Examining Garden Blogs as a Communication System

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The blogosphere supports an interpersonal meaning production process by providing the space and opportunities for communication through the circulation and discussion of topics. Using systems theory, as developed by Niklas Luhmann, I explore how garden bloggers issue invitations to communicate by studying their selection process from all possible entries and images. I examine the selection criteria for posting an entry and especially look at Swedish and German garden blogs to study "ordinary" people's relations in the blogosphere from the perspective of sharing opinions, impressions, and emotions about their garden environment. As a result, the selection criteria of novelty, values, identification, conflicts, visuality, and sociality are revealed. A communicative culture of approval, admiration, and respect, which promotes emotional ties and strengthens the feeling of common concerns in the blogosphere, is noticeably present.

Keywords: Domestic blogs, communication, systems theory, gardening

Blogging has been described as a publishing revolution that both private and public persons can use to disseminate information. By posting photos and comments, conveying stories, as well as linking to other websites, blogs, or to one's own earlier entries, polymorphous relations are established in the blogosphere. This article examines garden blogs that fall under the category of topic-centered blogs; themes concerning gardens/gardening are expected and communicated through narratives, comments, and especially images. These blogs belong to the sphere of domestic blogs that are insufficiently researched, even though they are more common than political blogs (Lenhart & Fox, 2006). Compared to other domestic blogs, such as craft, fashion, and interior décor blogs, the presence of garden blogs on the Internet is still relatively low (Bosch Studie, 2011).

The bulk of existing blog research concentrates on the relationship between bloggers and the public sphere and attempts to understand the increasing influence of weblog authors on public opinion. Researchers have also addressed gender and identity issues, as well as media genre issues, educational purposes, and relationships within blog communities (e.g., Gurak, Antonijevic, Johnson, Ratliff, & Reyman,

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2004; Lopez, 2009; Lüders, Prøitz, & Rasmussen, 2010; Pole, 2010; van Doorn, van Zoonen, & Wyatt, 2007; Schmidt, 2007; Siles, 2011).

Traditionally, when analyzing blog communication, we speak in terms of representations: A blogger perceives an event, undertakes an activity, and then describes it more or less, which means that the event or activity precedes the entry.

However, this article suggests another perspective: that of constructivism, which means that posting content is always the result of a selection process of possible entries and images made by an observer, not by the world itself. Here, the observer perspective becomes central. Observing means drawing distinctions (Spencer-Brown, 1969) by noticing something at the expense of something else to which one pays less attention (Graf, 2010, p. 95).

This article intends to explore the guiding distinctions of garden blog communication that precede blog entries. Inspired by news value research on how events become news (Galtung & Ruge, 1965), this article examines the distinctions that influence the selection of topics within the communication of garden bloggers. This article is not about what people do in their gardens as a mirror of actual garden life, but rather it is about how garden bloggers issue invitations to communicate and what selection criteria are involved. To stress the observer perspective in analyzing blog communication, I use the systems-theoretical approach, as developed by the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann.

Approximately 50 regularly updated garden blogs, 25 written in Swedish and 25 in German, comprised this study. Garden blogging is popular in Scandinavia, as well as in the United States, United Kingdom, and China, but it is less popular in the German-speaking countries (Bosch Studie, 2011). In selecting the blogs, I used criteria (such as being a hobby gardener) that represent a certain variety of popular and somewhat popular blogs; gender is also a criterion, although most garden bloggers are female. Of the examined blogs, 50% are created by females, 30% by men, and 20% by couples. Finally, garden bloggers are ordinary people who possess a small or large garden to cultivate vegetables, fruits, trees, and flowers. Since it is their hobby, they mostly garden for pleasure. In line with many other bloggers, they see blogging as an activity pursued for enjoyment (Lenhart & Fox, 2006, p. 7).

The oldest blog, written in Swedish, originated in 2005, but most blogging activity has occurred since 2008, and most blogs are situated within a blog hotel, such as blogspot.com. (See Figure 1). My blog selection is a mixture of well-established and newer blogs that have differing numbers of frequent readers (e.g., subscribers on blogspot.com). Some of these blogs attract from 30 to 360 readers, with others drawing more than 1,000 visitors a month. The use of images differs and can be divided into two types: (1) photos used as illustrations of texts, which represents less than two-thirds of these blogs; and (2) photos that constitute the majority of the blog and that are called photo blogs. I have remained outside of this blogosphere as a "lurker," that is, as a passive audience member. However, I have had access to posted comments when they were openly published. The entries that I analyzed were mainly posted from 2009–2011.

Figure 1. The oldest Swedish garden blog from 2005.

The Observer/System Perspective

To analyze the complexity of communication processes, Luhmann (1984) proposes thinking in terms of social systems where a "system" is a totality of mutual relations or an organized complexity that consists of various elements that relate to each other. A system exhibits a degree of closure, of autopoiesis (self-producing or self-organized), and is self-referential, meaning that all communication in the system is produced by the system itself. The system creates its own structures, its own communicative operations, and its own environment, as well as its own boundaries. A social system—in this case, the communication of garden bloggers—constructs its own perception of itself and of its environment, or in Luhmann's (2003) words "[. . .] all external references used in the system must be understood as internal operations" (p. 32). The blogosphere as a communication system constructs an order for which there is no blueprint in the environment but is instead a result of internal operations.

Communicated blog entries, resulting from internal blog operations, are influenced by several selection processes (Schmidt, 2007). The blogosphere as a social system has a specific construction. As selves, bloggers define their identities, starting with the name of the blog, for example, "The compost

philosopher"[2] or "wall flowers."[3] This selection process continues with how the blogs look. One can choose between different templates from the blogger service and then edit the selected template. Goffman (1959) would have described the layout as "scenery and stage props" and as part of the (blogging) performance (p. 22). Almost all blogs are decorated with images from one's own garden. There are also links to the "about me" pages featuring the blogger's self-description and a posted picture. Some bloggers divulge the name and place of their residence or garden, while others, more reticent, only mention the gender and the region where they live or where the garden is situated. In contrast to social networking sites (Jones, Millermaier, Goya-Martinez, & Schuler, 2008), the level of disclosure of personal information among the group of garden bloggers studied here is relatively low. Furthermore, the blog often features a motto that further describes its specific identity, such as "For an unhappy person, every flower is a weed, for a happy one, each weed is a flower." This motto, in a blog titled "The wild gardening blog,"[4] succinctly expresses the relationship to nature in one's garden.

These specified features are identity markers that the blogger has chosen to publish. However, identity is not given, that is, it is not an attribute but is instead constructed in some way and is always defined in relation to a specific context. Here, the context is gardening and blogging, with the intent of managing blogging relations in the community; in other words, conducting the search for desired reader(s). In White's (2008) phenomenological network theory, he argues that identity in a network can only be maintained via the control of one's own identity in relation to all other expressions of identities. In the case of gardening bloggers, control can refer to how to design the page, which topics and photos to display and how, or even whether to edit comments. Identity and control are mutual and embedded in a "net-dom." According to White, "net" refers to the pattern of ties, and "dom" for the domain that "comprises stories, symbols, and expectations, and together they co-constitute a netdom" (White, Fuhse, Thiemann, & Buchholz, 2007, p. 549)—and, in my case, the blogosphere.

Thinking in terms of systems allows us to see connectivities and, more specifically, to place the blog entries in relation to different contexts, not only to the garden and gardening but also to the context of the blogosphere that regulates, even identifies, the form of communication according to behavior, expectation, attitude, and emotions (Schmidt, 1996, p. 195). Simplified, this determines which entries are possible (and which are not) if one wants to be a part of the blogging community. The social system of the blogosphere therefore fulfills a function on two levels: individual and social (ibid., p. 196). One receives a frame and thus knows and learns how to behave in the blogosphere and can state one's own expectations. This is the precondition for social communication that also enables further communication. In regard to the social level of the blogosphere, there are implicit normative participating rules to regulate communication, such as being authentic (e.g., no advertising language), linking to the source of information, and following certain linguistic and argumentative rules, such as minimizing harm done to others and so forth (Schmidt, 2006). This can be described as a form of order or, more specifically, as a form of relationship management where the boundary is constructed, and expectation structures are established (Schmidt, 2007). As an example of relation management, one female blogger self-reflectively

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[2] See www.kompostfilosofen.blogspot.com

[3] See www.mauerblumen.blogspot.com

[4] See www.das-wilde-gartenblog.de

informs her readers about the circumstances as to why she is writing an entry about insect hotel habitats. Additional relations are activated by informing the readers about having received some promotional gifts to advertise these products. To preserve her credibility, she positions the post in this context, accompanying it with a photo of an opened packet and the products to clarify her role:

As a gardening blogger, sometimes I get various parcels, samples and products sent to me to write about. This is something I only do if it makes sense to me (and I have the time and desire!). Just now, I received an unusually voluminous package—but with very useful content, namely, a butterfly and a bee hotel (June 30, 2011 www.das-wilde-gartenblog.de).

The communication of garden bloggers, understood as a social system, produces its own reality as result of internal operations that are based on the difference between the garden blogosphere (the system) and the environment. This difference is not an ontological one but is mutually related to the operation of observation (Luhmann, 1984, p. 244). In the environment of the social system of gardening bloggers, we can note the garden in particular and nature in general, as well as the inner social environment of other media organizations treating gardening issues, such as TV programs, newspapers, journals, and books (intertextual relations). We can also note the environment of other functional systems, such as politics (ecology issues), economics (prices, bargains), education (gardening classes, knowledge about planting), art (gardening design), and family (children, pets in the garden). This indicates that the environment is a negative-correlate of the system in that the image of a wonderfully designed garden in a blog is not a representation of a garden but instead a correlate of one's own operations. It is a result of a process that encompasses what the blogger holds to be real, for example, a garden as "real-*for*-us" (Schmidt, 2011). Without these results of one's own constructions in the form of blog entries and posted images, nothing can be communicated and referred to.

However, these system boundaries between system and environment are maintained with the help of a code to filter the environment of the system and simultaneously to render the system calculable toward the environment. According to the functional system of media, Luhmann (1996) speaks of the general code of the difference between information and noninformation. On a semantic level, applying it to garden bloggers, with information related in some way to the topic of gardening, nature in general marks the boundaries. On a technical level, the gardening blogger simultaneously acts as a publisher in that this individual possesses the technical infrastructure to make "publishing" possible outside the professional publishing industry and without requiring an editor, publisher, or distributor.

Blogging is Communicating

Luhmann's term of communication differs from traditional concepts of transmission of a message., . It is not about a sender giving up something that the receiver then acquires, because the sender does not give anything away in the sense that it is being lost. It is instead a context (relationship) with something that determines the communicative process, as described previously. One is tempted to imagine that the transferred information is the same for both sender and receiver. It sometimes seems as if this identity is determined by the quality of the information, but identity is, as noted, constructed in the communication process. The identity of the information must be construed as possibly mean very different things to the sender and the receiver (Luhmann, 1984, pp. 193–194). In Schmidt's (2011) words, communication is a "social process based on the principles of reflexivity in terms of expected expectations (in the domain of knowledge), imputed imputations (in the domain of motives and intentions), and discourses organizing themselves via new contributions to respective topics" (p. 2).

Communication is, according to Luhmann (1984, pp. 203–204), the union of three selection processes: (1) information (what is selected to be communicated or what the message is about); (2) utterance (the selection of a form of communication or how the information is to be communicated); and (3) understanding (of the meaning that is generated, of whether the [a] meaning is selected, and if yes, which meaning is selected and how?). In the case of blogs, just posting an entry is not communication but an invitation to communicate. However, understanding (and hence communication) occurs "if a comment or trackback connects to an entry on a blog, or just every time one blog refers to another" (Taekke, 2005, p. 14). Understanding is not the duplication of a statement but the matter of connecting to a statement or a message. Meaning, "as a horizon of possibilities" (Luhmann, 1995, p. 65), is constituted in the communication process of the blogs and not inherent in a message. In the act of blogging, one imagines the potential reader and does not know in advance who or if someone reads the post or responds to it unless a comment has arrived. Since the post is archived and can be searched by indexes, responses do not need to be sent immediately (Rettberg, 2008, p. 66). There is a certain temporal delay that differs from other virtual interactions, such as chat and Second Life, and that therefore limits spontaneity.

When persons engage in the act of blogging, they add "posts" to their weblog. They publish their thoughts and pictures for others, allowing their audience to read these new entries and provide feedback through enabled comment functions. Writing comments on others' entries is a direct way of performing conversational interactivity (Taekke, 2005, p. 7) and strengthens the social character of the community. Based on the technical infrastructure, this form of virtual interactive communication system fosters a reciprocal relationship in which people often add others' weblogs to their own "blogroll," thus creating a network of links to other weblogs and fostering the possibility of subscribing to a blog as a reader or follower. As a result, new relationships and communication contexts emerge. Hence, a blog is created by the owner, as well as by the audience. Applying Luhmann (1984), a blogosphere is a communication system based on the selection of "what" topic is selected and "how' it is communicated, and it is often presented in an informal, personal style that is illustrated by images and is at least understood in the form of comments and references in the blog entries.

Guiding Distinctions for Topic Selections in Garden Blogs

In posting an entry, selections have to take place to reduce the complexity of garden life. The blogger regards some things as more newsworthy than others. The selection of information for dissemination as a blog entry follows certain criteria that this article will explore further. I want to provide possible responses to my research question—how garden bloggers invite their readers to "connecting communication" from a systems-theoretical point of view—by examining the main guiding distinctions for selecting topics treated in blog entries.

Blogging topics can be directly related to oneself, to others in the network, and to the environment as "other-reference"; hence, they are embedded in the order of communication. Topics of the posts, as results of one's own construction process, have a factual aspect on the one hand and a temporal aspect on the other. Some topics provoke new contributions or at least comments; other topics are exhausted quickly. Schmidt (2006), who discusses weblogs as such, distinguishes among blog topics that are "spikes," "spiky chatters," and "mostly chatters." The first are topics that receive relatively short attention, the second are wave-like, as they are discussed over a longer period, and the last are discussed on a stable and low level (p. 58). Such topics as weather conditions, cultivation issues, and the beauty of flowers are discussed on a stable level, while issues of seasons, pest control, wild life, green gardening, trends, and also reflections on the blogosphere are discussed in waves. Gardening is dependent on seasons; therefore, it is not surprising that most topics during the fall season refer to harvest, foliage, and winter preparation as representing "other-reference" or, in Schmidt's words, as results of experiences that are "real-for-us" (Schmidt, 2011, p. 4).

To identify the guiding distinctions that precede blog entries, this article focuses on the topics to which various postings relate and on those that generate communicative links or connecting communication. I chose an inductive approach and analyzed the topics of the posts to locate the main guiding distinctions used in selecting topics. Inspired by news value research and by Luhmann's mass media analysis (1996), I isolated the following selection criteria: novelty, values, identification, conflicts, visuality, and sociality. One topic can include several distinctions. Visuality is present in almost all of these blogs, but I want to mention it as a separate criterion to stress its special role when it comes to analyzing topics and further communication.

I will illustrate these guiding distinctions by referencing certain bloggers and comments on their blogs. Most of the referenced comments are made by other garden or domestic bloggers, but sometimes comments are posted by the blogger's friends. In my quotes, I have chosen mainly opinion posts and those topics related to environmental issues. In addition, I include the number of subscribers to the specific blog, if figures are available, to get an idea of its popularity.

Novelty

In line with Luhmann's mass media analysis (1996), a post entry has something new or distinguishable to tell. The topic does not have to be anything spectacular, but the simple repetition of a

former entry is not expected or welcomed. Even an entry on the lack of novelty can contain novelty. One can read blog entries that ask for reader opinion on how best to continue the blog due to the lack of novelty in gardening issues. If one has a stable group of followers, the question may be regarded as rhetorical and the answer is accordingly encouraging. Especially in systems of "high sensibility" (Luhmann, 1984, p. 267), which blog communication falls under, topics may vanish, as everything seems to have been told (or posted). Even such a seemingly narrow topic as gardening has myriad reference points, as noted, and can always guarantee new topics, which is necessary for the survival of the communication system.

An entry can refer to a topical event, spread news within the field of gardening, describe a current activity, refer to earlier entries, and even refer to past events, activities, and experiences. Blogging about a current event or activity is one of the significant factors in the selection of information in gardening blogs. It is linked to the seasonal activity of gardening and often used as a kind of diary. Posting something about winter activities during the summer season, for instance, requires some explanation.

To illustrate novelty, I will discuss a topic that allows for differing opinions: consumption in relation to garden trends. This complex topic generates contributions on several levels in a wave-like manner and is thus a successful starting point to generate new entries and comments from different points of view without repeating oneself. For example, most of the entries treating this issue circle around the dichotomy of unfettered (*über*-consumption) and sustainable consumption. Seeing plants from the perspective of being trendy or unfashionable is for some bloggers a development that results in *über*-consumption, as a blogger explains:

> It is not enough that the fashion industry forces us to critically see over our closet year after year, now even the flower industry can give us a bad conscience. The potted plants trend is moving away from small-scale flowers, bustling flower windows, towards huge soloists, the bigger the better. . . . I have better things to do than following every trend for potted plants. (January 28, 2011, www.guenstiggaertnern.blogspot.com)

This female blogger, with 192 subscribers (May 2012), reflects during the winter on the role of trends, and she refuses to adapt an ideology of fashionability regarding house plants or to adopt a lifestyle culture that demands a "rapid turnover of identity indicators" (Bonner, 2008, p. 34). Of the 15 comments following her post, all agree with her, and they narrate different stories (based on the topic), and stress the incompatibility between sustainability and gardening trends as being similar to fashion trends. Most of the comments stress the importance of having established a relationship to one's own plants, which stands in contrast to a throw-away-behavior that follows every trend.

Another example of consumption behavior is articulated by a female blogger from the perspective of mass consumption:

> Last year I spontaneously bought one of those magnolias everyone raves about . . .
> I planted it next to the pool. Thought it would be nice, a little Mediterranean area . . .

> Mediterranean flair is this year's catchphrase in the garden world . . .   and the
> shops follow suit. 129 kr for a 1.5 m tall olive tree at a discount store. Have not fallen
> for it yet. Olive trees will soon be in the home of every Svensson worth her name, I
> guess. Like a   new harangue: house, dog, and   an olive   tree. (May 12,   2011,
> www.tradgards-tankar.blogspot.com)

A trendy plant fits into an exterior and helps to express one's identity, the female blogger writes. A symbol of the Mediterranean, the olive tree, is available as a special offer at a discount store. But here, the blogger makes a distinction: Once it becomes mass-lifestyle culture due to its price, the blogger loses interest in buying an olive tree, as the desire to express an individualized vision of one's self cannot be accomplished. Only one comment on this post shares this opinion, and its writer declares she is "getting sick" of olive trees. The implication is that if one follows garden trends, one can expect change each year and season. Consequently, becoming tired of plants after a while produces a consumer attitude of constant renewal, which these bloggers reject.

However, in contrast to this blog, other bloggers see bargains from the perspective of satisfying consumption, as another female blogger writes:

> This week I got a very good bargain. Was eating breakfast when I saw that they sold
> olive trees at City Gross. My dear colleague E was also excited so we set off with
> my van. We thought that they would already be sold since the ad had threatened that
> they only had a very limited number of trees. (May 5, 2011, www.landetkrokus.se)

In comparison to the former blog with 42 readers (May 2012), this blog, with 174 readers (May 2012), is relatively popular, and its writer also received 11 comments that agreed with her excitement. This post—and the blog as a whole—emphasize garden style issues: Having an olive tree has the symbolic power of being trendy, that is, of showing good taste in consumer society. In this context, I want to define "taste" (and the same goes for "habitus," according to Bourdieu, (1996) not as an attribute of individuals or social groups but as a relational category that has the function of managing relations in a social network. It allows for distinctions between good and bad taste "and sorts out not only judgments but people as well" (Luhmann, 2000, p. 240). By expressing one's own aesthetic gardening preferences in a blog entry, bloggers distinctly place themselves in the wide discourse arena of taste that allows for (or not) connectivity possibilities in a specific manner. Where olive trees are associated with the Mediterranean—that is, with leisure time, relaxation, and a feel-good atmosphere—these trees also serve as an example of a reservoir of never-ending narratives about "must haves." Hence, trend issues exhibit the quality of telling new stories, and by expressing taste, people can be "sorted out," meaning that the desired reader(s) can be addressed.

Values: Good/Bad Behavior

The topic of gardening seems to be closely associated with certain moral values, such as environmentally friendly behavior to minimize one's impact on the environment. It can be expressed by respect or disdain for people's behavior toward nature. From the perspective of ecology blog topics, a

whole range of entries describe human contributions toward improving the earth by planting trees, being careful with the use of such natural resources as water, and using organic gardening methods. For the following male blogger, this means that a change in consumer behavior is also needed:

> By the way, today, it will be 100% organic. It feels a little better each time I do this. I'm still not 100% organic in my life, but on the way. . . If you think this is a hard task, it is because I am just a thorn in your side and you wish that you could make this decision, too. Yep it is so! (May 10, 2011, www.hannu-s.blogspot.com)

This blogger, whose popular blog numbers 353 subscribed readers (May 2012), challenges his blog audience to make dinner (or lunch) from organic food. He aspires to involve and engage the whole network into thinking and acting ecologically. Based on the comments (10 posts), he meets with approval: Some want to do better, some tell him they already eat organic food, and so on. Some weeks later, he picks the issue up again and tells his audience that he feels good when he buys locally produced organic food, which is documented by a photo of his just-purchased goods (September 19, 2011). The two comments express agreement by stressing the "completely genuine feeling" of locally produced food.

Good (meaning "sustainable") behavior is also addressed according to garden design. Aesthetic issues that are closely related to taste and therefore play an important role in relation management are here combined with sustainability, as the following entry shows:

> We don't like to cut dead trees, if we can think of another use. Dead wood is good for small animals and can be an element to create structure in the garden. (August 9, 2010, www.das-wilde-gartenblog.de)

Illustrated by one picture, the tree skeleton is envisioned as a flower stand, and all four comments praise this "great idea." Retaining dead wood for another use means, in this case, finding ways to improve insect diversity in the garden. Emphasis here is placed on a multiuse tree and the integration of beauty in sustainable gardening. In a broader sense, we can interpret it as the relationship between humans and nature, one "based on partnership rather than domination" (Merchant, 2003, p. 206). This realization of being part of an interconnected set of relationships in a broader world means the blogger (a couple) does not see any contradiction to tasteful design in the garden.

Good behavior is mostly articulated from the point of view of one's actions. But if norm violations are expressed in the blogs, there are also actions by third persons, outside of the blogosphere—a neighbor's unmotivated cutting down of trees or the transformation of a front yard into a desert of pebble stones—that are visually documented and also strongly criticized in the entries and in their comment sections.

By attributing values and norms to behavior in a way that readers can refer to, a social dimension of communication is actualized that bonds the bloggers to a greater or lesser degree. It can evoke a moral sensibility on the communicative level, as well as on the level of an individual's behavior in the garden.

Identification

Not all entries are successful at drawing comments or responses. Topics of general philosophical or political considerations on ecology, climate change, the nuclear industry, and the consequences of Fukushima, without any reference to one's own locality, do not receive any comments.[5] However, if they are connected to one's own daily experience and are personal, they have a greater chance of prompting common concern and identification, resulting in connecting communication. For example, when a male blogger expresses his sorrow at the earthquake in Japan by planting a chestnut tree to signify hope, he receives comments.[6] Distance does not encourage blog readers to post a comment. Being open and personal (and therefore authentic) makes it easier for one's readers to identify with topics dealing with general issues of ecology, as they are discussed from an angle of familiarity.

Hence, a significant distinction of the selection process is the stress placed on a close acquaintanceship with gardening. The bloggers refer to their own performance, which is often expressed as an intimacy with the environment, the garden, and its wild life. These blog entries refer to a common ground of experiences (gardening) that makes it easier to recognize and connect to. The following female blogger explicitly describes her close relationship to her own produce:

> One of the most beautiful things for me is still harvesting my vegetables and fruits. I am always amazed that I can harvest something. . . . Things I otherwise have to buy, I get for free, self-made. I have a relationship to the things that grow there, I know what it means, how many conditions must be met for something to grow, such as my radishes. (May 14, 2011, www.mauerblumen.blogspot.com)

She decorates her post with photos of her radishes like a family photo:

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[5] See www.kompostfilosofen.blogspot.com (April 9, 2011).
[6] See Footnote 5 blog (March 19, 2011).

In their nurturing, the plants themselves become proxies for a kind of extended family. The author speaks sometimes of babies or children when describing her plants, which belongs, according to Merchant (2003), to romantic narratives where nature is similar to a human being (p. 134). This blogger, who has 92 subscribed readers (May 2012), is an urban gardener with a small plot in her backyard. All of the five positive comments on her entry share her amazement at growing produce and being self-sufficient (at least regarding radishes).

Conflicts/Struggles

Following Luhmann's mass media analysis, conflicts in the form of struggles against nature or, in systemic words, against expectations are also common selection criteria for the distribution of information among garden bloggers (Luhmann, 1996, p. 59). Conflicts inspire readers and subscribed followers to post a comment and therefore respond to the invitation to communicate. However, the treatment of conflict narratives differs from what occurs in the mass media. For example, a blog called Arboarkticum, with 61 subscribed readers (May 2012), publishes photos of rotten apples and a forgotten, frost-killed banana plant in the kitchen garden, and its author comments on them as follows:

> These images are not only fuzzy and ugly. The subjects are also of a type Sköna Hem
> (an interior magazine—HG) would never dare to show. Welcome to reality, on a freezing
> cold Sunday in October! (October 3, 2010, www.arboarkticum.blogspot.com)

In the blog description, the authors (the blog is written from a "we" perspective) explain their garden life as a constant fight against "cold," "dryness," and "hard clay"[7] to get plants rooted. In contrast to glossy magazine content and harmonizing blog entries, gardening is seen as hard work. It is associated with disappointment, not only because of the unfriendly weather climate of mid-Sweden but also because of an atmosphere of neighborly discord, as another entry relates. However, the blog prepares its readers for its entries by narrating struggles against the climate, soil, pests, and wild animals. Here, identity markers are explicitly drawn—unlike mainstream bloggers and magazine images— by stressing the failures and difficulties of gardening (in addition to entries on successful harvests, the acquisition of new plants and seeds is taken up). From a systems perspective, these entries, which are to a great extent about winning against nature, have limited success at connectivity. They also can jeopardize communication in the community, because they do not correspond to the common expectation structures of garden bloggers, who generally demonstrate a more humble attitude toward nature. As long as these posts are written ironically, they may draw readers based on their unknown outcomes (does one succeed, or solve the problem, or not?) and allow for communication. The previous blog quote received two comments that shared the disappointment about the early onset of winter, yet that also contradicted the utterance of "ugly images" by stressing the beauty of rotten fruit. In other words, the struggle narratives are limited by the distinction between being a partner of and being a rival or competitor with nature. If one wants to play the role of a rival of nature, the language style has to be ironic; otherwise the blog will not meet the expectations of the community, and no communication occurs.

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[7] See www.arboarkticum.blogspot.com (October 3, 2010).

Another ironically written struggle story is about a harvest result that does not live up to the gardener's expectations:

> Nervenruh [the name of the blog] has taken your criticism to heart. He is nowadays fond of animals, and he continues to nurse many fine crops in his garden. Entirely without pesticides, artificial fertilizers or slug pellets. The poor little animals will finally have plenty of healthy food. Nervenruh himself buys them lettuce and other vegetables in the supermarket. Since everything grows on the shelves. (August 25, 2011, www.nervenruh.blogspot.com)

Illustrated by a photo of a lettuce leave totally eaten by a worm or slug, the male blogger exhibits his harvest fiasco. He received five comments expressing compassion and respect regarding his consistent ecological behavior. In his entry, he emphasizes a person-to-person relation (he has obviously changed his attitude to pests and animals based on former criticism) and presents the results of this "new" relationship to nature as a "failure" in an ironic manner. Slugs have taken charge of his planted vegetables, or in a figurative sense, nature has a mind of her own. This is a humorous story with an open end, and one might be interested to learn more about his future cultivation strategies and follow his blog.

In contrast to the former, the entry of another male blogger states that he has succeeded in his struggle against the climate, maintaining "Eden," despite harsh weather conditions. He begins his entry dramatically with a photograph of a desert of dry and burned lawn surrounded by rocks, and comments:

> What a great place to have a garden! Tantoberget (the name of the allotment—HG) after a month of sun and around thirty degrees every day. And barely a drop of rain. Climate change? (July 31, 2011, www.tantonorra.blogspot.com)

But when it comes to his garden, almost 50 pictures unveil the illusion of an unmediated paradise unaffected by "climate change." The blogger exhibits a protected, intimate place that is free from the "threats from outside." An "upper hand" provides protection by daily watering the flower beds and lawn. All is perfection: Close-ups show water droplets glittering on the petals like diamonds. A pergola of clematis gives shelter from the scorching sun. Lush current bushes, free from powdery mildew, bear plenty of fruit. Inside, there is order, health, and beauty. Outside, there is dryness, sickness, and disorder. His constructed Eden image relates to similar narratives in garden magazines and TV programs, which is perhaps the reason the entry received only one comment admiring the blogger's beautiful pictures. From a

communicative perspective, the author does not offer much space for other types of comments: He has a problem (dryness), and he has solved it (by watering) with great success, as shown in the photographs. (See Figure 2). The answer is simple, and no guesswork or interaction is required.
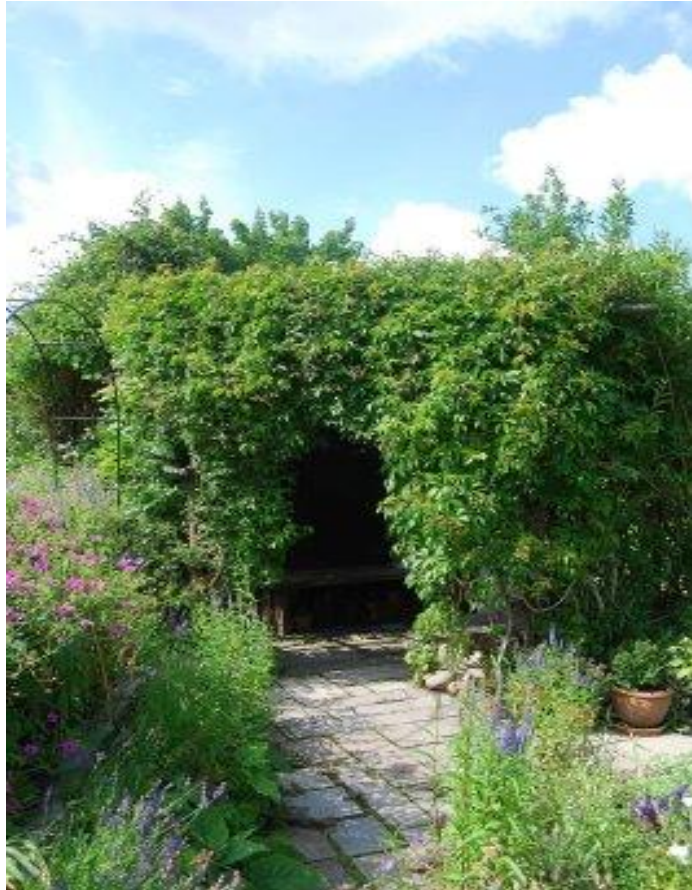
Figure 2. Paradise at Tantoberget allotment.

Visuality

It is striking that all gardening blogs are decorated with images of plants, flower beds, and wildlife. All the garden bloggers examined in this study are more or less occupied with sharing their feelings by celebrating the beauty of garden life in their uploaded photographs, and the image motifs seem to be endless. It seems that this experienced, inherent "magic" of garden and nature has to be captured, visualized, and finally presented to the blog community. Most visuals portray a place of natural

and cultural harmony and present their garden lives as small "natural wonders." These pictures constitute a kind of common denominator of generally accepted values of garden aesthetics—in line with Flusser (1982/1988)—that is, of being pretty, true, and also good (p. 22). On the one hand, the images function as illustrations to (verbal) entries, making the texts more comprehensive; on the other hand, they also serve as a kind of documentation of garden aesthetics and therefore as identity markers indicating taste.

Some of the bloggers treat their photographs as demonstrative of artistic maturation. They observe the garden through the lens of a camera, and each entry is dependent on the images provided by this camera. Equipped with a copyright stamp, the photographs are presented to the public as a valid way to capture an overwhelming impression. According to Flusser, this kind of ubiquity of technical pictures results in the constant repetition of action and passion and tends to be a "magic ritual" (Flusser, 1983/1988, p. 23). Looking at the communication structures resulting from these image-dominated entries, we can conclude that the comments are also often ritualistic, that is, admiring everything being presented: the excellent motif, the brilliant quality of the photograph, the proficient photographer, and so on. For example, the gardening blog, "The secret garden," mainly consists of artistic pictures and brief entries describing the conditions of time, place, and camera techniques that accompany or influence the image results. (See Figure 3). The blogger's visual profile is an image of a woman with a huge camera lens in front of her face: She is at one with the camera. She also introduces her camera, stating all of its technical parameters. In comparison to the relatively high amount of her 286 followers (May 2012), she usually receives 10 comments per entry praising her photographs. However, she receives more comments when she addresses controversial questions, such as discussing the quality of photographs in garden magazines or the plans of building wind power plants that would destroy the beautiful landscape of her neighborhood.[8]

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[8] See www.hemligatradgarden.blogspot.com
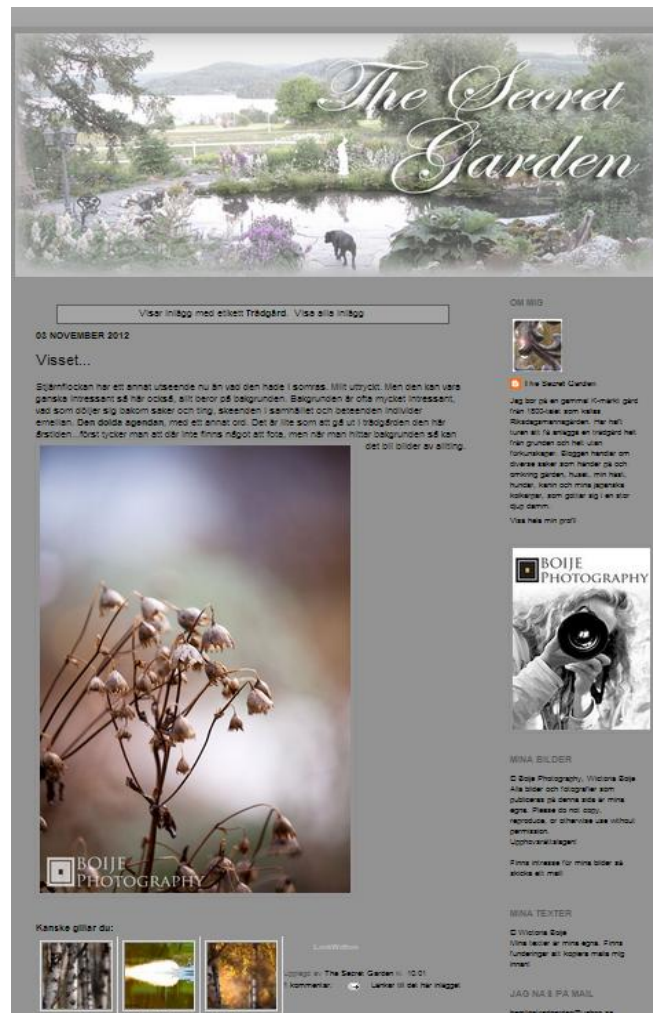
Figure 3. The gardening blog "The secret garden."

The posted pictures are not a representation of a garden outside the blogosphere but the product of a complex interplay among perceived motif, camera, blog context, and blogosphere context. The blogger can express oneself in an effective manner (often better than verbally) and therefore control one's own identity, as related to others' identities, which often results in an expected manner of communication. Photos are an integral part of the blogs. However, they can dominate an entire blog, and for many gardening bloggers the visual has become the primary means of expressing relations in the blogosphere. Gardening, then, is mostly seen through the lens of the camera, and, as a result, blog topics are often directed toward stylistic issues. These entries are more about cultivating taste to manage blog relations than about cultivating food; the garden is observed through the gaze of what can be effectively visualized in the blogosphere. Here, this gaze reveals uploaded pictures of a garden as a place of pure beauty: Plants

are carefully chosen, and colors and structures harmonize with each other, fulfilling an important function of managing social relations toward acknowledgement and admiration.

Sociality

The social dimension becomes obvious when communication bonds the blogger to some degree to the blog's readers. It includes a variety of social relationships, ranging from forms of phatic comments that Brake (2012) describes as "quasi-sociality" to posts and comments of common concern, as well as to forms of new friendships. These forms of sociality do not require the high level of "self-disclosure" that we are familiar with from such social networking sites as Facebook (as described in Jones et al., 2008).

In contrast to political bloggers, garden bloggers maintain a very positive and friendly atmosphere on the Internet. We can relate this also to gender. Earlier studies on computer-mediated communication have shown that ". . . females use language that is polite, appreciative, and cooperative" (Huffaker & Calvert, 2005). The comments always express approval; the worst that can happen is probably not receiving any comments. The following entry celebrates the "positive energy" that the blogger derives from the community of garden bloggers:

> It was about the pleasure that all the beautiful, wonderful, creative garden blogs spread. I am, as the newbie of the blogosphere, overwhelmed by the positive energy that you, Charlotta, and all the others, are spreading. (November 18, 2010, www.landetkrokus.se)

By referring to other bloggers and building trust with the people in this network, strong relationships are established. A bonding effect appears when the blogosphere is presented as being worthy of esteem; this effect is almost impossible to contradict. Sociality in gardening blogs is often established by sharing gardening experiences (and especially emotions) and giving practical advice.

Sociality is not only limited to virtual exchange but can also include material exchange, for example, of seeds of wild desirable perennials, as a female blogger relates:

> I have collected the seeds for you. *At the same time, a* huge tick *is running across* my hand (what I do for you!). . . . So, those, who want a wild perennial for shady areas that you likely will not get in the garden shop, post a comment to me and you will get them sent home to you. (June 18, 2011, www.guenstiggaertnern.blogspot.com)

This female blogger received 24 comments and was obligated to draw the names separately to determine who would receive seeds. It has become popular to organize lotteries, as magazines do, to receive comments, help increase the number of subscriptions to one's own blog, and stimulate links to each other's entries, therefore drawing attention to the blog. These lotteries also function as advertisements for (local) products. Such lottery entries can promote further communication if one is tempted to learn who wins.

Sociality not only occurs in virtual life but can also affect "real" life. It is a common practice that subscribers visit each other's gardens. Some gardeners open their gardens to the public on specific days. They advertise their open hours on their blogs and invite their readers to visit. Here, virtual communication can be transformed into face-to- face communication, which, in turn, can strengthen ties and open up new relationships in the blogosphere and beyond. It does not only apply to garden bloggers but also to the blogosphere as such where blogging has led to new face-to-face contacts and friendships (e.g., see Brake, 2012, p. 1065).

Conclusions

In general, blogs support interpersonal meaning production by producing space and opportunities for communication through the circulation and discussion of topics (Schmidt, 2006, p. 136). Topics belong to the indispensable requirements of communication (Luhmann, 1996, p. 28); without them, there is no communication. They represent the self- and other-reference of communication by constantly being coordinated in relation to each other within the system's own order of communication (Luhmann, 2000, p. 12). From a phenomenological point of view, blogging is always the result of selection or, more simply, of a choice, whether it is conscious or unconscious. One's blog entries, then, say a lot about one's self, and we can describe the blogosphere as auto-biography or as presentation of one's self in interaction with other selves.

In line with earlier remarks, an invitation to communication occurs if indications are made by drawing distinctions (Spencer-Brown, 1969). Successful distinctions are those that have a great chance of establishing connecting communication and, specifically in the case of garden blogs, to tell something new. This can include visualizing topics (often the beauty of plants), offering possibilities for identification, addressing sociality among bloggers, and discussing values, as well as narrating conflicts. All of these distinctions have semantic limits, that is, further distinctions. If conflicts and values are in focus, bad behavior is ascribed to persons outside the blogosphere, and struggle narratives against nature require a special style of writing. We can also distinguish among gardening blogs by looking at their use of images in both photo blogs and text-based blogs. Photo blogs tend to mainly stress issues of aesthetics, which, in turn, constitute the frameworks for the treatment of topics; entries are about beauty, which might relate to a garden behavior of constant renewal. The other group of blogs allows for more differentiation, seeing trends in relation to the distinction between sustainable and unfettered consumption from different perspectives. Those entries that stress aspects of close acquaintanceship, good behavior, and reuse are related to sustainability, whereas other entries that stress possession and trends advocate an unfettered consumption style.

In addition, each use of distinctions excludes other possibilities. For example, I did not notice any topics regarding the use of pesticides or chemical fertilizers for a better harvest. If garden bloggers were using chemicals in the garden, they perhaps would not write about it. This seems to belong to the unwritten rules of the network communication, that is, garden bloggers should advocate some kind of green gardening. It is also striking that there are no critical comments on entries (if there were any, they

must have been deleted). For instance, the entry of 50 pictures unveiling a paradise on Tantoberget did not receive any critical comments about the gardener's water consumption.

Compared to news values within journalism, content that focuses on scandals, norm violations, sensations, and negativity do not belong to the guiding distinctions of garden blog communication. Unlike the garden blog distinctions noted earlier, they cannot fulfill the important function of maintaining social relations toward a desired outcome of acknowledgement and admiration. Garden blog communication is characterized by a communicative frame of approval and admiration, or in other words, a feel-good atmosphere, which promotes emotional ties and strengthens the feeling of common concerns. From the perspective of systems theory—more precisely through the self- and other-reference of communication— the garden blogosphere examined in this study has developed its own communication culture, which stimulates communication toward an outcome of respect and emotional support.

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