

Constructing the profitable conversation:
A semiotic analysis of the company blog as a form of advertising

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Synopsis

This project is an examination of the practise of web logging, or “blogging” by companies as a new form of advertising. The essay consists of a semiotic content analysis of three companies’ blog postings over a seven-month period. The goal of the analysis is to illustrate how companies communicate with consumers online has changed due to the emergence of the company blog. The analysis is framed within the aims and history of mass media advertising in North America, as well as the norms associated with blogging as an online communication format.

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Introduction

In spring 2005, the United States' National Public Radio (NPR) aired a feature discussing American companies that were beginning to use web logs, or "blogs," as a means of communicating with consumers. According to the report, companies were having employees keep blogs on behalf of the companies themselves, which could be read directly from the companies' websites. I took an interest in the story for a couple of reasons. First, the idea of companies communicating to consumers via a blog struck me as odd. To my knowledge, at the time, a blog consisted of an online, personal diary of sorts written by *individuals*, not collective entities like companies. My immediate reaction was scepticism, thinking that a blog written by a company was, by definition, *not* a blog. In other words, how could a company, consisting of many, use a form of communication created for individuals? I then began thinking about a documentary I had seen in 2004 called *The Corporation*, which discussed how, in the United States, corporations had fought to obtain the status of citizens—of legal entities apart from those who compose them. It made sense, in a strange way, that corporations with the status of legal citizens, should also have the ability to communicate with singular voice like an individual can via a blog. Indeed, companies have been communicating with consumers for hundreds of years through advertisements and other public relations techniques (news releases, press conferences etc.). I thought it interesting that the next stage of the dynamic between companies and consumers might include communicating through a personalized diary that could be read by anyone online.

The second reason that the phenomenon of company blogging interested me when I heard this report was because I was reading Jack Kerouac's *On the road*. This book, about the so called "Beat Generation" of 1950's America, consists of Kerouac's continual journal of his experiences travelling back and fourth across America. The journal includes profiles of the people he met, descriptions of the music he heard and the drugs he consumed. Aside from loving the book, the style of writing Kerouac employed, to my mind, resembled the format of the continual public diary that has come to be associated with the blog.¹ Where Kerouac needed a publishing company to distribute his diary to a public audience, today's bloggers can simply post their thoughts and feelings on the Internet to whoever wishes to read them, free of editorial constraint. And, according to NPR, today's bloggers now includes companies.

After some discussion about the phenomenon of company blogging as a potential research topic, and some lingering uncertainty about whether a collective entity like a company could write a *genuine* blog, I decided to conduct some online investigation. I came across another indication that company blogging was catching on. A Swedish communications adviser had posted online a “Guide to Corporate Blogging” (Wackå 2005), which outlines the ways in which blogging can help companies achieve their communications objectives and the proper steps to use when constructing this kind of blog. This document was of interest to me primarily to gain a better understanding about what a corporate, or company, blog is, but also to see if the guide would address my concern about the company blog—written by a collective entity—contradicting the idea of a blog as a form of communication for the individual. This issue was addressed in the following way, with a definition of a corporate blog and a take on how it should be perceived in comparison to those written by individuals:

What, then, are corporate blogs? A corporate blog is a blog published by, or with the support of, an organization to reach that organization’s goals. Some would say this contradicts the original idea - that of the independent voice giving its views on the world, in a conversation with other independent voices. Probably it does. You must decide for yourself if that’s development or degeneration. [Wackå 2005: 5]²

Clearly, Wackå is leaving it up to the companies themselves to decide whether or not the company blog is contradictory to the established norms for blogging. As a researcher, I felt it not as important to engage in this kind of debate, but instead to investigate further *how* companies that blog were doing so. I wanted to gain a better understanding as to the kind of writing that companies were doing via the blog. In other words, the *content*, not the *format* was of primary interest to me.

I came up with some broad questions of interest: What does a company blog look like? Who within companies writes it? How does the blog compare to other forms of commercial communication present online and in other media? After reading a variety of blogs from large and small companies, I concluded that it is safe to classify the blog as a new form of *advertising*, in that it serves as a means for companies to convey messages that promote their brands, products and services. Indeed, this is how the blog is being used. As the study of advertising is an interest of mine, examining the phenomenon of company blogging from this perspective was

¹ A more detailed definition and description of the blog will be provided in the following chapter.

an appealing prospect. The cultural and economical influence advertising has had on North American culture cannot be understated, and any addition to the ways in which companies can advertise themselves, to my mind, is worthy of academic investigation. Furthermore, learning more about the phenomenon of blogging, as a relatively new form of online communication, is also a beneficial endeavour. As Gurak et al. (2005) explain: “Looking at blogs as rhetorical artefacts allows scholars to examine the ways in which they contribute to changing what it means to communicate online.” Scholars have begun to examine various cultural, political and social issues pertaining to blogging.³ My intention was to look at *the way companies communicate with consumers is changing online* thanks to the emergence of the blog. In order to do so, I felt that a content analysis of a selection of company blogs was the best approach. I decided to frame the analysis, not within the context of the blog as a communication format (in other words, not comparing the company blog to other types of blogs), but instead, within the history and objectives of *advertising*.

Statement of purpose and project outline

The general purpose of this project is to analyse how companies use blogs to advertise. The bulk of the essay consists of a content analysis of three companies’ blogs. The analysis is conducted using a semiotic methodology and will provide insight into how the blog provides new ways for companies to convey their desired messages to consumers. As will be explained further in the following chapters, the two primary communication goals I focus on with the analysis are:

1. How the companies use the blog to strengthen and convey the value associated with their respective *brands*—the primary goal of previous advertising techniques; and
2. How the companies use the blog to create and express a human identity and *personality* for themselves—one of the goals that has been forecasted as attainable by Wackå and others, when keeping a company blog.

In short, I seek to better understand the ways in which the blog helps, or hinders, the achievement of these goals and to speculate on the *effects* that the blog may have on how companies communicate with consumers online. Furthermore, I am interested in looking at how

² Throughout the paper, I will refer to the type of blog I am analyzing as a “company blog.” Not all companies are corporate, and my focus is blogs written on behalf of companies—corporate or not.

³ For examples, see Gurak et al. (2005).

consumers relate to these companies and their products may also be affected by advertising via a blog. The project takes the following structure:

- In Chapter I, I provide a theoretical and historical discussion about advertising goals and practice in North America and advertising's relationship with the mass media. This chapter also includes a definition and theoretical analysis of the blog as well as its emergence as a form of advertising. The purpose of this chapter is to provide the historical and theoretical framework and context for the content analysis of the company blogs, as well as to convey the relevance of company blogging as a topic for academic investigation;
- In Chapter II, I begin by presenting the criteria I used for selecting the company blogs and give profiles of the three companies whose blogs I have chosen to analyze. I then explain semiotic methodology I use to conduct this content analysis of these blogs. This explanation includes a definition and description of semiotics as a tool for textual analysis and an outline of how I conduct the content analysis.
- Chapter III consists of the content analysis of the company blogs from three companies: Google, *Ms. magazine* and the National Hockey League. The analysis is divided into three sections, based on the ways in which I have analyzed the blog text. Using tools of semiotic and literary analysis, I focus on *what* the bloggers write about, *how* their prose is constructed, and how the bloggers *position* themselves and *characterize* their audiences through their writing.
- The essay concludes with a summary of the findings of the analysis, a discussion about the limits of this research project and suggestions for further study. Although excerpts from the blog text are cited throughout the analysis, I will include an electronic appendix of the complete blog text that I have used for the analysis.

As I mentioned, the primary goal of the project is to shed light on the relatively new practice of company blogging as a form of advertising. An in-depth analysis of company blog content is beneficial to better understand the methods companies currently see to be appealing in conveying messages to consumers; to illustrate the particular characteristics of the blog as a communication format; and to see how these characteristics can serve the companies' objectives of strengthening the values of their brands and personalizing themselves.

CHAPTER I: THE FRAMEWORK

As the focus of this project is the emergence of the blog as a form of advertising, it is necessary to illustrate *why* a new form of advertising is a relevant issue for academic investigation, as well as to provide context to the phenomenon of the company blog. I will attempt to do so in the following chapter by providing a theoretical and historical framework of advertising and its relationship with the mass media in North America. The goal is to convey the significance of the *cultural and economic influence* this relationship has achieved. Section I of the chapter is an overview of the evolution of advertising in North America and its influence on contemporary culture; Section II discusses the interdependent relationship between advertising and the mass media; and Section III provides a definition of the blog, and the company blog, and explains how the company blog fits into the ongoing association between advertising and the mass media.

SECTION I

Selling modernity: the history and aims of advertising in North America

"I've got you under my skin/I've got you deep in the heart of me/So deep in my heart you are really a part of me." – Cole Porter, "Under my skin."

Throughout North American history, companies have communicated with consumers with various goals in mind. In the mid-1800's, the purpose of the earliest forms of mass advertising was to promote awareness about a new invention or a new product's existence, and, more importantly, to ingrain companies' names into the memories of consumers. With the industrial revolution came mass production and the flooding of markets with comparable goods and services. Companies distinguished their products by the establishing *brand names* and logos, tailored to "evoke familiarity and folksiness" (Klein 1999: 6). The industrial revolution also allowed for printed media products and advertisements to be "cheap and plentiful...The growth of the advertising industry at this time also helped to finance cheap daily newspapers, popular magazines and books" (McQuail 1997: 5). As advertising began appearing in popular literature in the late 1800's and early 1900's, many of the brand names familiar to consumers today were established.⁴ These names, and the logos and mascots that accompanied them, became the vehicles upon which advertising campaigns were based, mainly in the form of "jingles and

poster-style displays”(Marchand 1985: 10). The goal was to create distinctions between products based primarily on brand name recognition and recollection.⁵ As Williamson (1978: 24) explains:

There is very little difference between brands of products within any category...Therefore it is the first function of an advertisement to create differentiation...[Advertising] does this by providing the product with an image; the image only succeeds in differentiating between products in so far as it is a part of a system of differences.

Engraining the perceived differences between products depended on, what Barthes (1994: 177) refers to as “seducing without convincing...but nonetheless leading to purchase by the seduction alone.” “Seductive” brand integration marks the starting point in the evolution of commercial communication. This objective would be the basis for the various selling philosophies that would follow. In the beginning of the 20th century, as brand names and their slogans became a part of the popular lexicon, folksy rhymes and large product headlines were replaced with appeals to consumers’ reason. This is not to suggest, however, that slogans and jingles were discarded as selling tools, but instead supplemented with longer, text-based messages appearing mainly in handbills, magazines and newspapers. These messages “provided extensive information, the kind one might find on a patent application” (Abadi 2005). At the time, according to Postman (1985: 61), advertising was considered a “serious and rational enterprise, whose purpose was to convey information and make claims in prepositional forms.” Companies tried to convince consumers with argumentative statements that a certain product or service was beneficial to improving their lives, with the message *emphasizing the goods* themselves. As Jhally (1987: 1) explains: “At the material, concrete and historical level, advertising is part of a specific concern with the marketing of goods. It rose to prominence in modern society as a discourse through and about objects.”

Yet, the arguments and “reasons” advertisements provided in support of the superiority of a given product were not necessarily rational in nature. Marchand (1985: 10) cites the philosophy employed by psychologists and academics hired by advertising agencies at the time, which concluded that “consumers acted less from logic than from ‘non-rational yearnings.’” Despite claims of rationality, arguments were craftily constructed by advertisers, with implied truths and

⁴ In North America, this list includes Campbell’s soup, Ivory soap, Aunt Jemima’s syrup, Uncle Ben’s rice, Heinz ketchup, and Coca Cola, among countless others.

⁵ This is a process Jhally (1987) refers to as “structural recall” (129).

tricky wording. Miller and Stiff (1993: 8-9) provide a table of 15 types of “deceptive implications” that are found in advertising messages, including false implications of proof; qualification; superiority; resemblance; expertise and significance. A brief examination of this text from a 1916 Procter & Gamble soap advertisement helps to illustrate some of these implications:

*Do not look upon P&G–The **White Naphtha Soap** merely as good soap. If it were only that, there would be no reason for you to change from the good soap you are now using. Think of it as something more than soap. Consider it as a washday worker that actually would do the hard work you now must do yourself. Look upon it as something that would eliminate your washboard drudgery and troublesome boiling. Imagine it washing the clothes as sweet and clean as you ever washed them. See the wash on the line in half the time and yourself as fresh and happy as if it were any day but washday. In a few words, think of P&G–The **White Naphtha Soap**—not as soap—but as a laundress, your laundress, for that is the only term that does it justice. Consider it from this standpoint, then ask yourself if you can afford to let another washday pass without it. [Qtd. Marchand 1985: 10]*

Indeed, the implications of the soap’s superiority to other soaps (actually, it’s “more than a soap”), its significance to achieving a better wash, and, most humorously, its supposed resemblance to a “personal laundress” or “washday worker” are in no way qualified. The text neglects any logical explanation as to *why* we should see its claims to be true, or *how* the soap performs the wonders the ad promises. According to Myers (1994: 69), this vagueness is a common way for advertisers to avoid giving consumers the information they need to make a logical decision about a purchase. Instead, advertisers are “trying to place their product in a shifting system of meanings, to give it an image.” The image of the personal laundress, happy to relieve us from our washday burdens, presented in the White Naphtha soap ad, seems to be more of appeal to our emotions and desires.⁶ No one likes to do laundry today, not to mention 1916. A product that claims to do twice the work and “keep you as fresh and happy as if it were any day but washday” would certainly be desirable to the 1916 clothes washer.

Although these promises of personal benefit may have been as empty as those presented about the soap’s superiority, they seemed to affect consumers. Advertisers took note, and altered their copy accordingly, shifting from what Marchand (1985: 11) (perhaps generously) calls “more objective information about the product” to “subjective information about the hopes and anxieties of the consumers.” Claims about a certain product’s superior quality no longer held, and consumers were appealed to on a different level. Abadi (2005) notes how advertising literature in the 1920’s became infused with academics applying the rhetoric of psychology to

sales, deconstructing “the process of the mind of the buyer” into the categories of “attention; interest; desire; confidence; decision; action; and satisfaction.” This psychology-based selling philosophy, focusing on the consumer, would become the basis for commercial communication to the present day.⁷

Individually modern times

This shift in advertising philosophy from product to consumer came into full force in the mid-1920's. In North America, post-World War I society was gripped with the excitement and apprehensions of modernization: the increased velocity and mobility of lifestyles through advancements in technology and a fascination with development and urbanity. World War I also brought an increased cultural status to advertisers, who had played a large role in the wartime propaganda campaigns promoting war bonds, military enlistments and civilian morale (Marchand 1985). Their task now was to appeal to a consumer, who, although enthralled with the speed and excitement of modern society, was also prone to feelings of alienation from large, impersonal economic and bureaucratic institutions.⁸ Berman (1988: 15) describes the duality of the modern environment as one that “promise[d] adventure, power, joy, growth [and] transformation...and at the same time threaten[ed] to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are.” As lifestyles became more complicated, so too did the search for personal identity, and advertisers took the opportunity to capitalize.

Thus mass marketing, but with a personal tone, was needed in a fast, modern world that Bell (1976: 147) characterizes as one “of large-scale corporations—a world of coordination and bureaucracy—in which men were often treated as things because one can more easily coordinate things than men.” The goal was the creation of a relationship between people and the branded products they purchased, to “manifest the product as an integral part of large social purposes and processes” (McLuhan 1964: 201). The advertising narratives that illustrated this relationship “typically [told] stories of success, desire, happiness, and social fulfillment in the lives of people who consume the right brands” (Goldman & Papson 1996: 2). Commercial messages ceased to

⁶ The idea of using the concept of product as servant, or assistant seems to have persevered over time. A 2005 Acura automobile ad asks us to think of the *Acura RL* as “A personal assistant, beautifully disguised as a car.”

⁷ This is not to suggest that companies have ceased to centre ads on the superiority of a given product. That practice, too, continues to the present. However, the framing of products was altered to include appeals to issues not directly associated with the product itself, but with the consumers' feelings and desires.

⁸ This anxiety is illustrated famously through Weber's metaphor of the “iron cage of the mighty cosmos of the modern economic order” (Tucker 1998: 27).

just sell products and began to also sell dreams and lifestyles, attempting to convince consumers that purchasing Brand X would help them achieve a better job, happier, healthier children and a higher social status. Companies focused on “hailing” individuals directly, tailoring ads and other forms of communication, as messages just for “you” (as a member of a specified audience segment, determined by market research).⁹ At the same time, paranoia was used as a selling tool warning how *not* buying a certain product would subject one to social ridicule, as well as personal and professional failures.¹⁰ This approach came to be known as “user-centred advertising” (Jhally 1987: 128), and it attempted to incorporate companies’ brands into the fabric of everyday life and into consumers’ identities and ideologies (Williamson 1978).

It is important to further illustrate that during the 1920’s the enhanced role of advertisers as moulders of modern culture in capitalist societies continued to bolster the status of the profession. They ceased to be merely salesmen, and began to be associated with “high culture and business statesmanship” (Marchand 1985: 8). Ad critic Rothberg (qtd. Klein 1999: 7) likened advertisers to “philosopher kings of commercial culture.” The Harvard Business School began awarding artistic excellence in advertising; the work of famous illustrators such as Norman Rockwell began appearing in ads. “Dignified high-minded new institutional campaigns” (Marchand 1985: 8) for companies such as General Electric and General Motors were signs that advertising had become a corner stone in the modern cultural landscape. While addressing the convention of American Association of Advertising Agencies in 1926, the American President Calvin Coolidge went as far to praise the role of American advertising in the “cultivation of the mind and the social graces” and “harnessing America’s modern industrial system to the uplift of its citizenry” (qtd. Marchand 1985: 9). Although the perception of advertisers may have changed, the cultural power that was cultivated during this time remained.

There is little doubt the work of advertisers helped to “uplift” the citizenry to higher levels of consumption in, what Tucker (1998: 165) calls, “the quest for self.” As consumption habits became interconnected with identity in the mid-1900’s, that identity, too, became a commodity in the everyday workings of the modern economic order (Berman 1981: 111). As well, the process of consumption—shopping—became a “ritual,” with goods serving as the “markers of

⁹ See McQuail’s (1997) discussion regarding the “lifestyle” concept of commercial marketing research.

¹⁰ One of the more famous examples is the Listerine mouthwash campaign, which warned of the disasters of “halitosis” or bad breath. See Marchand (1985: 19).

social categories” (Jhally 1987: 7).¹¹ In this culture, the act of shopping has become more than the means to obtaining required goods: according to Shields (1992: 102), it is also “a social process of exploration and sight seeing akin to tourism.” Advertising’s role in this culture is to provide the images and symbols, of the lifestyle one can obtain while out on shopping excursions. At the same time, for manufacturers, advertising remained, what Jhally (1987: 3) calls, “the main weapon” in the continual production of an adequate consuming market for goods being made with ever-increasing speed, quantity and, perhaps most importantly to manufacturers, limited usability. Marchand (1985: 99) cites this third advertising purpose as one of the fundamental truths of modern society: the insurance of a continual need for production—what is bought is, essentially, built to be replaced, or “torn down:”

...From the clothes on our back to the looms and mills that weave them...All is made to be broken tomorrow, smashed or shredded or pulverized or dissolved, so they can be recycled or replaced next week, and the whole process can go on again and again, hopefully forever, in ever more profitable forms.

Such a philosophy fits well with the notion of advertising as a means of selling lifestyles, identities, fashions and trends, as opposed to a focus on the products themselves. All of these concepts are subject to change, which translates to the need for new products, or newer versions of the old products. This in turn, also requires advertisers to constantly refresh the need for a given product, or more importantly, a given *brand*, in the lives of consumers.

What’s your brand?

“Consumers are like roaches; you spray them and spray them and they get immune after a while.” – David Lubars
Omnicom Group senior advertisement executive.¹²

The importance of keeping the brand fresh in the minds and lifestyles of consumers remains the *primary goal* in current advertising techniques. Over the last 200 years, brand value has been the basis of many companies’ worth,¹³ as well as the basis of consumers’ buying habits. Companies continue to spend billions of dollars attempting to incorporate their brands into as many aspects of consumers’ lives as is possible through the mass media; through products themselves—for example the Nike “swoosh;”¹⁴ through the decorating of public places; the

¹¹ For a discussion about the rituals associated with shopping and shopping centres, see Shields (1992).

¹² Quoted (Klein 1998: 9).

¹³ For example, Philip Morris’s purchase of KRAFT foods, for \$12.6 billion, was six times more than the company’s net-worth. The difference was the cost of the word “KRAFT” (Klein 1999: 8).

¹⁴ For an in-depth analysis of Nike’s branding, see Goldman and Papson (1998).

sponsorship of sports and cultural events; as well as schools and universities (Klein 1999: 88). There is also the case of the branded *town* of “Celebration” Florida, which was created by the Walt Disney Company.¹⁵ For companies, the cost of ensuring the constant consumption of their brands is high.¹⁶ Competing producers engage in “ad wars” to see who can “out brand” the other.¹⁷ It is a constant struggle to find new ways to keep the brand fresh in the minds of consumers, as the buying habits of consumer groups are constantly changing (McQuail 1997) and the cultural “currency” of images used to sell brands is limited and in need of constant “abstraction and recombination” (Goldman and Papson 1996: 14).

More important is the cost of constant brand exposure to consumers, not just in terms of money, but also in terms of cultural and intellectual influence. Critics have been lamenting the effects of brand infiltration, specifically via advertising, for years. Writing in 1934, ad-man turned social critic Rorty (2004: 107)¹⁸ noted how advertising “has to do with the shaping of the economic, social, moral and ethical patterns of the community into serviceable conformity with the profit-making interests of advertisers.” This conformity has resulted in what Williamson calls “the creation of meaning” through advertising (1978: 17).¹⁹ Consumers are so inundated with commercial messages that how they relate to, and perceive, the world and themselves has not only been influenced, but also *created* by the advertisements they absorb and the products they consume. Some theorists, such as Smythe and Jhally, claim that consumers are actually inadvertently *working* for advertisers by spending their free time seeing and listening to ads, thus becoming commodities themselves (Smythe 2004, Jhally 1987). Klein (1999) furthers this idea by discussing the consumer as a conveyer of brands through, for example, porting clothes and other products with visible logos, thus becoming walking billboards. And yet, at the same time, wearing the proper brand is essential in the creation of desired individual identities, and consumers do it happily.²⁰

Engraining brands into the minds of consumers is the primary purpose of all forms of advertising operating today. As the focus of this research project is how companies advertise via

¹⁵ For more information about Celebration, see Muskens & Racké (2005).

¹⁶ Klein (1998: 9) cites a United Nations report, which notes “the growth in global ad spending now outpaces the growth of the world economy by one third.”

¹⁷ For example, Nike versus Reebok, Coke versus Pepsi, Microsoft versus Macintosh etc. See Goldman & Papson (1996)

¹⁸ Also the father of noted philosopher Richard Rorty.

¹⁹ Williamson (1978) provides a semiotic analysis of magazine ads to illustrate how this meaning is created.

²⁰ Goldman and Papson (1998: 1) cite the example of an athlete who actually tattooed the Nike swoosh to his chest.

a blog, part of the analysis of the blogs' text will deal directly with how this goal is achieved. Although the blog allows for other types of messages about a company to be conveyed, it is necessary to keep in mind the emphasis companies place on brand strengthening and to be aware of how they attempt to do so via a blog.

Societal manipulation, action and reaction

To this point in the chapter, I have discussed how the practice of advertising has evolved in North America, and the priorities companies have placed on branding via advertisements. I mentioned at the beginning of the chapter how the cultural, societal and economic influence that advertising has held makes the practise worthy of the type of academic investigation found in this project. The *effect* of this influence on how citizens in capitalist societies *consume* and have come to *relate to products* requires further discussion before the focus turns to advertising's relationship with the mass media, and finally to its relationship with the blog.

To begin, Tucker (1998: 156) notes the concerns of cultural critics regarding compromises to the quality of capitalist democracies caused by the importance placed on "the pleasures of private life." He describes how this causes "capacities for self-government to erode and democracies to become fragile, weak and governed by moneyed interests who promulgate their messages and encourage consumerism through the mass media." Habermas (qtd. Tucker 1998: 26) discusses the influence of monetary interests and consumerism as "the colonization of the lifeworld," which consists of "those realms of interaction, such as family, friends, and voluntary associations, which are orientated towards communicative action and the development of shared values." He refers to that resulting colony as the "system" of bureaucratic and corporate institutions, which also impedes the development of a successful "public sphere," where ideas are exchanged, debate emerges and democracies are strengthened. This "sphere" is appropriated by various forms of advertising on a continual basis. These messages are clearly forms of *propaganda*. Foulkes (1983: 18) defines propaganda as "intended manipulation; messages intended to affect action." It is difficult to do anything, whether it be go for a walk or turn on your computer, without being confronted with an advertisement reminding you how you need to act: what you need to buy next and how that purchase should make you think, feel and communicate.

Advertisements have also been the most convenient, although perhaps not the most desirable, means consumers have had to obtain actual *information* about the products they purchase. The information provided via advertisements and other promotions, indeed, does not look to help consumers better understand how and under what circumstances products are produced. Instead, the focus is on *fetishizing* the products, or giving them value based strictly on their perceived importance to consumers, and creating an artificial need for them where none actually exists.²¹ Critics have noted Marx's concern about production relationships in the formation of society (Gamble et al. 1999, Jhally 1987, Kellner 1989). In discussing the importance of obtaining production information Marx states, "In the commodity are the social relations of its production. They are part of the information that the commodity contains within itself...If only we can penetrate down to this information, then we can understand and unravel the whole system of relations of capitalism" (qtd. Jhally 1987: 26). Marx's strategy for unravelling this type of information is commonly referred to as *demystification*. This, according to Foulkes (1983: 55) "permits us to observe the origins and nature of false consciousness." He then goes on to explain the theories of "economic determinism" expounded by Marx and Engels, which explains the basis of this "false consciousness:"

[These] theories postulated a social superstructure deriving from an economic base. To the extent that the base was a system of unequal economic relationships, the superstructure produced by it, including false consciousness, acted to conceal the true nature of the base and to alienate the individual from the forces that determined his social existence. [Foulkes 1983: 55]

By "demystifying" the economics-based societal superstructure supported by the propaganda of advertising, Marx claims that the individual can reveal the true economic relations at work in capitalist societies. Certainly, with the proliferation of information via the Internet and other media, consumers now have the ability to better research (and demystify) the modes of production of the goods they consume. And as disheartening information about the production of many products has surfaced, some consumers have protested and boycotted offending companies, and a new culture of "environmental, labour and human-rights activists, determined to expose the damage being done" has emerged (Klein 1998: 325). Shields (1992: 100) refers to

²¹ Kellner (1989: 126) warns that it is important not to group all forms of consumption needs into the same category of "unreal or false," perpetuated by commercial messages. Some forms of consumption are obviously necessary, and the goal is to distinguish between that which should be consumed as, what Marx calls, "objects of enjoyment and activity" versus those products of "social integration and manipulation."

this movement as postmodern²² “regimes of value,” in which “many consumers...are conscious of the inequalities of exchange and the arbitrary nature of exchange value [the fetishizing of goods].” Advertisers are certainly aware of this trend and have attempted to alter copy to appeal to this emerging co-culture of consumers. Goldman & Papson (1996: 88) examine ad campaigns tailored to reach cynical, jaded consumers through the use of sardonic, self-deprecating ads that joke and make fun of themselves, and lampoon other ads. This is done through the use of previous clichés, such as unrealistic promises of beauty or athletic prowess through the purchase of a given products.²³ Goldman & Papson (1996: 187) also discuss the “green” approach to advertising that has emerged to appeal to those concerned with the environmental damages, which have resulted from a culture of over consumption and industrialization. Yet, they argue that this approach merely transforms environmental concerns into “commodity signs” to be incorporated into commercial messages and furthermore “re-legitimizes consumption by buffering corporate practises from criticism and by alleviating the guilt associated with over-consumption.”²⁴

Last brand standing

This approach illustrates how the appropriation of cultural meaning is constant in advertising, and as cultural trends change, so too do advertising approaches. With these changes, however, the *primary importance of the brand*, as well as its cultural and economical power, is showing no signs of subsiding. We can see this through the emphasis companies continue to place on brands (Klein 1999) and their omnipresence in so many forms of *space* available in capitalist societies. Space can take several meanings in this in this context: it can be actual property—for example what Shields (1992: 101) calls “urban public spaces,” such as malls, vendors and markets, which are, in reality, “often privately owned and therefore public only in appearance and in surface texture.” It can also mean personal spaces of thought, perception, information and identity (Morely & Robins 1995: 29). This space also includes the media—one of the primary influences on the development of individual and group identities.

²² My inclusion of the term “postmodern” is **not** a concession that the so-called modern era discussed earlier in this section is over, or that the “regime of value” is necessarily a postmodern phenomenon. The modern/postmodern debate exceeds the scope of this project.

²³ They cite examples from ad campaigns for companies such as Nike and Energizer and Isuzu.

²⁴ Corporations like Altria Group, the parent company of Philip Morris tobacco, have taken this approach, using ad space to exclusively discuss its charitable ventures and environmental concerns without mention of their products.

How advertising has been able to permeate so many forms of space, and why it has been possible for companies to make their respective brands such an accepted fact of life and a source of cultural capital will be the focus of the following section.

SECTION II The interdependent relationship: media and advertising

In North America, the relationship between marketing and the privately owned mass media is interdependent.²⁵ This type of mass media cannot function without advertising revenue—their primary source of income²⁶ (Allan 2004)—and companies require the media to distribute their messages along with programming desirable to consumers. Yet, without the revenue provided by advertisements, the mass media would not have been as widely accessible as it has become. With the need for advertising funds comes the concession to the commercial influence of content. As Herman and Chomsky (1988: 14) observe with regard to TV advertising: “Advertising has become normative reference, whose requirements and demands the media must accommodate if they are to succeed.” Along with advertisers’ influence on content comes consumers’ exposure to the continuous commercial messaging that accompanies it.²⁷ Where mass media is a prevalent cultural phenomenon, so too is the commercial. Williamson (1978: 11) notes: “Pervading all the media, but limited to none, advertising forms a vast superstructure with an apparently autonomous existence and an immense influence.” This “autonomous existence” and ongoing influence stems from consumers’ ever-increasing exposure to media in their various forms over the last century-and-a-half.

As the mass media grew and expanded, becoming more and more present in citizens’ lives, advertisements followed along: exposure to one meant exposure to the other. With the printed press came the possibility of first words and then pictures; the radio provided the use of sound, and the television and movie screen made it possible for sound, text and moving pictures to merge. Film and television, especially, provided advertisers the freedom to give *movement* to the

²⁵ As the focus of this paper is North American mass media, it is important to note that the abundance of media available to consumers is privately owned. The publicly operated media options (including the CBC, NPR and PBS) are nowhere near as prolific as in Europe. As well, there have been examples of a blurring of the line between public and private stations. CBC television, for example, depends greatly on advertising revenue.

²⁶ As Pilger (1998: 1) illustrates: “In American television, a one percentage point fall in the ratings can represent a loss of \$100 million a year in advertising.”

²⁷ Postman (1985: 129) suggests that an average American, by the time she reaches age 40, will have seen well over a million television commercials; not to mention the endless string of advertising “jingles” she will encounter on the

images of the lifestyles and identities they were attempting to sell through their brands. The shift in emphasis from *product to consumer* discussed earlier reached its apex through television advertising. On television, consumers could *see* themselves on-screen through the products advertised as well as being *entertained* by what would become the multi-billion dollar television advertising industry.²⁸ This industry has expanded even further with the emergence of the Internet.

The “purity” of advertising on the Internet

“*The Internet is the Viagra of big business*”—Jack Welch, CEO General Electrics.²⁹

Although television advertising continues to flourish, with the Internet has come the medium through which commercial texts have had the most freedom to permeate the consciousness of the consumer, and present them with the various aspects of their desired identities. As Klein (1998: 22) notes: “It is online that the purest brands are being built; liberated from the real world burdens of stores and product manufacturing, these brands are free to soar, less as disseminators of goods or services than as collective hallucinations.” This is not to say that the Internet ads one encounters do not resemble those found in previous media forms. Internet advertising philosophies, to date, are comparable in many ways to those found on television. Seiter (2000: 229) notes how “the association between television and the Internet [advertising] has been heavily promoted at the corporate level by access providers eager to lure as sponsors companies that invest heavily in television advertising.”³⁰ A key difference, however, is that Internet technologies allow companies to present their branded products through text, sound and image bypassing the limits of time constraints and editorial filter found on television, radio and in print. It also allows them to track exactly how many visits, or “hits” they receive at a given site and how many of those hits become sales (Lacey 2002: 108). The tracking and communication abilities now available to companies via the Internet are combined in the format of the blog. Blogs allows companies the ability to use the editorial-free, timeless platform of the Internet

radio; the pages and pages of marketing words and images in the daily newspaper and the “must-read” weekly or monthly magazines; as well as ever-present pop-up ad she will try to dodge while on the Internet.

²⁸ Television commercial premiers would become events in and of themselves during high-ratings broadcasts like the National Football League’s Superbowl, where interest in the advertisements would come to supersede interest in the game itself.

²⁹ Qtd. Maich (2006: 44).

³⁰ She cites the example of the merger between General Electric’s National Broadcasting Company (NBC) and Microsoft into MSNBC as one of the bigger marriages of a television network and a computer software company.

when attempting to engrain brands and product fetishism into the minds of consumers through personal, text-based messages that can also incorporate sound and image.

The consumer (potentially) strikes back

Conversely, from a consumer's perspective, the emergence of the Internet, and communication formats like the blog, meant that one-way systems of communication became two-way. As McQuail (1997: 10) explains: "The media user can acquire control of the information environment. In principle, this would seem to run counter to the general trend of media history." In other words, the Internet provides users, to a greater extent than traditional media, the option of *choosing* the nature of their information gathering, entertainment or buying experience; no longer does the sender of messages, commercial or otherwise, monopolize the communication exchange with consumers. Internet consumers can manipulate the medium and be proactive gatherers and providers of information and opinion.³¹ Therefore, online, a company can dictate to a far lesser extent the viewing and hearing choices of the consumer as compared to television, print or radio.

If an Internet consumer chooses to visit a company's website, he or she could come across a web log or "blog." The blog might provide information and opinion about the company and its products, as well as a forum for consumers to respond with their own comments. This form of advertising brings the relationship between company and consumer to a more intimate place. What a web log is, and how companies have begun to incorporate this communication format into their advertising approaches, will be the focus of the next section.

SECTION III, Blogging: The ongoing, open letter to everyone

In this section, I will outline what has, to date, been established as the definition of a blog. I will also cite examples of how the blog has been used by individuals and organizations—specifically companies—to further their communication objectives. As well, I will discuss some of the effects the blog has achieved in order to illustrate its relevance as a new form of mass communication and academic investigation. I will do so by noting how it has been characterized by cultural and media critics. The purpose of this section is to identify and explain as clearly as possible the communication format (the company blog) that is the primary subject of analysis for

this project. Such an explanation will hopefully provide helpful context to the content analysis of the chosen commercial blogs found in Chapter III.

What is a blog?

“Because the blog takes the form of a diary or a journal, it has an informal tone, from which you can sense that person’s values and interests, and *you can't remove the person – the personality – from the equation.*”³²

Walker (2003) defines a *web log*, or *blog* as “a frequently updated website consisting of dated entries...Typically, blogs are published by individuals, and their style is personal and informal.” These “dated entries” usually take the form of a diary or journal, which bloggers use to discuss themselves and their interests. As Gurak et al. (2006) explain:

The content of blogs combine musings, memories, jokes, reflections on research, photographs, rants, and essays...Blogs can be devoted to only one topic, or they can reflect what the author is interested in at any given time. They can have one author—authors of blogs are known as “bloggers”—or multiple authors. What characterizes blogs are their form and function: all posts to the blog are time-stamped with the most recent post at the top, creating a reverse chronological structure governed by spontaneity and novelty.

As a new form of Internet communication, the blog is not a fully formed or defined entity. Generally, however, blogs include hyperlinks and permalinks also known as “short cuts,” to information from other websites (including other blogs, known as a “blog roll”) and calendars, which can be used to link to previous entries. Although blogs are text-based, they can also include video and audio components, called “media objects.” The type of publishing the blog provides gives authors a means to convey opinions publicly, free-of-charge, without editorial interference and through a mass medium. In other words, a blog allows anyone with Internet access the ability to write an ongoing, open letter to everyone, without having to depend on anyone else to publish it.³³

Countless numbers and types of blogs are written on just about any subject imaginable. According to the blog search engine and measurement firm Technorati, 23,000 new blogs are created every day – “or about one every three seconds” (qtd. Kirkpatrick & Roth 2005). Online blog directories help to categorize these thousands of blogs by subject matter, author

³¹ As technologies continue to involve, the Internet is not alone in this regard. Options such as satellite radio and direct television also give consumers more freedom to manipulate their media.

³²Qtd. Wackå (2005: 4).

³³ This is because Internet companies, such as Google and Yahoo!, have provided blogging programs that are technically accessible to most computer users and are free-of-charge.

characteristics, location, language and so on. Blog entries are archived at the author's website and are listed in reverse chronological order, so that the most recent entry appears first. Entries are generally brief in content, but also can consist of longer prose, such as book chapters or articles. Entries are usually shorter, partly due to the tendencies of blog readers to skim small amounts of many blogs at a time (Walker 2005). A blog writer who wishes to attract a large audience of readers must keep this trend in mind.

Our readers write

The role of the blog reader, not only as receiver, but also as a sender of information is critical to the blogging dynamic. Blogs can have very few readers, but, in some cases, they have strong followings of loyal readers who return to the blog on a regular basis for the latest posting. Walker (2005) likens this trend to the followers of the "serials" traditionally found in newspaper comics, epistolary novels and on radio. Yet unlike the followers of these serials, blog readers have the possibility to state their opinions about a blog's content directly to the author and to other readers. Readers' opinions are usually listed in a section of the blog page called "comments," which is often a hyperlink to another page where all readers' comments can be read. Other blogs do not provide an open forum comments. Readers still have the means to state their opinions about blogs, but the comments are not displayed or readers are advised to email the author directly.

Of course, readers also have the possibility, of commenting in another way: *through their own blogs*. No longer does the information provider hold a monopoly over the publishing power of what can be consumed via a mass medium like the Internet.³⁴ Through the blog, the reader now can publicly respond to what angers or engages them instantly. This ability gives the blog reader and writer the potential to have a political, economic and cultural voice on the Internet—the results of which, to date, have been notable.³⁵

As a result of the blog's timely, far-reaching communicative power, social institutions, such as government and businesses, have been forced to acknowledge the presence of bloggers as

³⁴ This point harkens back to the larger characteristic of the Internet as a two-directional mass medium noted by McQuail (1997: 10).

³⁵ Bloggers were instrumental in support of relatively unknown Vermont Governor Howard Dean's significant run for the Democratic Party's nomination (Wolf 2003) and were the impetus for a scandal that arose when *CBS News* aired a report concerning President George W. Bush's military service—a report that was based on forged, inauthentic documents (Basen 2004).

significant stakeholders and incorporate them into communication strategies. As well, these institutions have begun to monitor blogs looking for comment and conversations that concern their interests. For those social actors who find themselves in the sights of influential bloggers, the results can be magnificent or devastating. In short, the broad communicative power of the blogger cannot be ignored by those societal institutions, which, in the past, have had a monopoly on such power. As Kirkpatrick and Roth (2004) explain: “The adage went ‘never pick a fight with anyone who buys ink by the barrel.’ But now everyone can get ink for free, launch a diatribe, and—if what they have to say is interesting to enough people—expect web-enabled word of mouth to carry it around the world.”

If what bloggers have to say is “interesting to enough people” to carry opinions around the world is, on the whole, debateable. Some media critics, including Salutin (qtd. Olive 2006: D4), contend that the blogosphere is not producing opinion or action that is of substantial societal significance:

The blogosphere is not a hothouse where brilliant new ideas are generated by self-described iconoclasts who populate it...The main qualification for blogging is that you failed to get a mainstream media job. Writers on the Web tend to be in touch only with other bloggers, not people in the street. It still takes a grassroots movement to force a fundamental change in social conditions.

Bloggers working alone, and targeting their writing only towards other bloggers may be limited in how effective and informed their thoughts and opinions can be. Yet, if one blogs on behalf of a *collective entity* of some kind, his reach and influence may be increased.

Organize yourself and speak for the collective

I mentioned in the introduction my initial concern about the authenticity of a blog written by a collective entity, like a company. However, it has become common for individuals to publish blogs from websites of organizations, such as political parties, sports teams, interest groups and companies. Journalists, for example, have begun publishing blogs alongside their articles at the websites of their magazines or newspapers, and in some cases, in the print versions of these

publications.³⁶ Political parties, too, have begun to use blogs from party representatives as a means of communicating their agendas to the public.³⁷

The concept of blogs being published on behalf of organizations also created a definitional concern for Winer (2003), who came across a what was referred to as a blog at the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) website. However, it lacked the technical features that have come to be associated with blogs, such as permalinks, a calendar, and biographical information about the author. Furthermore, the blog had more than one author, and they were professional writers. Yet, according to Weiner, “the *personalities* of the writers come through. That is the essential element of web log writing, and almost all the other elements can be missing, and the rules can be violated, as long as the voice of a person comes through, it’s a blog.”³⁸

This coincides with Walker’s criterion of the blog being written “personally and informally.” This point seems self-evident when an individual writes a blog for him or herself. (How could that not be personally written?) Yet when the blog is created on behalf of an organisation, as Winer discusses, how is the personality of the author(s), and furthermore, of the organisation conveyed? Furthermore, *whose* personality, the organisations or the individual author’s, is prominent? I will return to this point later when the discussion focuses on company blogs.

Significance of the voyeuristic benefit to democracy

As individuals and organisations continue to employ the blog to convey their thoughts and opinions to the world, there is the potential that the dynamic of information and influence conveyance through the mass media will, to some extent, shift. In other words, who are the creators of opinion and social trend has the possibility to change, although slowly. Historically, the societal “power players,” specifically politicians and entrepreneurs, have had a large say in what is transmitted, or not transmitted, across the mass media. Hackett (1991: 72) refers to these players as the “primary definers” of social reality and public issues. Media, he claims, “act as secondary definers, influencing and translating the primary definitions into idioms that are assumed to be acceptable to media audiences.” Indeed these “primary definers” can, and do, also

³⁶ For example, the sports network ESPN’s website now includes “video blogs,” which are pre-recorded speeches by writers and commentators resembling television features. See www.espn.go.com.

³⁷ During the 2006 Canadian campaign for prime minister, the Liberal Party of Canada, published a daily blog written from the campaign trail. The blog, written by then Prime Minister Paul Martin’s head speechwriter, became quite popular, prompting news articles and an interview on a nation-wide Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) radio program.

³⁸ Italics are mine.

use the blog to convey their messages, but the blog also allows for ordinary citizens to do the same.³⁹ To date, many tend to ignore blogs as banal ramblings, yet, more and more of what opinions appears in blogs, especially politics-based blogs, are serving to influence those who influence. As one public relations company CEO puts it: “Blogs are the latest tool that makes it harder for corporations and other institutions to control and dictate their message. An amateur media is springing up, and the smart are adapting. Now you’ve got to pitch the bloggers too. You can’t just pitch to conventional media” (qtd. Kirkpatrick & Roth 2004).

Indeed, any communication mechanism that gives a public voice to the individual is beneficial to the strengthening of a democratic society. The blog has certainly done this, helping to create the possibility of Habermas’s “public sphere” in cyberspace. Bloggers concerned about issues like politics, consumer rights, poverty, racism, equality, the environment and so on, now have an international, public voice and a free way to hear and be heard by those of like mind. They can now network, advocate, preach, act and connect with ease that just two decades ago seemed unimaginable. This format allows everyone with Internet access (and freedom from political censorship) to more conveniently fulfill their obligations as public citizens and engage in the discussions that Habermas claims is not taking place currently in capitalist, democratic societies that too occupied with the monetary and materialistic pursuits.

Of course, with any new advance in communications technologies comes the desire to manipulate them. The realm of the “blogosphere” is full of those writing calculated, widely distributed, rumour-fuelled gossip in order to help further their individual or organizational agendas, or in some cases for financial profit.⁴⁰ Such activity is not surprising, and illustrates the dark side of what can happen with media that provides, for the most part, unregulated freedom to write and publish at will without the strains of a premise of objectivity or fact-based opinion: strains that, to a greater extent, have bound the writing and reporting of those in traditional media.

³⁹ Street (2001: 212) notes how through traditional media, “citizens have been passive recipients of political information...They have enjoyed a modest degree of participation...but for the most part they have been consumers...The Internet [and the blog]...enable[s] people to become more involved, to *interact* with the political realm.”

⁴⁰ CBS News, for example, reported that in the 2004 Senatorial election in South Dakota USA, where Republican John Thune defeated the Democratic Senator (and Senate Party Leader) Tom Daschle, “the two leading South Dakota blogs – websites full of informal analysis, opinions and links [claiming to be neutral] – were authored by paid advisers for Thune’s campaign” (Kuhn 2004).

In keeping with the concept of financial profit, I will now focus on the main point of investigation for this project: the posting of blogs at company websites, written on behalf of the companies themselves. I will conclude this chapter by discussing the general phenomenon of the company blog and how it has been employed by some companies to date.

Commercially yours: creating the advertising-friendly conversation

"I am trying to humanize me." – Michael Dougherty, president and CEO of Kindermusik, on the purpose of his company blog.

As I have discussed throughout this chapter, the primary goal for advertisers is to engrain the value of company brands into the consciousness of consumers. This is a goal that has not changed since advertising became an accepted part of the North American cultural experience. Yet, with the emergence of the Internet, and the blog, companies now have the means to expand upon how brand value is established and communicated.

As is usual with popular cultural trends, companies have latched on to the practice of blogging as a way of reaching consumers in a more *personal* way. Companies have begun posting blogs by employees directly from their websites. *The Associated Press* (2005) reports that some companies engaging in this practice believe that blogs help businesses expand their reach, generate product buzz and encourage customer loyalty while bypassing traditional media." Blog tracker and author Wright (2005), in his book *Blog marketing*, goes as far as to claim, "Blogs are so powerful that to say they will revolutionize your business is an understatement – blogs have the power to create businesses, change the course of political history, and transform the way the mainstream media looks at itself."

By blogging, companies can now delegate an actual *human voice* to casually converse with a mass audience of potential consumers as though they were friends receiving a letter, instead of a pitch. Company representatives can use blogs to discuss new initiatives, or the personal work experiences of employees as a new project is completed. Thus the reader feels as though he has been given an *insider's view* into the process behind the making of a given product. For example, NBC includes a blog from a producer of one its popular dramatic television series (*Law & Order*),⁴¹ which discusses how his team came up with ideas for a particular episode and what it was like working with the show's writers and actors. This type of promotion gives fans of the show an insight they would not have received otherwise, thus, providing them access to what

⁴¹ See www.blogs.nbc.com/laworder.

Horton and Wohl (2004: 375) call celebrity “persona” in a more intimate way. This breaks from the previous “one-sided” structure of the persona-audience relationship, where reciprocity between audience and persona was only “suggested.”

This more intimate access marks a key difference between previous forms of advertising and the blog. Blogs, according to Wright (2005: 7), “take marketing communication a step further by bringing the best aspects of mass marketing and transforming them from one-way communication into a two-way dialogue.” As stated, the two-directional possibilities of the Internet allow customers to respond, or “comment” directly to companies’ blogs instantly and publicly. This benefits companies as well in that they can receive quick feedback about initiatives described in their blogs—what Wright (2005: 7) describes as like “being like a fly on the wall as people discuss your business.”⁴² This kind of communication also blurs the line between what McQuail (1997: 30) calls the “public versus private” audiences, or those considered experts on a given topic and those who are not. By including the blog readers in the conversation, companies can make their customers feel like they have a voice in determining how they do business. Myers (1994: 104) discusses the concept of the *conversation* in advertising and how it “can evoke a kind of ordinariness of everyday life that is paradoxically effective in persuasion.”⁴³ In other words, he is arguing that one is more likely to be influenced by an informal conversation with a friend than by a formal pitch from a stranger. As well, the fact that blogs are text based and obviously longer, more in-depth and unstructured than the typical thirty-second television spot or newspaper advertisement gives readers the idea that they are being talked with, instead of talked to: again, a *conversation instead of a pitch*.

The intimacy of the format of the blog gives the impression that the advertisement is not *really* an advertisement, but a casual discussion about a product or service. Yet, like any other form of advertising, company blogs are not natural conversations, but constructed, *scripted* messages intended to engage consumers in a company and its brand. How these messages are constituted is what I will address in the upcoming analysis. This will require looking at the ways

⁴² Of course, there is nothing to prevent a company from removing unwelcome critical comments from its site. However, Michael Wiley, GM's director of new media notes that although opening the GM blog to comments was a source of concern, officials ultimately decided comments were key to having a two-way conversation with customers and that comments are edited only to remove profanity or personal attacks (qtd. *The Associated Press* 2005).

⁴³ A study performed in 2004 by Forrester/Intelliseek found “recommendations from others” and “consumer opinions posted to online forums” significantly carry a higher trust factor than virtually all other forms of advertising on TV, radio, in print and online (qtd. Osterberg 2005).

in which blogging companies attempt to create narratives to engage consumers personally in a format that generally requires natural, personal narratives in order to be successful. This is also a format where disingenuous messages are quickly sniffed out and condemned by other bloggers.

“Act naturally:” the complicity of authenticity

However, as companies attempt to evoke the idea of a conversation into their marketing schemes via the blog, the issue of *authenticity* comes into play. In addressing consumers, companies have always been searching for a voice that is as authentic as possible, and consumers have become more and more cynical towards the genuineness of the messages they receive. Bloggers, especially, are quite concerned with this issue. One of the premises of the blog is that it is written honestly and genuinely with a personal voice—this holds true even more so for the company blog. As Wright (2005) explains, “This [genuineness] presents unique challenges for business leaders who want to understand blogging, as the concepts of transparency and authenticity are not often associated with corporate communications practices.” This paradox has created a headache for companies looking to be perceived as speaking with an authentic voice in the blogosphere, but at the same time are wanting to be sure to toe the corporate line when it comes to the divulgence of opinion and information. Fellow bloggers are quick to sniff out blogs that sound like press releases, or are manufactured by public relations departments, and they are happy to respond through comments at their own blogs.⁴⁴ Not surprisingly, companies to date have decided to err on the side of caution, despite concerns of authenticity. The legal and economic ramifications of a company blog that offends or discriminates can be damaging and, in some cases, have lead to lawsuits and firings.⁴⁵ Some companies, such as IBM, have developed extensive blogging policies, limiting what can be said through its blog.⁴⁶ This dilemma has lead some, such as Chuck Donofrio, CEO of Carton Donofrio (qtd. Dash & Terry 2005), to believe the company blog to be “anti-ethical” to the freewheeling culture of the blogosphere: “The blog is the ultimate forum for one person’s voice...The whole thing about blogs is, ‘I’m going to give you the real story.’ No matter how honest or forthright a CEO is, we have a responsibility to our

⁴⁴ Kirkpatrick & Roth (2005) note the example of Mazda’s “fake” blog, which mislead readers to think that the author was a 22-year-old skateboarder named “Kid Halloween.” The blog linked to a company-produced video showing a Mazda car break dancing and skateboarding. Bloggers were quick to respond with anger and the blog was pulled after three days.

⁴⁵ See Raiford (2005) for examples.

⁴⁶ See Wright (2005) for IBM’s blogging policy.

company first.” Despite these concerns, many companies are doing their best to engage in this communication form. The potential benefits of conversing with a large audience of consumers in such a personal way (authentic or not) are apparently too tempting to pass up.

Reading the company’s diary

This phenomenon of companies using blogs to communicate with consumers is the primary focus of study for this project. The content analysis I provide serves to illustrate the results of this phenomenon for three companies. The purpose of this discussion has been to frame this emerging practise as a chapter in the history of advertising and mass media communication. As those who have analysed blogging as a form of advertising have noted, this communication format (despite concerns about authenticity and disclosure) allows companies to “personalize” themselves by *conversing* with consumers in a serial, first person, timeless and editorial-free way. Company employees and representatives can talk about anything they choose as a means of generating interest in their products, and, furthermore, as a means of strengthening the values of their brands in the minds of consumers. It is important to reiterate that reinforcing a brand’s value is a company’s primary communication objective, regardless of the format of advertising it uses. The creation of a personality for a company is not necessarily a goal independent of brand strengthening. It may very well be just another means for companies to do so. It is imperative to keep the goal of branding in mind when conducting an analysis of any advertising text.

What follows is a semiotic content analysis of a selection of the blog text produced by three companies that have invested themselves in this form of advertising. The analysis will focus on two of the main research questions presented in the introduction: What *personality* is created for the company through the words of the bloggers, and how *brand promotion*, so crucial in past forms of commercial communications, is treated in the blogs. Before providing the content analysis of the blog text, I will discuss the criteria I used to decide which company blogs to analyze; provide background information about the chosen companies; discuss the semiotics-based methodology I have employed; and why I see it to be a beneficial means of carrying out an analysis of textual content such as that generally found in a blog.

CHAPTER II: METHODOLOGY

This project began with the umbrella research objective of examining how the way companies communicate with consumers is changing online due to the emergence of the blog. Keeping this objective in mind, along with the advertising priorities of *branding* and reaching consumers *personally*, discussed in Chapter I, the focus of the upcoming analysis is on how companies use the blog to strengthen their brands' values and create for themselves a persona. From a consumer's perspective, it is also of interest to address whether the commercial blog will provide consumers with more information about companies. In other words, could this form of communication provide readers with new significant insight into the process of production, thus helping to unveil or, in Marx's terms, "demystify" the ways in which companies have "fetishized" their products' and brands' exchange values in the past?⁴⁷

To confront these issues, I need to gain a better understanding of what is being written in commercial blogs and, more importantly, how the blogs are written. To do so, I will perform a semiotic content analysis on a sample of three companies' blogs. As Creswell (1994: 150) notes, content analysis is a beneficial qualitative research approach because it "enables a researcher to obtain the language and words of informants conveniently, unobtrusively through written evidence." In this case, my informants are the companies' bloggers and the written evidence is their blog postings. The decision to focus on a high number of postings from only three companies (as opposed to one or two posts from many companies) was based on the goal of illustrating how a given company uses its blog to develop and establish its personality and character over time. By examining many postings from three companies, I can also identify what kind of information about a company and its products is conveyed to blog readers and what general writing patterns emerge in this process. As well, I can see how a company uses the blog to add to the value of its brand—again over a period of time.

In the previous chapter, I provided an overview of what a blog is, and the general tendencies that have developed for writing them to date. In Section I of this chapter, I explain the criteria I used to decide which companies' blogs to analyse and offer profiles of the three companies, including their histories, information about their products and how each is presented online. In Section II, I provide a definition of semiotics, and explain why I see it to be an effective

⁴⁷ This last question will be addressed in the essay's concluding chapter.

methodology for the analysis of written content, like that found in a blog. In Section III, I outline the ways I will use semiotics in the analysis of the blogs for this project by citing some common approaches used by semioticians who analyse text-based communication, including advertisements.

Section I: Company blogs to be examined and why

Creswell (1994: 148) notes how “the idea of qualitative research is to purposely select informants that will best answer the research question[s]. The selection should not be random.” As the purpose of this project is to gain a better understanding as to how companies are using blogs to advertise over time, the informants that are the most beneficial are those that provide a continual source of blog text that can be analyzed, which is accessible to a general, but diverse, audience of consumers and is easy-to-find at a company’s website. With these priorities in mind, in deciding which three commercial blogs to analyse, I used the following criteria:

The blogs must be accessible directly from the companies’ home pages. Some companies (NBC, for example) produce blogs that can be accessed only after visiting secondary pages at the company website. This is problematic in that a reader must search to find the blog and would, therefore, be less likely to read it. The companies whose blogs I chose have links to the blogs from the first page a reader encounters when visiting the site.

The blogs must be updated weekly. I wanted to ensure that the blogs I analysed contained new entries in order to, first, have substantial text to analyse, and second, to see how the companies’ blogging voices operate and develop over time.

The blogs have multiple authors. As companies are composed of numerous individuals, I felt it appropriate to choose blogs that have more than one author. This characteristic also differentiates the company blog from individuals’ blogs, which generally have one author. Some companies offer a blog written exclusively by one employee, which helps to create an identity for that particular person. One of the goals for this analysis is to discover the identity traits of the company as a whole, expressed through the blog, again, over a period of time.

The companies should offer products that are generally recognizable. I avoid analyzing the blogs of smaller, or relatively new companies because larger companies with better-known products have a greater chance of their blogs being read by a wider audience. Therefore, I chose companies that offer known products relevant to broader demographics of consumers.

The companies should appeal to different demographics and offer products that are different from one another. I saw it necessary to choose companies and products that not only appeal to larger demographics, but also to different ones. This was done in order to see how blogging approaches may differ based on what kind of consumer is being hailed or targeted.

The companies are North American. I chose North American companies so I would have a better chance of understanding cultural or political references made in their blogs as well as the language used, thus making the search for meaning and communication codes within the text a little easier and more timely.

With the above criteria in mind, many companies were considered for analysis. I decided upon the following three: The National Hockey League (NHL), Google and *Ms.* magazine. All three companies have relatively well-known brand names, familiar to those who live in North America. In other words, none of the companies are new enough to have to introduce and establish a brand via their blogs. The three companies differ in many ways, including size and type of product: The NHL sells sports entertainment, Google provides online information and *Ms.* feminist journalism—a product that mirrors closely the format of the blog. Google is the largest, followed by the NHL, then *Ms.* The nature of their products and the demographics of consumers each wishes to attract are relatively independent of one another. Google's product is, perhaps, the most widely accessible of the three, with the NHL and *Ms.* looking to target more niche markets (hockey fans and feminists, respectively). As well, all three companies' products are multifaceted and dynamic, in that what each produces varies and evolves over time—thus providing bloggers with new issues to write about on an ongoing basis. This is illustrated through each of these three companies' dedication to providing posts on a weekly, sometimes daily, basis. Some other companies considered for this analysis were not as diligent in their blog postings and were not chosen as a result.

Each company also includes multiple bloggers—Google, by far, uses the most, with a new blogger for almost every post. The NHL has nine bloggers, and *Ms.* has three. This was one of the key reasons that these companies' blogs were chosen. Part of the goal of this analysis is to establish what kind of personality each company creates for itself through its blog. With multiple authors, we can see how their combined voices establish a persona for the companies over a number of blog entries. With one blogger, we have only one voice, and thus only his or her personality comes through.

Although the above characteristics made the companies desirable for analysis, I must stress that I chose them without extensive prior knowledge of their products (the NHL to a lesser extent) or what their blogs looked like. In other words, I did not choose the companies by reading samples of their blogs, but instead by looking at who the companies are, what they produce and how their blogs are maintained, framed within the aforementioned criteria.

In conducting the analysis of the chosen company blogs, I read a total of 190 blog entries (81 NHL, 54 Google, 55 *Ms. magazine*) over seven months (September 2005-March 2006). These 190 posts include all of the entries submitted by the companies over this seven-month period. While reading each post, I highlighted the reoccurring ways in which the companies' brands and products were presented and discussed. I grouped and analyzed the blogging trends specific to each company and then compared these approaches to illustrate the similarities and differences in how each company uses the blog within the guidelines of semiotic methodology.

The posts for each company were categorized based on commonalities and differences in various characteristics, including topic matter, writing techniques, tone, blogger positioning and targeted audiences. Why these categories were used to group the posts will be explained further in Section III of this chapter, which discusses semiotic analytical approach used in the project. Again, as the overarching goal of this project is to establish how companies are using blogs to enhance brand strength and product desirability, what kind of treatment the brands and products received via the blogs was the primary focus. For example, were the brands and products the main topic of discussion in the posts? Were products talked about explicitly or covertly? How did the writing approaches compare to previous forms of advertising? Were the posts more comparable to sales pitches or letters? I also concentrated on the ways in which the bloggers' personalities emerged through their writing. I noted whom the companies chose as their spokespeople; how their writing voices were developed; how they addressed their desired audiences; and what kind of credibility they established for themselves. Posts that best exemplified the general blogging tendencies of each company were highlighted and are cited directly in the analysis.

Before I explain further the semiotic methodology I used to conduct the blog content analysis, I will offer a detailed description of each company; the nature of their products; the products' relationships to advertising and the media; how the blogs are presented at their

websites; and brief profiles of the bloggers. Doing so will hopefully illustrate further why these companies best fit the criteria I have outlined and were chosen as the subjects for this project.

Company one: The National Hockey League

The NHL is the largest, most elite professional hockey league in operation. It is composed of 30 teams located throughout North America. The league is over 80-years-old and employs players, who are paid millions of dollars, from around the world. As with other professional sports leagues, the NHL is a large company, which oversees a number of smaller ones. Each team in the league is individually or corporately owned, but must adhere to the economic and operational regulations of the League. The NHL obtains its revenue in various ways, including dues from its individual teams, the merchandising of the NHL and its teams' logo, and the broadcasting rights of NHL games on radio, television and the Internet.

Despite the NHL's high standing as a provider of world-class professional hockey, it is facing a turbulent period. The entire 2004-5 season was cancelled due to a labour dispute, making the NHL the first professional sports league to lose an entire season for this reason. Because of the long layoff, and the economic restructuring of the league that occurred after the labour dispute, the 2005-6 season took on extra importance. The NHL already has a difficult time penetrating the American professional sports market, lacking the popularity of other team sports such as football, basketball, auto racing and baseball. The cancelled season made it easy for many American fans to forget about hockey, especially in the southern states, where "the emotional ties to home ice may not be strong enough to overcome the bitterness of the lockout" (Walker 2005). In Canada, however, it is a different story, as hockey is the national pastime and easily exceeds all other sports in popularity as well as cultural and historical importance.⁴⁸ Although many fans have been openly critical of the League's economic problems, it is really in no danger of losing its position as the premier form of Canadian sports entertainment.

Reputation of the product and brand

Despite its recent problems, the NHL remains the pinnacle of achievement for any aspiring hockey player and the league of choice for followers of the sport. The NHL's product is rich with history and tradition, and benefits from the *celebrity* status of its athletes as a selling tool.

⁴⁸ Statistics Canada estimated that the lockout cost Canada's gross domestic product at least \$20 million per month ("NHL lockout by the numbers" 2005).

Furthermore, the product, like that of any other professional sports league, is constantly in flux and offers consumers something new on a daily and yearly basis. All 28 NHL teams play 80 games, and there are at least 60 playoff games among the best 16 teams in the League. Each of these games provides a means for the League's product to be consumed, discussed and addressed in the media, and through the word of mouth of consumers.⁴⁹

Product's relationship to the mass media:

The NHL has strong presence in the mass media on a daily basis. In the major media outlets of at least 28 major cities throughout North America, the NHL's product is present through the reporting of game scores, features, statistics and highlights. NHL coverage appears in all forms of media, including, over the past 25 years, media devoted solely to the coverage of sports.⁵⁰

Website presentation of the blogs:

Online, fans can access the NHL through the websites of the sports media outlets, individual team websites, the message boards of the NHL's teams and the NHL's own website (www.nhl.com). This website is where the NHL's blog is posted, on a page called "Blog Central." The NHL blog can be accessed by clicking on "Blogs" along the left-hand menu. The blog entries are listed by author, in reverse chronological order, with older entries available through an "Archives" link. Every NHL blogger has his or her picture, biography and a short summary of their latest blog entry available. As well, on the right hand side of Blog Central is a list of links to team-specific blogs. Unlike the blog at NHL.com, these blogs are written by the individual teams' representatives, not by those employed or solicited directly by the League.

Authors: who *are* the NHL?

The NHL makes a point of illustrating the diversity of its fan base with its choice of bloggers. The group includes a sports journalist and former player, an actress, a stand-up comedian, a bassist in a rock band, the NHL website's executive editor and senior producer, a statistics computer, a Finnish writer and an NHL features writer. All of these personalities blog for the

⁴⁹ Another rare benefit of the NHL's product is that it is a sport, and as such has the ability to create and obtain a large, loyal, generational customer-base. Love of a game is something that connects communities and nations (Blain et al. 1993: 12) and can be passed down from parent to child, becoming part of the yearly routine. Rowe (1999: 69) cites a (perhaps extreme) notion of sport as "a secular religion, having taken over from the church as the primary place of collective and individual ritual, belief and ecstasy."

NHL because of their self-proclaimed love of the game, or, more specifically the NHL's brand of the game: they are *fans*.

Company two: Google

Google is one of the world's largest and most popular Internet search engines. Basically, a search engine is a web page that allows Internet users to type in words or phrases concerning information they wish to find on other web pages. The engine then searches the Internet for the pages that best fit the desired query and list them for the user, free of charge. The Google search engine, as well as its other online search-related services, operates from Google websites at 112 international domains,⁵¹ in over 35 languages. The most-used of these domains is Google's primary homepage (www.google.com).

Google was created by former Stanford University doctoral computer science students Larry Page and Sergey Brin and is now a publicly traded, multi-billion dollar corporation. Google is among the top five, most-visited websites in the world, and it is arguably the best known. The company's overview states: "Google's breakthrough technology and continued innovation serve the company's mission of organizing the world's information and making it universally accessible and useful" ("Company overview" 2006). This "breakthrough technology" has allowed the company to continually expand its scope and increase the number of web-based information tools it can provide users.⁵² Along with its technical innovations, Google prides itself on the speed and accuracy with which queries are answered, its user-friendly, uncomplicated layout, as well as its dedication to its users.⁵³ Since Google's search engines are free to users, its revenue comes primarily from selling advertising space on its search pages to corporate clients, such as advertisers, content publishers and website managers. As well, Google operates an advertising program called "AdSense," which pays website publishers for (Google operated) advertising space.

⁵⁰ For example in the United States, the Entertainment and Sports Programming Network (ESPN), FOX Sports, and Canada's The Sports Network (TSN) and Roger's Sportsnet.

⁵¹ Domain, in this context, refers to the country from which the website is based. For example, Google users in Canada can visit google.ca, whereas Norwegians would use google.no.

⁵² Google's technical innovations are too complicated for a computer layman like me to explain. For an expert analysis see Skrenta (2004).

⁵³ In an interview with Time magazine, Google chief executive officer Eric Schmidt reiterates this priority, while discussing the need to please shareholders—an important necessity for all public companies. He downplays the importance of shareholders, however, by stating: "The company isn't run for the long-term value of our shareholders but for the long-term value of our end users" (qtd. Ignatius 2004).

Google's primary headquarters, the "Googleplex," is located in Mountain View California, but the company also has offices in numerous cities around the world. It employs tens of thousands, many of whom are engineers, PhDs, and computer science researchers. Google employees can become quite wealthy thanks to stock options.⁵⁴

Reputation of the product and brand

Google's financial success stems from the company's extremely fast ascent as a reliable provider of web services that are "progressive and user-friendly" (Hughes 2004). Google has gained its reputation from providing the best information on the Internet in a straightforward way. Over the past seven years, Google has become one of the most powerful brands in the world, and the term has become a common part of the Internet lexicon. If one is stuck for information about, well, just about anything, he need only to "Google it." The company's presence online has been likened to "an upgrade for the entire Web" and the company itself as "a little like God," or an "omni-present oracle" (Johnson 2003).

Product's relationship to the mass media

Google has achieved its status primarily through word of mouth advertising from its satisfied users. It has not employed television, radio or newspaper advertising as a means to seek exposure. Online, the Google brand is appearing more and more, not just from its own website, but also through Google's ties to other companies.

Website presentation of the blog

Like the rest of the pages at Google's website, the Google blog is presented in a clean, text-dominated format. From Google's company homepage, the blog can be accessed by clicking on "About Google," then choosing "Google blog."⁵⁵

The blog is presented in reverse chronological order. Like the NHL website, this page displays links to other Google-related blogs, such as "blogs we're reading" and "blogs by Googlers." However, where the Google blog generally shies away from graphics and photos, it include numerous hyperlinks, most of which appear within the text of the blog. Many of these

⁵⁴ Harri (2006) notes how "one in five on the [Google] payroll is a millionaire."

⁵⁵ I must clarify that Google's primary page is its search engine option. Clicking on "About Google" takes one to the page at its website where information about the product and the company is available.

links direct readers to Google-related web addresses. The Google blog is introduced as “Googler insights into product technology and our culture.”

Who *are* Google?

The bloggers at Google who provide these “insights” include members of the numerous Google *teams*, including the Blog team, AdSense team, Zeitgeist team, Earth team, Video team, University Programs team, Pack team, as well as other employees, such as the associate product manager, vice president of search products & user experience, a software engineer, the staff doctor and the international product marketing manager. Google also includes “guest bloggers” such as academics or executives from other organizations. For the most part, the subject of Google’s *desired message* determines who in the organization will deliver it in the blog. Unlike the other two companies, Google offers one post on the days it blogs (the other companies may have two or more different bloggers write on the same day). If, for example, Google discusses a legal matter, someone from Google’s legal department writes it. Or if a new service is being introduced or explained, a software engineer does so. It is rare that the same person blogs more than once.

Company three: *Ms.* magazine

Ms. is a quarterly issued magazine that refers to itself as a landmark institution in both women’s rights and American journalism. It began independent publication in 1972 and focused on feminist issues including the repeal of laws that criminalized abortion, equal rights, domestic violence, sexual harassment, protest of pornography, date rape, and “the undue influence of advertising on magazine journalism.” The name “*Ms.*” comes from the prefix to denote a woman without divulging whether or not she was married that emerged in the 1960’s (as opposed to Miss. or Mrs.). *Ms.* offices are located in Los Angeles California and Arlington Virginia, and the magazine is now available at over 7 000 newsstands across the United States and Canada.

Ms. magazine began as an insert in the *New York Magazine* in 1971 and has since evolved in to the primary publication for contemporary feminists in the United States. According to founding editor Letty Cottin Pogrebin, “*Ms.*’s authors translated a movement into a magazine” (“About *Ms.*” 2006). This assessment plays directly into the magazine’s catch phrase: “*More than a magazine, a movement.*”

Ms. is distributed as a seasonal publication, meaning that its four issues each year coincide with winter, spring, summer and autumn. *Ms.* content consists primarily of features-style, academic and investigative articles. Articles appear in the magazine from freelance reporters, academics, activists and politicians.⁵⁶ *Ms.* also includes interviews with prominent feminist authors, politicians, activists and entertainers, as well as a calendar of feminist events taking place across the United States, such as academic seminars, awards ceremonies and charity functions.

Reputation of the product and brand

Ms. has the reputation of being a publication that has avoided compromising its mandate of advocating feminism in order to appease advertisers' or corporations' interests. As a result, the magazine has had to deal with constant financial instability due to a lack of advertising revenue. From 1978 through 1987, *Ms.* was published as a not-for-profit magazine, sponsored by the *Ms.* Foundation for Education and Communication. Since then, the magazine has had four different owners, and is currently a for-profit advertising-free publication ("About *Ms.*" 2006).

Ms. has won numerous awards and has developed a loyal readership from those who see it as an important source of opinion and, as one reader calls it, "my magazine of choice to inform our nation" (*Ms.* Spring 2006: 9). *Ms.* also has the reputation as a charitable organisation, dedicated to supporting feminist causes. This is done through the magazine's charity wing, called the *Ms.* Foundation.

Product's relationship to the mass media

As a quarterly publication, *Ms.* magazine is a mass media product. The magazine's publisher's decision to forego advertising revenue gives *Ms.* a unique position among American magazines: there are very few other nation-wide publications that are ad-free. However, *Ms.* does include notices throughout the magazine that could be classified as advertisements. For example, if a feminist author has published a book, the book will be promoted in the magazine, as will the book store(s) where the book is available. The magazine also includes numerous advertisements

⁵⁶ Some examples of article topics include the state of feminism in Israel, the historical treatment of Mary Magdalene, worker exploitation in Asian garment factories, and activists fighting for law reform in India. (*Ms.* Spring 2006).

for academic conferences, charity gatherings and women's organisations, as well as feminist and activist companies selling trivia games, clothes and menstrual products.

Website presentation of the blog

The link to the *Ms.* blog appears along the top, left-hand side of the *Ms.* magazine homepage (www.msomagazine.com) with the other primary links for the website, including the "Join *Ms.*" option, the "Feminist Daily Wire," "On the Radar" links, the website's search engine and contact information for the magazine. As *Ms.* is published only four times each year, the blog, the "Daily Wire" and "Radar" links allow readers to access feminist news and opinion, which is updated daily. This marks a major difference between *Ms.* and the other two companies I examine, both of which produce new products on a daily basis (as opposed to a quarterly basis). The *Ms.* website's homepage consists primarily of information about *Ms.*'s current publication, with summaries of articles, a photo of the magazine's cover, and a calendar of events. There is also an option that links to an archive of *Ms.* articles. Like with Google, the use of hyperlinks is common in the *Ms.* blog text, usually directing readers to other publications of interest to feminists, independent of *Ms.* magazine.

Who are *Ms.*?

There are three bloggers at *Ms.* magazine, and each of their blog entries are listed independently, but all under the headline of "*Ms.* Blogs." The bloggers are the cultural critic Christine Cupaiuolo ("*Ms.* musings"), the political analyst and publisher Eleanor Smeal ("The Smeal Report") and a "feminist comic" and radio personality named Carol Ann Leif ("A New Leif"). The biographies and pictures of all three bloggers are posted along with their current and archived blog entries. The *Ms.* blog is presented with a search option for readers to find topics discussed in previous entries. All three bloggers are considered *celebrities* in feminist circles, especially Smeal, who is one of the pioneers of the feminist movement in the United States. Leif is also well known as an actor and Cupaiuolo for her online writings for various publications.

Deconstructing the hockey administrator, search engine and feminist magazine

With this background of Google, NHL and *Ms.* magazine in place, I will now focus on explaining the methodology I use to analyse the content of each company's blog. In the

following section, I define semiotics, justify why it is a beneficial methodology for this type of project, and outline how the content analysis in Chapter III is structured and carried out.

Section II: Explaining semiotics as a methodology for content analysis

Semiotics is generally defined as the study of signs and sign systems. As Eco (1976: 7) explains: “Semiotics is concerned with everything that can be taken as a sign. A sign is everything that can be taken as significantly substituting for something else. This something else does not necessarily have to exist or to actually be somewhere at the moment in which a sign stands for it.” Saussure (1970: 44) describes a sign as being a “combination of a concept and a sound-image...The concept and sound image relationship is “replaced” by the *signified* and the *signifier*; the last two terms have the advantage of indicating the opposition that separates them from each other and from the whole [the sign] of which they are parts. (44) Manning (2004: 569) notes how signs, “represent concepts or ideas, which are culturally embedded...Cultural understandings reveal the conventions that govern the arbitrariness of the sign.” In other words, within a given culture, signs are used to communicate meaning about what is, and what occurs. The meaning expressed is understood by those a part of the culture, who are aware of the arbitrary meaning that has been attributed to a given sign. Although arbitrarily established, those concepts used to signify are “fixed, not free, with respect to the linguistic community that uses it” (Saussure 1970: 47).

Signs obtain meaning through *codes*. A code is a culturally determined set of rules for communication understood by the sender and receiver of a message. Codes are required to interpret the signs within a message. For example, within the communications codes of Western culture, a diamond has traditionally been understood as a signifier of wealth because of its rareness and beauty. The durability of the mineral has also caused it to become a signifier of eternal love, and it is common for diamonds to be given as wedding gifts. Yet, more recently, diamonds have also become signifiers of worker exploitation and danger, due to the deadly conditions those who mine them face, without adequate pay for their work. That a diamond can be a signifier for three distinct things (wealth, love, exploitation) shows us the arbitrary, culturally constructed way in which signs obtain meaning. It also illustrates the dynamic nature of a sign’s meaning: as cultures change, so too can the meaning associated with a given sign.

In a blog, or any other form of written communication, signs function through the words used, and these words are understood within the agreed upon communication codes in place. To exemplify this process, let us look quickly at a blog posting from the NHL's website, where sports journalist Eliot writes: "[hockey player Rick] Nash was effective low in the offensive zone as well as able to create off the rush." For a non-hockey fan, these words make very little sense. Eliot is a hockey expert, and this is signified by the expressions he uses ("off the rush" "low in the offensive zone") and the words he doesn't use. His omission of a noun after the words "able to create off the rush" (create what?) is acceptable to fellow hockey experts. They know Eliot is referring to Nash's ability to create a chance for his team to score a goal. This omission is called "*ellipsis*," or "when a text leaves something out which the reader must supply" (Myers 1994: 54). Eliot assumes his blog readers have a common position within the communication codes associated with the product (professional hockey), and therefore can supply what the text leaves out in order to grasp its meaning.

Cultures large and small have codes for communication. These codes are "often unreflective or unconscious" (Manning 2004: 568). With advertising, for example, the "commodity signs" that have been employed via brand logos and slogans are now ingrained within our cultural context and communication codes. We understand the code within which these signs operate so well that "we decipher ads' meanings routinely, automatically, even absentmindedly" (Goldman & Papson 1996: 1).

Codes can be complex, and this complexity can make the search for meaning through semiotics difficult. Therefore, as Manning (2004: 568) explains, "It is important to establish a central domain of meaning while conducting a semiotic analysis in order to discover what the referential basis is for a given text (the reasons behind the chosen content, style, grammar etc.), as well as the best way to connect it to a theoretical framework." It is important, therefore, to understand as fully as possible the codes within which examined texts operate: What are the agreed upon rules of communication and how does the text reflect them?⁵⁷ In this investigation, some of the primary communication codes, or "domains of meaning" in place are those that govern the writing of a blog, those used in the creation of advertising text and those established between the companies and their customers based on a common understanding of the companies'

products. My analysis of the blogs' content will be framed within these codes. The specifics of these codes, as well as those specific to the companies and their products, will be repeated throughout the content analysis in Chapter III.

Why semiotics as a method for a company blog content analysis?

Semiotics is a desirable method for blog content analysis primarily because it allows for a range of meaning to be investigated. Manning (2004: 566) describes semiotics as a “sponge concept, which soaks up diverse meanings.” Trying to decipher the communications codes of three companies, which are looking to attract different demographics of consumers, requires the freedom to analyse various writing approaches as well as to describe the context for the numerous topics discussed in the various blog postings. As well, I wanted an approach that had been used previously to analyse advertising techniques (Williamson 1978, Marchand 1985, Jhally 1987, Barthes 1994 Goldman & Papson 1996, 1998). Semiotics is a good fit for both of these criteria. In the following paragraphs, I will explain why.

Deconstructing narrative patterns

Blogs are composed primarily of written language in the form of a narrative. The job of the semiotics researcher is to look at the *words* of the narratives used in a blog to see how they signify the meaning the bloggers wish to express. Indeed, words are signifiers of meaning and to study them means studying signs. Burton (1973: 25) defines words as “symbols of things” and distinguishes the three components of meaning associated with words as signs: “There is the *symbol*, or word itself; the *reference* or *association*; and the *referent*, or the thing itself, whether a concrete or abstract concept. Words mean things only because they are associated with those things in the minds of the user of the word.” We can go back to the earlier example of a diamond to illustrate this process. The word diamond is the culturally constructed symbol of the thing itself; the association created has been that of diamonds with wealth, love, and now exploitation; and the referent is the actual mineral—the material thing, we have come to know as a diamond.

The journalistic, or diary, format of a blog can be described as a *narrative*. Genette (2004: 890) defines a narrative as the “representation of an event or sequence of events, real or

⁵⁷ It is also important to note that there are always many codes at work within any community. As Leeds-Hurwitz (1993: 153) explains: “In social life, codes are woven together as a coherent whole, in intricate and mutually-influencing ways.”

fictitious, by means of language and, more particularly, by means of written language.” According to Foss (1993: 399), “narratives help us impose order on the flow of experience so that we can make sense of events and actions in our lives.” Company bloggers post written information pertaining to events, or sequences of events, associated with their companies, whether it is the launch of a new product, an important sporting event or a political appointment. It is not surprising that bloggers choose narratives to communicate with consumers. Czarniawaska (2004: 650-1) notes the universal use of narratives to convey information: “Narrative knowledge is the main bearer of knowledge in our societies...Narrative knowledge tells the story of human intentions and deeds and situates them in time and space.” Using semiotics to analyse narratives means “searching for patterns and regularities affixed to the writer and the reader” (651). Finding these patterns, especially those affixed to the writer, will allow us to better understand the communication goals of company blog writers and how they structure their blog narratives to achieve them.

Section III: How to use semiotics to analyse written narratives

Through a semiotic analysis, a researcher can deconstruct how a blog writer uses patterns of words to communicate messages to a targeted audience. “Semiotics, as opposed to semantics, is the science or study of signs as signifiers: it does not ask what words mean, but how they mean.” (de Man 1989: 1012). Culler (1981: 50) explains further how semiotics is more concerned with the concepts of “sense” and “making sense” of a text than by the concept of “meaning.” In other words, where semantics focuses on the meaning of individual words, semiotics is best employed to find meaning in how words operate together within given cultural and linguistic codes. Although it is necessary to first grasp the meaning of a blog’s text (or any text) to analyse it, the focus must be on trying to decipher the purposes behind the text—to “make sense” of *why and for what purpose* it has been written in the form that it has. In the case of this analysis, for example, we can ask why it benefits companies to communicate with consumers in a certain way—like through a blog. But before we can address these *why* issues, it is important to understand *what* the bloggers are taking about to provide context for the blogs and the companies writing them.

Looking for meaning in written text

Culler (1981: 48) explains how “one must be able to identify effects of signification—the *meanings* objects and events have for the participants and observers. Then one can attempt to construct models of signifying processes to account for these effects.” In other words, the first step in the analysis of written text is to find out what the bloggers are discussing. Barthes (1994: 174), when applying this first step to find meaning in advertising texts, states, “The first message of an advertising text is constituted by the sentence taken in its literalness, setting aside precisely its advertising intention; this message includes a level of expression and a level of content (literal meaning)...This first message is called the message of *denotation*. To find the meaning, or “messages of denotation” inherent in commercial blogs, we need to analyze them as examples of written narratives, in the form of *prose*.

The first step in interpreting a written text is what Burton (1973: 18-19) calls *reception*, where “the reader tries to receive and respond to the text as a whole, when ‘meaning’ and ‘style,’ ‘matter and manner’ operate together to produce the initial impact.” After this first reading, one can then try to understand what the text is discussing—to look for its meaning. According to Culler (1981: 48), one assumption that needs to be made with a semiotic analysis of literature is that “literature should be treated as a mode of signification and communication, in that a proper description of a literary work must refer to the *meaning it has for readers*.”⁵⁸ Conveying the meaning the blog have for readers, who operate within a common communication code with the blogger, requires a discussion about the topics covered in the blog and explaining certain terms and in some cases offering context to what is discussed. As Manning (2004: 568) explains, “Context, or what is brought to the communicative encounter, is a resource...that allows sense-making to proceed.” The explanations I offer throughout the blog content analysis usually have to do with providing additional information about who or what bloggers write about, expanding on abbreviations they use, as well as giving brief histories about the companies doing the blogging and the nature of their products. Without this supplementary information, *how* the bloggers communicate—the priority of the analysis—cannot be fully investigated. Despite that blog readers may share codes with the bloggers, I cannot assume that these codes will be generally understood (by those who may read this essay, for example). Furthermore, my secondary research question asks whether the commercial blog provides readers with any new

⁵⁸ Italics are mine.

insight into the production of products and the inner workings of the companies themselves. Attempting to answer this question also requires a focus on the meaning of the blog text—on what is being said that perhaps has not been said before in previous forms of advertising and what that information could mean for how consumers perceive the companies' and their products.

Why and how?

Returning to the second part of the semiotic analysis, or the *why* part (Why are companies choosing to communicate with consumers with a blog?), the focus shifts from what is being written in commercial blogs to *how* it is being written. We know that the format of a blog, as a personally written diary or journal, adds to the feeling of authenticity for messages conveyed within them, and achieving the effect of authenticity and personality are certainly desired goals for companies. We must look a little deeper into the construction of commercial blogs to see how these effects are achieved. This deconstruction includes exposing what themes are reoccurring in the writing; the tones and linguistic devices employed; and the ways in which the bloggers position themselves and their audiences. By identifying these characteristics, we can identify what Culler (1981: 48) calls, "the effects of signification." For Barthes (1994: 76), when it comes to any advertising text, this desired effect is simply the "signification of a product's excellence. This signification is *connoted* [meaning suggested in addition to the actual *denoted* meaning]." In other words, Barthes sees an advertising text to have two messages: the literal, or denoted, message (what is actually being said), and the connoted message, (the total intended message). The desired message is achieved when the meaning of the content and how it is conveyed combines to signify a product's excellence.

With this analysis, I want to look at what I see to be more specific desired effects of signification within the blog as an advertising text than just a product's excellence. In keeping with the focus of this project, these effects are the furthering of the companies' brand values into the consciousnesses of consumers, and the development of a personality for the companies through how their messages are conveyed in a blog format. Determining if these effects are achieved in the company blogs requires examining *how* companies construct them.

Deconstructing ‘how’ companies blog

Advertisements are obvious examples of propaganda, which was defined in Chapter I as “intended manipulation; messages intended to affect action.” They are messages constructed with the purpose of affecting how consumers buy products and perceive the companies offering them. As a new form of advertising, company blogs are also composed with the same purpose in mind. In examining how companies use the blogging format and the resulting effects of this kind of communication, I will structure the semiotic analysis of the blogs’ text within the following topics: the *stylistic methods* used by the blog writers, how the writers *position* themselves and how they position their *audiences*, or the receivers of their messages. In the following sections, I expand upon these categories and provide and define the descriptive terms that will be used in the analysis.

Accounting for style

One of the ways I will deconstruct the companies’ blog text will be by expounding upon the writing methods of the bloggers, or what Burton (1973: 19) calls, “understanding the sense, recognizing tone and intention and identifying the kind of writing.” Recognizing tone for Burton means asking, “What is the writer’s attitude to his material and to his readers, and how is this attitude expressed?” (8). We can try to understand how the bloggers express their attitudes, or establish their tones, by examining the writing *styles* they employ. According to Said (1989: 1023), from a semiotics standpoint, style means “the recognizable, repeatable, preservable sign of an author who reckons with [or can relate to] an audience.” In order to find out what tones the bloggers use, we must first identify and define common linguistic devices, specifically those used regularly in advertising text. In the blog analysis, these terms are used as *tools* to identify and describe the bloggers’ writing styles and to establish what communication benefits stem from their decisions to write blogs. Here are some common linguistic devices, which are found in blogs and other forms of written communication, their definitions, and some illustrations of how they are used in advertising text. Unless otherwise cited, all of the following definitions are from Avis et al (1983).

Iteration/redundancy: Something said or done repeatedly. Eco (1989: 936) notes how this is a common device in television advertising: “In TV commercials, one distractedly watches the playing out of a sketch, then focuses one’s attention on the punch line that reappears at the end of

the episode. It is precisely on this foreseen and awaited reappearance that our modest but irrefutable pleasure is based.” One example of this “foreseen pleasure” comes from company mascots, such as Donald Duck, who use a catch phrase or silly joke each time they appear. Despite that we have seen Donald lose his temper numerous times in the past, we cannot help but chuckle each time he does at the end of a Walt Disney advertisement, when Mickey Mouse gets the better of him. Eco also contends “the greater part of popular narrative is a narrative of redundancy” (938). Consumers relate better to, and retain, narratives they have seen or heard before. And consumers also take comfort in seeing familiar names, words and characters—hence the creation of mascots, slogans and brands as well as companies’ desire to expose consumers to them repeatedly.

Imagery: “A verbal appeal to the reader’s sense of perceptions; whenever a writer uses words that awaken in the reader’s memory or imagination a concept of the senses of touch, taste smell, sight, hearing or movement, he or she is using an image. The function of an image may be mainly descriptive.” (Burton 1973: 43). Imagery often is used in advertising text that employs personal, often historical, anecdotes, which appeal to the readers’ senses. The goal is to place the reader in the described situation along with the advertiser.

Humour: Speech or writing showing ones ability to see the funny side of things. “Approximately 40% of all ads employ humour. Advertising executives believe that humorous ads can help attract attention to a commercial product” (Perloff 1993: 184). Perloff also notes how “injecting humour into a persuasive message helps get peoples’ attention...People pay more attention to a humorous message than a serious communication” (184).

Diction: The manner of expressing ideas in words; a style of speaking or writing. Manners of expression can come in many forms, such as *vagueness*, which is common to advertising texts. In the analysis, the focus will be an understanding of how the choice of a given set of words or sentence structures helps companies achieve their desired identities and personalities. For example, if an advertiser is trying to make a persuasive argument using facts and numbers, the diction employed will be more complex than that used in an ad employing humour. Such choices can be key signifiers of a writer’s tone, and how he or she feels is the best way to relate to a targeted audience.

Syntax: The ways in which words are arranged to form sentences, clauses, or phrases and the patterns of such arrangements in a given language. Earlier in this chapter, I used the example of

the NHL blogger (Eliot) who omits a noun from one of his sentences because it was not necessary for him to make his point (defined as *ellipsis*). It was not necessary because of the shared code between him and his readers. This is an example of the manipulation of syntax to serve a communicative purpose. Syntax also comes into play regarding the type of sentences that appear in advertising text. Some basic sentence types include *active* sentences (“Our company is improving to serve you better.”); *passive* sentences (“The competition’s product has been defeated.”); *declarative* sentences (“Our product was the best in tests against our competitors.”); *descriptive* sentence (We are a caring, charitable company.”); *evaluative* sentences (“We offer better services now than five years ago.”); *questions* (“Have you tried our new product yet?”); or *command/imperative* (“Try us today”). Different types of sentences also help to create a writer’s desired tone. For example, Myers (119: 47) explains how advertisers use commands, “not because telling you to do something really makes you do what they say, but because it will create a personal effect, a sense of one person talking to another.” It is important, therefore to try and establish the writer’s real purpose for using a certain type of sentence or why it benefits him or her to write in a given way.

Rhetoric: Language used to persuade or influence others. The use of rhetoric is a key component of all propaganda messages, including advertisements. Discovering the rhetorical patterns a company uses is necessary to uncovering the ways they persuade consumers how to act and how to perceive a given company. As Said (1989: 1020) explains: “The deconstruction of rhetorical pattern [allows for] the revelation of vast thematic and semiotic network...a network that structures the entire narrative.” Inherent in the rhetoric a company uses is the way it perceives its audience and how it can be best persuaded—be it with light, humorous rhetoric, rhetoric structured around numbers, factual statements, or alarmist appeals to fear. What rhetorical *patterns* are inherent in the companies’ blog entries will be discussed throughout the analysis.

Theme: A topic or subject. Usually in advertising, one of the major topics discussed is the company’s product. Yet companies tend to also focus on other, external, themes. One example of this that is common in advertising is the theme of *nostalgia*. Nostalgia is a sentimental yearning for something in the past. Companies employ nostalgia for various reasons, including giving historical context to their product, to evoke respect for their own histories as companies and to compare and contrast past and present social conditions that are relevant to them and their products.

While exposing the writing devices bloggers use in company blogs, I organize posts together that are similarly themed. Although the topics discussed in these grouped posts may not be identical, the groups serve to expose the larger trends, or “networks” as Said calls them, present in the blogs, and how these trends serve to help the companies communicate their desired messages to consumers.

Who are you? Why should I read you?

Along with looking at the linguistic devices and writing tones the bloggers use, I will also look at how the bloggers choose to *position* themselves in relation to their audiences. In other words, what personal characteristics do the bloggers try to convey through their writing in order to establish their identities? And in turn, how do these identities combine to create the personality of the company?

Manning (2004: 560) explains how “narratives...invariably tell us something about the narrator. In that sense, all narratives are positional.” As soon as writers type their first words in a narrative, they automatically position themselves in some way. Readers can then see what kinds of characteristics come through in the writing. In the analysis, I will note the ways in which the bloggers position themselves and how these positions characterize them, as writers, as well as those they are attempting to attract, or hail. This will help us to better understand the approaches the bloggers use to establish and maintain their desired positions within their texts as well as the characteristics they wish to be attributed to themselves and their audiences. Like with the linguistic devices, I will define the terms associated with author positioning and illustrate how each positioning approach has been used in advertising text. The categories I will use to group these characteristics are as follows.

Charisma: Perloff (1993: 137) defines charisma as “a certain quality of the individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and women and treaded as endowed with... exceptional powers and qualities.” Charisma is usually associated with some kind of celebrity status, such as that of entertainers, academics, politicians or athletes. Companies often attempt to create for themselves charismatic qualities by incorporating celebrity figures into their ads. Charisma can also be expressed through one’s writing style if, for example, the writer uses humour or other forms of engaging writing.

Credibility: “Attitude towards a communicator held by the a reader (Perloff 1993: 138).” Although it is difficult to determine a reader’s attitude towards a writer, we can look at the ways in which the writer attempts to *establish* credibility. For example, advertising spokespeople often attempt to promote their creditability by positioning themselves as *experts* or holders of *inside information* regarding the issues they discuss. They can also evoke credibility by showing that they are genuine *everymen* or *women*, who can relate to and understand their targeted audiences.

Trustworthiness: Established “when a reader has confidence in the writer’s intent to communicate the assertions he considers to be most valid” (Perloff 1993: 143). Consumers, as I discussed in Chapter I, become suspicious when they feel that they are being “pitched to,” or when someone is trying to sell them something. Advertising spokespeople often do their best not to position themselves as salespeople for their respective companies. By positioning themselves instead as experts, insiders, or fellow consumers, they avoid diminishing their trustworthiness. They do not pressure readers to “buy,” but do however prescribe other forms of action, such as “trying,” “reading,” “joining.” However readers can *trust* that these actions are beneficial because they are promoted based on the benefits of the experience or expertise of the spokesperson.

Evidence use: “Factual statements originating from a source other than the writer, objects not created by the speaker, and opinions of persons other than the speaker, that are offered in support of the speaker’s claim” (Perloff 1993: 146). Evidence helps to strengthen a persuasive message, and advertisers use evidence-based appeals (however skewed they may be) regularly. They often cite outside sources to support the arguments they construct, such as surveys, consumer reports or medical opinions. Advertisers’ creditability is also enforced by doing so, as their arguments appear less opinion-based and more objective with the support of outside sources.

Similarity: The state of having characteristics in common. “Writers are more likely to change [or reinforce] attitudes if they are believed to be similar, rather than dissimilar to those they seek to influence” (Perloff 1993: 146). As I mentioned briefly, advertisers often attempt to position themselves as similar to their target audiences. For example, television advertisements sometimes use actors serving as regular consumers to promote their products.

In keeping with the idea of similarity, Eco (1989: 931) in a semiotic analysis called “The Myth of Superman,” discusses how a literary character, like Superman, “takes on an aesthetic universality, a capacity to serve as a reference point for behaviour and feelings which belong to

us all...he is typical.” This point also applies to the notion that companies wish to create a personality that is relatable and real. They attempt to make consumers believe they and their products are “reference points for behaviour and feelings which belong to us all.” This includes communicating as though the companies *are* their audiences—although often a specialized segment of them, thanks to their enhanced status as experts, insiders, or celebrities. They are similar and relatable to their audiences, but, like Superman, are still worthy of attention and respect because of the various unique qualities they possess.

These positional factors will be noted and discussed throughout the company blog analysis. Establishing how the bloggers position themselves is key to seeing how they are perceived as communicators, and, furthermore, how they are *identified* by readers. We must also look at the other side of the writer/reader relationship. Indeed, how the bloggers perceive their audiences will obviously determine the writing approaches and identities they will employ in their blogs.

Know that your audience knows:

Advertising text, like any other form of communication must be composed with its intended receiver, or audience in mind. Without a consideration for one’s audience, the text loses its purpose and is void of meaning. Nystrand (1986: 33) calls the expression of words in any communicative form, “a two sided act...[The act] is determined equally by whose word it is and for whom it is meant.” For whom advertising words are meant has always been a great concern for companies. Billions of dollars are spent yearly in attempts to target demographics more likely to buy a given product and figuring out the best ways to communicate with them. By blogging, companies speak to consumers in a more personal, conversational way. Yet with blogs, and any other form of advertising, they must also speak to them within codes they understand and which they relate to and like. Foulkes (1983: 24) explains how if the writer and the audience operate within the same code of reference, the propaganda offered “seems to cut down the intervening sign-process of which the individual is capable, and thus allow the interpretants of the signs...to take form more directly and quickly—laughing when funny etc.” In deciding to write blogs, companies have had to ask themselves who they believe will be reading them and how to best communicate with these consumers, or potential consumers. Semiotically speaking, the question becomes, which codes should companies operate within to best attract their desired audiences? For example, should the codes be accessible to a general consumer or to those already familiar

with, and devoted to, a product? Or perhaps to those not familiar with the product, but whom they wish to educate and convince that it could be beneficial for them?

When asking these questions, it is important to remember, as Nystrand (1986: 33) does, how “every prose in any form cannot fail to be oriented towards the ‘already known,’ the ‘common opinion.’” This observation is important mainly to illustrate that companies will always operate within codes that are relatively accessible, for if they do not, they could cost themselves potential consumers. The last thing a company wants to do is communicate to consumers in an incomprehensible way. Having said that, the companies are also trying to establish to their customers that their spokespeople have a *special status*, be it as an expert, insider or everyman, and that it is beneficial for audiences to acknowledge their messages because of that status. In the content analysis, I will try to determine *whom* the three companies, whose blogs I examine, try to hail, or attract with their postings. Basically, the question becomes: Are these companies trying to attract new consumers with overtly general messages accessible to a basic audience, or are they trying to maintain those consumer bases already devoted to their products, which already operate within their specific codes of reference? By establishing what kinds of communications codes are in place and the status the companies attribute to their blog readers, we can attempt to answer this question through the analysis.

Summary

In this chapter, I have focused on discussing why semiotics is a desirable analytical approach for written forms of communication, such as a blog. This chapter has also offered an indication about how I structure the content analysis of the company blogs and what semiotic tools I use to conduct it. This will hopefully add background and context to the analysis for the reader. To recap, we have seen how signs are present in all forms of communication. By analyzing them, and the patterns within which they appear through narratives, we can decipher diverse systems of meanings (codes), including those that govern the interaction between companies and consumers. By semiotically deconstructing what is written, how it is written, by whom and with what audience in mind, we can gain a better understanding of the purpose and potential effects of a given text—in this case commercial blogs. As Barthes (1994: 173) explains: “In order to analyze advertising text, we must adopt a position immanent to the object we wish to study...we must place ourselves at the level of the message itself...[and ask] how is an advertising text

constituted? Semiotics allows for a researcher to position him or herself “immanently” to a text, mainly through the breadth of analysis it allows; in short, using semiotics allows a researcher the freedom to explore a text and find cultural meaning in what is said in its messages, how it is said, and in who is saying it to whom. This freedom fits the objective of my investigation of commercial blogs well.

I want to stress that the purpose of this analysis is neither to judge the quality of commercial blogs nor to label them as positive or negative examples of commercial communication, nor is it to judge whether or not these companies are writing good blog postings. Instead, the goal is to offer a *description* of what the blogs say, and how the bloggers say it, in order to speculate the effect such communication may have on consumers as well as to investigate how the blogs help companies accomplish the goals I see to be of primary interest to them: to ingrain their brands into the minds of consumers and develop their personas and identities.

The following chapter consists of the semiotic content analysis of the three company blogs chosen for this project. The analysis will be conducted using the methodology outlined in this chapter: I will semiotically deconstruct three companies’ blog text, focusing on the subject matter of the blogs, the writing styles being used and the positioning of writer and reader within the text.

CHAPTER III: CONTENT ANALYSIS

Introduction

This chapter includes the content analysis of the three company blogs I have chosen to research for this project. The analysis consists of citations of the text directly from the blogs, and a semiotic deconstruction of it, using the tools outlined in Chapter II: I will first look at what issues the bloggers from each company discuss and the larger themes that result. I then discuss how the bloggers structure their posts, emphasizing the writing styles and linguistic devices they use to convey their messages and tones that they develop. Finally, I examine how the bloggers position themselves and characterize their audiences in the prose. Throughout, I also provide supplementary information about the topics the bloggers discuss to help clarify the context of the posts. The analysis is organized around the project's two over-arching research questions, concerning how the expansion of brand value, product "fetishism"—the primary goal of advertisers to date—and the development of the companies' personalities are achieved via the communication act of maintaining a blog.

Format of the blogs' content analysis

Through the analysis, I will focus on how the companies attempt to create for themselves a personality through their blogs as well as how they try and increase the perceived value of their brands and products. That is not to say that the companies attempt to achieve these goals *independently* of one another. Quite the opposite, in fact, as the development of personality and the communication of brand value are often intertwined in the blog text. I have discussed how the primary goal of advertisers has been what Barthes (1994: 76) calls the "signification of a product's excellence." The blogging format of advertising shows that this goal is still prevalent. With regard to the creation of a personality for the companies via the blog, we can establish what kind of character traits the companies try to create for themselves and how the blog helps them to do so. We can also speculate why the creation of these personalities could help the companies achieve their selling and communication goals.

In presenting how Google, *Ms.* and the NHL use their blogs to communicate brand and product values and develop company personalities, I will present text from each company's blog independent of one another, and tie these texts together by noting the similarities and differences that occur in the companies' topics of discussion, writing approaches and positioning. In keeping

with the semiotic and literary methodology outlined in Chapter II, I will divide the analysis in the following way:

- Section I will focus on *what* the bloggers discuss and what topical *themes* emerge in the blog;
- Section II details *how* they write, what styles are in place, what *linguistic devices* (redundancy, imagery, humour, diction, syntax, rhetoric etc.) are used and how the writers' *tones are established*; and
- Section III explains *how* the bloggers *position* themselves (through the use of charisma, credibility, trustworthiness, the presentation of evidence, and establishing similarities or differences to readers etc.), as well as how they convey the characteristics of their *targeted audiences*.

The three parts of the analysis will each conclude with a discussion connecting the analysis to the overarching questions about brand strengthening, product fetishism and the companies' personality creation. Throughout the analysis, I will also illustrate communication approaches common to the blog and *previous forms of advertising*. Within the text of the analysis, each blog post is offered in its unedited textual form, unless noted by "...” if words has been omitted due to space.⁵⁹ To offer contextual clarity to some of the names and terms mentioned in the text, supplementary words are sometimes included in brackets “[]” and in footnotes. The author of each post is cited with the text, along with date of the entry. The bloggers' names or the dates can be used to search for the specific entries within the appendix for cross-referencing purposes.

Section I: “Dreams, themes and schemes,” or what do the experts say?

This part of the analysis will provide an overview of the reoccurring themes present in the companies' blogs. Looking at what companies talk about allows us to better understand what aspects of themselves and their products they wish to promote (or fetishize), what reoccurring topical themes emerge in the blog and furthermore, the type of spokespeople the bloggers attempt to be, or, what kinds of identities they create. I will begin by looking at the topics present in the Google blog, followed by the NHL's and then *Ms.* magazine's.

⁵⁹ A complete archive of the examined blog text, in its original online format, complete with photos, is included in the electronic appendix that accompanies this essay.

Google

Always updating: the “search” for constant innovation and improvement

One of the principle themes evident in the Google blog is the company’s dedication to constant *innovation* and *improvement*. Google’s desire to be known as the world’s best Internet information organizer requires it to be in a state of continual self-betterment. To help in this regard, bloggers emphasize Google’s production accomplishments regularly. This is illustrated in a New Year’s post, where a Google Blog Team member reflects on the company’s first full year of blogging. In boasting the positive effects of this venture, she cites a collection of statistics pertaining to the blog’s readers and content:

This is the 201st post to be published on the Google Blog in 2005. In closing out the first full year of our company-wide effort to share news and views, we thought you might be interested in a few factoids...4.3 million unique visitors have generated 8.7 million pageviews. Readers have come from all over the world, not just English-speaking countries: 53,001 visitors from Turkey have stopped by, for example; so have 155,691 from France, 29,614 from Thailand and 8,233 from Peru.

During the year, we’ve published 38 how-to tips, announced 77 new products and services, and addressed policy questions and legal matters 17 times. We’ve featured 11 guest bloggers. Forty posts have illuminated something about day-to-day life at Google; 19 have offered some international perspective.

In 2006, we’ll keep up the Google Blog with more posts, more bloggers, and even more topics. [Wickre: 12.30.05]

Google relies heavily on statistics to illustrate its proficiency, as is evident here. As the world’s information organizer, the company cannot help but *quantify* everything, including the topic matter of its blog and the number of readers that have read it. Doing so provides readers with *evidence* of Google’s efficiency. Along with the display of these numbers comes the promise that Google, and the blog, will be improved (“more posts, more topics”).

Google also likes to announce the *results* of its improvements: cases where a promise to innovate has been fulfilled, and the resulting new product, or improvement to an existing product, is made available to the user—one of its primary target audiences. Along with the efficiency of its company, Google often discusses the expansion of its search functions and other products. We know that we can visit Google.com and conduct a general search for desired information. However Google is also constantly producing specialized search and information gathering products to appeal to more specific groups of users. With each new product comes a

variation on the name Google, and therefore on the company's brand. There are numerous examples of these variations discussed within the Google blog. One example is Google's involvement with the mapping of the planet Mars. A member of the Google Earth team blogs about this endeavour:

We here on Earth have long held a fascination with the planet Mars. From Percival Lowell's sketches of its surface, to the countless books and movies that revolve around it, we've spent millennia studying and daydreaming about our nearest neighbour in the solar system.

In that tradition, NASA researchers Noel Gorelick and Michael Weiss-Malik from Arizona State University worked with us to combine Google *Maps* technology with some of the most detailed scientific maps of Mars ever made.

In commemoration of Lowell's birthday, we're pleased to bring you Google *Mars*. Explore the red planet in three different ways: an elevation map shows colour-coded peaks and valleys, a visible-imagery map shows what your eyes would actually see, and an infrared-imagery map shows the detail your eyes would miss.

We hope you enjoy your trip to Mars. [Ohazama: 03.13.06]

In this post, Google associates itself with the best in another field (NASA), and describes the high quality of the joint project ("most detailed scientific maps of Mars ever made"). Google Mars also shows a variation of the Google brand name. It and Google Maps are two of the many Google-named products the company has created, and talks about in its blog. Sprinkled throughout the Google blog postings, there are descriptions of Google *Space*, Google *Labs*, Google *Video*, *Gmail*, Google *Earth*, Google *Account*, Google *Crawler*, Google *Print*, Google *Mini*, the Google Foundation, Google *News*, the Google *Store*, Google *Base*, Google *Reader*, Google *Scholar* and so on.⁶⁰

We work with the best brands

Along with promoting its own brand and product variations in its blog, Google often mentions joint products with other well-known companies—as was the case in the previous example, concerning NASA. This is trend common to all three companies, which I refer to as *cross-branding*. Associations with other companies help strengthen Google's status as a top brand, as well as to promote its *friends* and their collective initiatives. Doing so also gives

⁶⁰ This Google-plus approach reminds one of the American restaurant MacDonald's branding approach: incorporating "Mc" into all of its food products and promotions ("Chicken McNuggets," "Big Mac" etc.).

Google the personality trait of being a cooperative and collaborative company, with big friends in diverse industries. Google blogs about its associations with numerous companies, including Sony Pictures, Scholastic Publishers, the University of Michigan and others.⁶¹ By writing about joint projects, a company can also expand its audience by drawing in devotees of the other brands. One of Google's more explicit attempts to cross brand with other big companies is this post by a software engineer discussing a Google project in collaboration with arguably the best known company in the world:

What do you get when Google and Nike get together and brainstorm? A sneaker-shaped server? A great TV ad for web search? No, you get Joga.com, an online football community that combines Google technology with Nike's unique sports content and access to players. Joga brings people all over the world together to celebrate their shared passion for the game of football (for you Americans out there, by "football" I mean "soccer").

What can Joga.com members expect? Three words: content, community, and players...

What does it all mean? Well, Joga.com comes from "Joga Bonito," Portuguese for "play beautiful," a phrase that symbolizes both any football player's desire to embody the grace of the game and our goal to offer a community site that helps promotes the sheer fun, skill, sportsmanship and community spirit that make football truly the world's favourite game.

Whether we've succeeded, of course, will be up to all of you to determine. We look forward to seeing football-crazy people from around the world playing as beautifully as possible at Joga.com. [Keyani: 03.29.06]

Here we have the cross-branding of two massive corporations: leaders in their respective markets joining forces to appeal to, and expand, both of their target audiences. The joke at the beginning of the post ("sneaker-shaped server" "great TV ad for web search") is accessible to those who are even casually aware of both companies. The joke is funny because of Nike's well-known status as the world leader in sports equipment and fashion ("unique sports content and access to players"), as well as for its award-winning television advertisements—and Google's status as the world's best web search engine and computer science innovator. Add to the mix the companies' decision to focus on the world's most famous sport (football) we see a relationship that can be beneficial for expanding the appeal, value and cultural influence of both companies' brands. The decision to nickname the online community "Joga," a Portuguese word (as opposed to an English

⁶¹ Some of the better known companies in relation to just Google's Video product include CBS, The Charlie Rose Show, Classic Media, Fashion TV, Getty Images, ITN, Sony BMG and Tai Seng Entertainment.

word—both companies are American), makes the project, and the companies, internationally accessible.

The philosophy of the community site, to “help promote the sheer fun, skill, sportsmanship and community spirit that make football truly the world’s favourite game,” also helps both companies to characterize themselves as friendly, engaged and sports-oriented. This is more important for Google, as sports is Nike’s stock and trade. Blogging about this association with Nike allows Google to show its users that it is not just technology and information: the company is composed of computer geeks, but it knows how to be *cool* as well. The Joga community would not be as successful and accessible to the world without Google’s *technological* prowess. And before, when one thought about football, perhaps Google was not the first company that came to mind. Now, by teaming up with Nike, this will not be the case for anyone who has engaged in this Nike/Google online community.

Through its cross-branding, Google has engaged itself with other big companies and promoted projects that have a mass appeal. The common theme when these projects are discussed is that they are all *powered* by Google’s technology. Where these other companies are independently successful, their connection with Google makes them even better on the Internet: Google’s home turf. In return, Google gets its brand spread to target audiences it may not have reached (such as football fans), and gets to praise the quality of its products at the same time.

As I mentioned earlier, Google is not a company that uses more traditional forms of mass media advertising. Therefore, it uses its blog to discuss the *particulars* of its products and initiatives, and to describe what the company produces, how these products work and what other companies are involved with Google. Discussing these issues helps Google to promote the quality of what it does—through its products’ diverse functions and its strong associations with other companies—and to give itself the identity of being a friendly company, willing to improve and collaborate. Google also creates the persona of a technical expert, who is always innovating and producing new ways to make users’ online search experiences more fruitful.

Oh yeah, we’re also businessmen: Google and transparency, but why talk about finances?

In Chapter I, I discussed the difficulty companies have in presenting themselves as honest through the narratives they create in their advertisements. It is presupposed that the blog, as a journalistic form of communication composed of personal narratives, is written with such traits

in mind. By blogging, companies can attempt to achieve the perception that they are being genuine and open with readers. Although Google blogs primarily about its superior products, it also tries to create this effect by blogging about issues pertaining to its own corporate information. The goal is to convince readers that the company is *corporately transparent*. As the world's best collector and provider of information, Google looks to give the impression that the information it happily provides includes *its own*. As one Google blog post notes, "Our belief is that communication networks should be open" (Perlow: 02.07.06). As I also discussed in Chapter I, the desire for companies to use the blog as a platform to provide consumers *insider* information can potentially cause problems of an economic and ethical nature. Even if a company has a desire to be forthright in its blog, doing so may compromise secrecy and privacy that could be a detriment to the company's success. Google gives the impression, through its blog, that it is willing to openly address the corporate issues that the company encounters. What Google has done is select and address some of the more visible corporate-related occurrences, and focus on topics it wishes to talk about, while avoiding those it would rather not.

For example, in 2005, one of these issues was Goggle's decision to launch "Google China," a Google domain that operates from servers within the People's Republic of China (Google.cn). By doing so, Google has compromised its mission to provide as much information as possible to everyone because its presence in China requires the company to comply with the censorship laws of the Chinese government. Google received negative feedback in the media and via protests and boycotts for this decision, with some claiming that it had "finally exposed the hollowness of its ambition to do no evil" and that the company was "just a capitalist monster after all" (Thompson 2006). One of Google's responses to this criticism came via its blog. The post was written by one of the company's senior lawyers. The message consisted solely of Google's statement to the United States Congressional Human Rights Caucus on the issue of "Human Rights and the Internet – the People's Republic of China." An excerpt reads as follows:

The rationale for launching a domestic version of Google in China – a website subject to China's local content restrictions – is that our service in China has not been very good, due in large measure to the extensive filtering performed by Chinese Internet service providers (ISPs). Google's users in China struggle with a service that is often unavailable, or painfully slow. According to our measurements, Google.com appears to be unavailable around 10% of the time.

These problems can only be solved by creating a local presence inside China. By launching Google.cn and making a major ongoing investment in people, infrastructure, and

innovation within China, we intend to provide the greatest access to the greatest amount of information to the greatest number of Chinese Internet users. At the same time, the launch of Google.cn did not in any way alter the availability of the uncensored Chinese-language version of Google.com, which Google provides globally to all Internet users without restriction.

In deciding how best to approach the Chinese—or any—market, we must balance our commitments to satisfy the interests of users, expand access to information, and respond to local conditions. [McLaughlin: 01.20.06]

This citation illustrates how closely Google’s blog content correlates with the company’s other public relations documents, such as this briefing. Although this text was not originally drafted as a blog post, it very well could have been. All the key messages fit: The brief includes the same mission statements and descriptive traits that appear so often in the Google blog. Although the company took heat for compromising its vision for monetary gain with regard to China, it made sure, via this statement, to stress its desire to better its *service* within China (“rational was that the service was not very good”) as well as to restate its general business goals (“provide the greatest amount of access to the greatest amount of information”). Words that we’ve seen the company use to describe its priorities appear in abundance (“innovation,” “access,” “satisfying user interests”). What also appears is a lack of self-criticism for the China decision. Google is quick to point the finger at the Chinese government for the company’s compromised service (“subject to Chinese restrictions”) and also makes sure to mention that, technically, its full services are available, (although “filtered” by ISPs) within China via Google.com. It is still the “good guy” in all of this, and is still capable of providing the best quality product if it were not for the restrictions of the Chinese government.

In its attempts to be transparent with blog readers about its agenda, Google has tried to make clear the objectives of its mission. Yet, it does not address its monetary goals in a comparable way. What could be classified as economic-based decisions, (like the China compromise), are spun to sound as though they are steps to meeting Google’s higher ambitions of providing and organizing the world’s information.⁶²

The example of Google response to the China situation in its blog serves to give us some idea what transparency *means* to the company that claims to cherish the complete sharing of information. It is clear that Google wants its blog readers to feel that the company’s business

decisions are made with its users in mind; what Google does, it does with the primary intention of bettering its service (as opposed to, say, its bottom line), and furthermore is happy to discuss these intentions. Google will talk relatively openly about its services and products. It seems, however, that finances, or the financial ramifications of its business decisions, are off limits.⁶³

It is important not to misconceive from this discussion that Google refuses to provide information about its finances. Indeed, it is obliged to do so, and does. However, when it comes to what topics the company *chooses* to talk about and comment upon in its blog—the topics the company revels in—it is safe to say finances are not one of them. It is common for companies to brag about how well they are doing financially. However, such praise contradicts Google’s desired identity as a *good* company, with its users and innovations as its greatest priorities, and is therefore avoided.⁶⁴

Although Google wishes to be transparent about its product and services, it will certainly not fully disclose any information in its blog or any other public relations material that it believes could be harmful. As I mentioned earlier, Google is happy to acknowledge that there are certain “secrets” to its success (mainly technical in nature), and chooses to leave it at that. Yet the willingness is there to at least give the *impression* of being transparent when it comes to the product, the company, its intentions and priorities.

The NHL

Why we love our game

Google describes to its blog readers what it is doing to constantly better its product, how user input helps to achieve this goal and who it wants to be—a friendly, innovative technological expert, more concerned about a mission than money. Where Google bloggers try to create the persona of being experts about their products, the NHL bloggers paint themselves primarily *as* consumers of the NHL’s product—*as fans*—in an attempt to establish credibility with readers

⁶² This was the case when Google discussed its purchase of 5% stakes in America Online (AOL) in a post by Mayer (12.22.06).

⁶³ It is interesting to note that Google’s relative unwillingness to be candid about its company’s worth has soured some investors and, as a result hindered the value of the company’s stock. See “Google stock” (2006).

⁶⁴ Google’s desire to be “good” is exemplified by its goal to “be a positive catalyst for change” and its corporate motto, “Don’t be evil” (Huges: 2004).

while explaining why they feel (as fellow fans) the NHL's product has improved and is now better than ever. This is one of the primary topical themes evident in the NHL blog.⁶⁵

"First things first, isn't it great that the game is back?" asks NHL.com's Senior Producer in an early season blog entry. "Not just hockey—but thrilling hockey. What we've seen thus far is scintillating rookie performances, back-and-forth action on the rink and mind-boggling early-season team records, just to name a few" (Haberman: 11.17.05). Indeed, many NHL fans would relate to this sentiment. After the cancellation of the entire 2004-5 season, fans were anxious to have the League back in action. Once the 2005-6 season began, it was important for the NHL to remind fans *why* its brand of hockey was the best. The bloggers do this by citing direct examples of brilliant NHL play and accomplishment. They avoid any negative reminders of the previous labour dispute or concerns about the new rules brought into effect because of the League's collective bargaining agreement (CBA) with its teams.⁶⁶ One of the most contentious of these new rules is the shootout, where, if a game is tied after regulation time and a five-minute overtime period has expired, a winner is decided by a one-on-one confrontation between goaltender and shooter—similar to free kicks in football. Many fans have been opposed to the idea, but it is discussed positively by NHL.com's senior producer as one of the reasons the game has improved:

As a traditional hockey fan, I wasn't sure how to take the news that regular-season games tied after 65 minutes would be decided by shootout, but when fans are standing in arenas and homes rooting, hoping—sometimes maybe even praying—for that extra point, it has surely delivered an entertaining product. Even the casual fan has to be captivated by this new form of sudden death. [Haberman: 17.11.05]

The Senior Producer uses the imagery of the "standing, rooting hoping and praying" NHL fans to illustrate the "entertaining product" that shootouts have produced. This new rule has helped to improve the NHL, in his opinion, to the point that he as a "traditional fan," as well as those who are just "casual fans have to be captivated." Along with highlighting the excitements of shootouts, NHL bloggers cite other examples of the exciting NHL product in numerous postings—including the emergence of young, quality players, and the faster, more offensive-style of play that has resulted. Bloggers work to remind fans that the NHL is still the best hockey

⁶⁵ When referring to each individual's blogs, I will address the authors by their 'occupational' identities e.g. the "Actress", "the Journalist" etc. I believe doing so gives the reader more of an illustration of the different sides of the NHL's desired identity, versus referring to the bloggers by name.

product available, using characteristics of the type of hockey the League is selling (full of young talent and offence) to support their arguments. The League has determined what strengths make its product and brand of hockey desirable to fans and blogs about these strengths to promote its company.

Marketing the NHL's unique employees

Generally, NHL bloggers avoid talk of administrative off-ice matters like the strike or the CBA, and focus on the NHL's improved on-ice product. The NHL's product begins and ends with the League's most important commodity: its *players*. Where Google's strengths lay with its ongoing innovations and user-friendliness, the NHL prides itself on the quality of its players (or employees) and how they add to the value of the company's product (the hockey being played) and its brand.

All the bloggers describe their fascination with, and appreciation for, the excellence of the NHL's players. They offer narratives about specific games and plays, remembering with excitement, as fellow fans do, the accomplishments of their *heroes*.⁶⁷ The Journalist, for example, devotes one post to a description of new trend in goaltending that has re-emerged in the NHL. He does so by describing a collection of excellent plays made by superior goaltenders from various teams:

First I saw Dominik Hasek stymie [stop] a would-be rebounder poaching off the weak side post with the move. Then I saw Marty Turco finish a fine flurry of saves with the lay-down scramble move. Next up was Martin Brodeur, anticipating and stacking his pads on a breakaway. Then Chris Osgood did the same thing, guessing right on a breakaway by Marian Hossa who looked to go five-hole, only to have the opening disappear sideways. Osgood made the move again on a play off the wing as Hossa tried to cut across the top of the crease to pull the puck laterally. Osgood stacked his pads to protect the short side while laying out to his right to cut off the skating lane. [Eliot: 12.17.05]

The hockey rhetoric used in this description—words such as “rebounder,” “poaching,” “weak-side,” “lay-down scramble,” “breakaway,” and “five-hole”—is accessible to those who follow hockey and operate within its communication code. Using it allows the Journalist to imitate how the League's audience would praise the best players' accomplishments. His knowledge of this type of language, as well as the names of the various players and his occupation as a journalist

⁶⁶These rule changes include the introduction of shootouts to decide tie games, how penalties are to be called and a limit on how much teams can spend on players each season.

gives him a voice of authority, worthy of blog readers' attention and trust. Furthermore, the enthusiastic descriptions of these goaltenders' great play also characterizes the Journalist as a fellow fan, who finds joy in outstanding accomplishments on the ice—accomplishments, which translate to a superior NHL product.

Passion, inspiration, remembrance...thanks to a product

Another major theme of the NHL's blog is its product's ability to inspire and evoke passion and emotion. The accomplishments of the players and, more importantly, the *memories* these accomplishments create become ingrained in the minds of fans, largely due to the repetition of the sounds and images of play via television and radio. The blog also serves as a reminder of these events and help to trigger the feelings they evoke.

The Features Writer tells of her experience attending a game when one of the game's most well-known and respected players, Mark Messier, was honoured by his former team, the New York Rangers. She illustrates how Messier, as a player and a person, has affected her as a professional writer and a fan:

While images of Messier's magical New York moments danced on the [Madison Square] Garden Vision scoreboard, I found myself experiencing emotions long forgotten. This is a man I've interviewed as a media member, but this is also one of the players that inspired me to become media [*sic*] in the first place. He's one of the players that took my growing interest in the sport and turned it into a full-fledged passion. I wore a Messier jersey on my back long before I held a tape recorder in my hand. And had he not introduced me to the concept of visualization, I may never have seen the inside of a locker room...Thank you Mark Messier. [Koenig: 01.13.06]

This post is especially interesting in that it explains how an ambassador for a product (Messier), influenced not only a "growing interest" in a product to turn into a "full-fledged passion," but also into a career. In this case, the Features Writer, through her personal narrative of inspiration and self-realization, subtly gives the NHL's product the quality of being life-changing and a means for a fan like her to incorporate this passion into her career. By choosing to talk about how the product has affected her personally, the Features Writer implies how meaningful the NHL's product is, and she gives the League the persona (through the inspirational qualities of an employee like Messier) of being a *motivational force* for one to achieve their own hockey-related dreams.

NHL bloggers constantly cite examples of NHL players, both past and present, and how their exceptionally high quality of play creates images that are ingrained in the minds and hearts of fans: images that are iconic of a hockey product that is unrivalled anywhere in the world. Specifically, some of the posting topics include “real time” live game observations; tributes to retired players; documentation of NHL players’ participation in the 2006 Winter Olympics; remembrances of the League’s history; and a tribute to the symbol of the NHL’s highest team achievement, and North America’s oldest trophy, the Stanley Cup. Descriptions of great play, like the one cited earlier, are constant throughout these postings, as well as information and remembrances about those players, such as Messier, Wayne Gretzky and Mario Lemieux, who have contributed the highest levels of quality to the NHL’s product (the NHL’s *heroes*). The accomplishments of these players, and those who have come before and after them, are described to entice readers, who, like the League itself are fans, to engage in the NHL’s product as a means for being inspired and entertained by the world’s best source of professional hockey.

The NHL and cross-branding: we play with other winners

The NHL’s blog also serves as another example of how cross-branding can be used to expand brand recognition and product value. For example, the NHL’s Finnish blogger posts the transcript of his interview with Macintosh Computers Executive Guy Kawasaki. The Finn discovers that, despite being born in Hawaii (not a hockey hotspot), Kawasaki is a devoted hockey fan, happy to discuss his love of the game:

I started hockey three years ago to play in a kids-versus-parents game. At the time, I was 48-years-old, and I had never skated in my life. The first time I went on the ice, it was a religious experience—similar to when I met my wife, saw a *Macintosh* for the first time, and became a Christian.

Since then, I’ve been obsessed with becoming the best hockey player a fifty-something year old Hawaiian can be. I love hockey for [many] reasons: first, it is extremely cerebral: you have to keep track of four team mates, five opponents, two goaltenders, the puck, your stick, and the various lines plus the fact that the puck seldom goes out of bounds so there’s a lot of math/physics going on, too.

...My favourite player retired this year: Brett Hull. I loved his shot and his attitude. He is definitely a Macintosh kind of guy. [Pakarinen: 01.09.06]

Including an entry like this is beneficial for the NHL on various levels: It is a first-person testimony for the game from an unlikely demographic (Hawaii). As well, Kawasaki is, to some

extent, a celebrity and represents another quality brand (Macintosh). The association of the League and one of its players (Hull) with another well-known brand helps its credibility and links it with a potentially larger audience (Macintosh users), just like Google's association with Nike. Transversely, the post is also of use to Kawasaki and Macintosh as a free advertisement and celebrity endorsement. His (rather clever) association of a star player with his product is appealing to those who are fans of Brett Hull and, perhaps, are looking for a new computer. In other words, if you're a "Brett Hull kind of guy," you might very well be a Macintosh kind of guy as well.

This kind of cross-branding and product promotion in the NHL blog is common, although subtle. The bloggers mention their own non-NHL projects; for example the Musician discusses his heavy-metal band, "Godsmack" the Comedian his stand-up comedy videos and performances, and the Actress her television program, 24. As well, bloggers promote the cable or satellite television providers they use to watch games. Yet, primarily, the bloggers write as fans (as opposed to their main occupations). They focus on promoting the NHL and its qualities to attract, maintain and expand devotion to the League, as well as to create the perception that the League is, indeed, a genuine fan of its own product, thanks to its ability to bring joy, a high level of entertainment and inspiration.

Ms. magazine

The absent magazine and the selling of the cause

Like the NHL, *Ms.* magazine hopes to inspire readers to engage themselves in its product. Yet, as *Ms.*'s motto of "not just a magazine, but a movement" expresses, the goal of its producers is not just for magazine buyers to read *Ms.*'s articles about feminist issues. They want the magazine to be a meeting place of ideas and action for those dedicated to furthering feminist causes. This goal is similar for the *Ms.* bloggers. They discuss a range of issues, all of which are presented from a feminist perspective, and they attempt to inspire feminists to engage not just in their magazine, but also in their movement.

Unlike the bloggers for Google or the NHL, however, the *Ms.* bloggers give almost *no mention* to the magazine (the product) itself. It is as though it is assumed that the blog readers are aware of the magazine's status as the best, most genuine, and primary publication for feminists, so there is no need to promote it as such. Instead, the magazine's blog is used to identify and

comment upon the *issues* and trends relevant to feminists as well as *prescribe* what feminists should be doing to confront these issues. In other words, *Ms.* uses the blog to present the feminist agenda in America and direct the *actions* feminists—their targeted audience—should be taking. The issues discussed in the blog are political, cultural and societal, and the bloggers often offer critiques of those who wield power in America. Topics discussed often in the *Ms.* blog include the negative influence of right-wing politics on issues such as a woman’s right to choose and civil and gay rights; the negative depiction of women in the media; equality in the workplace; parenting stereotypes; gender roles; the influence of advertising; pornography; sexual power relations in American society; and general political issues at the state and federal levels—all from a feminist point of view.

Bringing concerning causes to light allows the bloggers to justify why *Ms.* magazine and, furthermore, the feminist movement is relevant and necessary. This also gives *Ms.* the persona of the *chairperson* of the meeting place for feminist discussion and the voice calling for action. The bloggers are not trying to sell the magazine but, instead, *sell the movement*. Readers’ dedication to the magazine is a given. The goal is to ensure their awareness about the feminist issues of the day and to promote their activism in the war against the forces that threaten the feminist agenda.

Political consciousness and awareness

Often, the *Ms.* bloggers⁶⁸ take care to stress to readers the importance of political awareness. One of the ways they do this is through *advocating* for, and including information about, feminist causes, protests and movements. Blog postings also offer predictions as to the dire consequences if feminists let up in the battle against those in power, who threaten rights and freedoms feminists feel they have fought to achieve. For example, in this post, written after Samuel Alito’s confirmation to the US Supreme Court, Smeal warns of the many negative outcomes if American women do not band together to achieve a change of power in the US Senate:

The confirmation of Samuel Alito to the seat of [retiring Justice] Sandra Day O’Connor must be a wake-up call for American women. After the confirmation of Clarence Thomas, several Senators lost their seats, and the number of Democratic women in the Senate quadrupled from one (Barbara Mikulski) to five (with the addition of Dianne Feinstein, Barbara Boxer, Carol Moseley Braun, and Patty Murray) – a true breakthrough.

⁶⁸ As there are only three *Ms.* bloggers, I will refer to them by name (Smeal, Leif and Cupaiuolo) when citing their entries.

With the confirmation of Samuel Alito, women's rights, especially our right to access contraception and abortion, affirmative action, and sex and race anti-discrimination law, are in grave jeopardy. The consequences of the Republican stacking of the Supreme Court with reactionary judges will tragically remind Americans again and again of these bleak days for social justice.

Fifty-eight Senators turned their backs on progress for women and civil rights for all people. People, especially women, concerned with progress for human rights must be a significant force to change the current balance of the Senate. Women cannot take a backseat but must be in the leadership of this change. [Smeal: 01.31.06]

Alito's confirmation was a defeat and a "wake-up call" for feminists, and Smeal expresses her anger by predicting the consequences of the Senate's decision ("women's rights are in grave jeopardy," "Americans will be reminded of bleak days for social justice"). She also specifies the various rights that she believes to be in danger ("abortion, affirmative action, and sex and race anti-discrimination law"). Despite this dark turn of events, she advocates for the solution she has seen to work after a past controversial appointment (Justice Thomas): a change of power in the Senate, which can be facilitated if "women do not take a backseat."

This post illustrates the trend of how *Ms.* tells feminists what threatening issues they should be concerned about and what *action* should be taken. By doing so, the bloggers reinforce the persona of *Ms.* as a chairperson for the feminist movement. Smeal, the author of the previous post, is an aware, political critic and analyst, whose predictions and directions for action should be heeded by readers. This positioning provides her with the *special status* that the insiders for the NHL (the Journalist) and Google (technicians) also attempt to create.

We can be heroes: praising *Ms.*'s friends and supporters

Where the NHL praises its players as a way of promoting its hockey product, *Ms.* promotes its movement by praising fellow feminists. This includes noting the work and accomplishments of feminist writers, activists, politicians, performers and academics, as well as promoting their projects—many of which are independent of the magazine itself; again, a form of *cross-branding*. For example, in a posting called "Women in Action," Cupaiuolo writes about those featured at a 20th anniversary function for the Chicago Foundation for Women:

In other Chicago news, I meant to mention the Chicago Foundation for Women 20th anniversary annual luncheon and symposium that took place last week. It featured a terrific group of speakers – Lakshmi Chaudhry, former senior editor of *Alternet* and now with *In These Times*; Lisa Jarvis, publisher of *Bitch*; and Makani Themba-Nixon, executive

director of *the Praxis Project* – as well as a performance by Sarah Jones (check out Jones’ interview in *the Chicago Tribune*).

Fortunately Roni at *Goddess Musings* took excellent notes. She also points to Cindy Richards’ column in the *Chicago Sun-Times* about feeling more than a little overwhelmed and frustrated by the amount of work there is to do. [Cupaiuolo: 09.26.05]

This positing serves to praise feminist actors as well as to showcase the publications and projects of which they are a part (*In These Times*, *Bitch*, *The Praxis Project*). *Ms.* attempts to group itself with actors that are of interest to feminists, as well as to point readers to relevant articles in major publications, such as the *Chicago Sun-Times* and *Tribune*. This is done via hyperlinks to these publications.⁶⁹ Posts written about the poet Sharon Olds and the late feminist and civil rights advocates Betty Friedman and Loretta Scott King try to achieve the same effect. Associating *Ms.* with these actors and publications helps to inform readers about those supporting the feminist agenda, as well as to entice them to support these women and their projects. Although *Ms.*’s blogger is “frustrated about the amount of work there is to do” in bettering the feminist position in America, highlighting these feminists provides readers with the knowledge that others are doing their part to serve the movement. By providing this information, *Ms.* is working to construct further its persona as a feminist advocate and agenda setter looking to inspire readers to do their part as well.

Like Google and the NHL, *Ms.* blogs about the issues that best serve to enhance its product’s (or movement’s) desirability. Unlike Google, who wants to promote an innovative, user-friendly product, or the NHL, who wants to promote an entertaining product, *Ms.* wants to convince feminists to engage in and serve the movement that is the basis of the magazine. Selling the movement means selling the magazine, and vice versa.

Summary, Section I

The purpose of this section of the content analysis has been to compare and contrast the various issues the three companies, Google, the NHL and *Ms.* magazine discuss in their respective blogs. All three companies focus on topics that are helpful in expanding their brand and “fetishizing” or increasing their products’ values in the minds of consumers. By discussing these topics on an ongoing basis in the blogs, the companies develop larger themes that also help

⁶⁹ The use of hyperlinks is so common, that many entries include upwards of ten to 15 hyperlinks, often to editorial pieces, government documents and photos. I leave the hyperlinks active in the electronic appendix of the blog text for reference.

in this regard. For Google, it is the constant dedication to innovation and providing services that are diverse and applicable to a large audience of users with needs for various types of information. The NHL creates a perception that the brand of hockey it produces is a high quality source of inspiring sports entertainment. The *Ms.* bloggers, on the other hand, avoid mention of the product and are more concerned with identifying the political issues that make the magazine and the feminist movement relevant. They also try to explain why readers need to be engaged and what they can do to help. Another common trend within the three blogs is citing the accomplishments and celebrity status of the companies' employees or supporters. Celebrity association signifies the quality of the respective brands—a selling device often used in other forms of advertising.

With regard to the humanizing of these companies through what they blog about, some clear identity traits have been established for all three. By blogging about its user-friendly products, its cooperative joint projects with other companies and its emphasis on the noble goal of information collection (verse economic success), Google personifies itself as a friendly, helpful, *good* expert in information gathering and technology innovations. The NHL blogs about the positive qualities of its product in the same way a fan would. The bloggers are inspired and impressed by the product the League offers, and they feel passion for those special employees (the players) that make the League the best in the world. They not only promote the product, they are *fans* of it. Both Google and the NHL make a point of avoiding discussion about certain topics, the most obvious being the financial prowess of the companies and their employees. Neither Google nor the NHL wish to be personified as occupied with money, despite that Google is one of the richest companies in the world, and a majority of the NHL players are millionaires. *Ms.* also avoids any talk of the magazine's finances and tries to personify the magazine as a leader of the feminist movement and an advocate for those who are serving it. The bloggers, like the magazine, are informed and aware, being sure to monitor and critique those who wield the power that can threaten the rights feminists hold to be of greatest importance.

As we have seen, *what* information and opinion is conveyed in the blog is useful in identifying how companies attempt to enhance the value and cultural importance of their products and brands as well as how they create personalities for themselves. What is also of great importance from an analytical point of view is *how* this information is conveyed. In keeping with the semiotic methodology I have outlined for this project, the next section will focus on how

these companies construct their communication messages to consumers via the blog. I will do so by analysing the writing structures of the blog postings, using the literary analysis tools explained in Chapter II.

Section II: constructing the face of the message

In this section, I will discuss *how* the bloggers write their posts. I noted in Chapter II the necessity of understanding what one discusses in a literary text as the first step in understanding the semiotic patterns inherent in that text. What the bloggers write about was the focus of Section I of this chapter. Now I will deconstruct the bloggers' writing approaches to uncover the semiotic patterns in place.

As we know semiotics is the study of how conveyers of information (signs) operate within systems, or patterns, in order to achieve meaning for a receiver of that information. That receiver must coexist within a shared code of communication with the sender. For our purposes, the signs in question are the bloggers words; the senders are the companies and the receivers the blog readers. Analysing how the bloggers words are structured, or patterned, within the blog text can help to explain how the format of the blog helps (or hinders) companies in communicating their desired messages to consumers: specifically messages concerning the superiority of their brands and the type of personality they wish to convey for their companies. To do so, I will employ the tools for literary analysis I presented in Chapter II: I will look at the sentence structures, the linguistic devices used (for *example, redundancy, imagery, humour, rhetoric*) and the tones of the bloggers' entries (*serious, light, intimate, nostalgic* etc.). Like in Section I, I will cite some direct examples from each company's blog text to illustrate the writing styles of the bloggers. I will also compare and contrast the approaches employed by each company, beginning this time with *Ms.*, followed by Google and then the NHL.

***Ms.* magazine**

A call to fight: war rhetoric

One of major linguistic devices employed throughout many of the *Ms.* blog entries is the use of *war rhetoric* to remind readers of the ongoing battles that feminists must fight to ensure that the goals of the feminist agenda are met. The war includes fighting for the important issues feminists see to be threatened by the power players in the United States. Primarily, these players

are politicians, corporations and advertisers. For example, this posting by Leif discusses a California state bi-election where four propositions of Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger were rejected, including one regarding abortion—a victory for feminists:

Finally, an election night that I get to celebrate. I haven't done that a lot lately. In fact, I haven't done that at all since before the 2000 [US presidential] election.

We said no to all four of Arnold's propositions. Maybe we can stop calling him the Governorator now. He put his political reputation on the line and went zero for four. That was fun to watch, but that's not what I celebrated. I am thrilled, happy, overjoyed, and any other synonym you can think of that we defeated Proposition 73...

Prop 73 was a constitutional amendment requiring parental notification for any minor seeking an abortion...

...To talk people out of being in favour of parental notification laws is doable, but it is a complex, nuanced, and subtle endeavour. Complex, nuanced and subtle—not really words associated with political campaigns. It is an uphill battle to defeat these propositions.

We are in an on-going war to protect the rights of all women to have access to safe and legal abortions. But, for today, winning one battle feels pretty damn good. [Leif: 11.09.05]

We see Leif employ rhetoric associated with conflict (“war,” “uphill battle,” “dangerous,” “defeat”), and she uses *declarative* sentences to convince readers that she and other voters in California are fighting against the political will of the government (“we defeated Proposition 73”), and furthermore that all feminists are “in an on-going war to protect the rights of all women to have safe and legal abortions.” The tone of the post is *serious*, and the call for continued action is *urgent*. Also, by keeping the tone of this post *personal* (using the pronoun “we,” and describing her own joy and actions during the election), Leif conveys to readers that she is intimately involved in the battle and willing to continue to fight to ensure the “ongoing war” is won. This personal tone also keeps Leif’s approach within the code commonly seen in individuals’ blogs. By declaring that the war is “ongoing,” Leif expresses how it is necessary to continue to fight, and therefore to constantly dedicate oneself to the feminist cause—and *Ms.* magazine. This means acting like good feminists should: voting, monitoring power players and supporting fellow feminist soldiers.⁷⁰

The *Ms.* blog employs war rhetoric for a range of issues, from abortion and Supreme Court nominations, to equality for women in American college sports. For example, when discussing

⁷⁰ Ironically the use of the word “ongoing” is also used often by a feminist archenemy—the Bush administration—to describe the so-called “war on terror.”

the recent successes in the development of women's university basketball in the United States, Smeal describes the victory as a product of winning "the battles we [feminists] fight each day" (Smeal: 04.05.06). This description implies that despite the women's success, there are still *more* battles to be fought in the war for equality. And as this battle continues, those willing to fight must take *action*. The *command* for feminists to act, or fight in the war, is also characteristic of the *Ms.* bloggers' writing style.

The importance of political engagement: active language for activists

The *Ms.* bloggers' use of war-like rhetoric serves to characterize *Ms.* and its readers as soldiers in the on-going battle for women's rights in America (as well as *Ms.* magazine as collective voice and agenda setter in this battle). Those who identify with the causes at hand are called upon to participate in the fight. *Ms.* bloggers also make use of *active* sentences and *imperatives*, or commands, in their writing, prescribing what should be done to help other activists for the feminist movement. Later in the analysis, we will see the similarity of the commands used by Google for its users to "try," "buy" or "switch" to a new product to better their online data collecting experience—indeed a writing approach found often in other kinds of advertisements. *Ms.* bloggers do not promote purchasing anything (including the magazine), but do suggest other actions, such as donating to worthy causes, scrutinizing the government's policies and monitoring the media for coverage of feminist issues and the depiction of women. In short, the *Ms.* bloggers tell their readers to be *aware* and to *act*. Throughout the blog entries, there are *redundant* calls for action: "listening" to the Bush administration, "watching" the right wing talk shows, and "seeing" how conservative certain politicians are (Leif: 09.07.05). This redundancy serves to constantly remind readers not to let down their guards. As well, *Ms.* bloggers often *evaluate* for their readers what articles they should be reading, causes they should be supporting and feminists they should be applauding. As was discussed earlier, doing so gives *Ms.* the personality traits of the informed, engaged chairperson of the feminist movement, or, in keeping with *Ms.*'s war rhetoric, the *commander* of the feminist soldiers in battle, instructing what the next moves should be in the ongoing war.

***Ms.* and pop culture: critique and change**

One of the repeated commands *Ms.* bloggers give to readers is to monitor how women and feminist issues are depicted in the American media. *Ms.* bloggers use *declarative* sentences to

praise the positive depictions as well as evaluating the negatives, often citing the writing of other cultural critics to support their arguments. Providing these types of critiques helps the bloggers enhance the magazine's identity as an aware, critical feminist that is watching, listening, and talking about how power players, including the media, affect feminist causes. For example, Cupaiuolo (09.16.05) cites an analysis of the television show *Xena: Warrior Princess*, which characterizes the character of Xena as an "unapologetically strong and unapologetically female" fictional *soldier* (or warriors, if you will) and role model helping to expand and alter the "conventional" depiction of women in the mass media. In contrast to Xena, in another post Cupaiuolo (09.23.05) critiques the cliché of the "attractive, barely dressed, [dead] woman" she argues is overtly present in too many American television:

Television crime shows are often riddled with clichés – but one cliché in particular stands out for its exposure of society's fascination with and ultimately its tolerance for violence against women. Make that attractive, barely dressed women. It's the female crime victim you see every night: beautiful, tortured and dead.

In today's *Chicago Tribune*, Maureen Ryan describes what takes place in the new Fox series *Killer Instinct*:

We have reached a new low when a woman is paralysed, raped and murdered for our television "entertainment."

In the opening minutes of the new Fox crime show *Killer Instinct*, spiders bite a sleeping woman; she wakes up, but is soon immobilized by the spiders' poison. Conscious but terrified, she's powerless to prevent a man from breaking into her apartment and raping her. Then she dies.

...If this show...achieves anything, it's the display of a new level of depraved, deplorable violence against women....

...Lisa de Moreas' article, which was published in *The Washington Post* earlier this week, provides more gruesome details about the violent fate of women in a number of series this season, including *Supernatural*, *Criminal Minds*, *CSI* and *Close to Home*. Her observations of why dead women are so popular include this look at who's watching:

...The entire television industry these days is obsessed with the pursuit of young male viewers. ...Advertisers pay top dollar for ad time in a show that attracts more males 18 to 34 years old because it's so hard for advertisers to reach them.

And did you know that last season's highest-rated scripted, live-action series among males ages 18 to 34 were *Desperate Housewives*, an ABC prime-time soap about a bunch of forty-something hotties on suburban Wisteria Lane, and *CSI*?

Surprising, huh?

From which, we conclude, young men like their older women in teddies having sex with teenagers [males] who cut their grass (or, in the case of [actress] Teri Hatcher, naked and in the bushes), but they like their younger women – well, dead.

This is a good example of the common *Ms.* blogging format of long, *argumentative* and *evaluative* critical prose. This post *describes* cultural trends feminists are fighting to change. A stark contrast from the praise for *Xena*, here we see Cupaiuolo condemn TV's common depiction of women as victims of violent crime, or the objects of sexual desire, in order for advertisers to attract the desired demographic of men, ages 18-34. Writing with a dark, sarcastic, pessimistic tone, she provides vivid *images* of the negative depiction of women in these programs. The *critique* also touches on the evils of advertising influence—a theme common in *Ms.* magazine. The post serves to advise readers about the trend of violence against women common in prime-time television (so common, it may have been over looked), and does so with the support of an expert voice (deMoreas of *The Washington Post*). Also, through her “conclusion,” Cupaiuolo, *evaluates*, negatively, about the desires of young American men, regarding how they “like their women.” Whereas a character like *Xena* would not compromise herself in order to please others (especially men), the countless television characters “in teddies,” or “dead” are harmful products of an entertainment industry formatted just to serve these desires. By identifying this negative trend, Cupaiuolo reiterates the need for a critical feminist voice, like the one *Ms.* magazine provides, as well as exemplifying how a feminist should be reacting to such content with criticism and condemnation. Citing deMoreas' article, which is also sarcastically toned, adds to the feeling of disgust for such content.

This sarcastic tone is also evident in postings concerning what Cupaiuolo (09.20.05) calls the proliferation of “porn culture” in American society, and its effect on how women act, perceive themselves and their relationships with men. Like the previous example, secondary sources are used to support the argument that pornography objectifies women and is a negative influence on relationships in America. Comments like this help to promote *Ms.* as an *advisor*, looking to influence the opinion of those readers who may not have seen this issue, or others like it, as a problem that needs to be righted by feminists.

Fight the power: critiquing the government

As I mentioned, *Ms.* bloggers often *advise* that education about contemporary feminists issues comes from monitoring and criticizing societal power players. Smeal often uses her blog postings to provide readers with extensive, first-hand accounts and *evaluations* of political proceedings, including various US Senate hearings. She uses her status as a “Washington insider” to deliver commentaries about how American politicians’ policies help or hinder the feminist agenda. Although Smeal attempts to characterize herself as an educated, knowledgeable political observer, her accounts are compromised by her *subjective* comments about disliked politicians. It can be assumed that Smeal believes *Ms.* readers, as fellow feminists, feel the same *passion* she does, and will welcome her subjective commentary as another form of the *rallying cry* for the feminists troops to join the battle.

Remember the soldiers and the victories: *Ms.* and nostalgia

In developing her narratives and rallying other feminists, Smeal and the other *Ms.* bloggers declare which of the characters they discuss are *heroes* and which are *villains* of the feminist movement. For example, conservative politicians (including the President) are described as villains, where protesters and politicians who do not support the Bush administration are heroes. As I mentioned in Section I, hero worship is a common theme in the *Ms.* and NHL blogs. Smeal and other *Ms.* bloggers often use their posts to highlight heroes and describe how their actions, both present and past, have helped feminists win battles.

In keeping with the theme of hero-worship, *Ms.* bloggers make use of *nostalgia* in their posts. Nostalgia is used to praise those “fallen” soldiers, such as Betty Friedman and Loretta Scott King who have died, as well as for remembering the days when the feminist movement was in its infancy, and “giants for women’s rights” like Friedman “changed the status of women forever” (Smeal: 02.04.06). Smeal, especially, provides reflections and stories of past struggles and the battles she and others have fought and won in for women’s rights in America. Her first-hand accounts give an *intimate* tone to these narratives, which serve to inspire contemporary feminists. They are also *reminders* of how things were, and how, thanks to heroes like Friedman, things have improved. As one of Friedman’s and King’s contemporaries, Smeal is a logical choice to write nostalgic postings paying tribute to feminist heroes and offering reminders of the early days of the feminist movement. Another way in which Smeal’s long-time crusading experience colours her writing is how she uses nostalgic references to the past as a way to *describe* current

feminist activities. For example, in this post, she praises those organizing to oppose the nomination of Samuel Alito to the Supreme Court:

This past week leading up to the Alito hearings has been tremendously exciting. Student and community leaders from 35 states have come to Washington, DC to participate in Freedom Winter '06, part of a joint national campaign between the Feminist Majority Foundation, the National Organization for Women (NOW), and the National Congress of Black Women to block the confirmation of Samuel Alito because of the serious threat he poses to the future of women's rights and civil rights.

In the spirit of Freedom Summer 1964, when thousands of students from across the country traveled to Mississippi and other Southern states to register and mobilize African-American voters in unprecedented numbers, Freedom Winter '06 is mobilizing students to save women's rights and civil rights. [Smeal 01.06.06]

By nostalgically evoking "the spirit of Freedom Summer 1964," to describe "Freedom Winter '06," Smeal provides a sense of purpose, scale and history to the current (although unsuccessful) protest against Alito. The post also serves as a morale booster by praising the size and "excitement" of the campaign as well as a rallying cry for other feminists and activists to mobilize and participate in similar feminists campaigns—all writing approaches evident in other *Ms.* blog posts used to help sell the goals feminists are fighting to achieve.

We're feminists, but we're also funny! Constructing *Ms.*'s lighter tone

Throughout the *Ms.* blog text exemplified so far, a critical and sometimes sarcastic tone is common. The subject matter discussed is serious and the use of argument, analysis and evaluation is constant. The bloggers attempt to create an identity for the magazine as a group of feminist soldiers, advocates, critics, advisors and monitors. Yet *Ms.* also wants to have the trait of being *humorous* associated with its persona. It seems many of the issues feminists are fighting for are, in their view, being threatened, causing them to be wary, concerned and disheartened. Yet this has not dissuaded the *Ms.* bloggers from making light of their struggles as a way to remain positive. I discussed earlier the concept of *morale boosting* while the feminist battles are being fought. Even though most of *Ms.* blog entries are exposing and critical, some are more light-hearted, and humour is used as writing technique. At the same time, the posts maintain a serious message.⁷¹ So despite that *Ms.* is a crusading publication, it wants readers to think that it

⁷¹ This has a great deal to do with Leif being one of the *Ms.* bloggers. As a professional comic, she often employs humour in her writing. Her biography notes that one of her goals is to prove that "feminists do have a sense of humour."

does have the ability to have fun with the issues it discusses. This fun usually comes in the form of mocking politicians and others in power, which the magazine and the blog focus on so often. For example, in this post, we see a “letter” Leif writes to the lawyer Harriet Miers after she decided not to accept President Bush’s nomination for the Supreme Court amidst calls from politicians and the media that she was unqualified:

Dearest Harriet,

Thank you for trying out to be a Supreme Court Justice. I’m so sorry that it’s not going to work out. It turns out we were looking for someone, how can I put this politely, less unqualified. It might have helped if your team had been more supportive, but maybe that’s because some of them have other things like pesky indictments and plummeting approval ratings on their minds. I know that you were hoping to jump right in to your new job with some exciting work like over-turning *Roe v. Wade*, but your team didn’t seem to believe that. Take comfort in knowing that I believed it. You can also take comfort in knowing that you’ll now get to go back to working side by side with the man [President Bush] you say is the most brilliant you’ve ever met. Did I mention there were also some questions about your judgment? Anyway, it was lovely almost getting to know you and I wish you the best of luck as you return to your job.

In the end, I hope you learned a valuable lesson: You look fantastic in blue, but one brooch is enough.

Cordially and not at all gloating, Carol Ann Leif. [Leif 10.27.05]

Leif uses this sarcastically written letter to mark the victory of Miers’ resignation. She declares that Miers was not fit for the position (“looking for someone less un-qualified”) and would have been a threat to a woman’s right to choose (“exciting work like over-turning *Roe v. Wade*”). Leif also *questions* and mocks the integrity of the nomination process, by thanking Miers for “trying out” for the Supreme Court. (This is a term used for more trivial attempts at membership: one would “try-out” for a children’s sports team.) Leif also questions Miers’ judgement, noting her comment that President Bush is “the most brilliant man she had ever met,” not to mention her fashion sense (“one brooch is enough”). As with all satire, Leif uses her comedic letter to make a social comment, yet her contempt for the Miers and the Bush Administration, surrounded by “pesky indictments and plummeting approval ratings” is also clear. Although she claims not to be “gloating,” it is clear that Leif considers Miers’ failed nomination to be a positive for feminists, and a relief.

In the *Ms.* blog, humour is not reserved just for victories. Even when feminists suffer political defeat, making light of the situation seems to be a way of coping. Although the bloggers seriously lament the potential threats to the causes they fight for, they also do so in a joking manner, again by humorously criticizing those in power. Throughout the blog postings, targets include President Bush, Supreme Court justices John Roberts and Samuel Alito, Republicans, Harvard educators, members of the US Senate and other conservative politicians.

This use of humour is a change from the harshly toned posts that constitute the bulk of the *Ms.* magazine blog. By keeping the tone of some posts lighter, *Ms.* attempts to give itself the persona of a feminist with a sense of humour, who can successfully cope with the struggles she is facing in contemporary American society. It also conveys to readers that being a dedicated, fighting, aware feminist does not mean you cannot enjoy yourself as well.

Google

Writing the good sales pitch

In their attempt to sell the movement and characterize themselves as strong feminists, the *Ms.* bloggers make use of long, serious, passionate, opinionated, critical and sometimes funny personal narratives in their prose. In a stark contrast, Google takes a writing approach more common to traditional advertising text when promoting its products and services in its blog. It is important to remember that Google does not make use of advertising via television, print or radio. Therefore, its blog, along with its website, are two of the only places where Google provides information about itself. Google often constructs posts that focus on product launches or product improvements with a consistent formula of short, impersonal, information-heavy text, emphasizing the nature of the new or improved product and how it benefits the user—the targeted reader for these kinds of posts. Google has decided that users want just the facts when it comes to its products, as this example written by a product manager illustrates:

Today is the one year anniversary of the Google Mini, Google's solution for website and corporate network search, and to celebrate we thought we'd announce a few more of them. The standard Mini lets you search up to 100,000 documents. Now organizations that constantly crank out new content can opt for either of two new Minis: one searches up to 200,000 documents, and another that can manage up to 300,000. All three deliver the same easy set-up, intuitive interface and fast, relevant results that the Mini is already bringing to thousands of websites and corporate networks. You're growing, and the Mini is growing with you. [Sheth: 01.12.06]

Many of the traits associated with Google brand are present in this blog. The adjectives used to *describe* the Mini (“solution,” “easy,” “intuitive,” “fast,” “relevant”) coincide with those used by the company to describe itself. The purpose of this post is to reinforce those traits in the mind of the reader—very much like the traditional television or radio advertisement—in a quick, short message. The last line (“You’re growing and the Mini is growing with you”) sounds almost like a catch phrase that appears at the end of a television commercial.

The writing style here is curt and plain, with an impersonal tone. We receive no information about the product manager himself, and his narrative is emotionless. The focus is on the product and what it can do for the targeted audience (Google users). The blogger as a person is, essentially, absent. Although the pronoun “we” is used to denote Google and the reader is hailed personally (“You’re growing”), the emphasis of the post is placed on convincing the reader with positive descriptions about the Mini that it is a worthwhile product. Despite the text’s lack of personality, this writing style helps Google to convey its desired personality traits of being an informed, positive, innovative expert about online information collection.

A formula for success: fixing the problems

As the main target audience of the majority of Google’s blog posts, users are often directly hailed with a *question* or *statement* that is supposed to correspond with their own experiences—again, a technique common in traditional forms of advertisements. By asking questions and making prepositions, Google gives its bloggers the opportunity to introduce a product that can help users get what they want, be it video footage, directions, an email provider or a new romantic relationship. This post, written by a software engineer, targets those who access the Internet via their mobile phones, and describes how a Google product can make this activity easier:

Anyone who’s ever tried to browse the web on their cell phone knows that it isn’t always the best user experience. That’s why I’m excited to tell you about Google Mobile Personalized Home. We’ve designed a way for you to view the things that you really care about, from your Gmail inbox to news headlines, weather, stock quotes, and feeds (Atom or RSS). The interface is optimized for small screens, and we’ve arranged things so you don’t have to click on a bunch of links to locate what you’re after – your personalized content appears on top, right where it should be. Give it a try, and let us know how you like it. [Kalamkar: 01.12.06]

There are many similarities between this and the Mini post. The software engineer presupposes that the reader (“you”) has had a “bad” online experience with your mobile and is doing his best to *explain* all the benefits of this Google initiative. Like in the last example, the blogger attempts to be personable by referring to the company as “we,” and the product as being designed for “you” to view the things that you really “care” about as well as stressing Google’s “personal” steps to maximize your convenience (“we’ve arranged things so you don’t have to click on a bunch of links”) and solicits, or *commands*, “your” use of the product as well as your feedback (“Give it a try and let us know how you like it”). Yet, again, the tone is impersonal, with no feelings expressed or blogger personality conveyed (although the blogger does say he is “excited” to tell you about the product). The emphasis is on pitching the product. Despite that personal pronouns are used, the *distance* the Google bloggers write from is evident when comparing their prose to the fiery, passionate pleas for action and change that the *Ms.* bloggers provide. The differing modes of persuasion can account for this contrast: where *Ms.* preaches engagement in feminism through an appeal to emotion and outrage, Google is looking to *rationaly* convince readers to try its product by focusing on the merits of doing so. In other words, you shouldn’t try Google because its bloggers are engaging, but because its product is worth using.

The prose structure employed in this approach is common throughout the many Google blog posts that focus on products: a description of a user problem serves as an introductory anecdote; the problem is addressed by a Google initiative; the Google initiative is explained and declared to be a solution; the user is *commanded* to try and report their findings. The final part—soliciting feedback—allows Google to have it perceived that the consumer is engaged in the production process and has a say in the way Google does business. More importantly, it promotes the *word of mouth* advertising that has been so crucial to Google’s success to date. Getting people to talk to each other (as well as to the company) helps to promote the spreading of information, excitement and personal endorsements for a product—if the experience is positive, of course. And it seems Google is confident that it will be. Such action results in another cost-free form of advertising for a company. Soliciting feedback also adds to the idea of Google being an open, customer-oriented company, which listens and is dedicated to its users.

Different audience, different tone

The goal of any advertising venture, as we know, is to praise the quality of the product and to expand a company's brand placement, recognition and retention. Like all companies, Google wants its potential customers to remember its brand when choosing an Internet search engine or other Internet-based products. Google has not taken the traditional route of exposing its brand via advertising campaigns, relying instead on other strong selling tools: word of mouth advertising of its users and the splashing of its brand across the Internet via the company's association with countless website operators and organisations. More and more websites have search options "powered by Google," thus allowing the company to be subtly present more often during an Internet user's online experience. As a rule, the narratives found in the Google blog focus on the product, with a style that plain, straightforward and substance-focused—like the identity of the company itself. However, with posts targeted at other audiences, such as potential employees, the writing style and tone changes drastically.

In targeting potential employees, the company is attempting to make Google feel like an entity *composed of people*, not just information. It is as though monetary benefits and prestige of working for Google (the best) are self-evident, and the *fun* of working there is what needs to be promoted. Posts discuss the good times employees have at Google and are written more personally, with a light, whimsical tone. The oddest example of this is a post by a Pug dog (yes, a dog), from Google's *canine* division, describing his daily contributions to the company:

Unlike some others, I may be a small dog, but size is just a state of mind: My Google job is as important as anyone else's. After my morning nap at the office, I go out on hall monitor duty. This involves watching everyone who walks by our cube and getting some nice massages from passers-by. Some of the Googlers even know my language. For example, Jonathan Rosenberg is fluent in Pug, and loves to converse with me whenever we run into each other. And I get to play with plenty of dogs here: labs, doxies, tollers, and even some fellow pugs. Then there are occasional runs to the nearby Shoreline Dog Park.

Between the two, Google is my favourite place to be. Just as Google engineers get 20% of their time for their own projects, I have mine: at least a day a week I'm the resident court jester. It's not very hard to entertain Googlers—everyone seems to get a kick out of me. If I had a nickel for every time someone laughed or smiled at me, I'd be running the company. And then I'd put bins of biscuits in each Google mini-kitchen. [Nickey: 03.10.06]

This post is obviously constructed to appeal to potential employees, who happen to be dog lovers and are also attracted to a light, relaxed, personable working environment. As well, the mention of Rosenberg, a high ranking Google executive, as someone who interacts with Google workers

(and their dogs) gives him, an icon of upper management, the persona of a friendly, accessible boss. The use of *humour* and *fantasy* here strays from the general, straightforward, emotionless writing style used in the Google blog. The dog, as a mascot, operates similarly to the mascots countless companies use in advertising campaigns to help promote product recollection and personality. And the use of a dog in this regard serves Google well: Not only are many people dog lovers, but some of the traits associated with dogs (friendly, dependable, uncomplicated) can also be associated with those the company tries to convey. As well, the dog's mentioning that "Google is his favourite place to be"—and that this declaration is seconded by "Google engineers who get 20% of their time for their own projects"—serves to convince readers with evidence (not just humour) that Google is a great place to work.⁷²

Posts targeted at potential employees, as well as those that focus on Google's charitable endeavours, are written with a more personal tone. In attempting to give itself a personality (other than just an efficient information collector) to those targets, Google makes use of humour and does not focus on *convincing* readers about the superiority of its product. However, this is not the norm. Most of the posts I examined discuss products, and the format illustrated earlier is heavily relied upon. Google has determined that its successes begin and end with its users' satisfaction. Therefore it structures the majority of its blogs by describing why and how its products are beneficial to them with a style that is straightforward and uncomplicated. Again, traits that also describe the persona that the company wishes to convey to its users.

The NHL

Positive praise for hockey's "worldwide" appeal

Like Google, the NHL's primary target audience are its "users," in this case it is those who use the League as a source of professional sports entertainment. The NHL already has the title as the best professional hockey league in the world, yet it is always looking to better its appeal in comparison to other professional sports in North America such as basketball, football and baseball. Unlike Google, the NHL is not in a position to vary its product or brand with different products: It sells hockey. But what it tries to do, as we have seen, is make the game appealing to a wider audience of sports fans. In its blog, this is done primarily by *describing* the excitement

⁷² This post also includes a large photo of Nickey the pug dog. This is one of the few posts that strays from the mainly text-based format of the Google blog by including an image.

that NHL hockey creates in order to *convince* non-hockey sports fans to engage themselves and also to *reinforce* the love of the League for those who are already fans.

“Hockey is a sport with quite an international flavour,” writes the NHL.com Senior Producer. “You would not be hard-pressed to find players from Sweden, Finland and Russia on most NHL teams” (Haberman: 02.08.06). In Winter 2006, the best players in the world, including those from the NHL, met in Turin, Italy to compete in the Winter Olympics. The NHL bloggers used the Olympics as an opportunity to proclaim the international appeal of the game and the League:

Though, the majority of NHL players come from the hockey-rich countries of Canada, the United States and the Czech Republic, nations like Austria, Poland, Latvia, Korea, Switzerland, Belarus and Kazakhstan are represented. Fans of the sport are even more diverse. Those who watch hockey come from China, Australia and Mexico. We’ve received feedback from all three nations this year, and that doesn’t include the frozen tundra of Northern Canada, Iceland and Siberia, where more than a few fans have chimed in recently. Hockey, and we’ll see this at the Olympics in eight days, has an immense global following, unmatched by maybe every other sport, except soccer, which is played all across the globe. [Haberman: 02.08.06]

Such a *declaration* of hockey’s “global appeal...unmatched by maybe every other sport” is a stretch, to say the least (tennis, golf, football, basketball and cricket immediately come to mind as perhaps more “global” sports). Yet this statement is indicative of the NHL’s goal of convincing sports fans about its broad international appeal. The blogger supports his argument that hockey has “unmatched” global appeal by listing off the places from where the League receives “feedback” from fans (China, Australia, Mexico, Iceland and Siberia), and then by predicting how “we’ll see” the sport’s global appeal at the Olympics.

Indeed, international tournaments like the Olympics helps the NHL to showcase its best players—its most valuable commodities—on a global stage and thereby generate more interest in its product. A player’s standout performance for his country can translate into fans’ interest in that player’s NHL team. The NHL bloggers that attended the Olympics took the opportunity to praise the players’ performances, on and off the ice, as well as the magnitude of the tournament itself. They describe with a glowingly positive tone how the Olympics benefited by including the NHL’s superior players.⁷³ One blogger even thanks the NHL’s players for “being the most available, hardest working, toughest guys on the planet” (Libero: 02.25.06). The bloggers declaration of the players’ positive traits serves to strengthen the NHL’s brand value as being

composed of the world's best, and classiest, players, who create a product that has international entertainment appeal.⁷⁴

Personal life history intertwined with NHL history

Another writing approach the NHL's bloggers take to make the League relatable to the fans is the use of their *own* personal associations with hockey. These narratives consist of bloggers' *descriptions* of private memories of the game from childhood to the present and declarations of what it has meant to them, their families and friends. Doing so gives an association of tradition and history to the NHL's product as well as proclaiming the product's ability to bring people closer to those they love. For example, The Finn describes taking his father to Madison Square Garden (home arena of the New York Rangers) for the first time and the positive effect the experience of seeing a fellow Finn play for the Rangers had on both of them (Pakarinen: 12.06.05); the Features Writer declares that hockey brought her closer to her brother because their common love of the game gave them a bond to help bridge a nine-year age difference (Koeing: 01.24.06); and, in this example, the Comedian blogs about his introduction to the NHL as a young man, through his friend "Adam" and how their common love of the game affected their relationship:

Every one of us has our Adam. For many people, it's our father or older brother or mother or older sister...Adam is responsible for some great memories in my life, including a few that happened long after we stopped talking. Like when I saw the Rangers beat the Islanders at the Coliseum...

Adam, if you're reading this, thank you for hockey. And to anyone else reading this, if I've ever written something that upset you, well it's Adam's fault I'm a fan so blame him. [Hofstetter: 12.09.05]

Narratives such as these remind fans about similar memories of their own, with regard to hockey and their own relationships. The tone of this posting, and the other relationship anecdotes, is emotional and personal, which fits well with the tone generally associated with blog writing (in contrast to that of many of the Google posts). The Comedian declares that hockey and his friend are responsible for "some great memories in his life," even addressing the post directly to "Adam," and "thanking him for hockey" and for making him a fan. By taking such an intimate

⁷³ 170 of the 368 players who competed at Tornio play professionally in the NHL. This includes 22 of the 24 players from the gold medal winning Swedish team.

tone and providing specific information about his personal life, the Comedian (as well as the Features Writer and the Finn) establishes himself as an honest and genuine narrator, a position that companies strive to convey in all forms of advertising and blogging.⁷⁵

This type of narrative illustrates how fans who have a relationship to hockey, and the NHL, have used that tie to strengthen relationships.⁷⁶ The NHL's product provides common ground for those who may not have anything else in common. As well, the product provides an *emotional* experience to which people can connect to and, later, recollect with narratives similar to those expressed in these blog entries. This kind of entry further establishes the NHL bloggers, and the League, as *genuine* fans that feel as strongly about the game as do their readers and fellow fans.

Nostalgia, tradition and heritage

As I mentioned in the company's profile, the NHL has a long and storied history as the premier professional hockey league in the world. The bloggers take advantage of this history and the League's defining events and players to evoke a feeling of *nostalgia* about the product for its fans. We've also seen the use of nostalgia as a way to evoke emotion about *Ms.* magazine, as well as a selling tool in countless forms of advertising.⁷⁷ An example of this in the NHL blog is the post that discusses the retirement of Mario Lemieux, one of the NHL's most prolific players. The Website Editor uses this event as an excuse to revisit the highlights of Lemieux's career. He does not recite Lemieux's statistics, as is typical when gauging an athlete's significance, but chooses instead to reminisce about, and describe, the *moments* of importance in his career:

But I think Lemieux's career is one of moments rather than reciting statistics and trophies. Think about it for a second. If you conjure up some of the great hockey moments in the last 20 years, chances are Lemieux is right in the middle of them...And it starts with his first shift, when he stole the puck from Ray Bourque in Boston Garden and scored on a breakaway for his first goal on his first shot...Nothing like setting a tone.

⁷⁴ The NHL bloggers also praise the international collection of fans that assembled at the Olympics, including those from Switzerland (Libero: 02.16.06), a country not known as having a strong connection to hockey.

⁷⁵ At the same time, the approach mirrors one of the oldest in advertising—the use of a historical, personal story to sell a product. This type of narrative triggers a feeling of nostalgia associated with the product discussed—an approach I focused on in Section I.

⁷⁶ I can speak to that phenomenon personally. Sports, especially hockey, have been very important relationship builder for me, my brother, father and other family members and friends. Stories about past games are often shared, as are thoughts about the current season of play.

⁷⁷ Google, on the other hand, is a young company always looking ahead with new innovations and improvements and does not use nostalgia as a means of attracting consumers.

The 1987 Canada Cup is another [great moment]. I can still hear the late, great Dan Kelly's call—"Murphy...to Gretzky...to Lemieux...he scores!" That goal, in the waning moments of the championship game against the Soviets, sealed the verdict for Canada in the tournament and the wild celebration was one that shouldn't [*sic*] be missed. [Coffey: 01.24.06]

These descriptions create a feeling of nostalgia for fans that remember these events in Lemieux's career, and, in turn, the history of the NHL. Lemieux is declared a *hero* of the League due to his being "in the middle of some of the great hockey moments in the last 20 years." The blogger attempts to bring the *image* of one of these moments to life by replaying in print the words of the broadcaster who called one of Lemieux's most famous goals. Doing so also illustrates the blogger's personal feelings of about Lemieux and enhances the exciting tone he conveys with his retrospect, arguing that footage of Lemieux's goal against the Soviets "shouldn't be missed." He becomes nostalgic in the post and conveys that in his prose.

With the NHL, nostalgia is an easy effect to create due to the League's age, its constant presence in the mass media and because it is a continual, sport-based product, which fans follow throughout their lives. Furthermore, it is *natural* for fans to discuss past sporting events and the special players, like Lemieux, which have given the League's product its status and quality. Because of these reasons, a blogger can get away with overtly evoking nostalgia for the product without sounding insincere. Being nostalgic is part of the communications code of a sports fan.

The NHL uses nostalgia often, discussing with the praise and admiration of fans, the NHL's original teams, former players and its trophy, the Stanley Cup. The positive and laudatory style of writing employed in these posts helps the NHL to strengthen its persona as a fan of its product, as well as to reinforce its ongoing argument that the League provides an exciting, emotional, tradition-filled, international product that is accessible and desirable to a worldwide audience of sports fans.

Summary, Section II

Deconstructing how the companies' blog messages are written shows us primarily that the blog's timeless, text-based format allows companies to convey to readers *why* their brands and products (or movements, in the case of *Ms.*) are of value and quality in a variety of ways. The blog also allows these companies to develop the personality traits they wish to convey. Many of the blogging approaches we have seen differ substantially from the short, slogan-based advertising messages used as product and brand "fetishizers" in other media. Yet with this

opportunity for variety, we see that the companies use the blog format in similar ways, despite the differences in their products and demographics. Common writing approaches, such as the use of *promises and results of improvement*; *nostalgia*; the preaching the *universality of the product*, and its *worldwide appeal* are used by the companies in their blogs. Some posts even included catch phrases (Google's "You are growing and the Mini is growing with you," for example) and rhetoric (*Ms.*'s war rhetoric), which are also reminiscent of traditional advertising campaigns.

In conveying to readers why their products are of superior quality, we see the bloggers use extensive *descriptions* of their products. Google focuses on explaining the ways in which its innovations solve problems and help users obtain the online information they desire with information-heavy, impersonal prose. The NHL bloggers are more personal in their approach, using first-hand accounts of how the NHL's product excites and affects them, while praising the quality of the League and its players. Both companies use exclusively positive tones when discussing their products. *Ms.*, too, writes passionately, using seriously toned prose and war rhetoric to expose the societal trends feminists should be revolting against, commanding those willing to fight to take action and prescribing what that action should be. Yet with these trends, we also see *Ms.* and Google drastically change tones in order to achieve specific communication objectives. Both companies use humour at times: Google to attract employees, and *Ms.* to convey that, despite the seriousness of the feminist movement, a sense of humour is an important character trait for contemporary feminists to possess. This distinct change in tone illustrates how the blog entries are, like any other form of advertising, purposely constructed, or *scripted*, in order for the companies to communicate their desired messages, and, in this context, character traits.⁷⁸

The character traits these companies wish to develop for themselves also become clear through the bloggers' writing styles, as they did with the subject matter they discuss. The NHL bloggers' fascination with, and appreciation for, its product and how they nostalgically recollect great moments and players characterize them as the fans they wish to attract and keep: they write like fans talk—passionately, subjectively, using detailed descriptions to illustrate the images of NHL greatness. Google's prose helps the company to characterize itself as a friendly expert, able to solve the problems users may have. Friendliness is also a trait it wants associated with its working environment, as is conveyed in the way Google targets potential employees in its blog.

⁷⁸ Thanks to Tanja Storsul for identifying this most apt term for illustrating the trend.

Ms., by writing critical, argumentative, persuasive prose, characterizes itself as an informed, engaged and aware monitor of power players and social trends that affect the feminist agenda, as well as a activist and soldier, willing to fight for the causes it hold dear.

How the bloggers write exposes these characteristics, and so too does how the bloggers position themselves and their audience. So far, in examining the text of the three companies' blogs, I have looked at what subject matter is discussed, and, in this section, how the text is structured. I will conclude the analysis in the next section by focusing on how the bloggers position themselves and their audiences, and how this positioning influences the character traits the companies convey as well as how their products and brands are fetishized.

Section III: Take your position

In this final section of the content analysis, I will look at how the bloggers choose to *position* themselves in relation to their audiences. In doing so, I will focus on what personal characteristics the bloggers try to convey through their writing in order to establish their identities. This kind of analysis will help us to identify further the types of personalities that the three companies wish to convey through their blogs, as well as how the bloggers' positioning helps them communicate the value of their companies' brands and products. Throughout the analysis to this point, we have seen the establishment of various character traits for each company through what they blog about and how they construct their prose. As we will see, the traits are demonstrated further by how the bloggers position themselves within the blog text. As well, I will examine how the bloggers' audiences are characterized in order to illustrate the targeted demographics each company is trying to attract.

I will use the terms outlined in Chapter III to identify how the bloggers position themselves and attract their desired audiences. Some of the key questions to be asked in this regard include, Do the bloggers attempt to be *charismatic* in their writing? How do the bloggers establish *credibility* with the reader? Do they show they are *trustworthy* narrators? Do they try to provide *evidence* to support their claims? How do they *relate* to their audiences, or establish their *differences* and *worthiness* as writers?

As I mentioned in Chapter II, establishing how the bloggers position themselves is key to seeing how they are perceived as communicators, and, furthermore, how they are *identified* by readers. Transversely, how the bloggers perceive their audiences will influence the writing

approaches and identities they employ in their blogs. As with the other two sections of the analysis, I will discuss the companies individually, citing text directly from the blogs, and compare and contrast the positioning approaches of each. I will begin with the NHL, followed by *Ms.*, and finally Google.

The NHL

Be your audience: loyalty to teams and players

We have seen throughout the analysis that the NHL's bloggers attempt to characterize themselves and the League as genuine fans of the NHL's brand of hockey. The bloggers praise the product, reminisce about it and convey the passion and inspiration it has evoked in their lives. By positioning themselves as fans, the NHL's bloggers essentially *become* their target audience, thus giving the League the identity of being one of hockey's fellow supporters. There are numerous signs of this positioning approach with the NHL blog. For example, those who support the NHL generally have a team that they cheer for and support. For some it is the team that is local, for others it is a team with a particular player or history. One of the ways the bloggers establish their credibility as fans is by clarifying their favourite teams and devoting the bulk of their entries to recounting the successes and failures of those teams. For the Musician, it is the Boston Bruins, the Comedian, the New York Rangers, The Features Writer, the New Jersey Devils and so on. The Comedian offers one particular entry where he writes down his "real-time" thoughts as he watches the Rangers play:

It's 1-0 Islanders. The Islanders are beating my Rangers 1-0. That's impossible. The Rangers have been playing so well this season. And the Islanders are the Islanders! They're only a game over .500. They're not even in a playoff spot right now. They can't beat my Rangers. They just can't...Goal! I love you Petr Prucha. Okay, so I didn't know who you were before Halloween, but I promise I'll pay attention now...

Goal! [Jaromir] Jagr, oh, I love you Jagr. I knew that already. Jagr has been great this year. Is he still leading the league in points? Looks like it...Okay, first period's over. It's tied, I can live with tied. It's a new game now. The Rangers just have to win for the next 40 minutes...Breathe, Steve. Breathe. [Hofstetter: 01.06.06]

Here the Comedian positions himself completely as a fan, by enthusiastically describing his play-by-play reactions to the Rangers game against their rivals, the Islanders. Throughout his description, he also (rhetorically) asks questions and makes comments that a fan would ("Is he still leading the league?" "They're only a game over .500"). The high level of excitement the

product is evoking requires the Comedian to remind himself to “breathe,” and his emotional attachment and devotion—and furthermore his *credibility* as a fan of the team—is illustrated by how he refers to “my” Rangers and how he “loves” Ranger players like Prucha and Jagr.

The other NHL bloggers employ similar positioning approaches to that of the Comedian. With devotion to a team comes the license to complain. The Musician (Merrill: 01.17.06), for example, vents his frustrations about the lack of success of his favourite team, the Boston Bruins and criticizes NHL’s referees. Both activities are common actions of hockey fans. Doing so helps the Musician show that his is *similar* to his audience, as well as a *trustworthy* narrator. He loves his team, and therefore has a right to complain about its shortcomings. Having bloggers relatable to fans of the NHL also suggests that one of the League’s target audiences is like-minded fans, who also “live and die” with their teams and complain about officiating.

It is important to note that the Musician’s criticisms about the league’s officiating breaks from the norm of posting only positively toned comments in the NHL blog. Yet, as I mentioned, such comments reinforce his *authenticity* as a fan of the League because fans (of any sport) typically find comfort in blaming referees for many of their teams’ misfortunes.⁷⁹

Where the Comedian and the Musician devote their loyalty to teams, other fans may have a favourite player and will root for him regardless if he stays with the same team or not. The Finn (Pakarinen: 01.26.2006) uses one of his posts in a similar way. He positions himself as a fan as well and details his own “search” for a new team to which he can devote his allegiance. He explains how he is the type of fan who follows particular players, such as Wayne Gretzky and fellow Finn Sami Kapanen and as result, their teams. The Journalist (Eliot: 02.02.06) takes this approach as well. He suggests to fans that if they are looking for a new player to “root for,” they should consider Rick Nash of the Columbus Blue Jackets. Nash is a young player who represents the new generation of NHL stars. Although he positions himself as a fan, the Journalist also uses his status as a hockey insider and expert to convince fans why Nash is worth supporting. This positioning adds to his *credibility* as a blogger, as well as to his *charisma*. Not only is he a fan, he is also educated about the game, making his opinion worthy of readers’ attention. Furthermore, posts like the Finn’s and the Journalist’s serve to highlight

⁷⁹ Another trait shared by sports fans is a fascination with statistics. NHL’s Blog Central also includes a blog composed of a collection of various ‘interesting’ statistics. No “actual” writer is credited to this blog, other than a statistics computer from a company called Stats.inc. It seems the blog serves to, despite its lack of personality, relate to this fan trait of following statistics.

those players that give the NHL's brand and product its quality, as well as to establish that the League has both the characteristics of hockey fans and hockey experts.⁸⁰

The NHL is also a fan of charity

Along with characterizing itself as a fan and hockey expert, the NHL also wants to give the impression that it is *charitable*. This is exemplified in a post by the Features Writer, in which she describes hers and the League's work to make a Polish fan's hockey dreams come true:

Whenever I can facilitate a process of fulfilling someone's dream, I do because there is nothing better than knowing you helped put a smile on someone's face.

Edyta, a 17-year old from Poland and diehard [Calgary] Flames fan, was one of the first to write me when my contact information went up on the blog and weeks later, asked me the best way to obtain autographs at a game. With relatives in Chicago, Edyta planned a trip to the States at a time when the Flames would be in town for back-to-back games. The Flames were on their way to New York, so I ran the question by Peter Hanlon, the team's vice-president of communications, who was quite gracious in arranging a way for Edyta to attend a practice. While I wasn't there to see the look on Edyta's face in Chicago, I could feel magic and joy shooting out of the e-mail I received the next day. Thanks to Peter, a dream was fulfilled. [Koeing: 02.06.06]

The League, despite its size and status as the best, is still accessible to a 17-year-old international fan, and it is willing to accommodate her with free access to a practice and autographs. By blogging about how she helped "Edyta," the Features Writer positions herself, and the League, as being *charitable*. Such charitable work ensures that Edyta (an international fan) will have her own NHL experience. Like the bloggers, she now has a personal story to tell and retell: a *testimonial* (another common advertising technique) to her first-hand experience with the League's generosity. The Features Writer, due to her insider status, and her sympathy for a fan's devotion to her team, was able to facilitate the meeting with the Flames and by doing so—by doing a good deed (and blogging about it), she furthers the NHL's desired persona as a family-oriented source of sport enjoyment and positive memories. The League is willing to help those who are, like the League itself, a *fan* of the product.

⁸⁰ Furthermore, having the Finn as one of the bloggers helps the NHL to establish its reputation as an *international* product, a goal discussed in Section II of this chapter.

Common positions, diverse backgrounds

One of the reoccurring trends in the NHL blog is the identification and praise of a diverse, international fan base. The League's desire to focus on how hockey fans are everywhere and of every stripe is signified by the "random" collection of bloggers assembled to discuss their own particular ties to its product—their own brands of *fandom*. Although all of these bloggers position themselves as fans, their differing backgrounds symbolize the universal appeal of the NHL's product. Interestingly, the Senior Producer, albeit in a joking way, blogs about this very issue. He gives each blogger a title (similar to what I have done) and discusses their writings and their personalities as symbolic of the league's diverse fan base:

Elisha Cuthbert [the Actress], Risto Pakarinen [the Finn], Robbie Merrill [the Musician] and Steve Hofstetter [the Comic] are an interesting quartet of NHL.com bloggers. Another example of hockey's tremendous diversity (OK, that's a stretch). For this entry, they'll be referred to as "The Beauty," "The Scribe," "The Rocker" and "The Smart Aleck."

"The Beauty" hasn't submitted anything since the New Year began. Unfortunately, for those who are eagerly awaiting her next soliloquy, Jack Bauer's daughter is in taping.⁸¹

"The Scribe" has given us some doozies in recent weeks. With a good dose of history, enthusiasm and wit the Finn journalist delivers interesting, thought-provoking blogs. "The Scribe" has shown good range of topics and allowed readers to get inside his head for upwards of five minutes (depending on how long it takes to read his lengthy prose).

"The Rocker" is about due for another opinionated blog on the Bruins and/or the zebras [referees]. When he isn't ripping it up on the bass, "The Rocker" tries to watch or attend as many games as possible. Though he hasn't been happy with too many things from his beloved Bruins this season...

Lastly, "The Smart Aleck" must be conjuring up ways the Rangers will win the Stanley Cup this season or doing his latest play-on-words bit in a comedy club somewhere between Redondo Beach and Hermosa Beach. "The Smart Aleck" can be a bit brash, but his words are quite amusing and his fandom is apparent. [Haberma 02.08.06]

By writing this rather metaphysical blog, the Senior Producer essentially concedes that it has been a *calculated* marketing effort by NHL.com to assemble a "diverse" group of blog writers to appeal to the various demographics the NHL wishes to attract. This is no surprise, but what is surprising is that he would let readers behind the curtain of this plan with his comments. Nevertheless, what is obviously most important for the NHL is that the bloggers' "fandom is

⁸¹ Cuthbert appears on the FOX television drama *24*, along with Kiefer Sutherland. She only submitted one blog entry during the period which I collected data.

apparent,” regardless of their occupations or writing styles. Although the bloggers, and the League’s audience may come from various backgrounds, their position as *fans* is a constant. So long as that is the case, they will be welcome in the ever-expanding, hockey-devoted, NHL family.

***Ms.* magazine**

Experts and insiders

In the first two sections of the analysis, we’ve seen *Ms.* magazine bloggers convey the characteristics of a feminist activist, motivator, critic and humorist. Another way in which *Ms.* bloggers attempt to convince their readers to join in the fight for feminist causes is by positioning themselves as *experts* or *insiders*. This is made clear through the liberal use of language and communication codes that are not accessible to everyone. We have also seen the use of product-specific language in the Google and NHL blogs—terms, names, and acronyms that only an educated user or fan would understand. By using this kind language, the *Ms.* bloggers help to strengthen their position as dedicated, creditable, feminists, as well as earn the respect of readers for their knowledge and understanding of the cause (the product). In the *Ms.* blog, the insider status is commonly established by *name-dropping*. This means mentioning the names of social actors without explaining who they are or why they are of importance, assuming that the reader knows, thereby characterizing the target audience of the blog as feminists as well. Names dropped in the *Ms.* blog are usually power players to be monitored or fellow feminists (writers, activists) to be praised. In this example, Leif drops power players’ names as well as the names of court cases important to feminists, without explanation, assuming that readers will know to what she is referring. The topic of the posting is a Senate Judiciary Committee hearing, regarding the nomination of John Roberts:

He’s a super-duper nominee. Okay, that’s only Arlen Specter’s rationale for voting for John Roberts. But honestly how can any so-called pro-choice senator justify voting to confirm Roberts? Patrick Leahy is supposedly 100% pro-choice and is still going to vote for Roberts tomorrow. “I can only take him at his word that he does not have an ideological agenda.” That’s how Leahy rationalized his decision. Well, sure. The Bush administration has blocked every attempt to see documents from Roberts’s time as Kenneth Starr’s deputy.

Roberts wouldn’t answer any questions about cases like Roe, Casey, or Webster. Anytime he was confronted with the scary statements from his time in the Reagan administration that one could at least infer sounded like someone with an ideological agenda, he would

use the excuse that those were from a long time ago. His “word” is all that’s left. I’m glad Senator Leahy is willing to risk the future of civil rights law and abortion rights, neither of which will ever affect his life, on someone’s word. [Leif: 09.21.06]

Leif does specify that Specter and Leahy are senators, but she also drops in the name Kenneth Starr (special prosecutor in the President Clinton impeachment hearings) as well as the partial names of Supreme Court cases concerning women’s health, about which Roberts refused to answer questions (“Roe, Casey and Webster”).⁸² By doing so, she positions the reader as a fellow insider, and as an aware monitor of the power players who, in this case, are “willing to risk the future of civil rights law and abortion rights” with their support of Roberts.

Along with presuming that readers are aware of the *villains* like Roberts and conservative senators, and the threats they pose to feminist causes, *Ms.* bloggers also are comfortable dropping the names of the *heroes*—those who are fighting the good fight for feminists, and should be recognized by *Ms.* readers. Often those mentioned are writers and activists, or as in one example by Cupaiuolo (09.26.05), a collection of bloggers at a site called *Women in the Media & News*. In this post, Cupaiuolo’s drops the names of her fellow bloggers, assuming the readers knows who they are because, as informed feminists, they would have come across their work. Her knowledge of these writers and their work helps to establish her credibility and positions her as an informed, *networked* feminist who is in tune with those who are acting to serve the feminist agenda.

We’re educated and informed and so should you be

As we have seen, *Ms.* magazine blogs about issues that present the magazine as engaged in, and informed about, the societal happenings of the day—as any good feminist soldier should be. The magazine’s role is as a platform for feminism, advising about issues of interest and keeping feminists informed about happenings relevant to the cause. However, the bloggers tend not to refer readers to the content of *Ms.* magazine (a sign of the absent product approach), but instead to newspaper articles and other daily publications feminists *should* be reading. As *Ms.* is only published four times each year, it makes sense that blog entries would cite more up-to-date articles. Or, it could be an assumption on the part of the bloggers that the reader has already purchased *Ms.* magazine. The referral approach present in many entries usually includes a

⁸² “Roe” refers to *Roe v. Wade*, “Casey” to *Casey v. Planned Parenthood of Southern Pennsylvania* and “Webster” to *Webster v. Reproductive Health Services*.

hyperlink to the article, as well as a justification of why it is worth reading. The bloggers do the research for the reader, leading them in the right direction. By doing so, *Ms.* also takes on the position of an *academic advisor* to the feminist providing them the intellectual background to be good activists.

For example, Cupaiuolo (09.26.05) writes about an article that appear in the *New York Times* about Doulas (a nursing service available to pregnant women) as well about how the Chicago Tribune discusses the negative depiction of women in a television series called *Killer Instinct* (09.23.05). Cupaiuolo's evaluations position her as an advisor about the media's coverage of feminist issues. In these examples, the recommendations are positive. Yet postings are also used to offer detailed critiques of articles that the bloggers feel misrepresent women's issues, including a *New York Times* article about an apparent trend of women graduating from elite American colleges then deciding not to work after graduation and choosing to be stay-at-home mothers instead (Cupaiuolo: 09.20.05). Critiquing such articles also serves to position *Ms.* bloggers as *actors*, leading by example. It is their duty as feminists to probe such articles for inaccuracies and negative trends. Furthermore, presenting these critiques positions the bloggers not only as experts about feminist issues, but also how they are presented in the media. They are looking to *educate* readers about how they should read and criticize the mass media's coverage of feminist issues as well as how to critique the social factors that shape this coverage.

Cupaiuolo, specifically, is generously providing the means for readers to improve themselves and their awareness of important issues—as long as they concur that these are the proper issues upon which to focus. In other words, she is advising another form of action for feminists to take, as well as the proper way to do so. Her *trustworthiness* is established through both her dedication to feminist issues (and how they are depicted), and how she supports her arguments with *evidence* from the various publications she cites. These types of post allow for the *Ms.* bloggers to convey that they possess the traits of awareness, education and criticalness that engaged feminists should. As well, these posts highlight the issues that support the bloggers' ongoing claim about the work that needs to be done to better the feminist position in American society.

Google

Google has a charitable, academic heart

As Google tries to establish for itself an identity by blogging, certain character traits become clear. The company wants to be seen as the best provider of information available in the world. It wants to provide service in a friendly, efficient, innovative way. It wants its users to think of it as a good company, not obsessed with the bottom line, and it wants potential employees to be attracted to it, not just for the prestige of being a Google employee, but also because it is a fun place to work. We have seen in the blog examples cited so far that Google positions itself mainly through its choice of bloggers for a given topic. Like *Ms.*, it wants to convey that its bloggers are *experts* about the topics they discuss. Engineers write about new innovations, product managers write about improvements to a given service and so on. The bloggers' titles give them automatic *credibility* with readers: they know what they are blogging about because their job titles demand it. Readers' can *trust* their assessments because they have personally worked on the projects they have discussed. Furthermore, because they are experts, they must know *more* about what Google does than do the readers, and how that can help Internet users. Yet, we have also seen that Google wants readers to perceive the company as being transparent and honest, as well as charitable. Some of the Google posts attempt to convey these traits, and how the bloggers position themselves helps in this regard.

As a successful company, Google's revenue is substantial, a fact that it has chosen not to brag about. What it is happy to discuss in the blog, as the NHL has done as well, is its charitable ventures. Good, friendly companies give back, and Google wants this to be known by all of its target audiences. For example, the company has created "the Google Foundation," which, according to the company blog, "supports select organizations whose work addresses the challenge of global poverty in ways that are effective, sustainable, and scalable." When charitable endeavours are discussed in the Google blog, it is common that "guest writers" from outside the corporation write the post. For example, this post, about a project in Ghana, is written by a director from another charitable organization called "TechnoServe:"

We're pleased to report that TechnoServe and the Google Foundation are launching a national business plan competition this week in Ghana, called "Believe Begin Become." It's designed to help Ghanaian entrepreneurs develop skills, obtain seed or expansion capital and establish the networks that help transform their business ideas into successful enterprises.

More and more, entrepreneurs are recognizing the value of gaining skills, tools and a strong business network, and we know from our experience in Latin America what this kind of competition can mean to entrepreneurs. The program helps establish a crucial business network that will carry on long after the competition ends...Get in touch if you'd like to get involved. [Railston-Brown: 03.30.06]

By creating a charitable “business plan competition” like this and blogging about it, Google can strengthen its image as the big, friendly benefactor, helping those smaller and less fortunate make their business dreams come true. Structuring the contest as a business plan competition, Google can also show itself to be a *supporter* of the little company or entrepreneur who has a dream—in effect, a supporter of the type of company Google once was. Google also is a company that prides itself on being informed and innovative, and it is willing to help those who are committed to the same goals and can express that through a business plan.

The credibility of this endeavour is conveyed through the post's author. He is not a Google employee, and therefore has a more objective voice. He is supporting this project on its merits, not because he is affiliated with Google. As the director of TechnoServe, he also achieves instant credibility as a narrator on the basis of his title. His testimony for the project is evidence that Google is doing the good deeds it claims to do. And by writing this kind of post, Google is characterizing its audience as being concerned about charity and being appreciative of companies that give back to those in need.

Along with playing benefactor to small businesses in poverty stricken areas, Google also wishes to position itself as, not only a collector of information, but also a *defender* and *conveyer* of it. As Google's financial capital can be put to good use, so too can its technological capital. This is illustrated through posts that discuss Google's joint book preservation project with the University of Michigan (DeBonis: 02.08.06); its participation in “National Engineer's Week” in the USA (Nishi: 02.23.06); and the company's observance of Earth Day. Describing these charitable endeavours, allows the Google bloggers to provide *evidence* of Google's charitable actions and noble intentions. This trend is exemplified in the post concerning Earth Day:

To help spread the word about keeping our planet green this Earth Day, Google has joined forces with Scholastic – the folks who brought us [the children's book] *Clifford the Big Red Dog* – to distribute lesson plans (and a contest) to middle-schoolers [*sic*] across the U.S.

Using Google Earth, teachers can fly their students around the world to talk to them about issues like climate change and how it has affected places like Glacier National Park, the Chesapeake Bay and Los Angeles...Using Google Earth, teachers can show their students

place marks of the towns where outreach projects are taking place and students can get involved in cleaning up their own environment.

As for the contest, students write their own environmental stories by researching a topic of interest and illustrating it with Google Earth images. Following detailed instructions, they can create their own Keyhole Markup Language (KML) files, which they will send to us for review. The top three environmental story creators will win prizes for themselves, their class and their teachers, including a week at Earth Camp, technology grants and Lenovo laptops for the classrooms...[Frodella: 04.22.06]

This is one of Google's most multi-functioning blog postings. The blogger positions Google as an concerned *public citizen* ("helping to spread the word about keeping the planet green") as well as a *teacher*, providing plans to schools explaining how environmental change should be taught in the classroom by using a Google product. The Google blogger can easily take the position as teacher for a two reasons, the first being the user-friendliness and superiority of the product he is promoting (Google Earth), as well as its association with Scholastic, a well-known provider of teaching material in North America.⁸³ Google also promotes its association with quality by structuring its involvement in Earth Day as a contest, as we also saw with the business plan competition. Google is happy to give away laptops, and trips to the Earth Camp, but these prizes must be earned. The company wants it to be perceived that it has a charitable heart but also that it expects the highest amount of *quality* from itself, as well as its contest winners.

Happily bought out by Google

The above examples show how Google wishes to characterize itself as a friendly benefactor, willing to help companies in developing countries, preserve America's literature, and teach students about the environment. Google also wants to convey that it is a benefactor to small computer technology companies, commonly known as *startups*. Google has bought some of these companies and made them parts of its corporation. One of these bought-up companies' founders, and now a product-marketing manager with Google, writes about his company's new status as a piece of Google:

I was sitting at the breakfast table this morning, drinking a cup of coffee while I looked out at the snow. It was pretty much like any other winter morning, except — it wasn't. When I went to sleep last night, I was employed by a small start-up called @Last Software. This

⁸³ It is interesting to note that by taking this position, Google gives itself the licence to covertly promote its product (Earth), not to mention *bribe* teachers to use it through the promise of a contest full of "fabulous prizes" for everyone!

morning, although I'm going to the same office, sitting at the same desk, and seeing the same people, I'm going to work as a Google employee.

As I sipped my coffee, I thought of a fellow I met on the last day of Macworld in January...He had never seen *SketchUp* before. I started to give him a demo to give him an idea of what the software can do and how it works. Two or three minutes in, he interrupted me. "Can I buy a copy of *SketchUp* now?" I said sure. Then: "How about two?" No problem, I said.

It's often like that. People see *SketchUp* and they love it. Now that we're part of Google, how many of those ah-ha moments will happen every day...? Our little company was founded six years ago with the grand vision of bringing 3D to everyone; now that goal is truly within reach. No second cup of coffee for me — contemplating the possibilities is exciting enough. [Martin: 03.14.06]

This post serves to power Google's image as the good guy. By purchasing the "little company," Google provides it the possibility to reach its "grand vision." And what better an endorsement could Google get than from a personal account from the founder of the company himself, now happily a part of the Google team? Not bitter about being bought out, he is "contemplating the possibilities" and "a-ha moments" working for Google will bring. In a business world filled with corporate takeovers, mergers and buyouts, it is clear that Google wishes to place these activities in as positive a light as is possible. By framing its purchase in this way, the company comes across as the generous benefactor—not the corporate bully. This project manager positions himself as a grateful beneficiary of Google's help. His love of the company comes through in his personal account of Google's generosity. Posts like this also illustrate how Google is attempting to target *other companies* like this, who may need Google's backing to bring their quality products to a global stage. Google knows there are countless companies with products like *SketchUp* that would be valuable additions to Google's collection. The company wants to convey to them that it buys, and is constituted by, the *happiest* and the *best* personnel and products.

Summary, Section III

In this section, I have focused on how the companies' bloggers position themselves and their audiences in order to best convey their desired messages to consumers. Many of the positioning techniques evident here have also been illustrated in the first two sections of this analysis. As I noted earlier, one of the key traits about the format of the blog is that it allows the companies' authors the freedom to establish *clearly* their positions, be it as experts, fans or feminists. By

being given the communication space to articulate in a time-free, written format *who* the communicators are, and *what* they claim to know about a product, the bloggers can not only discuss the product, but also their *relationship* to it. Furthermore, they can convey to readers why their writing is worth reading. This helps to create for the company an identity that can be calculatedly strengthened and developed with each blog posting as often as the company desires, without advertising costs or media filter. The NHL presents its bloggers as a diverse group of genuine fans of hockey and the NHL. Their comments have substance because not only do they take on the role of a fan, but they also position themselves as insiders and experts of the game, as well as charitable ambassadors for it. Yet despite this special access to the players and the League, their main position is that of the common fan. The *Ms.* bloggers position themselves as engaged, informed, concerned, sharp-tongued feminists dedicated to fighting for the causes—such as freedom of choice, civil and human rights, gay and lesbian rights, peace, equality between the sexes, and the objectifying of women in the media—that constitute the feminist agenda. Google obviously positions itself as experts about its products and the Internet services it provides. Yet it also uses the blog to create the perception that it is a charitable, generous public citizen and benefactor, thanks to how its bloggers position themselves as concerned, friendly and, in some cases grateful ambassadors of Google’s good deeds.

The chosen positions of these companies’ bloggers also show us how these companies characterize their audiences. Some targets are obvious: The NHL is looking to reach and expand its base of hockey fans; *Ms.* wants to mobilize other feminists; and Google wants to attract users, advertisers and potential employees. Yet Google, specifically, shows us that it also wants to attract small businesses that it might acquire, as well as audiences concerned about the environment, students and philanthropy. The diversity of these audiences illustrates the communication possibilities available with the company blog. A company has the means to plan and construct messages targeted at a more diverse audience and deliver them via its blog without the strains of time or cost. This observation, as well as others that have resulted from the content analysis will be discussed further in the project’s concluding chapter.

Conclusion

Before summarizing the preceding analysis and concluding the paper, I will discuss some of the limits and concerns about the type of research I have conducted in this project, specifically regarding methodology and focus, and how I have attempted to address these shortcomings. I will then look at the findings of the content analysis and attempt to place them within the larger context of the ongoing communication dynamic between companies and consumers that I discussed in Chapter I of the essay. I also point out some general observations about the analysis and speculate on some of the effects of company blogging for both companies and consumers. I conclude the essay by suggesting some additional topics for research.

Section I: Research limits and concerns

In Chapter II, I noted how a semiotic analysis fit the objective of this project well because it allows for a broad range of meaning to be investigated. Yet like every other analytical approach, it has limits and potential problems. I will address these concerns in the following section.

I have stated repeatedly how the broad nature of a semiotic analysis is beneficial for a qualitative analysis of written communication, as well as it being a method of choice for researchers interested in advertising. However, with the freedom and breadth of analysis possibilities that come with semiotics, so too comes the problem of too much subjectivity, or too much freedom to interpret meaning. Manning (2004: 571-2) explains how “signs differ in their level of abstraction...Signs differ in the degree to which they are internally tight or loose in a system...loose, open systems are embedded in everyday life and, as a result, the ‘shadings’ of the expressions ‘rub off’ or affect meaning of content.” Systems of signification associated with prose and advertising are examples of those “systems imbedded in everyday life,” and therefore are in danger of having too much, sometimes inaccurate, meaning associated with them. In the context of this project, it is possible that a blogger’s comments about a certain product or event may have meaning attributed to them that is not accurate. I have attempted to lessen this concern by providing as much context to the blog analysis and actual text as possible to avoid misappropriating signification. Nevertheless, it goes without saying that the context provided is limited and subject to the interpretations of the researcher.

Culler (1981: 49) comments how “one cannot deny that works do have an impact on readers and do produce effects of signification, but these effects, one can argue, are not a content that could be grasped, catalogued and studied.” It is not possible to “grasp or catalogue” how reading commercial blogs will affect consumers’ buying patterns or perceptions of the companies in this limited, qualitative study. However, part of the aim of this project is to speculate, on the basis of the content analysis, *possible* effects. To make this speculation, I have attempted to inform myself about the three companies and their products to make a relevant analysis of the blog content and receive it similarly to how a targeted consumer might.

As the above concerns illustrate, this project is subject to the limits of methodology and framing approaches, as well as time and resources. Keeping these limits in mind, the goal for this project has merely been to identify a social phenomenon, contextualize it, and investigate for possible meaning and a better understanding of cultural interactions, communication and power structures.

Section II Taking stock: summarizing the blog analysis

Before returning to the content analysis and its summary, I will share a short anecdote. About a month ago, I stopped at a coffee shop for lunch. Over a bagel and coffee, I took in (okay, I eavesdropped) a conversation between two men sitting at the table beside me. For almost thirty minutes, these two men excitedly discussed an automotive company they both like. They talked knowledgably about a new version of the company’s product, its benefits, features, and, most importantly, how both *had* to own it. Through their conversation, they were using their own free time to provide the company with an extremely valuable asset: a *word of mouth* endorsement. Of course, the asset could easily have been a liability if they had spent their lunch break condemning the product instead. Yet, in this case, the conversation was positive and the *need* for the product was increased through both men’s excitement and praise for it.

In Chapter I, we saw Myers’ (1994: 104) assertion of how the concept of the *conversation* is appealing in advertising because it “evokes a kind of ordinariness of everyday life that is paradoxically effective in persuasion.” In attempting to place the preceding content analysis into perspective, the idea of the conversation, like the one I witnessed at the coffee shop, repeatedly came to mind. I mentioned in Chapter III how Google has forgone the use of traditional ad campaigns to promote itself, relying instead on the word of mouth endorsement of satisfied

consumers. It is clear that by blogging, Google, and the other companies that do so, are attempting to *manufacture a conversation* about their products, using the informal, personal communication format of the blog. I argue that the goal of this kind of endeavour is the same goal that has gone unchanged over 200 years—simply to reinforce the value of these companies’ brands in the minds of consumers and to fetishise their products by talking about them in the personal way that the blog allows.

Constructing the conversation

In analysing the text from the *Ms.*, Google, and NHL company blogs, I focused on two issues: how the bloggers create an identity for their companies through their blogs and how the blogs strengthen the companies’ respective brands. As the analysis conveyed, the blog allows for companies to discuss a range of issues pertaining to their products in an editorial free, timeless, written format. The bloggers have the freedom to explain, argue, advocate, praise, condemn, joke and inform readers *personally* about anything that they contend will help place their companies, and their brands, in a superior light with consumers. We have seen various approaches used by each company to achieve this goal. Where Google uses straightforward, product-based selling approaches to promote itself, *Ms.* avoids direct discussion about its product, focusing instead on presenting the societal conditions that make its product desirable. Furthermore, *Ms.*, as a magazine can afford to neglect direct reference to its product because of how the format of its blog mirrors so closely its product of feminist journalism—a trait that marks a significant difference between it and the other two companies. The NHL, on the other hand, concentrates on its product, sings its praises and reminisces about the great memories it has created for hockey fans. Generally, the prose used by all three companies is constructed to strike an intimate tone (Google, to a lesser extent) and engage readers on a personal level.

Each company works to create their desired conversations using techniques common to previous forms of advertising (short, catching phrases, expert opinions, celebrity endorsements) as well as taking advantage of the blog’s timeless format to provide longer, explicit descriptions of their products’ superiority and positive effects. Although each company looks to attract new consumers to their products, they all write within communication codes more accessible to those already familiar with their products. For example, we saw the repeated use of specific hockey and information technology terms, name-dropping and acronyms. I referred to this as *insiders’*

language. This approach adds to the credibility of the bloggers as *experts* about their products, as well as better educating consumers, helping them learn to *speak the companies' language*, thus making it easier for them to join the conversation: The codes are indeed specific, but certainly not undecipherable for those not as familiar with each company or their products.

The blog also allows the writers to convey to readers *who* they are, and *why* their writing should be acknowledged. They have the time and space to explain themselves, their credentials, qualifications and character traits. In Chapter II, I discussed how advertisers attempt to make spokespeople relatable, yet also try to equip them with special character traits, such a charisma, expertise or celebrity to make them extraordinary communicators. The bloggers establish their credibility in various ways; yet they also attempt to make themselves relatable to the companies' target audiences. In the case of the NHL, the bloggers went as far as to characterize themselves as their desired demographic of hockey fans. *Ms.* bloggers are not only experts about feminist issues; they are also fellow soldiers, looking to better serve the cause. Those who work for Google may be innovative, information technology experts, but they are also citizens concerned about the environment, the development of small businesses and the preservation of cultural artefacts. Such traits not only characterize the individual bloggers, but also *combine* to give the companies these personalities—each blogger is a part of the whole company voice, each trait a part of the whole company persona.

What's the objective?

The primary purpose of this analysis has been to gain a better understanding about how companies use the blog to advertise. Not surprisingly, we have seen that the goals of reinforcing brand value and company personification are at the forefront of this communication approach. With these objectives in mind, we need to ask why it is beneficial for companies to blog. It is clear that the blog allows companies to provide more information about their products, to converse with consumers informally, and to develop human qualities for themselves. Yet, as I have stated often throughout this essay, it is essential to remember the reason for all forms of advertising—that being brand strengthening and retention. We have seen through the analysis how blogging helps to create company personalities that are relatable, appreciated and understood. Working to do so is the only way a company blogging approach—dependant on the establishment of a personality for the writer—could ever hope to be successful. It seems,

however, that the creation of personality is not as much of an end goal for the companies, but instead a *means* to achieving the ultimate, ongoing advertising goal of *reinforcing the brand value*. This is also not so surprising. Appealing to readers' interests and identities has been a common advertising approach, as we saw in Chapter I. All advertising techniques throughout history—be they arguments for a product's superiority, the promotion of a kind of lifestyle that would benefit from a given product, or how that product helps one to create an identity—have been used to ingrain brands and brand association into the minds of consumers. By blogging, companies are taking advantage of a new, more personal advertising format, trying to convince consumers that they—the companies—are on your side; they talk like you, they enjoy what you enjoy and care about what you care about. This is done to make the companies and their brands *relatable* through the voices of those *people who compose them*. In a media environment chalked full of commercial messages, companies are using the blog to give consumers personal letters, written especially for them by those they know, or think they know, and by those who are supposed to impress them. McQuail (1997: 117) explains the general necessity of this kind of selling approach when attempting to attract contemporary media audiences:

Under conditions of intensified competition for the audience we can observe renewed efforts on the part of the media for actively controlling the relationship with the audience. It is not enough to set out the wares for the passing customers. They have to be drawn into the bazaar and into personal engagement with media personalities and events. It becomes part of the communicators' aims and skills to accomplish this effect. Main goals are to attract attention and promote feelings of personal involvement on the part of the audience.

Bloggers attempt to draw consumers “into the bazaar,” or into the conversation, to, as McQuail points out, “attract attention” to the company and its product and to “promote feelings of personal involvement” for the consumer. They need to feel they have a voice in the conversation and are being spoken with, instead of spoken (or pitched) to. Clearly the blogs we have seen attempt to create this *effect*.

Special or meaningless effects?

Having attempted to clarify the objectives of company blogs, and how these objectives are met, I will to discuss briefly some further observations from the analysis, as well as the possible effects of this kind of advertising, both for the companies that blog and for consumers.

In Chapter I, I noted how the two-way communication possibilities of the Internet allows consumers the possibility to have a voice in the conversation with companies, as well as more

control over the amounts and types of advertising and other commercial messages to which they are subject. The blog, specifically, allows for readers to comment on postings with messages of their own. It is interesting to note that although all three companies examined in this project solicit feedback and comments from consumers, only one (*Ms.*) actually posts readers' comments. So despite that, technically, a two-way, public conversation could be held via the blog, Google and the NHL would rather maintain control of the information flow and what parts of the conversation are seen publicly. In other words, the information and opinion that appears where the blogs are posted is still fully controlled by the companies. Having said that, the information that appears in the blogs must be *sought out* by the consumers in order for the companies' messages to be consumed. It is up to the reader to visit the companies' websites, find the blogs and *take the time to read* them. Unlike previous forms of advertising, where commercial messages run along side other broadcasted or printed content (news, entertainment, sports), the blog stands alone and the consumer needs to seek it out. This reality is a significant change from other forms of advertising that are thrust upon consumers whether they want it or not, and include what O'Rielly (2006) calls "the catchiness and the human tone that spoken word provides." Certainly the companies we have looked at attempt to write charismatically and with a personal tone, but it is questionable whether this format is as entertaining or enthralling as the kind of advertising that focuses more on speed, *image* and *sound*.⁸⁴

Top-secret information

Where companies sacrifice the catchiness and entertaining values of sound and image when blogging, they gain the freedom to convey as much information about their products as they choose. Personally speaking, after having read the company blogs for this project, I feel as though I know a lot more about what Google products are available as well as the issues the affect feminists and who are the up-and-coming stars in the NHL. I note repeatedly how the blog works to educate readers about the issues of relevance to the companies that are writing and gives the readers the insight to successfully participate in conversations pertaining to the companies and their products. This issue of information brings us back to one of the secondary

⁸⁴This is not to suggest that blogs do not provide image and sound as they can and do so. Yet the basic format is the longer prose. This format differs significantly from what Barthes (1994: 177) calls a 'good' advertising message: the one that "condenses in itself the richest rhetoric and attains with precision the great generic themes of humanity, thus performing that great liberation of images, which defines poetry itself."

questions of interest for this project, which I introduced in Chapter II: From a consumer's perspective, does the commercial blog provide consumers with more information about companies and a new insight into the process of production, thus helping to unveil or, in Marx's terms, "demystify" the ways in which companies have "fetishized" their products' and brands' exchange values in the past?

The short answer to this question is no. This is best exemplified by Google, who quite clearly concedes that there are certain "technical" secrets to its success that it would rather not discuss. Furthermore, it (along with *Ms.* and the NHL) avoids discussing issues such as finances or production conditions: we don't know how much the NHL makes from each game played or to what causes *Ms.* magazine donates its revenues. Certainly, blog readers are given substantial amounts information about these companies' products—information presented to fetishize them and make them more desirable. This is information that can help readers become better, more educated *word of mouth ambassadors*, but certainly not critics or doubters (of the companies or products themselves). In Marx's terms, the products discussed in these companies' blogs are just as *mystic* as they were before—consumers are not given the tools to demystify, despite the promises of openness and authenticity that company bloggers have made. Furthermore, company blog reading is also another example of companies *appropriating* consumers' time and space (mental and media) to further their own agendas.

Will it catch on or fizzle out?

With the primary objective of this project having been to gain a better understanding about what a company blog is and how it functions as a new form of advertising, it is beyond the scope of this project to make any substantial predictions as to whether it will be a successful, ongoing endeavour. Where many companies are buying into this concept, others are concerned about it—largely due to the issues of secrecy and authenticity that I just discussed. Nevertheless, as the phenomenon of company blogging is relatively new, in-depth case studies such as this can, according to Lijphart (1971: 691), "make an important contribution to the establishment of general propositions, and thus to theory building." My priority was to bring the practise to light by exposing how it is performed and identifying the characteristics inherent in it. With regard to speculations of the success of the practice, I will mention that company blogging takes place in an environment (the Internet) that is overflowing with information and messages of all kinds,

especially commercial ones. It is safe to suggest that as more and more blogs are written, the practice may lose potency because with so many messages available to consumers, it would be easy for company (and other) blogs to become lost in the crowd: just a part of the Internet din of messages that is too overwhelming for the general consumer to take in. Furthermore, we have established that there is a calculated, scripted nature to company blogs in that they are written with the same objectives as other forms of advertising. In Chapter I, I noted how bloggers are quick to establish ingenuity and inauthenticity in blog postings. If there occurred a widespread blogger backlash against company blogs, it is possible that the practice would die due to the detriment of negative word of mouth advertising that could occur online.

Old habits are hard to break

According to Maich (2006: 47), in such an information-overloaded environment like the Internet, users and blog readers are more likely to “gravitate towards sites that reflect their established point of view.” This point is interesting in that part of the companies’ blogging objective is to attract new consumers: the NHL wants to expand its fan base, Google is appealing to new users, and *Ms.* needs more feminist soldiers. The question becomes whether or not a blog can help in this regard. Of course part of the blogging objective is to retain the loyal customers (fan, users, and feminists), and we have seen this through the use of communication codes specific to those already familiar with the companies’ cultures and languages. I would suggest that this is a more realistic goal for company blogs mostly because it is up to consumers to search out the company blog and take the time to read it. Therefore, they would be more likely to do so for a company they have become familiar with previously or to learn more about a product they have already purchased.

Suggestions for further studies

Despite potential limits, it is clear companies are choosing to blog and it seems consumers are, to some extent, reading them. It is safe to assume that so long as this advertising dynamic is taking place, it will be a relevant subject of further academic investigation. Where this project focused on what the companies say in their blogs and how it is said to strengthen company brands, other approaches might focus instead on the comments provided by consumers (at those sites that actually post them) or how brand strength is increased, or decreased, through blogs written by individuals. A direct comparison between blog content and texts from other forms of

advertising from the same company would be beneficial to gaining a better understanding of a company's holistic approach to brand strengthening. Again, because the blog format consists of extensive written content, it is a rich source of analysis from a qualitative point of view.

I will close by briefly reiterating my belief that research concerning advertising techniques is always a beneficial endeavour due to the substantial cultural and economical influence of this form of communication. Advertising has become ingrained in Western culture and is a staple of much of the mass media consumed. It is therefore important for researchers and citizens to be aware and critical of it and its effects. This project has hopefully been helpful in gaining a better understanding about how advertising has been taking place on the Internet via the blog and the possible effects this practice may have for companies and consumers.

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