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Whose Blog Is It Anyway? Seeking the Author in the Formal Features of Travel Blogs

Abstract

Amateur travel blogs hosted on advertising-sponsored websites are generally viewed as credible sources of information about tourist behaviour and destination image, particularly as the content is user-generated. Little is said, however, about the webhost-created content. It is generally assumed that the content and features of a blog reveal a good deal about its author. In the case of travel blogs, however, this can be problematic as both webhosts and authors create content. This paper examines formal and paratextual features of amateur travel blogs to analyse the extent of the contribution made by the webhost and its influence on authorial voice. In particular, it considers titles, links, and advertising in travel blogs hosted on *Travelpod*, *Travelblog*, and *Bootsnall*. It finds that the webhost plays a significant part in positioning the text as a narrative about a particular destination. Furthermore, not all the features of these blogs transfer a sense of who has authored them.

In Search of the Author

Studies of amateur travel blogs, largely in the area of tourism research, often examine bloggers' entries to gain insight into tourist behaviour and destination image marketing (Akehurst 2009; Carson 2008; Schmallegger & Carson 2008; Wenger 2008). While these studies recognize the presence of different authors and webhosts, they rarely elaborate on the influence of the hosting website or content from sponsors (Pühringer and Taylor 2008; Schmallegger & Carson 2008; Wenger 2008). For example, Wenger's (2008) analysis of travel blogs is based on the assumption that content is credible because it is user-generated, but stops short of examining features and content created by the webhost, and how these may or may not contribute to a

sense of the author and the destination being described. Authorship is a basis for classifying travel blogs. Blogs on travel-specific hosting sites sponsored by third-party advertising are differentiated from those created and managed by independent travel bloggers, travel companies or tourism organizations (Schmallegger & Carson 2008). However, while researchers note the presence of different authors and webhosts, they rarely elaborate on the influence of the hosting website or content from sponsors (Pühringer & Taylor 2008; Schmallegger & Carson 2008; Wenger 2008). It is the purpose of this paper, therefore, to examine how webhosts contribute to a sense that the text is a travel blog and destination narrative. This study also considers the extent to which features and content provided by the webhost give a sense of the author as travel blogger.

The issue of authorship in hypertext narratives such as blogs has been widely discussed with arguments both for and against the centrality of the author. These discussions often focus on how the formal features of the text influence authorial control and voice. For some, hypertext narratives such as blogs signal the 'death of the author', since features such as the comments box allow readers to engage with the author, thus undermining authorial control over the text (Landow 2006). For others, blogs celebrate authorship. Chesher (2005), for example, proposes that the features of a blog facilitate author identification. It is usually the blogger who selects topics, writes entries, and places hyperlinks, thus creating an online text where authorial voice is easily identifiable. The content of the posts, the quality of which is linked to the blog's reputation, is decided by the author (Carter 2005). Similarly, it is the author who selects the links in a blog, digital 'footnotes' that have some bearing on the online persona created by the blogger (Serfaty 2004). Finally, the uniform voice and visual elements of the entries emphasise a blog's "personal ownership and authorship" (Warschauer & Grimes 2008, 8). Clearly, any discussion of authorship in blogs must examine the role of formal elements in defining or decentralizing authorial voice.

Researchers often refer to generic definitions of blogs when describing travel blogs. These usually emphasise technical features, describing a blog as a webpage consisting

of regularly updated, reverse-chronological posts containing topical entries, personal anecdotes or commentary, accompanied by hyperlinks and open to responses from readers (Bruns & Jacobs 2006, 2; Jones 2003, 33). In the case of travel blogs, the principal theme discussed in the entries is travel, usually a personal journey. Such definitions indicate that the principal identifying features of blogs are entries, hyperlinks, and comments. However, they give little clarification of the role of the webhost in creating content for these features.

Certain features of web pages such as banners, images, and links, are paratextual on-site elements that position the text in terms of genre and reader expectations (Stewart 2010). Authors of personal web pages have used links to describe themselves (Walker 2000). In the case of personal blogs, it is usually the blogger who selects and provides paratextual elements such as links to other blogs in the form of a list known as a blogroll (Lomborg 2009). Such linking leads to a "cementing of certain chosen connections" and situates the blog in a network of similar online texts (Lovink 2008; Syverson 2007, 433). Thus some formal features of personal blogs may act as paratexts that situate the text and provide a sense of the author's identity and authorial voice. This also implies that the role of paratextual on-site elements must be considered in discussions of authorial or textual identity in blogs.

Viviane Serfaty (2004, 61), who also supports the idea of the centrality of the author in blogs, observes that while the features of a blog may make it a polyphonic text where conflicting discourses interact, the author still remains in control. This view is to some extent true of amateur blogs on travel-blog hosting sites such as *Travelblog* or *Travelpod*. These are personal blogs in that bloggers write posts describing personal travel experiences. The webhosts use these posts as a foundation for producing commercial content in the form of advertisements and links to other travel-related information, and these accompany each post. Bloggers, in their turn, rely on webhosts to provide space for their personal travel narratives. When the personal discourse provided by bloggers mingles with commercial content from both the webhost and third-party advertisers, it can be difficult to determine the extent of these bloggers' authorial control over various elements of their blogs. It is also evident that

features such as advertisements enable the interaction of different discourses in the text as a whole, thus making it heteroglossic. However, this mixing of discourses can lead to a blurring of personal and commercial interests (Howard 2008). This means that some features of amateur travel blogs found on such hosting sites may in fact complicate rather than contribute to both authorial identity and the positioning of the blog as either a commercial text promoting a destination or as a personal travel narrative.

Recent studies of amateur travel blogs often base their findings on samples drawn from travel-specific blog hosting sites such as *Travelpod* or *Travelblog* (Carson 2008; Pühringer and Taylor 2008; Wenger 2008). These analyses assume that a travel blogger's identity as a consumer of tourism lends credibility to the content, but stop short of examining how blog features contribute to the author's identity, or how these webhosts influence the image of the author. For the most part, these examine the personal content generated by amateur bloggers, but often overlook commercially-produced paratextual elements that frame these posts. This paper examines a number of amateur travel blogs hosted on *Travelpod*, *Travelblog* and *Bootsnall*. It should be recognised here that while amateur travel blogs may also be hosted, free of advertising, on blog hosting sites such as *Blogger* or *Wordpress*, this study focuses on those found on travel-specific hosting sites driven by advertising sponsorship. It considers webhost-provided paratextual elements – particularly titles, links, and third-party advertising – in order to determine the contribution of these formal features to authorial identity. In doing so, it also analyses the various narrative techniques incorporated in the blog and explores the implications of the underlying discursive tensions for author identification and the positioning of the text.

A Twist in the Title

The idea of the paratext was originally used by Gérard Genette (1997) with respect to printed books. According to Genette, the paratext includes both external presentation elements (peritext), such as the title and the name of the author that are located around the text, as well as distanced elements, other related texts (epitext). This concept has

been adapted, in film and television studies in order to analyse trailers, spin-offs and fan-created texts. Some paratexts are seen to guide viewers' selection, expectation, and interpretation of texts, while others may change their initial understanding of the text over time (Gray 2010). In other words, they draw upon and elaborate on existing themes. Evidently, paratexts play a significant role in the evaluation of the nature of a text.

The concept of paratext has also been useful in the study of online texts. Gavin Stewart's (2010) analysis of the paratextual elements of the *Inanimate Alice* website indicates that some formal elements of a webpage are in fact paratextual on-site elements that contribute to a reader's understanding of the content and positioning of the text. Applying Genette's framework to web pages, Stewart lists banners, images, links, and the general layout of the webpage as paratextual elements. These features are present in most web pages, including blogs. In amateur travel blogs on travel-specific hosting sites, paratextual elements produced by the web host include banners, title bar text, and URLs. This suggests that the webhost makes a significant contribution to the positioning of the text and thus influences a visitor's evaluation of the narrative. Also paratextual are the bloggers' user names and titles for the blog and its entries.

The most visible paratextual element provided by the webhost is the template of the blog itself – the general layout of elements and their appearance. These are part of the peritext that frames the blog entries. If we consider, as Genette (1997) does, the title and the author's name as part of the paratext, then these too appear in the form of a title bar, URL, or user name over every blog post. It is reasonable to assume that a text owes its identity and positioning to its title and that the author's name as it appears in the text must lend itself to author identification. The same may be said of titles and URLs of blogs. However, in travel blog hosting sites, the content provided by the webhost jostles for space with titles created by the amateur bloggers in a manner that can influence the positioning of the text. Also, the corporate identity of the webhost usually looms large in the form of logos and banners, at times superseding the identity of the blogger and thus complicating both authorial

identification and authorial control. Therefore, discussions of textual or authorial identity must begin with an examination of the titles and banners in these blogs, before moving on to other elements such as links and entries.

Darryl and Sarah – Wallaby Wanderers is a featured travel blog on *Travelblog* (2010c). With over 300 entries and more than 4000 photographs, the contribution of the bloggers is substantial. However the paratextual banners and title bars that appear in the template provided by the webhost can detract from the identity of text as a personal narrative written by the blogger. All pages hosted on *Travelblog* carry the website's signature dark blue banner bearing its name in orange and white lettering alongside a globe motif. The blogger's title for the post appears immediately under this logo, as it does on the title bar, but the URL for the page itself carries the name of the place being described in the post. For example, "A Peak too Far" (seen in Fig.1) is located by typing the following URL: (http://www.travelblog.org/Oceania/Australia/Tasmania/Cradle-Mountain/blog-479978.html) (2010a). *Travelblog* differs in this respect from other blog hosts like *Blogger* and *Wordpress* that allow bloggers to use their blog title as part of the URL. Evidently, the webhost uses the URL to position the post as a text on Tasmania, rather than a personal travel narrative. Also, though the title bar bears the mark of the blogger's creativity, it is the corporate identity of *Travelblog* that looms large in the banner and logo over the blogger's name.

Fig. 1. Title bars and banners in *Travelblog* web pages.

A similar style is present in *Travelpod* blog titles and banners but not URLs. Technotrekker's blog *Global Roaming* is listed as the website's best travel journal. Both the blog and its author, Ross Pringle, have been featured in the media (*Put it in the Family Blog* 2006). Here, the blogger's title for each post appears in the title bar but is modified by the webhost to include a qualifying phrase that locates each post in terms of the destination it talks about. So a post ambiguously titled "Life on the Fringe" (seen in Fig. 2) reads "Life on the Fringe – Edinburgh, United Kingdom Travel Blog" in the title bar. Directly over the post is an interactive map that indicates the destination as well as the route taken to reach it. Thus the paratext created by the webhost makes the title more specific and locates it as a travel text on Edinburgh (Pringle 2007). Similarly, the interactive timeline accompanying the map numbers each entry and positions it in relation to other posts on the journey. This indicates where and when a particular destination was reached not just on the journey, but in travel narrative of the blog as a whole. Also, as with *Travelblog*, the corporate logo enjoys a prominent position at the top left-hand corner of the page, while the blogger's name appears almost as an afterthought under the post's title. There is a thumbnail picture and a link to an "author" profile. Unlike *Travelblog*, however, the URL includes the user name "Technotrekker", lending a clue to the blogger's identity. Here, paratextual elements created by the webhost position the text as a travel

narrative rather than merely a personal one and also play a role in defining the blogger's identity.
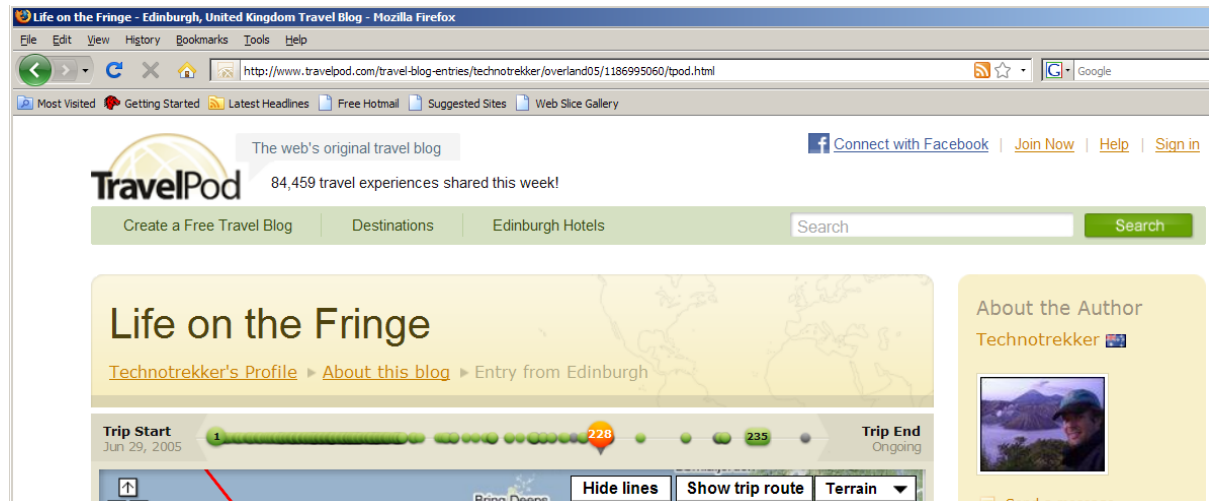

Fig. 2. Title bars and banners in *Travelpod* webpages

In contrast, bloggers' identities are more clearly defined by the paratextual elements of *Bootsnall* blogs. The top blog on this website, in terms of posts, is *For Mom*, *Love Steve*, and the title chosen by the blogger appears without modification or qualification in the title bar. In the case of this particular blog, the URL is www.steveislost.com, indicating that the webpage is now an independent website, although it continues to use the *Bootsnall* template and is accessible through the webhost's home page (Nakano 2010). The number two blog, *The Laughing Nomads* still uses the *Bootsnall* domain name, but here again the blog's title appears unaltered in title bar, and the URL (http://blogs.bootsnall.com/nomads/) also reflects the blogger's choice of title (Goetz 2010). In comparison with *Travelpod* and *Travelblog* the logo for this webhost occupies only a small corner in the top right of the web page (Fig. 3). The banner for the webpage is provided by the webhost, but users may choose between several visual elements – a pair of boots, in the case with *For Mom, Love Steve* (2010). Such banners and visual elements – boots for hiking and monuments worth visiting – place greater emphasis on the concept of travel than on the corporate identity of the webhost. Rather than highlighting the destination being

described in the post, paratextual elements in these blogs call attention to the blogger's traveller identity and the general idea of travel.
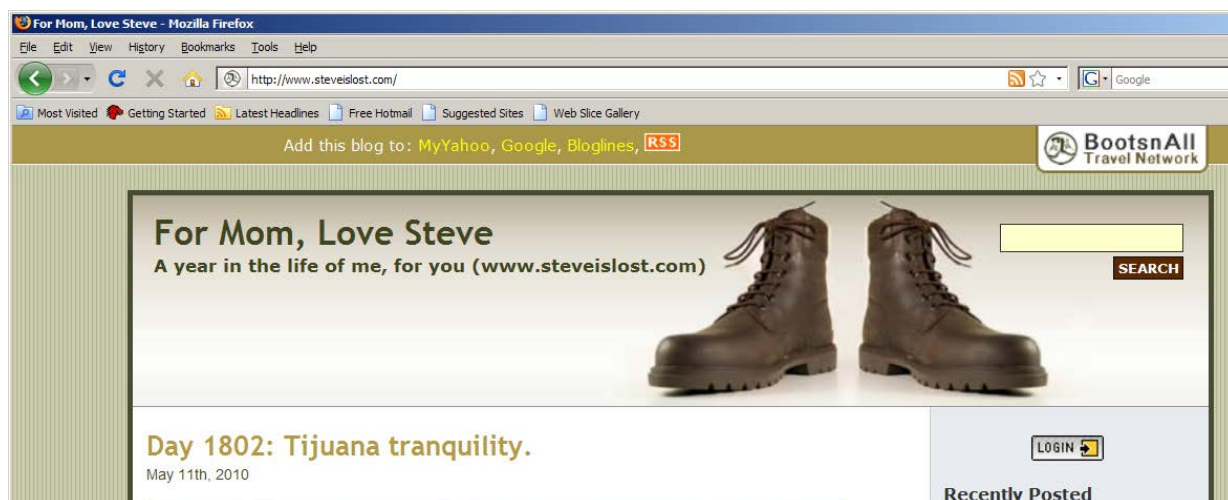

Fig. 3. Titles and banners in *BootsnAll* blogs

Thus far, such blogs indicate that discussions of the role of blog features in author identification must acknowledge that a blog as a whole may have multiple authors in the form of a webhost and a blogger, or recognize that some blog features constitute a text created by a blogger-author while others are really paratextual elements that appear courtesy of the webhost-publisher. Such blogs appear to support Genette's (1997, 74) theory that both author and publisher share the responsibility for authorship of titles. Although webhosts often provide a blog template with default features that bloggers can customize or personalize (Schmidt 2007), these authors appear to have little control over the creation of title bar text or URLs, which are probably automatically generated by the webhost. Arguments that a blog's features emphasise the author's ownership and identity therefore need to be aware that some formal elements may not identify the blogger. Such blogs also reveal how corporate discourse as represented by host-generated content can take precedence over personal discourse as represented by user-generated content. To a certain extent, the identity of the author is either superseded by the corporate identity of the webhost or sidelined by the need to give prominence to the destination of the journey described. Thus,

discussions of authorial identity or control in such amateur blogs found on hosting sites must recognize that the blogger's voice is not present in the entire text.

The Language of Links

Going by generic definitions, links are indispensible to blogs, and in fact contribute to their textual identity. Conversations about links in blogs usually pertain to the links list known as a blogroll, which positions the blog in a network of other blogs that share the same culture (Lovink 2008; Serfaty 2004). This blogroll often appears alongside the text entry, literally framing and positioning it in terms of layout and genre and taking on the function of a paratextual element. In personal blogs such as those found on *Blogger* or *Wordpress,* where the blogger selects the links, it is easy to identify his or her online persona through the blogroll. Yet, with amateur travel blogs where the webhost generates the links instead of the blogger, such identification becomes problematic. In addition to this, any comprehensive study of the links in such blogs must also take into account links to advertisements and other, often annotated, external and internal links also generated by the webhost. Furthermore, any analysis of these links must recognise that their function in blogs on travel-specific hosting sites differs greatly from that of links in a hypertext fictional narrative such as *Inanimate Alice*. A technical feature that works as paratext on one webpage may not play the same role on another.

Although posts on amateur travel blogs are usually accompanied by links to other blogs, these are not always blogrolls in the traditional sense of a static list of links that appears alongside all posts. In *Wallaby Wanderers*, for example, a boxed-in menu of links appears over each post. The first of these is always to blog posts on the same destination, while others are to pages offering information on various travel services such as flights or accommodation. So a post on Orange in Australia links to a page with blog posts on Orange (Howell & Howell 2010d). Similarly, a post on Canberra in the same blog links to "Canberra Travel Blogs" (Howell & Howell 2010b). This "blogroll" then, changes for each entry, as do the accompanying links. *Travelpod* entries are similar in this respect, with the only difference being that such links appear

below the entry. Links to similar blog posts appear under an imperative heading that directs visitors to "Read about Experiences". Such link lists indicate that these hosting sites fragment the blog, treating each entry as a separate text, rather than preserving the integrity of the narrative as a whole. Both webhosts do allow bloggers to nominate "favourites" or "recommend" other blogs by providing links to these from their profile page, but only to those that are hosted on the same website. Only *Bootsnall* has something resembling a blogroll in a list alongside the posts titled "My Links" that includes links to both blogs and other online texts selected by the blogger.

Travelblog, *Travelpod*, and *Bootsnall* also provide links to other web pages and advertisements. Directly below the Travelblog banner in *Wallaby Wanderers* is a menu with links to information on every continent. Each of these leads to other *Travelblog* web pages containing maps, factual descriptions of the region, and more links to other similar resources. Under this is another boxed menu of links relevant to the entry. So "A Peak too Far" is linked to similar blogs, photos, and forums as well as information on Cradle Mountain (the destination described) that includes a brief history, accommodation, and flights. In a similar fashion, *Travelpod* provides a boxed menu of links to hotel reviews, forums, photographs, and videos on Edinburgh, for Technotrekker's "Life on the Fringe". Both *Travelblog* and *Travelpod* entries link to pages within the same website. *Bootsnall* entries also link to similar web pages on the same website. However, there are usually a few external links as well.

While *Travelpod* and *Travelblog* "blogrolls" do situate the post in a network of other similar entries, the focus on destination does not do much for identifying the author's persona. Also, this network is largely contained within the same website. Networking is part of the "enclave culture" of blogs (Lovink 2008, 252). Yet these webhosts' restriction of such networking and participation in blog culture effectively controls and limits textual identity. Amateur blogs on *Travelblog* and *Travelpod* can behave as personal blogs and take their place in the blogosphere only as far as their webhosts permit. In addition to this the blogroll and links break rather than bind the blog narrative, making use of the episodic structure to turn it into a number of texts on various places, and indeed tries to position each entry as a stand-alone text on a

particular destination. Instead of preserving and promoting the interpretation of these blogs as personal narratives, they manipulate the text to serve the webhosts' commercial ends by firmly situating each post among online texts dedicated to tourism marketing. Even *Bootsnall* with its "My Links" gives but a token nod to the blogger's identity and the text's identity as a personal narrative. Thus, the host-provided links in such blogs fail as paratexts in that they do not, to quote Syverson (2007, 433), "cement connections" that build upon the text. Instead they position these amateur blogs among other commercial texts rather than personal ones. As for the question of authorial control, in the case of links in such travel blogs, the webhost wields the baton.

Making Sense of Ads

Blogs in *Travelblog*, *Travelpod*, and *Bootsnall* often contain banner advertisements that appear over, below, or alongside the entries. These advertisements are generated by third parties. *Travelblog* and *Bootsnall* use Google AdSense, a software program that analyses the words in the post and places small advertisements relevant to the destination being described therein (Auletta 2009). For example, "Needle in a Haystack", the *Wallaby Wanderers* post on Orange, is accompanied by advertisements placed beside the title and alongside the entry from tour operators offering services in Australia and New Zealand such as "Cradle Mountain Walks" or "Great Divide Tours" (Howell & Howell 2010d). Similarly, advertisements for travel and tourism services in Guatemala appear in a little box alongside posts on the same destination in *For Mom, Love Steve*. There are no sponsored advertisements in *Global Roaming*, but this indicates that Technotrekker is probably a paying member of *Travelpod*, and that this permits him to maintain an ad-free blog. Other *Travelpod* blogs, such as *Woodsy79's* (2010) *Great Adventure* do have a banner that usually has about four "Sponsored Links" promoting travel services pertaining to the destination described in the post which appears below.

Such advertising is dependent on the text generated by the blogger, suggesting that the blogger has some degree of authorial control over content generated by the webhost, however indirect or involuntary this control may be. However, they serve a commercial purpose that has nothing to do with promoting or interpreting the blog

narrative, and a lot to do with selling travel-related services for the destination mentioned in the post alongside which they appear. These advertisements reveal little about the author. It should be noted here that these webhosts do not have complete control over such third-party advertising. Programs such as AdSense also take a reader's interests and geographical location into account while generating advertisements. Often, it is the reader's location rather than the author's destination that determines advertising content. Thus an Australian visitor to a *Travelblog* post is likely to see advertising for services in that country. Advertising may, in some cases, supplement a blogger's representation of the destination described in the entry. Yet, in the case of posts on obscure destinations, banner advertisements may not supplement the text at all, and may only be relevant to the country or region of the location described. In fact, content from sponsors forms a parasitic relationship with the blog posts, feeding off them in order to exist. It is also likely that it does not support the central travel narrative. Steve Nakano's posts on South America, for example, are accompanied by advertisements for services in Australia (Fig. 4). Yet, while advertisements contribute to the overall identity of the blogger, the personal discourse of the blog, and the description of the destination, their very presence on the page also pays for the existence of the post itself.

And now, off to Mexico we go… Damn, Mexico is big. And expensive. But they have tacos so everythings going to be alright.

Posted in Guatemala | 1 Comment »

Perth Deals
Amazing Daily Deals, 50-90% Off
Restaurants, Spas, Events and More!

Publish Your Poetry Today
Publish & sell your book world-wide in
stores & online. Free Guide!

Ads by Google

Xela, Guatemala: Happy Easter, Sunday, Semana Santa
Sunday, April 4th, 2010

Fig. 4: The user's location in Australia determines the advertising content for a post on Guatemala in *For Mom, Love Steve*

The content provided by these travel-blog hosting sites and their sponsors generally uses narrative techniques such as an authoritarian and impersonal tone, a lack of sender identification, euphoric description, and repetition. In *Global Roaming*, short but imperative headings categorize the links under each post, directing visitors to the blog to "Read about Experiences", "Get Travel Advice" and "Check out Attractions". Also authoritarian are links to the right of each post that encourage readers to "Print this blog", "Share", or "Turn blog into book". This narrative style is more pronounced in the text of advertisements. An advertisement for Kokoda Spirit in *Wallaby Wanderers* is both imperative and euphoric: "Walk in the footsteps of heroes. One of the world's great adventures" (Howell & Howell 2010). Advertisements in the *Bootsnall* blog entry on Guatemala echo this tone: "Great hotels in Guatemala Official site. Book online today" (Nakano 2010). The language of such advertisements is largely impersonal, although the sender may be identified in the advertiser's website URL that appears in fine print. This narrative style, commonly used in guidebooks, brochures, or advertisements for the promotion of tourism, is characteristic of tourist discourse (Dann 1996).

"Incorporated genres" are central to the inclusion and organization of heteroglossia (Bakhtin 1981, 320). They draw together various narrative forms and techniques and styles of language drawn from different social spheres. By incorporating tourist discourse, features such as the headings and advertisements examined draw upon the language of the tourism marketing industry and contribute to the heteroglossia of the blog. However, this language is marked by an impersonal tone that contrasts rather than supplements the personal discourse of posts. In effect, the tourist discourse in links and advertisements sets up a discursive tension between the post and other blog features in a manner that may complicate the identity of the text and identification of the blogger's authorial voice. The association of tourist discourse with forms such as guidebooks and brochures may position the blog as an informational travel text, but it is at odds with the blog itself which is often associated with more personal narrative forms such as the diary, in which the author's voice is clearly identifiable.

When considering banner advertising, it should be noted that the discursive tensions set up by the presence of such advertising and webhost-generated content may not be recognised by a visitor to the blog. Discussions of advertisements become immaterial when a reader uses filters or ad-blockers that prevent their appearance in the browser. Furthermore, readers may ignore a significant proportion of the banner advertisements on a page, even if they do not physically remove these (Drèze & Hussherr 2003). Such avoidance of advertising is not exclusive to online texts. Studies of television advertising indicate that viewers either deliberately ignore commercials or fail to absorb the message therein after repeated viewing (Calder & Sternthal 1980; Elpers, Wedel; Pieters 2003). However, Drèze and Hussherr (2003) suggest that at least some readers recall the advertisements they do look at online. Therefore, it is possible that in such cases the banner advertisements do complicate textual identity and increase the discursive tensions in the text.

While advertisements contribute to heteroglossia, they raise several questions about authorial control. A blog visitor's ability to either physically block advertisements or read the entry while ignoring the accompanying advertisements has several implications. Firstly, there may not always be a discursive tension between blogger and webhost-provided content, particularly if the webhost's contribution is a banner advertisement. Secondly, although such travel-specific blog hosting sites often have the power to place advertisements, a reader's ability to block these suggests that ultimately the responsibility for the appearance of some blog elements is in fact shared between blogger, webhost, and reader. Finally, such advertising introduces a number of third parties but does not necessarily supplement the identity of the blogger.

Whose Blog Is It Anyway?

Clearly, webhosts play a significant part in these blogs. In varying degrees, they manipulate blog features, commercialize personal discourse, change the positioning of the text, and emphasise their corporate identity over the blogger's. Webhosts, not bloggers, foreground the reference to a destination. Webhosts such as *Travelpod* and

Travelblog restrict linking, generally regarded as the bloggers' preserve, in a manner that makes it difficult to get a sense of the author through the links. Bloggers using these services cannot express authorial identity by linking to other external blogs or other websites. Third-party content contributes to the heteroglossia in these blogs but much of this content can hardly be said to play a significant role in identifying the authors. Therefore, those who analyse travel blogs to study destination image must recognize contribution of the webhost to the positioning of the blog as a travel narrative. Others who view blogs as a source of information about consumer behaviour must be aware that features that indicate authorial voice in other personal blogs may not serve the same purpose in the travel blog. It is necessary to note, as Genette (1997) did, that both publisher and author are responsible for paratextual elements such as titles, and as such not all formal features in these travel blogs contribute to a sense of who the author is.

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