

# Applications of blogs in corporate communication

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## APPLICATIONS OF BLOGS IN CORPORATE COMMUNICATION

Recently, blogs have gained a lot of attention as an instrument within corporate communication. There are numerous discussions and research projects in various academic disciplines about blogs creating a diffuse body of knowledge with different concepts, notions, and ideas. This paper summarises typologies from these different disciplines and tries to integrate them into a multidimensional model in which all relevant aspects and applications of blogs are considered. The results are summarised in the St. Galler blog cube.

*Keywords:* weblog, typology, classification, St. Galler blog cube.

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## 1. Research Question

Blogs are online publications that are characterised by short entries which are usually written in an expressive and authentic style and are arranged in reverse chronological order. One of the most interesting features of blogs is the built-in function that enables comments on each of these entries (Kolbitsch & Maurer 2006; Rosenbloom 2004; Shi, Tseng & Adamic 2007). This enables an open discussion for every entry that is made and therefore fosters dialog between the blog author and its readers (Zerfass & Boelter 2005: 20). Other definitions either describe blogs as a “Web page where a Web logger ‘logs’ all the other Web pages she finds interesting” (Blood 2004: 53) or they describe the act of blogging as “to blog is to continually post one’s own ideas, opinions, Internet links (including those for other blogs), and so on about things on one’s own website, which is called a web log” (Smudde 2005: 34). All of these definitions emphasize the fact that blogs are online publications that are regularly updated and are based on the personal opinions of the author.

As blogs are gaining a lot of attention throughout media lately and a growing number of blogs (Syfri 2007) are becoming an important part of the public mediasphere, they have increasing impact within the context of corporate communication. Within this paper, the term corporate communication is used to describe a mode of interaction between a corporation and its environment. It is considered to be an important part of the value creation process of a company and should be recognized as a management challenge (Schmid & Lyczek 2006). To address this challenge, corporate communication utilises different channels to communicate with internal and external stakeholders whose behaviour is considered to have an influence on the company’s success (Kunczik 1996: 194). Blogs can be considered to be one of these channels, and as they are relatively new, there is a growing interest about them in diverse academic disciplines as well as in industry.

Blogs in the context of corporate communications are called corporate blogs. Research about possible applications and effects of corporate blogs within corporate communication takes place in different academic disciplines. As a result, a multitude of terms trying to explain the blog phenomenon have been created. Systematic approaches to order the various terms are scarce (Lee, Hwang & Lee 2006: 319). The following

list documents the diversity of terms in the context of blogs and corporate communication: knowledge blogs, flogs, vlogs, flash blogs, CEO blogs, employee blogs, product blogs, podcasts, topic blogs, crisis blogs, moblogs, PR blogs, service blogs, blams, voter blogs, CR blogs, executive blogs, vodcasts, project blogs, collaboration blogs, and splogs. Additionally, there are also various possible applications of blogs in the context of corporate communication, but no fundamental research or evaluation about their value for corporate communication has been conducted. Our central research question is: how can existing types of blogs be classified in the context of corporate communication?

The main purpose of this work is to order the different approaches of classification found in the literature by introducing a multidimensional model of classification for corporate blogs. The intention of this model is to provide a framework that offers directions for specific applications of corporate blogs within the different fields of corporate communication. Therefore, this paper is organized as follows. In section 2, we give a general overview of the classifications used to describe the different types of blogs. In section 3, we review different classification approaches that have been specifically developed for corporate blogs. In section 4, we present the St. Galler blog cube, which integrates the aforementioned classification approaches. In section 5, we give a short summary.

## 2. General Typologies of Blogs

Typologies of blogs found in the current literature can be divided using two main classification paradigms. The first is a general classification independent of corporate communication. The second is a specific classification, which takes particular characteristics of corporate communication into account. In this section we will give an overview of the more general classifications.

### *2.1. Early Typologies of Blogs*

Lankshear & Knobel (2003) were the first authors who tried to create a taxonomy of blogs. In their approach, they identify different blog types based on the content of the blog. On the first level, four categories of blogs

are identified: 1) commented links, 2) journals, 3) hybrid (commented links and journals), and 4) meta-blogs.

The first category – commented links – describes blogs which mainly link to and comment on other websites found useful or interesting by the blog author. Therefore, they act as a filter, similar to the first website from Tim Berners-Lee at CERN (Schmidt 2006: 13). The next category – journals – refers to regularly updated online diaries with a strong personal reference. The second level within this category can be differentiated into personal or commercial blogs. Personal blogs are comprised of content about personal and private life issues whereas commercial blogs focus on business topics. In both cases, the personal opinions of the blog author dominate the content and writing style of the entries. Hybrid blogs combine characteristics of both previously discussed categories. The fourth category – meta-blogs – describes blogs about blogs and completes the classification list (Lankshear & Knobel 2003).

The main problem with this approach is that the categories are not very selective. This becomes especially evident when comparing the hybrid category to the commented links and the journals categories. An exact differentiation between those categories seems rather difficult, because most blogs are neither just commented links nor just journals, but show some characteristics of both. It is also questionable why meta-blogs are placed on the first level of classification. This category could be used as a sub category of the other three and, therefore, is not very selective. Apart from these inherent problems, this classification does not provide useful categories for decisions related to the application of blogs within the context of corporate communication.

Another approach for classifying blogs was suggested by Nardi et al. (2004). In their approach, a categorization is created by “an ethnographic investigation of blogging in a sample of ordinary bloggers” (Nardi et al. 2004). The main focus of this investigation was the motivation of bloggers to maintain a blog. This study identified five different motivations, which are a) blogs to “document my life,” b) blogs as commentary, c) blogs as catharsis, d) blog as muses, and e) blogs as a community forum. This investigation provides interesting insights into personal blogging. Because of the rather specific personal focus within this study, it is of limited use in the context of corporate communication.

## 2.2. Typology Based on Format

Another approach proposed by the MIT Advertising Lab (Adverlab 2004) is based on formats to differentiate blogs. The main criteria to distinguish between categories within this approach are the different formats of blogs and the different technologies which are used to update the blogs. Table 1 shows the different categories derived from these criteria.

*Table 1: Formats of Blogs*

<i>Type</i>	<i>Format</i>
Weblog	Web based journal
Photoblog	Blog entries mainly consist of photos.
Moblog	Blog entries are created from the mobile phone (mostly entries include photos taken with the built-in camera of the mobile phone).
Audioblog	Blog entries consist primarily of audio files (originally uploaded from the mobile phone).
Videoblog	Streaming videos embedded in the blog.

Within this classification, a blog is interpreted as a very generic term for a personal, regularly updated journal and is used as the basis for all other types described within this classification.

Photoblogs mark one of the first adoptions of blogs for content other than text and therefore represent an early type of a format specific blog. Blog entries in this type of blog consist of photos instead of text entries. The entries are also open to comments. The improvement of mobile phones and in particular the development of built-in cameras and mobile internet access gave rise to another format specific blog – the so-called moblogs. Moblog entries consist mostly of photos taken with a mobile phone and sent via a wireless access connection to the blogging system. However, moblogs may also consist only of normal text entries that are updated from the mobile phone. Moblogs also triggered new innovative developments that have resulted in a variety of different services such as Twitter, which is the most recent example. In contrast to moblogs, which are updated from the mobile phone, Twitter sends messages or small blog entries to the mobile phones of a defined recipient list. At the

moment, only a few corporate moblogs exist (Green 2007: 40), but applications such as a virtual scavenger hunt or ad-hoc announcements show the wide range of possible applications in particular when mobile phone market penetration is taken into account. Other interesting application areas include customer, employee, or service communication because of the immediate update possibilities and because mobile communication is not bound to location (Döring 2006: 202).

Audio and video blogs embed audio and video files into the blog entries. The early definition of audio blogs was blogs that are updated by telephone, but this is no longer very accurate. Through the growing popularity of pod- and vodcasts (other terms for audio and video blogs), there has been a constant improvement in audio and video blogs, which led to the development of a different definition and usage than the one described above. These type of blogs are used more often as a subscription-based channel for public relations since 87% of internet users are familiar with podcasts (Guiniven 2005: 6). Vodcasts are interesting alternatives to TV advertising as they combine classic TV advertising with the possibility for viral marketing on the World Wide Web. An example for such a blog type is an advertising campaign from Volkswagen, a German automobile manufacturer, launched in 2007. It uses short video clips which can easily be shared and distributed across the World Wide Web. The story is trivial showing an old man (Horst Schlämmer) preparing for the driver licence examination. Thanks to the casting of the known German comedian Hape Kerkeling, the clips are amusing and entertaining. All clips were used by Volkswagen for dedicated product placement for their VW Golf model (Hebben 2007: 14; see also: <http://www.schlaemmerblog.tv>).

This taxonomy provides helpful technical details on different blogging formats, but lacks consideration of other factors such as goals, processes, and recipients.

<sup>1</sup> *Virtual Scavenger Hunt* describes a game, in which the internet users need to visit certain locations on the Internet to acquire the requested information. In combination with mobile phones, the virtual scavenger hunt combines a virtual information search with location based information.

### 3. Blogs in Corporate Communication

Having completed the general overview of blog typologies, we will now discuss classifications of blogs within the context of corporate communication. We will begin with an in-depth review of one-dimensional approaches followed by a discussion of a systematization of blogs in corporate communication by Zerfass.

#### 3.1. Typologies Based on Sender and Recipients

Dearstyne (2005: 40) introduces an intuitive and content based classification of blogs. He distinguishes between personal blogs, news blogs, business and marketing blogs, topic blogs, and knowledge blogs. Building upon this classification, Lee, Hwang & Lee conducted a study of corporate blogging strategies of the *Fortune 500* companies in the USA (2006: 319). Based on the proposed dimension by Dearstyne, they identify five general communication strategies used with blogs (see Table 2), which can be differentiated by the involved persons, groups, or departments.

The bottom-up strategy for blogs describes the development of a democratic blog culture within the company that includes the involvement of a reasonable number of employees. Examples of this blog strategy are the blogs of Sun Microsystems and Frosta. New considerable challenges for management arise with this strategy as monitoring and governance are limited by the self control of the employees. Therefore, guidelines that define the regulatory framework of employee blogs are vital. The top-down

*Table 2: Strategies of Blogs within Corporate Communication by Lee, Hwang & Lee*

<i>Strategy approach</i>	<i>Involved person/group/department</i>
Bottom-up	Company-wide
Top-down I	Top Management
Top-down II	Individual
Top-down III	Group
Top-down IV	Promotion



strategies I–III are communication strategies that are focused on systematic communication activities with all stakeholders of a company. The difference between the three approaches is the hierarchy level of the blogger within the company. In contrast to the bottom-up strategy, a company has more possibilities to control and regulate with the top down strategy as blogging activities are initiated from the management. The top-down IV strategy more or less describes blogs that are used for advertising purposes. As authenticity is one of the key characteristics of blogs (Zerfass & Boelter 2005: 20), it is very important to maintain the personal and authentic style of blogs if this strategic option is chosen.

The differentiation between internal and external recipients as well as senders is another approach for classification of application areas within the context of corporate communication. Internal blogs – written and read by employees – are used for knowledge management (knowledge blogs), project coordination (project blogs), or as an additional tool for the development of a company culture (employee blogs). External blogs – written by employees and read by customers – could be used for branding activities or customer relationship management (Wacka 2004). This type of blog can be used to build relationships with other actors within the blogosphere (for example: sales or CSR blogs). Another type of external blog is written by external authors and read by customers. As these actors are not employees and do not benefit from the success of the company, they can become important stakeholders in terms of reputation building. It is also possible that external blog authors can have a significant influence on the scope of operation of a company. This can happen if blog entries contain sensitive company information or are written by critics of the company or its products.

The mutual relationship between readers and authors in terms of internal and external stakeholders are shown in table 3. As a result of these diverse relationships, blogs can constitute a complex network structure between a company and its stakeholders. This leads to various communication and management challenges if a consistent image of a company in terms of an integrated communication strategy is to be considered (Bruhn 2006: 492).

We do not claim the completeness of table 3, but tried to outline possible application areas and conflict situations in the use of blogs within

*Table 3: Reader and Author Relations in Blogs within the Company Context*

		<i>Author</i>	
		<i>Internal</i>	<i>External</i> (without direct control of the company)
<i>Reader</i>	<i>External</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Corporate Social Responsibility blogs</li> <li>- Sales blogs</li> <li>- Campaign blogs</li> <li>- Topic blogs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Fan or critic blogs</li> <li>- Third Party Campaign blogs</li> </ul>
	<i>Internal</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Knowledge blogs</li> <li>- Collaboration blogs</li> <li>- Project blogs</li> <li>- Employee blogs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Employee blogs</li> <li>- Union blogs</li> </ul>

corporate communication. Therefore, it should be noted that most of the relationships between recipient and blogger are outside the scope of the influence of a company. This implies significant challenges for corporate communication activities; in particular for issues of management and crisis communication. Blog monitoring becomes important as do adequate and consistent responses that need to be carried out within the blogosphere if an issue arises. In the case of an American retail company, a blogger revealed that the involved company sold T-Shirts with NS symbols printed on them. In an instant reaction, the company announced an apology in various blogs, stating that it was a mistake and that they would stop selling these products. Although they officially announced this mistake, the company did not stop selling the products, which then resulted in negative press coverage for several days (Associated Press 2006-10-14).

### *3.2. Fictional and Non Fictional Blogs*

Blogs are generally perceived as expressive and authentic communication channels. Because of this, a differentiation between fictional and non fictional blogs is rather difficult. Nevertheless, a differentiation is necessary as recent developments in the usage of blogging systems demand it. Splogs or Blams (both combinations of spam and blog) are used as trigger

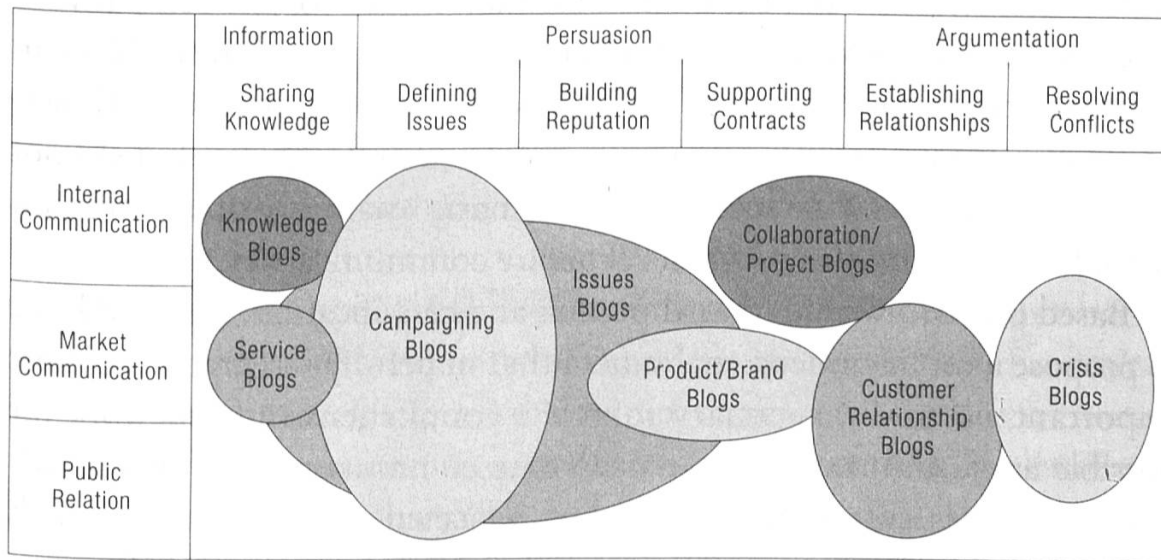
web pages to direct visitors to certain websites. These websites are mostly highly optimized for search engines and their content is similar to that of spam emails with offers ranging from credit cards and pharmaceutical products to pornographic content (Salveti & Nicolov 2006: 138). Thanks to sophisticated algorithms that search for known and problematic patterns within the page content and the webpage URLs, it is possible to efficiently filter out that kind of blog content (Kolari, Java & Finin 2006). However, a development similar to email-spam can be observed, which will most likely lead to a blog spam culture.

Flogs (short for fake blogs) are much more subtle than Splogs and Blams, which are solely focused on generating web traffic. Flogs try to attract readers' attention with fictional stories and fake content. In most cases, they are part of Astro-Turf campaigns trying to create viral effects with fictional persons – so-called “meat puppets” (Ahrens 2006: DO1). Astro-Turf is an allusion on the so-called grassroots blog campaigns, which are said to have the goal of bringing social and political changes starting from the grassroots movements. An example of an Astro-Turf blog is the website [www.iDont.com](http://www.iDont.com), which publishes negative comments about a well known and popular MP3 player, clearly trying to create an anti-trend. Some investigations from interested bloggers showed that the website was created by a competitor and not by a frustrated user (Ahrens 2006: DO1).

### *3.3. Classification of Blogs by Zerfass*

One of the most comprehensive classifications for blogs in terms of corporate communication is proposed by Zerfass (2005: 127). He uses two dimensions to classify the different blog applications in corporate communication. The first one characterises the aim of all tasks performed for corporate communication. There are three different approaches to how a company can achieve its communication goal: argument, persuasion, and information. Argumentation aims for a collaborative process to solve a problem, persuasion tries to realise unilaterally focused goals, whereas information aims for a common understanding in which concrete intentions remain unconscious (Zerfass 2004: 188). In a second dimension, Zerfass sorts the contexts in which the company, and therefore the corporate communication, needs to

Figure 1: Application Areas of Blogs within Corporate Communication



Source: Zerfass 2005: 127

be active. This refers to the company itself in cases of internal communication, but can also refer to the public market and public relations in a political and socio-cultural environment. With these two dimensions, a scheme can be drawn that includes a great variety of possible blog applications within corporate communication (see Figure 1).

The classification by Zerfass (2005) is the most comprehensive and, in terms of corporate communication, the most specific one. This classification is based on two dimensions: the communication means and the orientation of the communication. However, other aspects that may influence the selection of specific blogs for specific communication tasks are not taken into account. Blog authors and their relation to the company as well as cross-sectional tasks within corporate communication, like media relations, issue management, and crisis and change communication, are not considered in these two dimensions although they are used within the classification itself as items.

### 3.4. Summary and Evaluation of Existing Blog Classifications

The aforementioned overview of existing blog classifications shows that different factors may influence the application of blogs for specific corporate communication tasks. These factors are the specific content format

and update channels of a blog, the blog author and blog reader, the communication strategy, and the communication means for the company.

Only Zerfass provides a multi-dimensional classification for blogs in corporate communication. All other models are rather flat, uni-dimensional classifications of blogs, which show relevant aspects, but do not provide a complete framework for systematic analysis or reasoning on possible applications for blogs in corporate communication.

Based on the aforementioned models and classification, we would like to propose a multi-dimensional model that hopefully integrates the most important categories necessary to give a comprehensive framework for possible applications of blogs in corporate communication. This multi-dimensional classification is oriented on a faceted classification, in which the final classification is a summary of distinct and specific classifications combined within this model (Gaus 2003: 129).

#### 4. The St. Galler Blog Cube

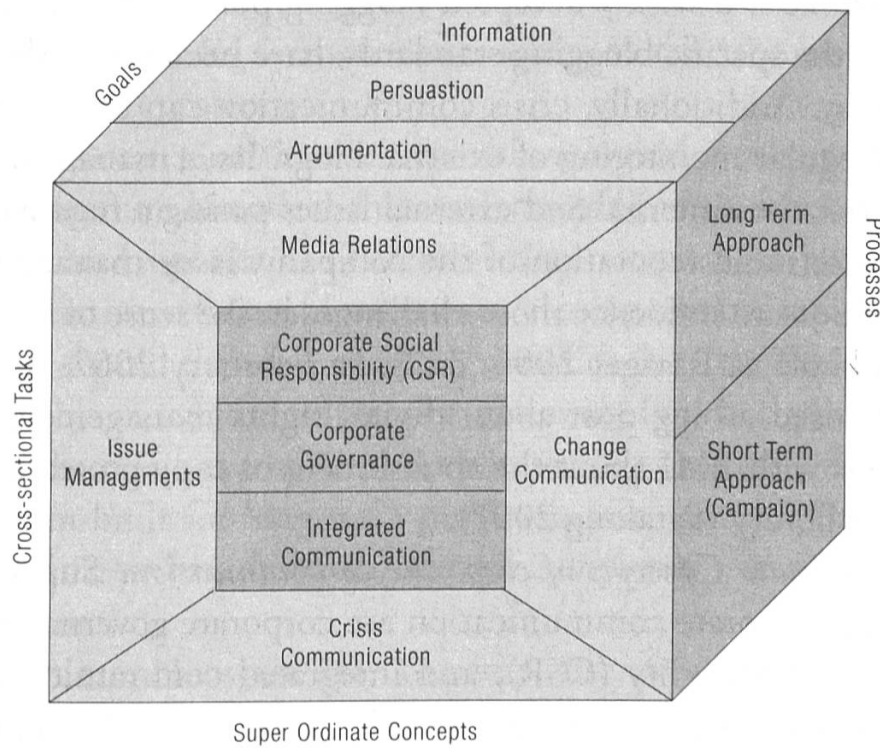
The St. Galler blog cube integrates different perspectives for the analysis of blogs discussed above. Based on the classification factors, practical examples for each dimension of the classification are given.

##### *4.1. Cross-Sectional Tasks, Goals, Processes*

The front side of the cube is shown in figure 2. It is not the purpose of the St. Galler blog cube to integrate all possible kinds of blogs, but to highlight the relevant dimensions for analysis and investigation of blogs. Dimensions exclusively related to blogs will be part of figure 3.

The St. Galler blog cube is based on the specific cross-sectional tasks, concepts, goals, and processes of corporate communication. Cross sectional tasks are relevant for all areas of corporate communication: media relations, change communication, crisis communication, and issues management. Concepts influencing the cross-sectional tasks of corporate communication are corporate governance, corporate social responsibility (CSR), and integrated communication. Out of the previously mentioned tasks and concepts, several possibilities arise to achieve the communication goals of a corporation, namely information, persuasion, and argu-

*Figure 2: Tasks, Goals and Processes of Corporate Blogs*



mentation (Zerfass 2005: 72). The process dimension illustrates the different temporal character of corporate communication activities.

*Cross-sectional tasks of corporate communication:* Cross-sectional tasks of corporate communication include media relations, change communication, crisis communication, and issue management. Media relations involve all direct interactions with actors of the various media institutions (Meckel & Will 2006: 290). CEO-blogs are a perfect source for first-hand information from a company's executive. Change communication aims to catalyze transformation processes of an organization (Mast 2006: 403). Therefore, companies may use an employee blog to illustrate and explain abstract concepts with concrete examples. Such a strategy could be used to strengthen acceptance and awareness of change processes. Crisis communication refers to the communication with involved individuals after the occurrence of a crisis (Töpfer 2006: 365). Bloggers are among the first providing information if a crisis occurs. The reports from bloggers about 9/11 (Gilmore 2006: 18) are just one of many examples of the increasing

importance of user-generated content in the context of crisis communication. Companies should be aware that a blog strategy during a crisis is only credible if a widely accepted blogging policy, or at least knowledge about the specific blogging standards, have been established within the company. Additionally, crisis communication can be effective only if there is regular monitoring of external blogs. Issue management localises and prioritises internal and external issues posing a future challenge for the options and reputation of the company. Issue management also includes actions to influence those challenges in the sense of the corporation (Ingenhoff & Röttger 2006: 322). In February 2007, Apple CEO Steve Jobs used a blog post about digital rights management to flank negotiations with EMI about the abolishment of copy protection for the EMI music library (Patalong 2007).

*Super ordinate Concepts of corporate communication:* Super ordinate concepts of corporate communication are corporate governance, corporate social responsibility (CSR), and integrated communication. Each concept has specific requirements towards the blogging philosophy of the company. The field of corporate governance blogs could possibly be used to explain management decisions transparently und authentically. Blogs could also be useful to illustrate and accompany campaigns with a social background like the CSR-blog "Open for Discussion" from the McDonalds Company. Integrated communication aims for consistent communication through various channels. The diverse network of stakeholders within the blogosphere today poses a great challenge in terms of an integrated communication in corporate communication. Employee blogs, in particular, may be in contrast with company statements and need to be aligned with the corporate strategy.

*Goals:* The Zerfass systematization of public relation goals (see chapter 3.3 of this article) is useful and can be used as one dimension for analysis of corporate blogs. Persuasive communication aims to reinforce interest using the emotional binding and personal preferences of a recipient (Zerfass & Boelter 2005: 72). To achieve persuasive goals, a blog should have a long-term character and a strict topic focus. Argumentative communication aims at initiating mutual processes to achieve consensus (ibid.: 72). Using such an approach, the American telecommunication company Verizon started a blog to expose their standpoint on legal devel-

opments in the telecommunication industry. The use of informative communication strategies is not primarily aimed at influencing people. Such a strategy usually aims to explain the facts about a relevant topic. The Swiss telecom provider Swisscom uses a blog to describe its engagement in environmental protection.

*Processes:* Because of their reverse chronological structure, blogs tend to have a long-term historical character, maintaining a timeline of events, statements, and opinions. Therefore, they seem to be appropriate to build long-lasting relationships between a company and its stakeholders. Companies should therefore carefully consider the time dimension when choosing a blog as a communication channel. This becomes even more evident with recent examples of corporate blog projects, which seemed to have been built for long-term purposes, but have not been updated for a long time or have been abandoned completely (for example: [www.fixingblog.com](http://www.fixingblog.com)).

Furthermore, blogs are easy to setup, use, and update, which also makes them useful as tools to accompany temporary or limited events like projects or campaigns. The Burton-Motorola (<http://burton.motorola.com/>) was used for exactly that purpose and was only available for a limited time as an instrument for corporate branding (Fleck, Kirchhoff & Stanoevska-Slabeva 2007).

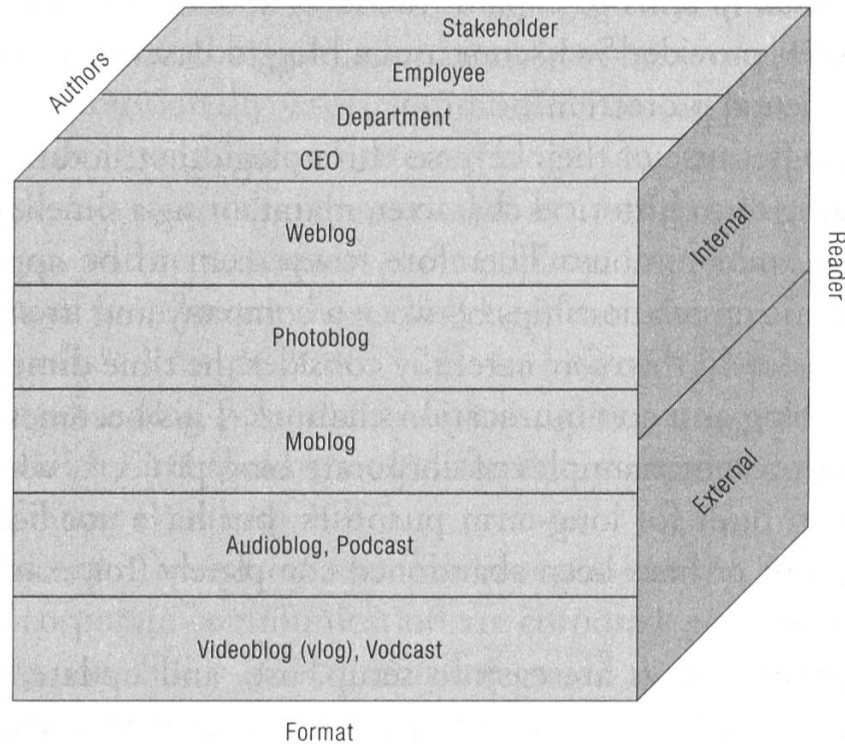
#### *4.2. Author, Reader, Format*

The back side of the St. Galler blog cube shows dimensions specific for blogs. In figure 3, the different roles of readers and authors are illustrated, including the internal and external viewpoint. Additionally, the blog format gains in great importance. As Marshall McLuhan puts it, “the medium is the message” (McLuhan 1968); thus, it is obvious that interaction and transaction processes between an author and its recipient are dependent on the constraints of the format and therefore influence the communication process.

*Author:* The different kinds of blog authors are of great importance for the analysis of corporate blogs. For example, a company’s influence on a blog will decline with a rising number of authors. The influence will also decline with decreased connection between the authors and the company.



*Figure 3: Author, Reader and Format of Corporate Blogs*



For a growing number of companies, it is not the question whether their employees blog or not anymore. It is rather the question how the blogging activities of employees could be integrated into the company's corporate communication from a legal point of view as well as from a communicational perspective.

*Readers:* Also, readers of blogs are of great importance for the design and success of a corporate blog. The differentiation between internal and external readers seems to be especially important based on the fact that internal readers have specific knowledge about a company and its culture.

*Format:* Various applications of blogs arise from the different formats described in chapter 2.2. For example a Podcast is more appropriate for one-way communication than it is for establishing an intense dialogue. This fact becomes even more evident when comparing the Vodcast of German chancellor Angela Merkel, providing no options to comment, with the various feedbacks the Swiss politician Moritz Leuenberger is receiving for his postings.

## 5. Summary

Corporate blogs are used in various contexts of corporate communication. Therefore, they have been analysed by a broad number of academic disciplines ranging from computer science to social and management sciences. Thus far, the analyses of blogs lack a unifying theory framework. The current paper intends to integrate the different perspectives into a single multi dimensional model. The dimension tasks, goals, processes, reader, author, and format have been identified as overarching elements within this model. The heuristic value of the St. Galler blog cube is basically the identification of relevant dimensions for planning, analysis, and design of corporate blogs. This implies that successful corporate blogs need a perfect fit within the described dimensions.

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