

National Centre for Research Methods Working Paper

11/14

# Development of methodologies for researching online: the case of food blogs

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**MODE multimodal methodologies**  
FOR RESEARCHING DIGITAL DATA AND ENVIRONMENTS

**NOVELLA**  
NARRATIVES OF VARIED EVERYDAY  
LIVES AND LINKED APPROACHES

**IOE**  
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University of London

## Introduction

The expanding reach of the Internet has opened new sites for conducting social science research (Hine, 2009, 2005; Miller & Slater, 2000; Murthy, 2008, 2011). More recently, attention has been given to weblogs – or blogs, as they are more commonly known – as a generative data resource. Blogs are a contemporary digital authoring platform widely kept and read across different social and cultural groups for a range of different purposes. They have become a significant aspect of online engagements; their widespread adoption has been attributed to user-friendly template designs in free access blogging platforms (Hookway, 2008). A prime example is Wordpress, which has more than 60 million blogs created by its users.

The prominence of blogs in combination with their varied areas of focus (e.g., personal diaries, professional portfolios, travel journals, photographic exhibitions, culinary displays) makes them a rich source of qualitative ‘user-generated data’ (Hardey, 2011). We define user-generated data in a blog as archived posts comprised of multimedia, or what we shall call here multimodal, digitally produced materials displayed on screens that are chronologically sequenced by the blog platform and thematically organized by the bloggers. These include representations that range from writing (e.g., captions, headings, paragraphs), images (icons, videos, photographs). In part, these materials include the digitally-enabled customization of the blog platform resources (e.g., formatting the vertical sidebars, provide horizontal framing, thematic layout and colour palette).

The National Data Strategy encourages research use of new types of data arising from digitization (Elias, 2009). However, there are significant practical challenges in empirical research on digital material online. Central among these are ethical, archival and methodological issues. We highlight these in the development of our cross-disciplinary approach. We combine multimodal social semiotic, ethnographic and narrative methods to examine blogs, in our case here, food blogs, created on Wordpress platforms. ‘Food blogs’ are a prospective source of information about parenting, feeding and caring for children, given blogs’ wide use among parents, particularly mothers, in the UK, and current concerns about food poverty for many families in resource-constrained circumstances. This relatively new digital environment of the blog, in which often quite intimate portraits of family life are materialized through public ‘multimodal narratives’ of mothers, provides the context for the online research.

In this paper, we explicate on our combined multimodal social semiotic, ethnographic and narrative methods to provide a more encompassing approach: one that is able to attend to the unique, online material, which might not be wholly illuminated by any one of the three methodologies used independently. This involves coming to terms with the different epistemological perspectives that guide and shape the cross-disciplinary collaboration. We explain the framework we developed and the research processes, including data sampling, collection, archival and analysis; provide an overview of key findings from the substantive focus of this project; discuss the overall possibilities and constraints

of working with combined perspectives; as well as offer suggestions for future online research in blogging platforms.

### Frame and structure of the collaboration

The work reported here has been produced in a collaborative project between two nodes of the ESRC (Economic and Social Research Council's) funded National Centre for Research Methods (NCRM): Multimodal Methodologies for Studying Digital and Data Environments (MODE) and Narratives of Varied Everyday Lives and Linked Approaches (NOVELLA). Both Nodes are based at the Institute of Education, University of London.

As this is a 'joint project' in which the interests and the work of two 'nodes' are brought together, the methodologies of the 'sister-nodes' MODE and NOVELLA had to be articulated together, within the overall project. Blogs are 'about' something. Dealing with this 'aboutness' introduces a need for further theory and methodology that go beyond investigations of the semiotics of blogs generally. In the case of this small-scale study, the social issue we were exploring was the complex of 'food and family', 'parents and children', in the UK of the contemporary period – an era characterized by political and popular discourses of 'austerity', and policy processes of restructuring and cuts within health and social welfare. So the topic of the blogs we focused on here was both a larger-level social one and a 'homely' one: what we are calling here 'scarcity' or 'resource constraint', in order to avoid the contested 'austerity' discourse, instead registering the increased need for material 'watchfulness' in domestic matters.

The collaborative project settled on three main research questions: What are blogs' semiotic affordances and constraints? What stories are told in UK based mothers' food blogs, and how? What are the methodological potentials and difficulties of doing a cross-disciplinary analysis of blogs? These two questions were addressed by both teams within their respective theoretical frames as well as through a joint timeline (see Appendix A). MODE focused primarily on methodological and structural and NOVELLA on methodological, structural and substantive aspects.

MODE: How can we sample, generate and archive data in digital platforms? What tools are needed to describe and analyze the social semiotic multimodal 'make-up' of texts in a blog platform? How can the theories and methods used by MODE be joined with those of NOVELLA?

NOVELLA: How is mothering articulated in and narrated through blog posts about feeding families? How do narratives about feeding families emerge in blog posts about motherhood? What are the methodological (including ethical implications) of working narratively with blogs? What can we learn from MODE's semiotic approach?

## Data and methods

### *'Reading food blogs': The online field site*

'Sites' – whether on- or off-line – offer semiotic potentials, which have effects of a social kind: social relations of participants and kinds of social organization. The social characteristics of sites and their formal compositional characteristics co-occur with the *modes* through which 'meaning-as-content' appears on the sites. The online environment as a field site draws attention to a range of formal characteristics of sites – e.g. the category of platforms and its affordances – as well as to the social positions and social relations of participants. All these differ from those encountered – and relatively well understood – 'offline'. For instance, semiotically, the 'online' environment offers different and perhaps a greater range of resources for representation; it offers greater ease and facility; and greater flexibility, in the choice and use of semiotic resources (Domingo, Jewitt & Kress, in press, 2014). The relatively greater choice and flexibility of means for representation draw attention to the 'economy' of semiotic as well as material / financial effort, and through this to the potentials for the use of the epistemological / ontological affordances of modes. The distinctness of these 'online' sites gives them a 'visibility' and salience in contrast to 'offline' sites.

In our joint project, the ethnographic account of blogging platforms enabled exploration of the blog as a research 'site' comprised of social and textual interaction. Amit (2000) suggests that ethnographic work in digital contexts requires 'constructing' the field site rather than 'discovering' it, particularly since online space is vast and can be contextualized using a range of constituent relationships and connections. For the context of our research, it was essential to examine the blogs not merely as static textual artifacts but also as cultural resources that bloggers shape. For example, the social shaping of the two blogs in this study could be described not only by their narrative contents but also through the overall representational choices of the bloggers in terms of layout, framing, use of colour, of writing and kinds of images.

We recognize that other scholars, especially those involved with virtual ethnography (Boellstorff, et. al, 2012; Boellstorff, 2008; Hine, 2000, 2005); visual research (Pink, 2007) and digital anthropology (Horst & Miller, 2001; Madianou & Miller, 2011; Underberg & Zorn, 2013), have explored interaction with participants for 'triangulation' of data sources (e.g., online focus group interviews, surveys, email correspondences) and in some cases have extended their research beyond online sites to include physical settings. However, we purposely set the scope and aim of our study to develop methods that would allow us to conduct empirical investigations using blogging platforms as a 'field site' rather than, say, examining the validity of accounts by the bloggers themselves. In addition, a large amount of work has examined the content of online materials in relation to the fluidity of cultural, social and political identities, and/or in relation to broader realities within political, policy and cultural fields (e.g. Davis, 2011; Davis et al., 2004; Jensen, 2012). However, we did not study the individual blogs or bloggers, nor do we aim our work to be theorizing their social and linguistic identities, nor do we assert claims about their cultural reproduction so often inherent in qualitative studies of online

contexts and their participants. There is by now an abundance of recognized empirical work developed for such purposes.

The NOVELLA approach to the joint food blogs project started from the premise, like MODE, that online and offline materials offer distinctive although overlapping realities and possibilities for those producing and consuming them – and indeed, in the case of blogs, media production and consumption themselves importantly overlap. Within the overall NOVELLA interest in everyday narratives, the concern with such overlaps is more general. Stories are viewed here, as in much other narrative research, as contiguous with other life practices, and as mutually determining them, reframing the past, constructing the present and imagining the future, though always within constraints (Andrews, 2014; Phoenix, 2013; Squire, 2012; Squire et al., 2013). Nevertheless the particularities of specific story modes and platforms (in MODE's term) are increasingly viewed as integral to this kind of research (Georgakopoulou, 2007; Herman, 2013)

Many of the issues addressed by the MODE team also appear in relation to the narrative research on this relatively new field of online materials, albeit under different names.

First, this type of research raises important questions about the nature and relations of 'narrative', defined here as sets of symbols that build meaning across their movement, progression or sequence, in verbal, still and moving-image visual, and visuo-spatial material – forms of data usually seen as distinguished by media rather than 'mode' (MODE's term). These questions are important in a great deal of contemporary narrative research (Bell, 2013; Esin & Squire, 2013; Luttrell, 2010). MODE and NOVELLA often pay attention to very similar features of the blogs in considering these factors. However, for NOVELLA, the verbal/visual narrative concern lay behind the selection from the shortlisted 15 blogs of the two eventually archived and analysed in detail, one (*Thinly Spread*) being more visually oriented and the other (*Diary of a Frugal Family*) more text oriented, rather than, primarily, on one being more customized in its use of the blog platform, which was the important difference for MODE.

Second, the obvious and intense concatenations of genres online, especially in blogs, interested NOVELLA as well as MODE researchers. However, this phenomenon often leads narrative researchers interested in online material to search out commonalities related to stories as systems of progressing meaning construction (Davis, 2011; Herman, 2013; Squire, 2013) that may gloss over the specificities of media or 'modes' to which MODE pays particular attention. Perhaps this tendency is indicated in NOVELLA's willingness to title our part of the project 'Recipes', despite the formal differences between canonic contemporary print recipe formats, and 'recipes' within blogs.

Third, and relatedly, narrative researchers frequently address larger corpora of data than semiotic researchers, leading to a more 'thematic' approach to blog stories (Riessman, 2008), which perhaps, as indicated earlier, foregrounds concerns with social identities and cultural formations (or forms of 'capital') constructed and reconstructed in the blogs within our analysis. This less fine-

grained, more 'big- story' (Bamberg, 2006) approach could be said, for instance, to have produced NOVELLA's expansion of the 'recipe' framing of the blogs, to take in 'recipes' for social practices – particularly mothering and food shopping, cooking and eating within families – in our project title. This approach was also the reason that NOVELLA began from a sample of 30 blogs addressing parenting and food from a range of positions, before the initial shortlisting to 15. It also explains why NOVELLA started work with a six-month analysis of the *Diary of a Frugal Family* and *Thinly Spread* blog posts, looking primarily at story theme, but also at the amount of text in relation to image; responses to the blogs; and bloggers' own responses to those comments, which convey a kind of co-constructed story of blogger and audience social practices (Esin et al., 2013; Riessman, 2008). The differences of the 'narrative' approach also explain NOVELLA interest in the blogs' place within contemporary 'austerity discourse', and in how they frame resource scarcity; and NOVELLA's historical – as well as the social –view of these blogs, as contemporary versions of part-time 'piecework' for women in situations of some socioeconomic precarity (Savage et al., 2013). These concerns led us, in our analysis of blogs produced over a six month period, to address sponsorship and advertising, as well as amount and frequency of posting and the broader storyworld of the blog-market, which involves interactions between bloggers, between bloggers and their site owners, and between blogs and other entities such as radio, television and magazines, and campaigning organisations, and companies (Head, 2014). These concerns, many also addressed by MODE, related most importantly for MODE to the distinct and developing characteristics of the blog platform. For NOVELLA, they were part of an assemblage of social practices around food, family and scarce resources to which the mothers' blogs themselves belonged.

Fourthly, the positioning of verbal and visual 'characters' within the blogs (among whom we can include landscape and various kinds of food), whatever media were deployed to achieve this, were a concern both for NOVELLA and MODE. Their analyses here were again close, with NOVELLA extending such analyses (as the above point suggests) over longer stretches of material (Davies & Harre, 1990; Esin et al., 2013; Phoenix, 2014; Taylor, 2012) and being attentive to narratives' positioning in relation to sociocultural demands (Butler, 2005) -the sense in which a 'recipe' is also a prescription, for instance - but giving less attention to the detailed online technologies achieving such positionings. For both MODE and NOVELLA, however, caution had to be exercised in reading off social identities and cultural resources from particular verbal, visual or spatial positionings, since these latter are polyvalent, and fluid in their meanings.

Fifth and finally, incoherence, inconsistency, and elision are a consistent focus of contemporary narrative and NOVELLA analysis (Butler, 2005; Hyvarinen et al., 2010). For NOVELLA, these features are not to be interpreted according to just one specific theoretical tradition - for example, psychoanalysis. However, given the blogs' positioning in relation to arrays of social practices around mothering, food and 'austerity', all of which are highly moralized fields, it is unsurprising that the NOVELLA analysis paid considerable attention to transgressive elements of the blogs.

### *Sampling of blogging platforms*

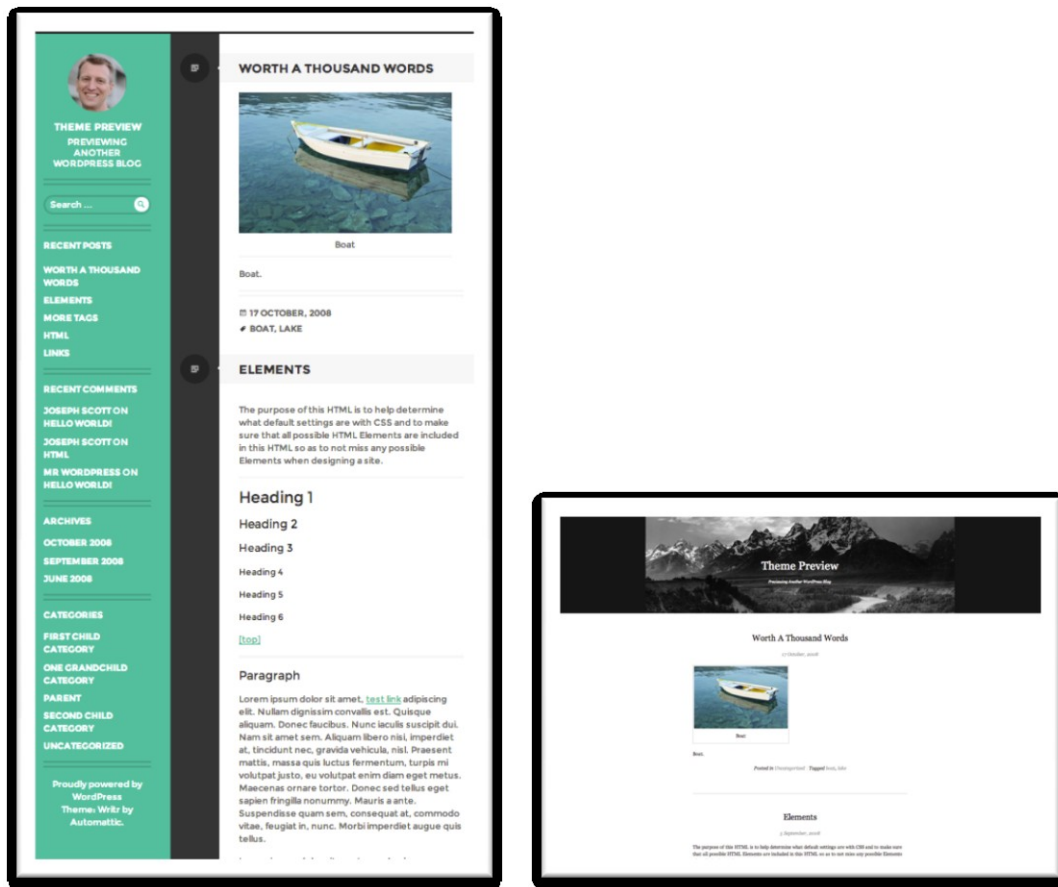
The scope of the collaborative project and the research questions framed the selection of food blogs such as blogs linked to by local and national parenting organizations in the UK. Our corpus initially reduced from 30 to a total of 15 well-established food blogs with multimodal representations (e.g., writing, visuals, colours), written by UK based mothers of primary school age children. To narrow the initial corpus further into a purposive sample, the predominant blogging platforms that appeared in the corpus were closely examined, namely Wordpress and Blogger.

Kress and Domingo (2013) emphasize the need for attending to the *technical orientation* of a digital platform in order to understand the potentials and constraints for meaning making. This entails sampling design features available to users of the blogging platform such as the range of templates users may choose for the overall 'look' of their blog. An instance would be using a thematic template from Wordpress, which would include a pre-formatted layout, colour palette and often an intended purpose. As written on Wordpress about their blog template Writr: "Writr is a minimalist, content-oriented tumblelog theme perfect for your personal blog. It comes packed with 6 different color schemes: turquoise (default), blue, green, grey, purple, and red. With a modern look and attention to crisp typography, Writr put the focus on your content." Here, the focus is the significance of writing as the primary semiotic resource for meaning-making, and other modes such as colour and typography has less prominent roles in the preformatted technical design of the template. In contrast, the WordPress blog template Landscape is described: "Landscape is a simple, responsive WordPress theme. Perfect for photography sites." Here the emphasis is on the mode of image for generating the blog content and the photograph is presented as the primary modal resource for materialising meaning on the page (see Figure 1).

As Figure 1 makes apparent, the technical design of the pre-formatted templates have a pre-given set of material resources that are available to the user for customizing content. Writr as a template offers a more vertical orientation; whereas Landscape offers a more horizontal one. In this regard, frame as a mode is a material resource that is apparent even before the user generates, uploads and creates content on the blog. While templates can be customized by users for further personalization (e.g., selecting number of columns, adding more images, changing the colour palette), the technical features of the blog design are more or less constrained to fit the designed purpose of the template. Sampling blogging platforms, like WordPress and Blogger, makes discernible what aspects of design were of the blogger's choice and which were offered by the blogging platform. It is therefore a significant aspect of multimodal research of online materials to take into account both the 'forms' and 'contents' as they are technically designed by the blogging platform and how the users take the given set of design resources to further customize their blog.



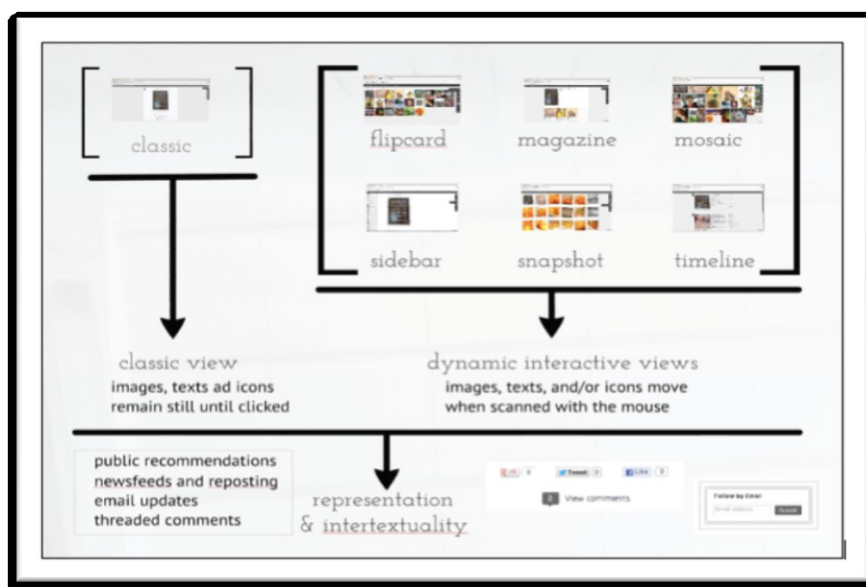
Figure 1 Screen shot of the WordPress Thematic Templates Writr (left) and Landscape (right)



There are other aspects of the technical features that bear significance for sampling blogs as data. For example, interactive features of blogs such as different ways to view the blog as a visitor are not always of the blogger's design (see Figure 2). The platform 'Blogger' introduced interactive options, which automatically present the blog contents in a variety of views to site visitors (e.g., flipcard, magazine, mosaic, sidebar, snapshot, timeline). The templates in blogging platforms do not always offer such interactive views. There are instances when the blogger customizes a relatively static template to include such interactive views, as is the case in one of the food blogs closely sampled in this research (see *Diary of a Frugal Family*).

For our research, sampling blogging platforms also made evident which blogs in the corpus were well-established in terms of 'advanced' customizing and helped to narrow focus to the two blogs closely analyzed for the duration of the research.

Figure 2 Blogger Views



### Sampling of blogs

In our joint project, the main site of research was therefore two food blogs, followed closely for the duration of this research: *Diary of a Frugal Family* and *Thinly Spread*. All data sampled and analyzed were online. MODE used distinct and compatible approaches to harness both the forms and contents of blogs, namely an ethnographic one for the interactional part (e.g., social and textual interaction) and a social semiotic for the representational (e.g., modal resources used). NOVELLA focused on thematic narratives of blog posts (including visual materials), and on the interactions between blog authors and audiences, links, sponsorship, and response patterns.

For both blogs, technical features of the template were also examined alongside the contents and structures of blogs. This differs from examining the initial blogging platform in that this stage now closely analyzes how the bloggers customize the pre-formatted blogging template. Some of these technical features in our study include 'advertisements embedded', 'looped banner', 'embedded social media'. Sampling both blogs enabled us to examine how each user shaped the given modal resources of a particular template to further suit her intended audience/interest/focus. This step also involves mapping the architecture of the various pages of the blogs and noting recurring and distinctive features: for instance, banner and menu bar on top of each page, sidebars typically comprised of advertisements, sponsorship and/or social media links (see Figure 3). It is for example, a common feature of blogs to have the homepage as integrating a variety of modal resources (images, writing, colours) whereas clicking a link to enter a subsidiary page shows the bloggers relying more on writing as the main mode for making meaning. Noting the technical features of blogs and how bloggers shape them to make meaning is a significant aspect of sampling online data.

Having an understanding of the technical features of the blogging platforms and narrowed samples, makes for better purposive sampling of data sources.

MODE and NOVELLA focused on the postings and contents of both blogs from September 2013 – February 2014. At this stage, both Nodes were able to examine the contents of blogs posts using their respective theoretical frames.

Among the main focuses at this stage of this joint research was to address the substantive research question: What stories are told in UK based mothers' food blogs, and how? To address this question, NOVELLA focused on analysing the personal, social and cultural thematic narratives of the blogs, as well as the narrative positions, genres and performances. A detailed narrative analysis of 'About Me' pages and a pair of emblematic posts (*Pancake Day* and *Christmas Eve*) was also performed.

### *Sampling of posts*

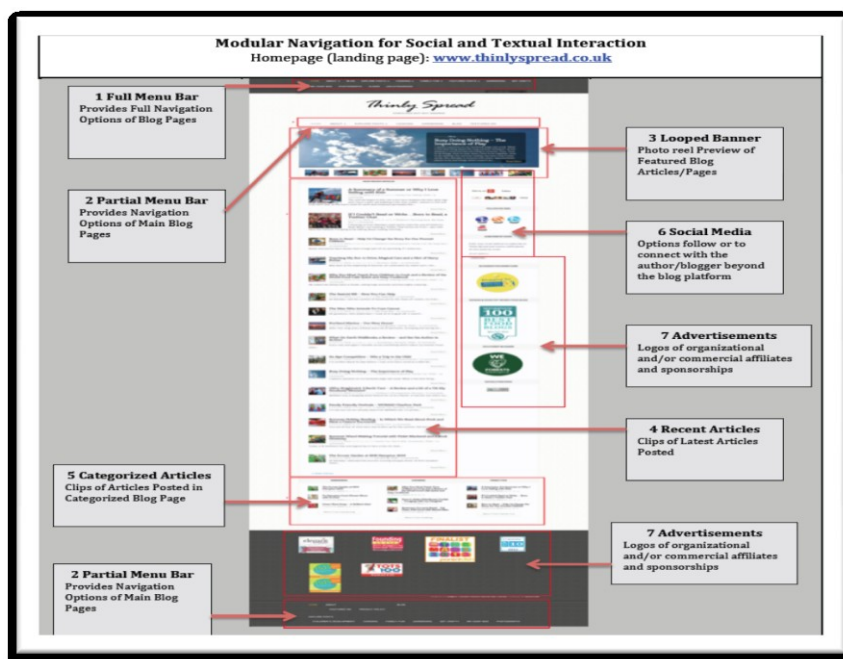
The three NOVELLA researchers analysed two months of each blog as well as checking each other's analyses of the other four months. Within this sample, we looked at posts on everyday and special occasion cooking, according to season and date – for instance, posts on birthdays; Halloween; Christmas; Pancake Day. We also looked at posts within which food was not the main topic, as well as where it was the foregrounded concern.

In this overview analysis, we noted narrative themes, and the place of verbal and visual materials, as well as links, sponsorship, interaction patterns, positioning and performance.

We chose for our in-depth, finer-grained analysis to focus on the 'About me' pages of the blogs, and on two emblematic pairs of posts, as means of drawing out similarities and differences between the blogs in relation to our research questions. This focus also enabled us to track how narratives established in the 'About me' section of blogs, for instance around identity and authenticity, might be replayed or departed from in other blog content. The pairs of posts chosen were themed around food, as well as family (*Pancake Day*) and a special occasion highly associated with family but also strongly linked with food (*Christmas*). MODE worked alongside NOVELLA by sampling the same blogs posts and pages.

For MODE, this empirical work made evident how the features of composition are shifting in the context of contemporary communication. Domingo, Jewitt and Kress (in press, 2014) suggest that the 'modularity' of writing online offers access to content beyond a linear format; it moves away from traditional linear text: visitors are able to enter and 'read' the text according to where their 'interest' takes them: beyond a left to right, top to bottom order.

Figure 3 Modular Navigation for Social and Textual Interaction on the Homepage of *Thinly Spread*



### What counts as ‘content’?

Contrary to paper texts, blogs offer a different materiality and access to their ‘contents’ poses a different demand on researchers to understand the ways in which meaning is made available through user-generated data (Hardey, 2011). In this paper, we define user-generated data in a blog as archived posts comprised of multimodal, digitally produced materials displayed on screens, that are chronologically sequenced by the blog platform and thematically organized by the bloggers. How the content appears on screen is closely linked to the shifting function of composition in contemporary communication environments, and access to ‘content’ is changing with that.

In many contexts paper and print are being displaced by digital means of producing and disseminating texts on screens. This is happening at the same time, as there are the most profound re-arrangements of social relations – the move from the dominance of the nation state to the dominance of the neo-liberal capitalist market (cf Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001). These social changes, as much as the changes in the relative prominence of modes are unmaking semiotic processes of text-making and principles of composition in general. With these changes, the centuries’ long naturalized relation of the site of the page and the mode of writing are being loosened and undone and displaced in many sites by new principles of text-making on screens (Kress, 2010, 2005).

This points to another key aspect of examining food blogs as a source for qualitative data. From a multimodal perspective we point to *modes* and questions around modes: What modes are used? What purposes is each mode used for? What is the frequency and extent of use? What is the position of each

mode: is it central or marginal in the blog? Having got some descriptive material, we can then attempt a comparison of the two blogs.

NOVELLA's focus is more apparently 'substantive', given that their work drew on clear thematic concerns within the NOVELLA projects indicated by the titles, 'Food and Families' and 'Parenting Identities and Practices. However, narrative research, NOVELLA's theoretical and methodological approach, also offers a history of toolkits. In addition, s with the online transposition of ethnography and semiotics, online research brings to this tradition a new perspective the parameters of which need redefinition.

What, then, counts as 'content'? From the semiotic perspective as 'style' on the one hand and 'aesthetics' on the other (though differently elsewhere) are aspects of content. The first of these, 'style', is defined in multimodal social semiotics as the overall effect produced by the sum total of choices made by each of the bloggers in all the aspects we mentioned. 'Aesthetics', in turn, is defined as the social judgment of 'style'. Both 'style' and 'aesthetics' as defined here show the effects of power in social settings (Kress, 2010).

Within the NOVELLA project and narrative research generally, 'content' is, too, indistinguishable often from stylistic characteristics (defined more around textual feature, and less around 'overall effect'), and from contextual, positioning features (Squire, 2008).

#### *Ethics and data archival*

The study was reviewed by the Research Ethics Committee of the Institute of Education, University of London. The project focused on the online content appearing in the two blogging platforms, rather than on individual participants (AoIR, 2002; BERA, 2011). The collaborative project followed the guidelines set out by the ethics committee and code of ethics particular to online research. All data sampled, generated and analyzed for this research were online. As with other research of this kind, the main ethical issue here is that while the 'data' is publicly available, it remains open for debate whether 'informed consent' to participate in the research should be sought from the authors of the blogs. The ESRC Ethics Framework (2010) for example, suggests that, "forums or spaces on the internet and web that are intentionally public would be valid to consider 'in the public domain.'" However, the British Psychological Society (2006) Code of Ethics advises researchers still to seek informed consent for online research in cases where public comments and posts are linked to 'personal web pages'. The position of the Association of Internet Researchers (AIOR) is that although the blogs are in the public domain, since individual and cultural definitions and expectations of privacy are ambiguous, contested and changing, it is impossible to rule definitively on whether blogs are private or public documents and a case by case approach is recommended. What is significant is not necessarily whether a space is private or public but the appropriate flow of information and the contexts in which it appears: thus a blogger is unlikely to expect a post about her Christmas preparations to be the subject of an academic paper.

Given the lack of consensus on this issue, we took an extra step and liaised with the British Library to comply with the Legal Deposit Libraries Act (2003) and chose to contact the bloggers to inform them about our research. The British Library assisted in a well-founded and ethical application of data documentation and data protection for this project. We contacted the bloggers to inform them about our research; additionally, the British Library contacted the bloggers for permission to 'harvest' and archive the sites for the UK Web Archive. Further, we took the following measures to work sensitively with the bloggers' material

- We analysed the authors' public online identities (which will be related to, but not synonymous with off-line identities), developing accounts that were descriptive and grounded in material the authors have written rather than evaluative or speculative about 'off-line' lives.
- We chose blogs that were well established, have a media presence and generate benefits in kind or income. These characteristics indicate that the authors are operating in public contexts and managing their on-line identity.
- Mindful of the potential ethical risks of including in our analysis people beyond the scope of our study, we discussed the comments which posts elicited in general terms, as this is an important part of analysing cultural narratives about mothering and food which emerge from the blogs. We did not identify or quote particular commentators.
- We selected posts for detailed analysis, which describe families in general terms and avoided discussion of authors' children.

Both blogs can be accessed as archived by the British Library UK Web Archive under the special collection for blogs and subject heading titled society and culture (<http://www.webarchive.org.uk>).

We also used Safari WebArchive, Adobe PDF and Microsoft Word to account for written, visual and other modal configurations materialized in the blogging platforms. The Wayback Machine was used to view instances of the blogs and how they have changed in form (e.g., layout, colour palette).

### Data Analysis

MODE analyzed both the customization of the platform as well as the forms and contents of blogs to account for all social and semiotic features, and reveal the 'semiotic work' – the meaning-making work - undertaken by the blogger. We used distinct and compatible approaches, namely an ethnographic one for the interactional part and a social semiotic for the representational. In 'the world', the two are never distinct; in our analysis it is useful to use the lenses for analytic and descriptive reasons, only to relate them again in a joint account (Kress, 2011).

NOVELLA analysed thematic narratives as well as positioning and interactions between bloggers, audiences that read and respond, the designers and owners of the platform, the advertisers and sponsors, and the surrounding blog 'storyworld' (Herman, 2013). Genres and their hybridization were also analysed.

Blog narrative structure, content, and context, may exhibit many features in common with those displayed in similar personalised, regularly produced, private and public, and current and historical text forms – for instance, diaries, letters, opinion columns, scrapbooks, cookbooks, and photo albums. However, blogs are also developing new genres of their own.

Joint analysis focused on design of the Wordpress platform, customization of the platform by both bloggers and user-generated contents of both blogs. The analysis of the platform design was aimed at gaining insight at what aspects of design were of the blogger's choice and which were offered by the blogging platform. It included a detailed analysis of the overall technical features of the platforms, identifying the constituent elements of the main pages, sub pages and their affordances, as well as the use of colours, images, writing, layout, hyperlinks and other design features. The analysis of the user-generated contents included: (a) a detailed analysis of the structure of each blogger's blog posts; (b) a detailed analysis of the 'About Me' pages and a pair of emblematic posts (*Pancake day* and *Christmas Eve*); (c) narrative positions, genres and performances such as identification of characteristics attributed to mothering; and (d) examination of the modal resources that the bloggers shaped to materialize their meanings, which includes noting the ways that they not only used writing but what are various ways that writing appears and is used in the blog (e.g., writing as caption, writing as expansion of image).

#### *MODE: a multimodal ethnographic and social semiotic account*

Our findings demonstrate that one blogger (*Diary of a Frugal Family*) uses writing much more than the other, whose posts are more image-centred; and that she uses writing much more in 'conventional' fashion than the other, that is, as an *apparently* transparent, unedited and trope-free mode. She uploads more frequently (almost 30 posts per month) – and most work appears to happen online since fewer features of the entry are imported, more are taken from the blog platform services (e.g. in image editing), and there are signs of lack of editing (e.g. in images, writing) that are not clearly worked on offline as elements to include. For MODE, the blog *Diary of a Frugal Family* has more 'narrative' images in Kress & Van Leeuwen's (2006) sense, that is, images that involve interaction and change - in this case, images of personal moments of the blogger's family recounted and extended to her community of followers. For both MODE and NOVELLA, here the gaze of human participants is directed at an audience: inviting both affirmation (she/they/this experience is/are like me) as well as a direct intimacy not so clearly signaled in the other blog. Here the blog is presented as largely a personal memoir, aimed at creating a memory book for the blogger's children of their times together as a family. As the blogger writes in her 'About Me' page, "My plan is to get the blog made into a book for the children when they are older so they remember all the happy times we had while they were growing up (by make into a book, I don't mean I have aspirations of being a real life writer, I just mean I'll print it out, punch holes in it and stick it in a pretty folder)."

The other blog (*Thinly Spread*) seems to let images communicate 'for themselves', not explained by or related to text; and the kind of images, their

composition and production values are markedly different. The blogger appears to spend more time editing prior to uploading content – and most of her ‘work’ seems, from its highly edited and composed nature, often using facilities not available via the blog platform, to be happening offline. The MODE analysis suggests that the *Thinly Spread* blog is marked by having more conceptual images (cf by Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006), whether in idealized notions of family or of nature as landscape. MODE, like NOVELLA, have noted that subjects of photographs on this blog appear not to be expecting the gaze of onlookers: they are casually there to be observed: they do not engage explicitly with the audience: there are different notions of ‘personal distance’, so that the blog appear at times like a professional portfolio showcasing the blogger’s writing and her visual art (photography). This reading is supported by the blogger’s writing in her About Me page, “I am also a freelance copywriter and photographer and an unpublished (as yet) fiction writer.” At the same time, the abstracted, ‘conceptual’ nature of the images can induce strong though less direct identificatory reactions from the audience, as some of the comments indicate.

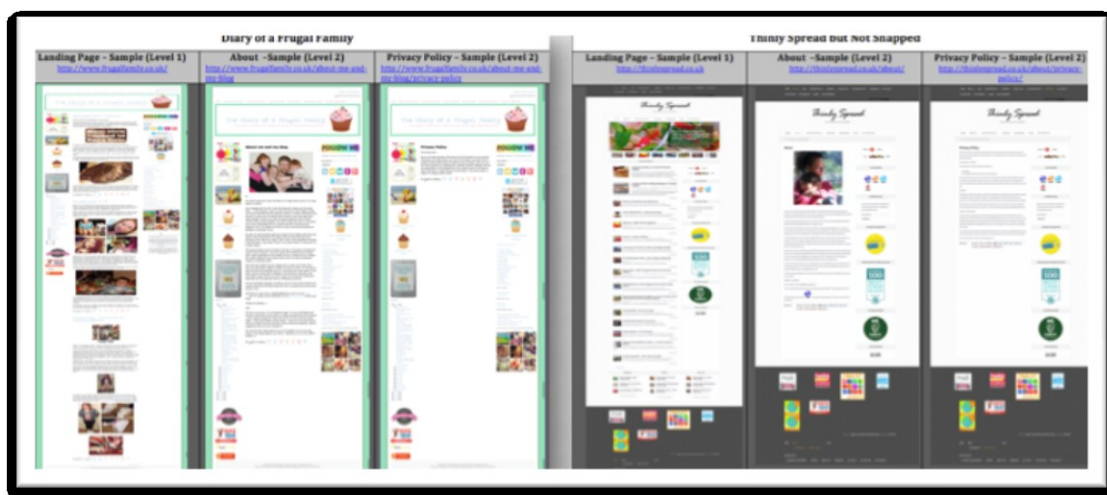
The blogging platform provides bloggers with a range of modal resources to design and shape meanings (see Figure 4). *How* the blogger has customized the blog templates and then uses the range of possibilities through layout, fonts, colours, frames, images, within her blog is reflective of the differing imagined social contexts in which and for which it was designed. In the view of researchers from both nodes, these factors are evidence that point to subjectivity and identity. For instance, the ‘About Me’ section for *Diary of a Frugal Family* emphasizes family rather than an individual project; whereas, *Thinly Spread* shows more compartmentalizing and moving between identities as mother, writer, photographer, etc. (Elliott, et.al, 2014).

Even the selection of a template is suggestive of a certain ‘the politics of choice’ (as in the notion of ‘style’ employed in this report). *Thinly Spread* uses ‘Elegant Themes Premium Wordpress Themes’; that is not a standard, free template, but an option for purchase. The language and images here are extensively worked on and operate with consistent principles of composition, for instance, in the use of space. Here, choice-as-design offers insight into the relationship between technical affordance and social positioning. In the case of *Thinly Spread* it implies a blog which offers itself to its readers as highly edited and reflective; it could even be read as a Likewise, *Diary of a Frugal Family* differentiates itself from a standard or premium Wordpress template. It is customized in line with the blogger’s aspiration to produce ‘a book’ for the blogger’s children. The language and images here are informal, consistently and deliberately spontaneous-seeming, and often directly address the blog’s readers. In each case, the choice is to shape the blog personally but also to reflect the blogger’s larger social purpose: a professional portfolio in one case; a personalised keepsake focused on familial experiences and childhood memories, yet strongly and directly engaged with readers situated as like the author, in the other. Both blogs can be identified as food blogs; yet what we do have are two food blogs designed for different social purposes (cf Adami, in press, 2014).



Similarly, the use of space – as a medium or ‘mode’ – differs markedly between the two bloggers: one blogger being content for there to be much ‘unused space’ – that is, space used aesthetically, which, because large amounts of it are not necessary for the blog’s information conveyance, can appear as a marker of taste and a luxury (see right in Figure 4, *Thinly Spread*). In other words, the sum total of choices made from the available resources for ‘making meaning material’ leads to distinctly different styles, and these will have particular social judgments attached to them. MODE’s analysis also shows that, as evidenced in the choices of the bloggers, the use of the screens in each blog, from the ‘homepage’ to the third screen ‘down’: there is a strong distinction in terms of who speaks, who is given space, how much space, and so on (See Figure 4).

Figure 4 Screen captures of the two sampled blogs: homepage, second and third screens ‘down’



The ways in which meanings are conveyed in the overall design is both an effect of the technical givens and of personal customization; and both are, at the same time, socially and economically situated. The technical potentials offered by the social media site represents that which the ‘owners’ of and, as crucially, advertisers on that site wish to make possible as social positioning and interaction; the customization and its use represents that which the blogger wishes to do socially and within the blog and wider markets, as well as personally. We are confident that we could do further research and discover that all these features correlate with specific social positionings, or with specific kinds of ‘cultural capital’ to use Bourdieu’s term. That is to say, what appears on the screen is a combination of social aims: the technological and socio-economic affordances of the digital medium combined with the choices of the blogger.


#### *NOVELLA: a narrative account*

Many points in the narrative account echo those made by MODE – both approaches pay attention to the address of the gaze in images; to the aesthetics, especially the clearly coded aesthetics (e.g. in use of space) of *Thinly Spread*; to the lo-fi (though just as worked-on) nature of the stories in *Diary of a Frugal*

*Family*. Sometimes these points are part of different arguments; sometimes, different points emerge.

Figure 5 *Diary of a Frugal Family* 'About me' page (screen shot of image and writing)

### About me and my blog



Hi,

My name's Cass and I write *The Diary of a Frugal Family* which is my blog about my family.

Lots of people ask me why I write this blog and I always say the same thing – I write because I want to make sure that we don't forget a single one of the memories that we make as a family. It's really important to me as both my mam and my brother died of Cancer a few years ago which really brought it home to me that we should make the most of every moment that we have together. All I have of them now are my memories and a some photographs and I'm determined that if anything every happens to me, my children will have as many memories and photos as possible to remember me by.

My plan is to get the blog made into a book for the children when they are older so they remember all the happy times we had while they were growing up (by make into a book, I don't mean I have aspirations of being a real life writer, I just mean I'll print it out, punch holes in it and stick it in a pretty folder).

The second reason is kind of linked to the first. In the spirit of making the most of every moment, I was very aware that working full time meant that I wasn't spending as much quality time as I wanted with my children. We couldn't afford for me to drop to part time so we had to drastically change our spending habits.

We're far from perfect but the changes we've made so far mean that I have now been able to afford to reduce my hours at work. I'm now able to drop the kids off at breakfast club on a morning and be there again to pick them up from school which is fantastic. We still have a long way to go, some debt to pay off and a lot more money to be saved and made and I hope that you'll be right here with us, following our journey.

As you've probably guessed, my blog is a bit of a mish mash of family fun, money saving tips and foodie ideas with lots of cupcakes and smiley faces thrown in too.

Feel free to e mail me at: [cass@frugalfamily.co.uk](mailto:cass@frugalfamily.co.uk) or you can [tweet me](#) and I'm usually around checking in on our [Facebook page](#) if that's your thing.

Thanks for reading x x

Cass

PS Just so you know, I'm not hardcore frugal! I'm not comfortable with having a cold house to save money or taking moneysaving to the extreme. I have massive respect for those who do but I'm more common sense frugal. I have lots of ideas to save money – some you may know and do, some you might know but never get round to doing and hopefully, loads of suggestions that you never thought of.

Oh, and the main reason that we try to live frugally is so we can have money to do things together as a family. Because to me, it's ALL ABOUT FAMILY x x

Figure 6 *Thinly Spread* 'About me' page (screen shot of image and writing)

**About**



I am an over stretched, thinly spread mother of 4 writing, teaching, tutoring and parenting in Somerset. My family gets first call on my time, writing is a close second, teaching brings in a bit of useful money and the housework gets neglected with glee.

This blog is about all the things I like to do. There will be the odd rant about things which get my goat and pieces about things which have caught my eye.

It will be full of all the things me and my children have enjoyed doing together over the last 16 years and the new things we are finding to do as we all get older. It is the story of all those little letting-gos as my lovely husband and I encourage our birds to spread their wings and fly.

I will be posting some of our favourite veggie family recipes, most of which can be cooked in 30 minutes or less with a toddler sitting on the work surface, an older child moaning about a grumbling stomach another one asking for homework help and yet another needing to be picked up from an after school club.

We spend a lot of time outside growing stuff and the garden has been my escape since they were tinsies. I feel I am still being a good Mum while I'm planting seeds and pulling weeds accompanied by various small children digging holes, making fairy houses, climbing trees and holding tea parties. So I will be posting stuff about gardening with kids (and without) too.

I am also a freelance copywriter and photographer and an unpublished (as yet) fiction writer so I will be sticking some of my writing on here too as well as some tips and ideas which have come out of the fiction writers' workshops which I run.

I hope you enjoy sharing bits of my life with me and that you will post a comment so I know you are out there!

### 1. *Image, text, and webpage as narrative*

In reading the narratives of the About Me pages, NOVELLA paid attention to the page-top, illustrative placing of the relatively small *Diary of a Frugal Family* family 'snapshot', which works like a Labovian abstract for the narrative that follows below (Labov, 1972; Patterson, 2013) By contrast, the image at the top of the *Thinly Spread* page is much larger, with a depth and saturation of colour that clearly distinguishes it from the grey-on-white of the text section - whereas the black-on-white text of *Diary of a Frugal Family* works in concert with the image colouring. So for *Thinly Spread*, the 'About me' story is more image-centred, starting from the woman who takes most of the picture space, moving to the child and the natural environment as context, and then proceeding to the

'backgrounded' text below. The image is sized, coloured and composed to tell the story rather than introduce it. This difference shows how stories online can be visually driven and not necessarily print-derived in their sequencing. That is, even if they move top to bottom, left to right, on a web page – which they will not always do – they may be narratively shaped by their visual elements. They can, too, move around, literally or metaphorically, depending on how they are viewed. This finding has implications for the nature of narrative in still images (Esin and Squire, 2013) something that has been argued often in art and film theory (Barthes, 1978; Mulvey, 2006; 1991) – and also for narrative online, which may travel across and between images, but also across and between text, links and ads.

When we examine blog post narratives, *Thinly Spread* and *Diary of a Frugal Family* images often work similarly to on the 'About me' pages. However, the comments feature maintains some textual linearity for *Thinly Spread* as well as *Diary of a Frugal Family*. Even in *Thinly Spread's* image-led posts, the story is not over until the last textual comment is made or answered. Even these comments and replies, though, contain, like other blog text, 'sideshadowing' (Morson, 1994) links that expand the narratives hypertextually, so their apparent linearity can be deceptive.

## 2. Working on blog narratives

Both blogs engage consistently and differentially with their audiences – readers, other bloggers, blog and other website administrators, companies and NGOs – and these engagements are productive as well as communicative. Both blogs make strong efforts to sustain and build interpersonal and microsocial blog-worlds, while at the same time functioning as new forms of variably paid work. The functionings of blogs as wider socio-economic practices do not map perfectly onto their narrower psychosocial functions, and both the overlaps and the mismatches invite further research. Moreover, the psychosocial and the socioeconomic workings of blog are achieved by extensive cross-media hybridities, transmediation and 'convergence culture', as is often the case with Internet signification, but such characterisations can be over-homogenising (Jenkins, 2008; Ryan, 2004)

NOVELLA identified 'lo-fi', 'scrapbook' versus 'composed' magazine narratives that were declared, and explicitly and implicitly worked up and performed within *Diary of a Frugal Family* and *Thinly Spread* blogs, respectively. These analyses relate strongly to MODE analyses of the platform characteristics and styles of the two blogs. The low-tech, 'Instagram' character of the *Diary of a Frugal Family* stories, declaredly a record, often hasty, of family events, largely for later family consumption, is instantiated, for NOVELLA, in the commonplace book, chapbook or scrapbook bricolage of genres patched together by the blog stories. This bricolage deploys, translated to the blog platform, the genres of diaries, as indicated in the blog title; recipes; lists; tips; memories; letters; images with a 'snapshot' quality explicitly said sometimes not to look pretty; 'photo-album' elements; event narratives that preserve aspects of speech in writing – and all these are loosely linked by familial and resource-scarcity topics.

The MODE analysis of this blog pointed to the effortful use of platform features in the blog to produce what NOVELLA has called its 'lo-fi' narratives – but MODE also noted the blog's apparently more 'narrative', interactional and mobile tone. For NOVELLA, this distinction is less significant, given our attention to the comments and replies which follow both blogs, and which constitute narrative work in both cases.

*Thinly Spread's* 'composed' character was analysed by NOVELLA in terms of highly structured visual and verbal narratives that are more heavily synthesized into a consistent style –characterised, for NOVELLA as for MODE, by the priority of image function and visual features within the blog, and the consistent use of nature imagery, despite topics that are more diverse than in *Diary of a Frugal Family*. MODE analysis, suggesting a probable concentration here on offline blog composition, supports some of this account. However, NOVELLA recognized here too the divergent genres deployed within the blog, with for instance the translation to this platform of diary, letter, opinion column and lifestyle journalism genres.

MODE notes the differential frequency of posting between the two blogs, as NOVELLA also did. MODE was able to part-quantify the on- and offline work involved with posts to the blogs. NOVELLA, as indicated above, addressed comments and responses to posts, as well as the amount of links and non-author material used; this intertextuality is also 'work', because it is required to maintain the overall blog 'storyline' that will retain and built audience. NOVELLA also investigated stories within posts that explicitly addressed blogging as work, telling of how it took resources from other activities, and how it connected to resource gain (through company gifts, including trip, sponsorship, and the maintenance of social-capital links with other bloggers, blogsites, and other sites). We think that this analysis can usefully extend to give a fine-grained picture of blogs as work for women, particularly in straitened times, in ways that may relate interestingly to other gendered kinds of part-time work, piece work, emotion work, and home-based work, all of which are often poorly and ambiguously monetized. We would also argue that while *Thinly Spread* stories often show verbal and visual characteristics of professional journalism, *Diary of a Frugal Family* stories display common characteristics of successful online posting, in blogs but also on picture-based sites and video channels (informality, immediacy, personal address), that constitute an important version of the online field's emergent professionalism - a version that is, indeed, translated 'back' into print and broadcast journalism in some cases.

Like MODE, NOVELLA views these various forms of story-work as building various kinds of 'capital' or resources, as well as drawing on existing stores of resources and capitals.

### 3. *Narrative audience*

MODE draws a strong distinction between the direct and less direct audience addresses of *Diary of a Frugal Family* and *Thinly Spread* blogs respectively. For NOVELLA, stories of tips and 'what works' aimed explicitly at the blog audience, lists made directly for the readers, and recipes with a second-person 'you'

address, for instance, are indeed more evident in *Diary of a Frugal Family*, and these consensus-building blog stories are often extended and explicitly co-constructed in the comments. *Thinly Spread* does nevertheless, for NOVELLA, engage continuously with its readers, although sometimes somewhat differently, for instance, by offering aspirational positions, or positions readers declare they cannot take up (when in comments they express admiration of how something looks in a particular photo, for instance, or say they could not manage such a difficult recipe on a weeknight). Moreover, for NOVELLA, audiences of sponsors, advertisers, other bloggers, blogsite administrators and other site administrators, are key to both blogs, despite their different forms. Considering these wider audiences makes it clear how both sets of blog-narratives are situated within social and economic systems of exchange.

#### 4. *Family/self/food narratives*

In terms of narrative analysis, a similar pattern to that deriving from points 2 and 4 and Figure 5 (above) of MODE's analysis was noted by NOVELLA but developed in terms of its relation to cultural discourses. NOVELLA noted how *Diary of a Frugal Family* posts emphasise family – for instance, concentrating on family reactions to food - whereas *Thinly Spread* shows more compartmentalising and moving between identities as mother, partner, writer, photographer, activist -for example, by relating food to environmental issues and providing recipes for dinners with the blogger's partner (Elliott, et.al, 2014). This is also apparent on the 'About Me' pages where *Thinly Spread* describes herself diversely as 'mother of 4 writing, teaching, tutoring and parenting', while *Diary of a Frugal Family* says in its PS, 'it's ALL ABOUT FAMILY'; and in the 'About me' images, in which the *Thinly Spread* blogger positions herself centrally, with secondary elements of child and nature, while the *Diary of a Frugal Family* 'About me' image is of a family group (including the dog). In the blog posts, *Thinly Spread* but less, *Diary of a Frugal Family*, include stories thematically organized around non-family events. The links and sponsors are more family-oriented for *Diary of a Frugal Family* and include more issue-based organisations, for instance, Fair Trade, for *Thinly Spread*.

In addition, and as indicated above, NOVELLA analysis points to the different *means* of structuring narratives around family in the two blogs. From this standpoint, it is not so much that *Diary of a Frugal Family* is 'narrative' and non-conceptual, as in the MODE analysis, but rather that its conceptual character is conveyed by a lo-fi, spontaneous, experiential style that occults its form of what MODE describes as 'conceptualism'. Here, family in both verbal and visual narratives of family is connoted more or less stably with fun and enjoyment, as well as frugality. By contrast, *Thinly Spread's* 'narrative' quality, as MODE would call it, or event-story character, as NOVELLA might have it, (Patterson, 2013), is occulted by its 'conceptual' nature, in MODE terms – or for NOVELLA, its generalizing, habitual and third-person narratives, and its narratives that invoke family metaphorically through larger issues, such as health and environment.

#### 5. *Narratives of 'austerity' and resource scarcity*

Time and expertise are constraints that MODE addresses by looking at the resource requirements for both of these blogs and analyzing the differently-

allocated on- and offline, template and customized, resources required in order to get these blogs to function well, as they do, in and for 'austerity' times. These differential resource uses relate closely to the amount of work the blogs do, and the capital/s they build up (see above, 2.). NOVELLA also analysed explicit stories of resource constraint - economic especially in *Diary of a Frugal Family*; based on time, particularly women's time, in *Diary of a Frugal Family's* and *Thinly Spread's* tales of the double shift (Hochschild, 1989) and other time constraints. NOVELLA was interested in how 'austerity discourse' (Jensen, 2012) appeared within and shaped those stories. NOVELLA also looked at the ways in which the blogs themselves are stories co-constructed via sponsorships (sometimes), advertisements, and reports on samples and other goods received that themselves involve or generate financial or other resources, and how these wider co-constructions functioned alongside the blogs' own stories of 'austerity' and resource scarcity.

#### 6. Narrative transgressions

Narrative analysis's interests in the intertextualities and polysemy of stories mean that it focuses analysis on parallel and contradictory meanings. In this research project, addressing blogs within the moralized but contested cultural spaces of contemporary mothering and resource scarcity, NOVELLA was particularly concerned with transgressive narratives. MODE pays attention to the 'luxury' connotations of *Thinly Spread's* space use; NOVELLA looks more generally at how signifiers of excess disrupt the narratives described above (in 4. and 5.) across the blogs. Space and layers of editorial effort and detail work in this way in *Thinly Spread* to foreground the blog itself rather than just its declared 'mothering' and 'natural life' themes. In *Diary of a Frugal Family*, the high posting frequency, which constitutes the blog as an almost overwhelming life-record, works similarly; the record supercedes the life at times. The blogs also contradict themselves internally, in different ways. Stories in *Diary of a Frugal Family* brings together family frugality and fun, but the link is often severed by pleasures that contravene thrift around food, and the scarcity of family time is sometimes subordinated to the blogger's 'me time'. *Thinly Spread's* narrated concerns with straitened family times are occasionally diverted by lavish imagery of the type MODE identifies, and a wide array of non-family topics, especially around the environment. *Thinly Spread's* 'natural ethics' stories and *Diary of a Frugal Family's* 'fun' stories, therefore, talk back to austerity discourse and at times assert alternatives, particularly when they explicitly take 'pushback' positions against austerity, opposing the closure of breakfast clubs (*Frugal*), or supporting campaigns against food company pressure to buy poor-value, low-nutrition products (*Thinly*).

More broadly, across the modalities or media at play in blogs, we have already seen in both MODE and NOVELLA analyses that the multiplicity of stories in operation inevitably generates contradictions. The genre-stories called up by particular blog elements generate radiating, what-if narratives not explicitly played out. The webpages' hypertextual radiations to other blogs, advertisers, and sponsors, suspend us within more untold stories of blog capitals and markets. The gaps within images and between words also break up the stories

(Butler, 2005). Narratives are uneven, constitutionally, and attention to their playings out across blogs foregrounds signification's uncertainties.

### Benefits and constraints of a cross-disciplinary collaboration

There are both benefits and constraints in using cross-disciplinary approaches for examining blogs. Among the main benefits are that the combined approach enabled an aptly encompassing view of the structure of blogs on two levels: blogging platform design (e.g., thematic templates) and uptake of the design through blogger customization (e.g., changing the thematic template colours or adding/deleting columns to post template pages, including edited photographs, inserting writing). It was particularly useful to have ethnographic, multimodal social semiotic and narrative perspectives to draw from in terms of understanding the patterns that emerged in our study. Where at times our emergent findings seemed to demand different types of 'naming' (e.g., what do terms such as *media*, *platform*, *genre* actually mean in these new environments?) as well as varied definitions rooted in the distinct epistemological traditions of each methodological approach, there was a time constraint on finding ways to agree on terminologies before proceeding to next stages of analysis. This is a problem that will take some time, and many researchers/theorists to settle. Despite the competing discourses inherent in each epistemological stance and the time required to tease out the ensuing methodological differences, it was nonetheless a positive attribute of this project to explore how methodologies can be combined/extended/challenged in collaborative research of online field sites.

### Conclusion

This report has set out to identify how blogs - as 'online field sites', as sites of meaning construction, or as sites of 'narrative' - offer researchers opportunities for investigating the social world of the platform's users, and, with that, of their social positions, values, relations and everyday practices. The aim in combining multimodal social semiotic, ethnographic and narrative methods has been to provide a larger, more encompassing frame and approach for examining the 'contents' of food blogs: a frame and approach that is able to attend adequately to the material, which might not be sufficiently illuminated by any one of the three methodologies used independently. The Economic and Social Research Council encourages research use of new types of data arising from digitization as well as methodological development focused on 'new technology, innovation and skills.' It has been a central focus of this collaborative project to address this research initiative, particularly since blogs remain under-theorized and under-researched.

Through the cross-disciplinary approach developed in the project, we have illustrated which user-generated content in a blog could be analyzed as a source of data and how. Specifically, we have highlighted the modes most frequently in use in the two blogs we sampled; namely writing (e.g., captions, headings, paragraphs, blocks of writing), images (e.g. photographs), colour, and layout. These are all available and used within the digitally-enabled customizations made possible via the resources offered by the blogging platform. We



demonstrated how both the customization of the platform as well as the forms and contents of blogs need to be examined to account for all social and semiotic features, and in this we could reveal some of the 'semiotic work' – the meaning-making work - undertaken by the blogger. As far as the narrative analysis was concerned, we were able to examine how visual and verbal media work together in different and somewhat new ways within the blog platform, along with comments and responses, advertisements, sponsorship and links. We identified both the translations and patching-together of multiple offline genres into blogs, and the emergence of at least two online blog-genres, one typified by lo-fi and one by composed aesthetics. We were able to instantiate the operation of incoherence, contradiction and transgression as narrative heuristics within a platform where narrative multiplicity, polysemy and intertextuality are particularly clear.

We have provided an outline of how we addressed the practical challenges in empirical research of digital material on-line, focusing on ethical, archival and related methodological issues as being of main concern. What is personal and what is public is increasingly blurred, and nowhere more so than with 'digital data' online. Similarly, what is copyrighted and what is available for archival and dissemination is not clear in any reliable way. It became a prime concern for this particular project to understand the distinctions of what data sources can be 'captured', 'archived' and 'disseminated'. Further, although the blogs are in the public domain, individual and cultural definitions and expectations of privacy are ambiguous, contested and changing. Consequently, while publicly available, the food blogs we studied do display personal information and as such, informing the bloggers of our research became for us a strong ethical responsibility (AoIR, 2002; BERA, 2011; ESRC Ethics Framework, 2010) and we have outlined above the measures we took to work sensitively with bloggers' material. Consulting with the British Library Web Archive team, who specialize in online data archival and copyright regulations, provided a well-founded and ethical application of data documentation and data protection for this project.

### **Future research**

In terms of future research, blogs offer a rich and accessible source of qualitative data; especially on recent and ongoing social phenomena such as those developing, as here, for mothers and others around food and other resources in the time of 'austerity discourse'. Much remains to be investigated in relation to this new and attractive data source. Our work was focused primarily on methodological development for using blogs as a qualitative data source. We pointed to certain substantive and structural findings about narratives of motherhood in food blogs, which raise questions for policymakers about what can be assumed in addressing mothers as food buyers, makers, distributors and consumers. There is also much to be explored in the research on blogs as an online field site. For example, there is an increasing need for understanding the sociological and semiotic questions of blogs in relation to integrated commercialised features (e.g., corporate logos, video advertisements, hyperlinks to external commercial sites). The previously relatively secure boundaries of public and private are everywhere an issue. Blogs, while a relatively new

medium, have evolved since their emergence in the early 1990s (Garden, 2011; Hookway, 2008). For example, current and popular blogs are often sponsored by corporations to market their product. This integration, which was not common in earlier blogs, is reflecting larger societal shifts. The use of company logos and embedding of advertisements (video and visuals) raises questions about ethical procedures and archival protocol. Thus, a future area of this work would be to develop or adapt methodologies that would be able to attend to the larger social ideologies apparent in the embedded commercial elements and to examine how blogs themselves function as forms of work.

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## Appendix A

### Timetable and working practices of the collaborative research project

The collaborative project entailed three work packages. The MODE and NOVELLA teams met approximately twice per work package to discuss progress about the project timetable and collaborate on the next stage of the research. The two groups met fully and jointly on eight occasions: in 2013, in January, March, April, September, November; in 2014, January, February 2014, March 2014. Smaller groups from the nodes also met before, during and after this time.

*The first work package* (October 2012-January 2013) focused on establishing the principles and procedures for the purposive selection of case study blogs, and of sampling within cases (e.g. which cases and sampling for how many months). The corpus of data was built from the initial sample of family food blogs of mothers based in the UK. The project drew on a range of food blogs based in the UK, such as blogs linked to by local and national parenting organizations in the UK. After the first four meetings to agree the scope and the research questions, sampling and analysis were conducted from October 2012 to January 2013.

*The second work package* (February - May 2013) focused on establishing the cross-disciplinary approach to be applied in the analysis of the data, namely ethnographic, multimodal social semiotic, and narrative analysis. The first two methods were used by MODE and the latter by NOVELLA. Ethnographic analysis of the blogging platforms was selected to map the technical, social and sociohistorical orientations of the corpus. This method helped the team narrow the sample and identify which features of the sampled blogs were generated by the blogging platform and which were customized by the bloggers. Multimodal analysis was selected to identify the modes of representation that are used in the blogs and to analyze how they operate in ensembles to produce coherent texts and narrative genres. Multimodal social semiotic analysis highlighted the significance of the meaning choices that bloggers make in designing the blog environment and the posts. Using successive analyses of narrative structural analysis, narrative thematic analysis, and analyses of narrative contexts via character positioning within narratives, and broader generic and discursive positioning, the NOVELLA team focused on examining the role of food and the construction of mothering in visual and written stories about feeding families.

The second work package also involved meeting with relevant staff at the British Library to establish data harvesting and archiving of the two blogs to be sampled closely for the project.

*The third work package* (June –Sept 2013) was aimed to tease out the methodological differences and commonalities between the two teams. A key focus in this stage of research was to share preliminary findings to inform and where possible merge the developing findings.

*The fourth work package* (October 2013 – January 2014) involved planning the collective dissemination of findings for publications, workshops, training

sessions and seminars.