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Doing Gender in Computer-Mediated Communication: The Blogosphere

Previous research has identified and critiqued a male bias in public computer-mediated communication (CMC), along with differences in the ways males and females perform their social identities online. The so-called "blogosphere" is the newest online realm in which public conversations and self-presentation are taking place on a large scale. Is gender also salient in blogs, and if so, is there inequality between male and female bloggers? Some superficial evidence seems to suggest that this is the case; for example, the highest-profile ("A-list") bloggers are male (Herring, Kouper, Scheidt, & Wright, 2004). However, recent empirical evidence on gender and blogging paints a more complex picture.

In this talk, we report on three studies of gender and blogging carried out by members of the (We)blog Research On Genre (BROG) project at Indiana University. The first study surveyed random blogs over a six-month period, and found that the number of female and young bloggers is higher than generally portrayed in the media, and growing. However, men are more likely to author the type of blogs—so-called "filter" blogs—that attract media attention. The other two studies examined whether the discourse of male and female bloggers differs within the same blog type. The second study compared filter and personal journal-type blog entries written by both genders, focusing on features of language style identified in previous research as predictive of the author's gender. No overall gender stylistic differences were found, but filter-type entries exhibited male stylistic features, and personal journal-type entries exhibited female stylistic features. Finally, the third study compared entries in personal journals by adolescents of both genders, in terms of the activities performed. This study identified gender differences: Boys more often narrated their personal experiences in a linear fashion and displayed their knowledge or skill, whereas girls more often reflected on their experiences and expressed cultural or personal values.

These studies of ordinary blogs present a different picture from mainstream portrayals of blogging. Women and adolescents are among the most active bloggers, although their blogs rarely (if ever) make it to the "A-list." Moreover, male and female blogs tend to differ, although not so much in traditional stylistic terms. Rather, males and females often blog about different topics, and express different concerns. From this, apparent gender differences in discourse style follow, according to the genre conventions of the blogging activities in which the authors engage. These findings confirm that discourse-level functional analyses can be more revealing than micro-level linguistic analyses in



gender and communication research, and suggest that more attention should be paid to topic, activity, and genre in studies of gender in CMC.