may be one small part of a larger blogging strategy at GM. In fact, the root level of the gmblogs.com domain name points to two weblogs: The *FastLane Blog* and the *Smallblock Engine Blog*, but the *Smallblock Engine Blog*, created to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Chevrolet small-block engine, is no longer an active site and visitors attempting to locate the site are automatically redirected to the *FastLane Blog*.

GM’s main corporate website contains a link to the *FastLane Blog*, but the blog receives very little attention on the gm.com website. If readers know exactly what they’re looking for, they can click on “News and Events” under a drop-down menu titled “Company.” On the “GM News” page, a small link appears in a left-hand submenu with the title “Fastlane Blog” [sic]. If readers decide to search for the blog, they will be completely stymied. A site-wide search for “blog” returns a single result, which contains no mention of the *FastLane Blog*, and a search for “fastlane” returns no results at all.

The visual design of the weblog further indicates the distance between GM’s main website and its only active weblog (see Figures 5 and 6). Although the blog features a small General Motors logo in the upper left corner, no other design elements link the two websites. The *FastLane Blog* employs a visual design familiar to many bloggers: a centered, two-column layout with an image at the top, the posts on the left-hand side, and in a narrow right-hand column a series of common blog elements (a search box, a list of categories, a calendar, links to archived entries, and a “blogroll,” or list of links to other websites). The most
striking difference between the blog site and the corporate site is the bright green background that surrounds the content on the blog site, a color to be found nowhere on GM’s homepage.

**Frequency**

During the three months of this study, 18 posts were added to the *FastLane Blog*. These numbers are slightly lower than the average across all five blogs of 21.2 posts. Other than the EDS blog, whose data had a skewing effect on the aggregate averages (see Case Study #5), the GM blog had the highest number of posts during the study. There was a single instance of two posts being added to the blog in a single day (01/09/06), but otherwise posts to the site followed a predictable pattern: one new post per week, usually added to the site on a Thursday or Friday, with an occasional additional post added mid-week. The longest gap between posts was 15 days, over the winter holiday break.

**Archiving**

The *FastLane Blog* archives its posts primarily by date. All posts from the blog, dating back to its debut in January 2005, are still online, and readers can still comment on archived posts. Each post is also assigned to one of six categories: Auto Shows, Business, Cars & Trucks, Design, Podcasts, or Photo Albums. These categories are somewhat meaningless, however, in that individual posts do not list the categories to which they have been assigned.

**Conclusions**

GM’s *FastLane Blog* is strong evidence of the company’s efforts to alter its image and enhance its *ethos* among tech-savvy consumers. The site effectively appropriates the conventions of the blog format, attributes posts to powerful individuals within the
organization, and maintains a visual and rhetorical distance from the GM corporate website. Neville Hobson, who authored a case study on GM's blogging efforts in early 2005, refers to the FastLane Blog as "undoubtedly the current poster child for executive blogs" (Hobson). Although the blog misses the mark in a few areas discussed above, its overall effect with regard to the company's institutional ethos is certainly salutary.
CASE STUDY 2: BOEING

In January 2005, Boeing launched Randy’s Journal, a weblog designed to chronicle the travels of Randy Baseler, Boeing’s vice president of marketing and “the lucky guy who gets to travel the world talking about Boeing’s perspective on commercial aviation” (Boeing 01/17/05). In Baseler’s inaugural post, he writes,

Happy New Year, and welcome to my new web journal. Talk about a new year’s resolution—I’m starting the year by entering the internet, and I’m looking forward to it. I hope it will help solve one of my biggest frustrations—not being able to talk with everyone as often as I like about what’s going on in our industry and our company....

[T]his web space can be a place where you can go to find out my thoughts and opinions. (Boeing 01/17/05)

Baseler’s choice of words (e.g., “entering the internet”) reveals his unfamiliarity with weblogs and with the Internet in general, but phrases like these may serve to add to the charm of the site; the blogosphere is generally more receptive to authors who admit their technological ineptitude rather than try to appear more knowledgeable than they are. Baseler’s status as a novice blogger certainly hasn’t hurt the site’s visibility in the blogosphere—a Google search for “randy’s journal” returns 40,300 results, second only to GM’s FastLane Blog.

Although Baseler attempts to maintain a conversational tone, he certainly didn’t write the blog’s “Guidelines” page, which abandons any attempt at informality in favor of legalese:

Photos, charts and graphics in Randy’s Journal are not for commercial use.... Randy welcomes your comments. Keep in mind that your name, and all or part of your comments may posted or cited in a future blog entry.... All comments are screened
and/or edited for content and may be posted or cited.... By submitting a comment, you agree that Boeing may use it for any purpose and may publish it in Randy’s Journal or elsewhere, without compensation to you. (Boeing “Guidelines”)

Disclaimers like this one are standard fare on corporate websites, but on a corporate blog, such language has a chilling effect on the company’s institutional ethos. Readers immediately know that the site is being vetted by the company’s lawyers, and in the blogosphere, ethos is attributed to sites whose content is wholly unfiltered.

Content

Despite the blog’s title, posts to Randy’s Journal read like carefully crafted press releases, not off-the-cuff journal entries. At the conclusion of Baseler’s first post to the site,
he writes, “As we have researched effective web logs, I learned that a cardinal rule of blogging is to keep the entries short and to the point. So I’ll save some more thoughts on 2004 for another entry” (Boeing 01/17/05). Baseler is correct that most bloggers favor short posts, but he seems to forget this fact: on average, posts to the Boeing blog are longer than posts to the four other blogs in the study—an average of 556 words, compared to the five-blog average of 300 words. In fact, only one post is shorter than 300 words (Boeing 01/30/2006).

*Randy’s Journal* differs greatly from the genre of personal journal blogs, which focus on the minutia of their authors’ lives. In contrast, Baseler spends little time writing about himself or his nonwork-related interests, instead focusing on the future of Boeing as a company (Boeing 12/23/05) or the capability of Boeing’s planes (Boeing 11/10/05,
With one exception (Boeing 11/18/05), all of the posts relate directly to Boeing’s business. Likewise, with only one exception (Boeing 11/03/2005), all of the posts include hyperlinks, with an average of 4.43 links per post. Although many of these links predictably point to other Boeing websites, several posts contain links to news articles, the corporate sites of Boeing’s industrial customers, and travel and tourism sites related to Baseler’s travels. *Randy’s Journal* also makes frequent use of nontextual items; eleven of the fourteen posts contain pictures of Boeing aircraft or of Baseler himself.

One of Baseler’s pet topics is Airbus, Boeing’s main competitor. Five of the fourteen entries refer to Airbus by name, and Baseler pulls no punches in pitting his company against its rival. After reflecting on Boeing’s successes during 2005, Baseler smugly writes, “As I sit here today in Seattle, I can’t help but wonder what discussions are going on in Toulouse [Airbus’s headquarters] right about now…. [I]n light of the overwhelming response Boeing has had to the 787 and 777 this past year, do you think the other guys are beginning to ask some difficult questions?” (Boeing 01/13/06). This example demonstrates the power of the blog: Boeing certainly couldn’t refer to “the other guys” in a press release or annual report, but the blog format, with its expectation of informality, allows Baseler and other corporate executives to build *ethos* among their already-loyal customers.

**Interaction**

The intended audience of *Randy’s Journal* is die-hard Boeing aficionados. In his final post of 2005, Baseler writes that, for him, 2005 has been “the year of the blog,” and he boasts that “over the past 11 months, we’ve had nearly 200,000 visits to this site, from blog readers around the globe. You’ve certainly told me when you think we’re off-base. And your suggestions have made this a better blog” (Boeing 12/22/05). Unfortunately, readers have
limited interaction with Boeing’s blog, because the site doesn’t allow for comments on individual posts. Instead, *Randy’s Journal* has a single page on which readers can leave feedback for Baseler. Further defying blogging conventions, the page doesn’t time- or date-stamp the comments, nor does it include hyperlinks to the commenters’ email addresses or websites, so it is impossible to contact other readers who have left comments, or even to determine when the comments were posted. Boeing’s blog claims to have improved the feedback loop between the company and its customers, but it has done so in a tightly controlled manner. Of the six criteria applied here, Boeing’s handling of the interaction between its author and audience does the greatest disservice to the company’s *ethos*.

**Authorship**

*Randy’s Journal* is unique among the weblogs in this study in that it lists a single author: Randy Baseler, vice president of marketing for Boeing Commercial Airplanes. Baseler writes in first-person, using “I” to refer to himself and “we” to refer to Boeing as a company. Adopting a standard blogging practice, he consistently addresses his readers as “you.” Strangely, however, the “About Randy” page on *Randy’s Journal* is written in third person and reads like a standard introduction an audience might hear at a speaking event featuring Baseler; it even concludes, “In his free time, Randy enjoys spending time with his family, skiing, camping, fishing, coaching soccer (football), and all outdoor activities” (Boeing, “About Randy”). This is obviously the company’s boilerplate biography for Baseler, but it stands out against the casual, conversational tone found in the rest of the entries.

As with the *FastLane Blog*, *Randy’s Journal* often reads so smoothly that it becomes difficult to believe that Baseler is penning the posts on his own. Some posts are so filled with
product descriptions and statistics that we can only assume they are the work of several ghost authors, or at minimum that the posts have been vetted by multiple departments before being added to the blog.

Integration

*Randy’s Journal* is hosted on Boeing’s corporate site at http://boeing.com/randy, but the company is not actively promoting the blog on its main site. There are no links to the blog from the main site, and while searches for the terms “blog” and “Randy’s Journal” return links to the blog itself, these searches also show that there are no references to the blog on any other part of the boeing.com site. Clearly, *Randy’s Journal* is not central to Boeing’s overarching communications efforts.

That being said, the weblog shares several design elements with the main Boeing website (see Figures 7 and 8). The blog features an almost-identical layout to GM’s *FastLane Blog* (see Case Study #1), but unlike the *FastLane Blog*, the colors used on *Randy’s Journal* match those found on the boeing.com homepage, and the design of the heading graphic is much more conservative, featuring the Boeing logo, a photo illustration of an airplane, and a photo of Randy Baseler.

Frequency

During the three months of this study, 14 posts, were added to the *Randy’s Journal*. These numbers are approximately 34% lower than the average across all five blogs of 21.2 posts. Although the site averaged approximately one post per week, there was no pattern to the days on which posts were added, other than the fact that posts were only added on weekdays. The longest gap between posts was 12 days.
Archiving

Randy's Journal archives its posts solely by date. All posts from the blog, dating back to its debut in January 2005, are still online; however, since readers cannot comment on specific posts (see “Interaction” in this case study), the archived posts stand frozen in time.

Conclusions

Baseler's comment about 2005 being “the year of the blog” for Boeing may indeed be correct (Boeing 12/22/05). During its first year, Randy's Journal was written about in numerous media outlets, including an in-depth profile of the site in U.S. News & World Report (Larson). Mainstream press coverage, however, carries little weight in the blogosphere, and in the long run, Randy's Journal, with its perfectly edited posts and lack of true reader interaction, may actually damage Boeing's ethos with web-savvy customers.
CASE STUDY 3: SPRINT

The newest of the five weblogs in this study, Sprint's *Things that Make You Go Wireless* blog was created in July 2005. Posts are added to the site primarily by Vicki Warker, Sprint’s vice president of product management and marketing. Warker only uses her first name on the blog, but the blog’s “About” page contains a third-person biography of Warker and a corporate-speak description of the blog: “Our goal is to discuss the development and applications of Sprint wireless products and services. We’ll discuss Sprint wireless solutions that improve your ability to communicate and conduct business in an always-moving world” (Sprint “About This Blog”).

On its “Terms and Conditions” page, the Sprint blog attempts to straddle the line between corporate responsibility and careless abandon. On the one hand, the site tries to convince readers that “entries have not been read or approved before posting,” and that they “are not part of any public relations or marketing program.” On the other hand, readers are advised that, “for legal reasons, we may refuse discussion on certain topics if the issue is confidential or the information is proprietary,” and that readers are “responsible for following the policies of any third-party provided Web sites” (Sprint “Terms and Conditions”). This somewhat contradictory approach may leave visitors to the site confused as to the company’s motives in operating the blog.

**Content**

Readers of Sprint’s blog are cautioned that the site contains “Vicki’s personal opinion” and that “Sprint may not necessarily share these opinions” (Sprint “Terms and Conditions”). Given the content of the site, though, one can easily assume that Sprint does
indeed share Warker’s opinions. All eight posts relate directly to Sprint’s business or to the blog itself, and with one exception, in which she mentions that she has returned from a vacation (Sprint 11/06/05), Warker never discusses nonwork-related topics.

The average length of posts on the Sprint blog is 390 words, above the five-blog average of 300 and second only to GM’s 556-word average. The posts collected for this study contain zero non-textual elements, but all of them include at least one hyperlink. Many of these hyperlinks point to Sprint’s homepage, but they are just as likely to direct readers to articles about wireless technologies (Sprint 12/11/05) or websites for technology conferences (Sprint 01/06/06).

One post in particular illustrates Sprint’s efforts to refashion its institutional ethos by presenting content that would be inappropriate in other formats. In the post, Warker writes a
review of her new cell phone, made by Treo, which has recently been added to Sprint’s product line (Sprint 12/04/05). Although the post is plainly designed to promote one of Sprint’s new products, the corporate blog genre allows Warker to transcend mere marketing copy by using a personalized narrative and admitting the shortcomings of the device (“I learned that turning the power button off on the device does not necessarily turn the phone off”). Of the eight posts included in this study, this one comes closest to realizing the potential of corporate blogs to present unique content that is not available in any other format.
Interaction

The intended audience of the Things that Make You Go Wireless blog is loyal Sprint customers, but these customers are either unaware of the blog’s existence or uninterested in joining a dialogue with Warker. The site allows readers to add comments to individual posts, but six of the eight posts have no comments at all, and the average number of comments is 1.75 per post. On the posts that do feature comments, the feedback is sometimes less than friendly, but Warker should be commended for her willingness to respond to criticism the way most bloggers do: in the comment area itself. After one particularly caustic comment, which begins, “SPRINT IS THE WORST SERVICE I HAVE EVER SEEN!!! IT IS ABSOLUTELY HORRID,” Warker calmly responds, “While this blog is not intended to be a collection point for service issues I do recognize that we fall short of expectations on many occasions” (Sprint 11/06/05). Although Warker’s boilerplate response reads as if it was taken directly from Sprint’s customer service handbook, the fact that Warker left the original comment on the site speaks volumes about Sprint’s efforts to embrace the spirit of the blogosphere.

The lack of greater interaction on the site during the study may be attributed to the relative newness of the blog. In January 2006, Warker writes, “Welcome to those of you just joining us. We have kept this blog under wraps for a while with little promotion even within Sprint. A recent posting on our internal website has changed that and Sprint employees are a friendly bunch who tell their friends about what they’re reading and interested in so I expect traffic will pick up” (Sprint 01/25/06). Additional data, gathered several months after this study’s data were collected, may provide a more accurate account of audience interaction on the Sprint blog.
Authorship

Two authors added posts to the *Things that Make You Go Wireless* blog during the study: Vicki Warker, Sprint’s vice president of product management and marketing, and Russ McGuire, Sprint’s director of business strategy. However, Warker refers to McGuire as a guest poster, and his three posts to the site were actually added by Warker herself. The five remaining posts are attributed to Warker, who writes using first-person singular and occasionally addresses her readers as “you.” Confirming Warker’s role as the primary blogger at Sprint is the prominence of a link on every page of the blog to an “About Vicki Warker” page. Much like Randy Baseler’s biography on Boeing’s site, Warker’s biography is written in third person and comes across as out of place on a weblog.

In contrast to the GM and Boeing blogs, however, a compelling case can be made that Vicki Warker is indeed the author of the posts attributed to “Vicki.” Warker’s posts are much less polished than those on the GM and Boeing sites, and her casual writing style imbues the blog with her personality. As Sprint’s blog matures, the tone may shift and additional authors may begin posting in a more formal capacity than “guest poster.” For the moment, however, it appears that Warker is in complete control of the blog.

Integration

*Things that Make You Go Wireless* is hosted on a subdomain of Sprint’s corporate site at http://businessblog.sprint.com, but there are no links to the blog anywhere on the main site. The lack of publicity on Sprint’s site may be due to the relative newness of the blog, but at present, Sprint’s customers have no way of finding the site by visiting Sprint’s homepage, which doesn’t even have a search engine. A Google search for the term “blog,” restricted to the sprint.com site, returns *Things that Make You Go Wireless* as the first hit, but it is
difficult to imagine a scenario in which a reader is passionate enough about Sprint’s products and services that she would go to such lengths to find the company’s corporate blog.

The blog’s visual design has little in common with Sprint’s main website (see Figures 9 and 10). Although the blog uses the same two-column design employed by all of the blogs in this study, its masthead makes no mention of Sprint. In fact, users must scroll midway down the page before they will find a link to Sprint’s homepage. The visual design of *Things that Make You Go Wireless* is clearly intended to signal the site’s “blog-ness” more than its relationship to the company responsible for the site.

**Frequency**

During the three months of this study, 8 posts were added to the *Things that Make You Go Wireless* blog. These numbers are approximately 62% lower than the average across all five blogs of 21.2 posts. There was no pattern to the days on which posts were added to the blog: posts were added on weekends as well as weekdays; only one post was added during the month of November; and the longest gap between posts was 28 days.

**Archiving**

The *Things that Make You Go Wireless* blog archives its posts primarily by date. All posts from the blog, dating back to its debut in July 2005, are still online, and readers can still comment on archived posts. The blog has a list of categories to which posts can be assigned, but currently the only categories are “Home” and “News and Updates on the Sprint Nextel Merger.” One post is assigned to the latter category, and all other posts appear in the “Home” category. It is safe to assume that the content management system behind the Sprint blog
allows for greater use of categories, but currently the site is not making full use of this functionality.

**Conclusions**

Sprint's first experiment with blogging is a work in progress, and its long-term effect on the company’s institutional *ethos* remains to be seen, but if the early posts collected here are any indication, the *Things that Make You Go Wireless* blog has the potential to enhance the company’s credibility in the blogosphere.
CASE STUDY 4: CISCO SYSTEMS

Cisco Systems created its High Tech Policy Blog in February 2005 to "share our staff’s knowledge and opinions about government policy, legislation and regulation and the environment in which it is created" (Cisco 02/04/05). The site is unique among the five sites studied here in that it focuses on one narrow aspect of Cisco’s business. It is included in this study, however, because it is Cisco’s sole corporate weblog and, by extension, the company’s only presence in the blogosphere.

Every page of the blog contains a lengthy legal disclaimer, which is printed in a minute font and is noteworthy for its dense legalese:

The content is provided for informational purposes only and is not meant to be an endorsement or representation by Cisco or any other party.... By posting you agree to be solely responsible for the content of all information you contribute, link to, or otherwise upload to the Website and release Cisco from any liability related to your use of the Website. You also grant to Cisco a worldwide, perpetual, irrevocable, royalty-free and fully-paid, transferable (including rights to sublicense) right to exercise all copyright, publicity, and moral rights with respect to any original content you provide. (Cisco "Disclaimer")

Rather than inviting participation from the blog’s readers, this disclaimer acts more like a guard dog, scaring away visitors before they fully explore the site. The *ethos*-damaging effects of this disclaimer are mirrored by numerous attributes of the Cisco blog, which may be the nadir of Fortune 100 corporate weblogs.
Content

Of the nine posts collected for this study, two deal directly with Cisco as a company or with the High Tech Policy Blog itself (Cisco 11/28/05, 01/11/06), and the other seven focus on political issues related to Cisco’s business. The average length of posts is 315 words (close to the five-blog average of 300), and none of the posts contain nontextual elements. Only two of the posts include hyperlinks, and all of the links point to Cisco websites. The blog’s authors, especially John Earnhardt, frequently use casual speech and slang expressions in their posts. For example, Earnhardt jokingly refers to William Shakespeare as “Billy Shakespeare” and gives a “shout out” to readers who are interested in broadband regulations.
Figure 12. The homepage of the Cisco Systems website.

(Cisco 01/23/06). In another post, he prefaces his remarks by writing, “As always, this is just me talking,” and concludes with, “So, those are my two cents on this” (Cisco 01/27/06). One could argue that these examples are carefully considered rhetorical devices used by Earnhardt to establish ethos with his readers, but such attempts at familiarity seem out of place given the topical focus of the blog.

The most surprising aspect of Cisco’s blog is its overtly political nature. Earnhardt and Laura Ipsen, another Cisco blogger, do not hesitate to discuss pending legislation or mention politicians by name. For example, Earnhardt urges Google not to comply with a Justice Department subpoena (Cisco 01/27/06); Ipsen identifies herself as “a Republican living in a ‘blue’ state” and praises California governor Arnold Schwarzenegger (Cisco 11/30/05); and Earnhardt, writing about immigration reform, asks, “Why are those who seem
to want to build walls around the U.S. so patently against the very way that their ancestors first arrived in the ol’ U.S. of A?” (Cisco 01/09/06). While taking positions on political issues signals the authors’ independence, the posts rarely make explicit connections between these political positions and Cisco’s corporate interests. As a result, readers are left wondering why Cisco is sponsoring the High Tech Policy Blog in the first place.

**Interaction**

Given its political slant, it is difficult to determine the intended audience of Cisco’s blog, and the sparse comments on the site provide few clues about who is reading the blog. One post, focused on Bill Weld’s candidacy for the governorship of New York, features a single comment that simply reads, “BILL WELD IS THE MAN. WITHOUT A DOUBT” (Cisco 12/08/05), giving the impression that the commenter stumbled upon the Cisco blog by searching for “Bill Weld.” On another post, in which Earnhardt pines for the “optimism of President Reagan,” a reader excoriates Earnhardt for his “Republican political views” and advises Earnhart to “Get a Livejournal [a weblog format popular among teenagers] if you want to prattle on like this” (Cisco 01/18/05).

Interestingly enough, among the blogs studied here, Cisco’s blog is the only one that publicly admits to approving readers’ comments before they are posted (Cisco “Disclaimer”), but the flippant nature of several comments that have been posted causes one to wonder what would cause a comment to be rejected. Whatever screening may be going on, the paucity of comments viewable by the public—an average of 1.33 comments per post, the lowest of the four blogs that accept comments—negatively influences the ethos of Cisco’s blog.
Authorship

The Cisco High Tech Policy Blog lists six authors on its “Blogger Biographies” page, but only three added posts to the blog during the study: Laura K. Ipsen, vice president of worldwide government affairs (one post); John Earnhardt, senior manager of policy communications in the office of worldwide government affairs (seven posts); and Jeff Campbell, director of technology and communications in the office of worldwide government affairs (one post). The biographies of all three posters are written in third person, but the blog posts themselves use first-person singular almost exclusively.

John Earnhardt is the primary author of the posts analyzed in this study, but even a single post each by Ipsen and Campbell offer enough evidence to conclude that each of these individuals is adding posts to the blog with little or no oversight by other individuals. Earnhardt’s posts in particular reveal a casual tone, abundant use of slang, and strong political opinions, all three of which would likely be excised if the blog had an editor.

Integration

The Cisco High Tech Policy Blog is hosted on a subdomain of Cisco Systems’ corporate site at http://blogs.cisco.com/gov/. That the blog is located in a subdirectory of the site indicates that the company may have plans to host other weblogs in the future; at present, visitors attempting to access blogs.cisco.com are automatically redirected to the High Tech Policy Blog.

Due to the blog’s focus on government policy, the only links from Cisco’s main website to the weblog are found on the “Government Affairs” pages. In theory, visitors looking for Cisco’s blog could navigate to the site with two clicks, but only if they assumed the blog would be affiliated with the Government Affairs office. Given the fact that most
corporate blogs are operated by the public relations staff, such quick navigation seems unlikely. Although Cisco's main website does have a search box, a search for the term "blog" does not return the *High Tech Policy Blog* as one of the results. In short, it is highly unlikely that casual visitors to Cisco's website would stumble across the weblog; even visitors going to the site with the intention of finding the blog may have difficulty doing so. Likewise, visitors to the *High Tech Policy Blog* will find it difficult to return to the Cisco homepage, as the weblog has no links at all to the main page of Cisco's website.

Visually, Cisco's blog has little in common with the Cisco homepage (see Figures 11 and 12). Other than a small logo in the upper right-hand corner of the site, the sites share no design elements. While other corporate weblogs use this strategy to differentiate the blog from the parent corporation's site by using bold colors or striking images, Cisco's blog merely appears unfinished. The blog employs the same two-column layout used by all five blogs in this study, but nothing about the appearance of the site indicates that the blog is either trying to mirror the look of the parent company's site or rebel against it.

**Frequency**

During the three months of this study, 9 posts were added to the *Cisco High Tech Policy Blog*. These numbers are approximately 58% lower than the average across all five blogs of 21.2 posts. There was no pattern to the days on which posts were added to the blog: only two posts were added during the month of November; in December only one post was added; but in January six posts were added. The longest gap between posts was 32 days.
Archiving

The *High Tech Policy Blog* archives its posts primarily by date. All posts from the blog, dating back to its debut in February 2005, are still online, and readers can still comment on archived posts. Each post is also assigned to one of four categories: General, Security, Telecom Policy, or Trade. These categories are somewhat meaningless, however, in that each individual post does not list the category it has been assigned.

Conclusions

The convergence of several factors makes Cisco’s *High Tech Policy Blog* the least credible blog in this study. Among other problems, the posts lack a clear thematic focus, the blog is wholly disconnected from Cisco’s primary Internet presence, and the interaction among the blog’s authors and readers is either off-topic or confrontational. In short, the Cisco blog is likely to have a detrimental effect upon the company’s institutional ethos. Fortunately for Cisco, it appears that very few people have seen the *High Tech Policy Blog*. 
CASE STUDY 5: EDS

EDS' Next Big Thing Blog, launched in June 2005 by Electronic Data Systems Corporation, is written by a group of employees known as “EDS Fellows,” a title “awarded to the company’s most innovative thought leaders in recognition of their exceptional achievements” (EDS “About the EDS Fellows”). Placing the corporate blog under the control of the fellows is an obvious move to establish ethos in a traditional manner, namely, by appealing to the reader’s respect for age and experience. Indeed, the site is quick to point out that the company’s twenty-five fellows have an average of twenty-four years of “industry experience and futuristic technology implementations” (EDS “About the EDS Fellows”). In the blogosphere, however, credibility is not automatically ascribed to those with age or experience, and this move may be a misguided attempt to establish ethos among blog-savvy readers.

Like GM’s FastLane Blog, the Next Big Thing Blog adapts its “Blogging Guidelines” from Charlene Li’s sample code of ethics. The EDS site lists five guidelines for its blog:

1. We will tell the truth.
2. We will review all comments for business and subject relevance before they are posted.
3. We will try to respond to comments as fast as possible.
4. We will link to all of our online resources directly.
5. We will respect your comments and disagree with them where appropriate. (EDS “Blogging Guidelines”)
Although the EDS blog also links to an EDS-wide “Terms and Conditions” page, written in legalese, this succinct list of five guidelines caters to the blogosphere and enhances the ethos of the blog by communicating its policies in plain English, using short, declarative sentences.

**Content**

The EDS blog is responsible for more than half of all posts collected for this study (57 out of 106), and the EDS data single-handedly skewed the five-blog averages in several areas. For example, if the EDS data is removed, the average number of posts across all blogs drops from 21.2 to 12.25. The sheer volume of posts alone distinguishes the EDS blog as the most “blog-like” among the five corporate blogs studied here, but several other factors
differentiate it from its fellow subjects in this study. First, although the blog includes almost no nontextual elements, the blog’s authors understand the importance of the hyperlink in establishing ethos—only four of the fifty-seven posts lack hyperlinks. Next, the blog posts are short, averaging just 211 words (compared to the five-blog average of 300). Finally, the thematic focus of the site is clear and consistent; the EDS fellows write almost exclusively about bleeding-edge technologies, taking time out only occasionally to write about the EDS blog itself (EDS 11/04/05).

Paradoxically, this final factor—the blog’s narrow focus—may negatively affect the ethos of the site. Because of the topical focus of the blog, the language used by the EDS fellows, while not typical “corporate speak,” is elevated, even academic in places. The site’s primary author, Charlie Bess, doesn’t write like a public relations executive, but he does

Figure 14. The homepage of the EDS website.
write like a computer engineer, posting on topics like “service oriented architectures” (EDS 11/04/05), “context sensitive RSS readers” (EDS 11/09/05), and “domain specific modeling” (EDS 01/12/06). The specialized vocabulary necessitated by some of these technological posts may limit the blog’s reach to other technophiles and may be off-putting to first-time visitors to the site.

**Interaction**

When compared to the aggregated average number of comments per post (25.72), the average number of comments on the *Next Big Thing Blog* (1.96 comments per post) appears meager, but if the data from GM’s ultra-popular *FastLane Blog* is removed, the *Next Big Thing Blog* boasts the highest average number of comments among the remaining blogs. More important than the raw numbers is the fact that Bess regularly replies to readers in the comments section of the blog, evidence that he is not only adding posts to the site, but actively reading the comments left by visitors.

The majority of comments added to the blog use the same elevated tone found in the blog posts themselves, which indicates that the primary audience of the *Next Big Thing Blog* is other EDS fellows (who sometimes comment on one another’s posts) and likeminded technophiles. In one post, Bess solicits feedback from his readers, asking them, “What would you like to see covered in this blog that would peak [sic] your interest and desire to carry on a deeper conversation?” (EDS 11/03/05). Bess’s choice of words here is significant—he isn’t interested in finding out what readers is trendy; rather, he specifically asks them what topics would inspire them to engage in a “deeper conversation” with the EDS fellows. The readers who comment on the EDS blog share Bess’s interest in a thoughtful, extended conversation about the future of technology.
Authorship

Two authors added posts to *EDS' Next Big Thing Blog* during the study, but one of them—Tom Hill—posted only twice, while the other—Charlie Bess—posted 55 times. In fact, during the study, Bess was responsible for more blog entries than all of the other blog authors from all five companies combined. The EDS blog is jointly authored by the “EDS Fellows,” each of whom has his or her own account on the system, but Charlie Bess clearly has a passion for blogging and his posts dominate the site.

The nature of the site—an ongoing discussion about the “future of technology”—as well as the topics and frequency of the posts, indicate that the EDS Fellows, especially Bess, are posting to the site themselves. Bess writes in first person and addresses his readers as “you”; he also regularly adds comments to his own posts in response to readers’ comments, in which case he addresses his readers by name. There can be little doubt that Bess is both writing his own posts and physically adding them to the blog.

Integration

The *Next Big Thing Blog* is hosted in a subdirectory of the EDS corporate site at http://www.eds.com/sites/cs/blogs/eds_next_big_thing_blog/. Despite the lengthy URL, the EDS blog is more fully integrated with its parent company’s website than any other blog in this study. Under “News and Events” on the EDS homepage, visitors will find a link titled “Blog,” which will take them directly to the weblog. On the “News and Events” page, the *Next Big Thing Blog* is prominently featured, with another link to the blog and a brief description of the blog’s purpose. If visitors to the EDS homepage prefer to use the company’s search engine instead, a search for the term “blog” returns the *Next Big Thing Blog* as the first result. No other company in this study links to their corporate weblog on the
homepage of the main website, and no other company contains links to the blog on as many pages as does EDS.

The visual design of the site further reinforces the integration of the blog with its parent company website (see Figures 13 and 14). Although the blog uses a standard two-column layout, its visual design is seamless with the rest of the EDS site. Instead of using a visual header image, the blog simply exists within the visual framework of the parent site; hence, visitors to the blog can use the primary navigation and search engine features found on all pages of the EDS website. A “breadcrumbs” trail at the top of each page of the weblog leads visitors back to the “News and Events” page or back to the EDS homepage.

**Frequency**

During the three months of this study, fifty-seven posts were added to the Next Big Thing Blog. This number is approximately 269% higher than the average across all five blogs of 21.2 posts. Although posts were never added to the site on the weekends, some weeks saw posts added for five consecutive days, and there were numerous days when more than one post was added to the site. The longest gap between posts was nine days, when Charlie Bess, the blog’s primary contributor, took a scheduled break over the Thanksgiving holiday week.

**Archiving**

The Next Big Thing Blog archives its posts primarily by date. At present, posts dating to June 2005 are still online; however, it is unclear if this date represents the launch of the blog or merely a cut-off point for archiving. Readers can still comment on archived posts.
Conclusions

Of the five blogs in this study, the *Next Big Thing Blog* most closely resembles a personal weblog. Posts to the site are relatively short, new posts are added several times per week, and the blog’s authors actively interact with readers in the comments section of the site. The similarities between the EDS blog and the genre of personal weblogs indicate that the blog’s authors, especially Bess, have embraced the spirit of the blogosphere, but these similarities by no means indicate that the EDS blog is effective as a corporate weblog. The function of *ethos* on a personal weblog differs the function of *ethos* on a corporate weblog, and the EDS blog may be too lofty in its intellectual ambitions to connect with the company’s average customers. Although the *Next Big Thing Blog* doesn’t seem to be having a negative effect on the institutional *ethos* of EDS, its power to improve the company’s *ethos* within the blogosphere appears limited.
Chapter 5: Conclusions

The case studies presented here provide insight into the emerging genre of corporate weblogs and enable us to draw tentative conclusions about the state of corporate blogging in early 2006, but they must be viewed as a snapshot of the blogosphere, not a narrative film.

With this in mind, we can return to the two primary questions addressed by this thesis: First, how do corporate weblogs compare to personal weblogs, and what do the similarities and differences reveal about the two closely related genres? Second, how might corporate weblogs represent the institutional ethos of the corporations that use them?

CORPORATE BLOGS AS AN EMERGING GENRE

The first question, concerning the relationship between corporate blogs and personal blogs, can be answered by examining the parallels between websites and weblogs. Ten years ago, most American corporations viewed corporate websites as a novelty, a passing fad with limited practical application and even more limited reach as a means of communicating with customers. Today, of course, no major corporation lacks a website, and it would seem ridiculous for a company’s executives to ask themselves, Should we have a website? That question has already been answered; all that remains are questions of execution: How should we represent the corporation on the web? Who should design our website? What type of content should we include on our website? How frequently should we update our website?

The advent of the corporate weblog is one way companies are answering this final question, and it is easy to imagine a time in the not too distant future in which companies no longer ask themselves, Should we have a weblog?, but rather focus solely on questions of execution: Who should maintain our blog? How closely should our blog be integrated with our corporate website? How carefully should posts be edited and screened before they are
added to the blog? What level of interaction should we invite from our customers? How long should we archive our blog posts?

As early adopters of the weblog format, the corporations studied here are exploring uncharted territory, and as a result, none of them has avoided all of the potential pitfalls of corporate blogging. At the same time, all of these companies are benefiting from the fact that corporate weblogs are still viewed as a novelty. Mainstream media sources are more likely to cover the launch of a new corporate weblog because such an event is still considered newsworthy, customers are more likely to participate because they see the format as a unique way to communicate with corporate executives, and blogging pundits are more likely to be forgiving in their assessment of these blogs because they are seen as evidence of corporations embracing the populist spirit of the blogosphere. As more companies begin blogging—and, given the meteoric rise of the weblog in our popular culture, it appears inevitable that they will—these benefits will evaporate, and companies will be forced to consider (or reconsider) the role blogging should play in their overarching communication plans.

In addition, the idea that companies can reach some mysterious, previously untapped market with a blog will eventually be seen as naïve. As blog readership and creation continue to increase, it will become increasingly problematic to refer to “blog readers” or “the blogosphere,” much in the same way that is seems patently absurd to refer to “television viewers” or “newspaper readers” as a single population. If the phenomenon of blogging continues on its current trajectory, the format will become so ubiquitous as to be almost invisible, and the lexicon of blogging will shift to accommodate the evolution of the format. Instead of referring to “bloggers,” we will refer to “right-wing political bloggers” or “knitting bloggers.” A columnist in the Wall Street Journal speculates that “blogs will be everywhere
in the near-future, but singling them out amid the Internet tumult will seem odd, like talking about one’s favorite commerce or community sites as a group” (Fry).

As blogs become segmented into an ever-increasing number of genres and subgenres, niche business blogs will emerge to target narrow populations. This evolution has obvious historical precedents; for example, whereas most Americans once watched the same few television programs, there are now hundreds of cable and satellite channels, all designed to cater to history buffs or NASCAR fans or political junkies. The broader blogosphere has already undergone this evolution, and business blogs are quickly catching up. In a sense, one could argue that every business blog is already a niche blog, in that companies are focusing solely on strengthening customer loyalty to a particular brand. If 2005 was the year that corporate blogs emerged as a new genre, the next two or three years will see this genre solidify (and perhaps even move toward invisibility) and will see the emergence of numerous subgenres within the corporate blogosphere.

THE ETHOS OF CORPORATE BLOGS

The second question, concerning the role of corporate weblogs in representing institutional ethos, can be answered by examining the five case studies in chapter 4 for broad trends in the six criteria established in chapter 3.

Content

Any study of corporate weblogs must take into consideration the primary content contained in the blog posts. As the case studies demonstrate, corporations are still struggling to find an appropriate balance between the personal and professional on their blogs. If corporate blogs can’t effectively maintain such a balance, the potential for harm to the
company’s institutional ethos is great. Posts to a corporate blog should avoid sophomoric slang and humor (e.g., the Cisco blog), but they must not be so carefully crafted that they appear to be written by a team of public-relations officers (e.g., the Boeing blog). A corporate blog can humanize its authors by offering readers a glimpse into the authors’ personal lives, but the blog shouldn’t lose its focus on the mission and goals of the company. After all, with millions of blogs to choose from, readers aren’t likely to seek out a corporate blog in order to find out what the company’s CEO ate for breakfast. Blog readers are savvy enough to understand that a corporate blog is a marketing tool, and these readers will assent to being marketed to, as long as they feel the blog provides them with information they can’t obtain anywhere else. Thus, corporations desiring to enhance their ethos in the blogosphere must provide unique content and present the content using the conventions of the weblog, not the press release.

Interaction

Of the six criteria used here, interaction between a blog’s authors and its readers may have the greatest impact on a corporation’s institutional ethos. As the Harvard Management Communication Letter notes, “The ability to engage with others is what gives blogs their power.... A corporate blog allows a company both to keep an ear to the ground to hear what’s being said about it and, if necessary, speak up with a correction” (Heires). With the exception of Boeing, all of the companies studied here allow their readers to comment on individual blog posts. This level of interaction is important, but it is just a first step. A more interactive blog will feature authors who use the blog’s commenting function to respond directly to readers’ feedback. The Sprint, Cisco, and EDS blogs all contained comments by their blogs’ authors consisting of responses to other comments added to the site, but only the
EDS blog featured a genuine dialogue between its authors and readers. Corporations considering blogging should study the EDS blog for its ethos-building method of interaction.

Authorship

Before a corporation embraces blogging, it should carefully consider who will author the company’s blog posts. I initially hypothesized that there would be a positive correlation between the status within the company of a weblog’s author and the ethos of that weblog among its readers, and the case studies appear to support this hypothesis. Whether or not executives like GM’s Bob Lutz are actually authoring the posts attributed to them (and sufficient evidence exists to arouse suspicion that they aren’t), their names carry with them a degree of gravitas not enjoyed by mid-level managers and public relations officers. At least some of the success of GM’s blog can be attributed to Lutz’s public involvement with the blog, and the failure of other blogs in the study to attract a greater readership can be attributed, at least in part, to the lack of a high-profile executive on the blog’s masthead. Corporations that blog must take into account America’s fascination with celebrities and executives and weigh the benefits of featuring a high-profile author against the risks of increasing the public availability of this author’s words.

Integration

The process of integrating a weblog and its parent corporate site can be a two-edged sword. On the one hand, a company that has invested financial and human resources in the creation of its blog will naturally want to draw attention to it by putting out a press release announcing the blog’s launch, placing links to the blog on the company’s homepage, and even notifying prominent bloggers in hopes of being linked to and discussed in the
blogosphere. On the other hand, a company that understands the spirit of the blogosphere will realize that the *ethos* of its blog can be damaged if the blog appears to be *too* closely connected to the corporate site, in either content or visual design.

The blogs in this study varied wildly in regard to this criteria, with some tightly integrated into the corporate website (e.g., EDS) and some hardly integrated at all (e.g., GM and Sprint). Neither of these approaches can be said to be more effective than the other, but based on the success of GM’s *FastLane Blog* in attracting readers, it appears that maintaining at least a measure of distance between the blog and the corporate website—via a distinct URL, a marked difference in tone, and a unique visual design—may strengthen the company’s institutional *ethos* in this venue.

**Frequency**

Television increased the pace at which information flows in our society, but the Internet, and the weblog in specific, have greatly multiplied the speed of information. Because new information is constantly available, all information is at risk of becoming quickly outdated. This is especially true in the blogosphere, where news becomes old news in a matter of hours or even minutes. In such an environment, companies that choose to operate weblogs must be vigilant about adding posts to their blogs on a regular basis. Defining what constitutes “regular” is difficult, but in this study, two of the five blogs averaged less than one post per week (Sprint and Cisco), and two of the blogs averaged slightly more than one post per week (GM and Boeing).

Only the EDS blog came close to matching the pace of the blogosphere, with an average of 4.38 posts per week. Many bloggers would insist that even this posting schedule is too infrequent to maintain the attention of the blogosphere. Corporations that blog must
understand that an infrequent posting schedule can have a deleterious effect on the institutional ethos of the company responsible for the blog. Companies who cannot devote the time and energy to maintaining a frequent posting schedule would be wise to avoid blogging altogether.

Archiving

Of the six criteria established here, the relationship of archiving to a corporation’s institutional ethos is the easiest to define. Simply put, if a corporation wants to maintain its credibility among visitors to its weblog, the corporation must archive its blog posts and make them publicly available. At minimum, a date-based archive is necessary, and additional methods of archiving (e.g., by topic) further enhance credibility. Because the blog format is still relatively new, it is uncertain how long individual and corporate bloggers will be expected to maintain their archives, but given the decreasing costs of storage and bandwidth, companies may be expected to keep old blog posts online indefinitely.

LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

This study conducted here is meant to serve as a starting point for additional research on the subject of corporate weblogs. The possibilities for research on this topic are nearly limitless, and I offer just a few suggestions for additional research. First, although the size and scope of this thesis necessitate a limited examination of corporate blogs, the criteria I establish here could be applied to a much larger sample of corporate websites. Presumably, a large-scale empirical analysis of corporate weblogs would require a longitudinal study that tracks a greater number of blogs for a longer period of time. A larger data set would allow for
more quantitative measures to be used, and the resultant data would be more representative of the state of corporate blogging over a given time period.

Next, a more narrow approach could be applied to a single corporate blog, focusing specifically on the discourse between a company and its customers. For example, in this study I was unable to carefully examine the thousands of comments I collected from GM’s FastLane Blog, but this data, or a similar collection of comments from another corporate blog, could be coded and examined for the use of rhetorical strategies in online dialogues. The sheer volume of available data on the GM blog would provide a solid foundation for a longer, more comprehensive case study.

Finally, although internal weblogs, hosted on corporate intranets, are worthy of examination, such weblogs cannot be accessed by the general public. Hence, they fall outside the scope of this thesis. However, the use of corporate intranets has been examined (Jackson), and a case study of an internal company weblog would build upon such research. Bruner and others have compiled

Research in these areas would build upon the framework established here and would likely spark academic conversations on topics I have not considered in this thesis. The subject of corporate weblogs is ripe for academic research and scholars in rhetoric and professional communication are perfectly positioned to claim this intellectual ground as a topic for both quantitative and qualitative research.
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