

## SEMIOTICS, BLOGS AND GASTROMANIA

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### **Abstract**

The current culinary megatrend owes much to Internet socialization practices. Discussions online began very early (the boards of *Chowhound*, for example, have already been operating since 1997), which says a lot about how much the “great conversation” of online communities is linked to gastronomic discourse. This paper propose a semiotic assessment of such a connection.

**Keywords:** semiotics, blogs, gastronomic discourse, political cuisine, online

### **Introduction**

Food and chat on the Internet are, in fact, intrinsically connected: a classic inseparable combination. All over the world, bloggers and culinary storytellers become, therefore, cult authors, able to generate legions of loyal readers ready to follow their heroes everywhere: on the Internet (reading and commenting on their blogs), at the bookstore (buying their cookbooks), around culinary festivals and sponsored gastronomic events.

It is also not uncommon for successful bloggers to organize paid cooking classes that presuppose the possibility of establishing more direct contact with them. Culinary writing on the Internet falls, thus, perfectly in that *converging culture* model (Jenkins 2006) typical of the digital sphere that works by incessantly reformulating stories, texts and characters. Moreover, bloggers present themselves to the public *as inter-mediatic heroes* (Marrone 2003) whose greatest desire for realization is media proliferation: for them, hopefully, the blog stands as a starting point (or a legitimization tool) of a professional career. It is precisely for this reason that writing about food on the Internet immediately takes on a political character, generating texts and identities struggling to emerge from anonymity. Cookery, therefore, becomes, political, a ground for negotiation and a construction site of group and individual identity.

At the core of each dispute lies an object of value: the recipe. While culinary blogs emerge, in fact, essentially as collections of recipes, bloggers narrate themselves as subjects of a pedagogical discourse (usually in a self-centered story: “I shall tell you, along the way, my culinary education”) in view of a value to be achieved through food. Recipes, in such a view, turn into actual challenges to be overcome in order to achieve the editorial promise prospected by the blog. In a certain sense, in fact, blogs, as every recipe book does, ask for a double commitment, both that of the reader and that of the cook (or the aspiring cook): they cannot only be read, because they require that the reader accepts the challenge of cooking, for the purpose of actualizing the universe of meaning that is the object of narration. Such a call for cooking, moreover, cannot clearly be limited to a single dish but must aim at the construction of a coherent collection. It is not enough to learn how to cook a single course but to enter into many recipes, entire menus in line with the identity proposed by the author. Achieving such a result requires time and patience, a medium/long-term affiliation in a training process with an unspecified duration but perfectly suited to the serial nature of the blog. One would be tempted, as Marrone suggests (cf. Marrone 2014), to attribute a “long-lasting” configuration to the very nature of the genre “cookbook”: in every recipe book worthy of the name. Just think of the Arthusian archetype, one can recognize, albeit in less accentuated terms, the characters of non-closure and conversation with readers which characterizes the success of cooking on the Internet. Recipe after recipe, story after story, a culinary life form is outlined, and, at the same time, an audience of loyal readers is built, all of whom are likely to become defenders and bishops of their leader.

### Culinary values

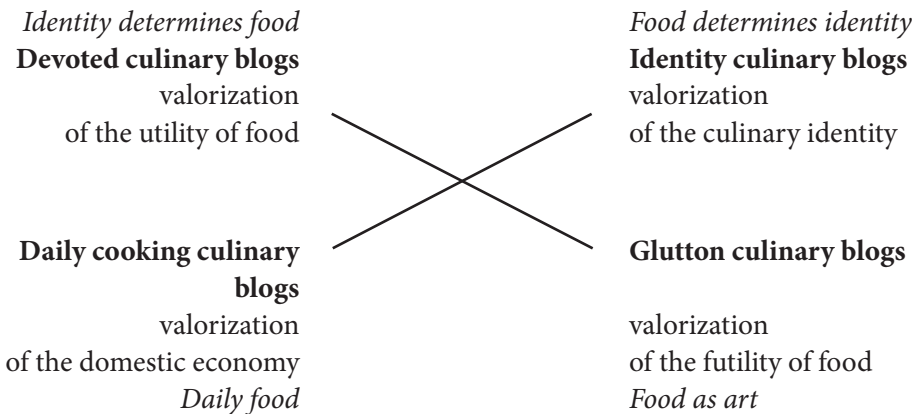
Semiotic theory (in this case Floch 1986) may help to understand the merits of the narrative strategies available to each blogger, in order to position their own culinary writing. A first discriminating element is the value that may be attributed in the story to the proposed dishes, a value instrumental to some form of identity or, on the contrary, itself a sign of identity. “Devoted” culinary blogs are those who think of nutrition (and, therefore, of food and recipes) as a pure means of sustenance in view of a greater good. In such positioning, food submits its taste and cultural specificity to some compliance with a dominant diet (identity). This is the case of diets assumed for therapeutic reasons or related to health-conscious options or even specific ideological choices (examples could be considered blogs such as the Italian *Cardamomo & Co.* (<http://saporiesaporifantasia.blogspot.it/>) — linked to celiac and gluten-free cuisine or *Green Kitchen Stories* (<http://www.greenkitchenstories.com>) — dedicated to vegetarian cuisine). If, in these blogs, food has an instrumental value, the same cannot be claimed for the ideological choices to which food itself is submissive. The very fact of selecting a food option from among others, in fact, constitutes a very powerful way to construct group affiliation: vegetarians, vegans, celiacs, healthists are all identities related to forms of life which exhibit the instrumental character of their daily alimentation as an identity fetish (“we are the ones who do *not eat* animal meat” etc.).

On the opposite side, *identity* culinary blogs may be recognized where food itself is the objective of the storytelling and the dining experience. In this case, nutrition and value coincide so much that cooking and eating becomes a path of (re)discovery of the self, an emersion of meaning that takes place through food and the frame of practices that encompasses it. Since this culinary reappropriation is the ultimate goal of the narrative, it presupposes a rupture, an initial discontinuity to be filled along the way. That is why these culinary blogs often tell about lost identities to be restored, rituals, times, spaces, to be re-actualized, roots and affections to be re-established through food. The one outlined is then a path of the refoundation of oneself at the peak of which stands a coincidence between one’s individual identity and that of the group, expressed or handed down through food. There are innumerable examples of such positioning and they often concern territorial identities (blogs on the most varied *terroirs*) or even theme blogs dedicated to precise (and stereotypical) scenarios and atmospheres (see, for instance, the *sophisticated bourgeois* setting of the blog “*Il pranzo di Babette*”).

Starting from this basic opposition, it is then possible to discern at least two other positions. On the one hand, a *tactical* attitude which is looking to achieve the desired effect with the ingredients available in the shortest possible time. Such blogs, dedicated to *daily cooking*, bet on the valorization of the domestic economy and operate by selecting from among well-established culinary practices that which is most appropriate to a specific situation. Proceeding this way is clearly in contradiction to the identity writing of the blogs seen earlier: cooking, in this case, becomes a task to be performed in the most rational and effective way, in view of a daily life that is built precisely through subtracting any identity value to food. Blogs written by housewives are particularly widespread in this category; they show no qualms about using “ordinary” and easy-to-find products in their preparations. These bloggers do not disdain the use of ready-made products to save time (for example, ready-made puff pastry to cook their *quiche*). See one example among the many possible: the blog of *Francesca V* (<http://www.francescav.com>).

The last position, “glutton” culinary blogs, has to do with the denial of the practical value of food, which, instead of being considered as a means to be submitted to a superior good, is regarded for itself, disconnected by any utility and contemplated as art. Many blogs love to go hunting for delicacies to be exalted for their aesthetic, impromptu, ephemeral and elusive dimension (see the case of blogs such as *Il Cavoletto di Bruxelles*).

In the semiotic square:



### Style and food discourse

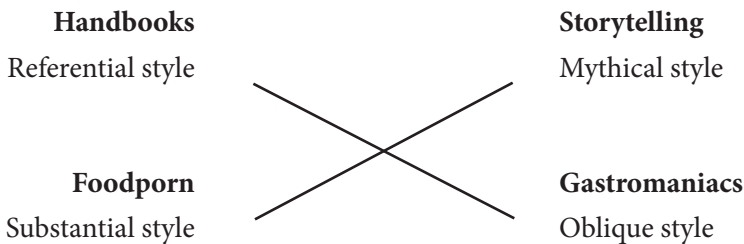
In addition to taking a position over a culinary conception regarding the value attributed to food, bloggers are called upon to choose a tone and

precise communication style through which to model their tales. Jean-Marie Floch (1990) proposed a general model for articulating discursive styles: the renowned square of advertising philosophies (easily adaptable as a *square of culinary genres* for our purposes), which articulates the opposition between a descriptive and a constructive function of language. Such a dichotomy, in Floch's reading, finds its roots in a profound ideological difference between two cultural types: one, led to think that the sensitive world is endowed with an autonomous existence with respect to perception; the other, instead, convinced that perception and language work as mechanisms of construction of the world as it appears. The choice between the two ideological options then influences the communicative style of the enunciator. In the first case, convinced that the task of any storytelling is the mere *objective description* of reality; in the second, instead, upholding a position that attributes to the story the role of *dramatizing* reality, which, outside the tale would therefore prove to be insignificant. It is easy to recognize in online culinary writing practices, the predominance of one or the other stance. One can also recognize a *referential* style when the blog is dedicated to the precise determination of the amount of ingredients and to the documentation (most of the times with the support of detailed photographs) of the various steps required for the recipe. In this case, the blog presents itself as a *handbook*, to be used if necessary in order to make the desired dish. On the contrary, a *mythical* style will tend to use the blog as a *storytelling* tool, interested in representing atmospheres and situations, stories and characters that revolve around the food.

It is possible to derive two other trends from the denegation of these two poles. The denegation of the descriptive approach generates the *oblique* style, characterized by the fact of interrupting the linearity of the basic argumentation, thus requiring an interpretative extra effort on the part of the reader. This is the case of some niche blogs (one very well-known blog in Italy being *dissapore.com*) that bet on the specific codes used in the culinary world, on winking on and ironically commenting on the other *foodbloggers*. They are targeted as *gastromaniacs* (Marrone 2014), i.e. readers capable of decoding and *demystifying* all the small provocations and stings hidden between the lines of the posts. This style of writing is obviously fundamental in the identification and group affiliation practices of *foodbloggers*. Finally, the denial of the constructive approach generates what is called a *substantial* style, capable of eliciting the sensitive qualities of food in search of an emotional complicity between readers and food itself. Such a style has made the history of food communication (starting from the giant slice of rusk in the old adverts held by the Italian food brand Mulino Bianco,

up to *the Marketing Aesthetics* and the *Experiential Marketing* campaigns) finding a new appeal on the Web 2.0. The basic principle of this style has to do with a simple operation: *zooming*. By zooming in the focus close-up to the food, one obtains a renewed image of it, triggering the mechanism of the *saisie esthétique* (Greimas 1987). In the eighties, Jean Baudrillard (1983, 1987) compared, perhaps somewhat apocalyptically, this operation of *zooming* to the approach towards the object of desire, as typical of *pornography*. According to the philosopher, this desire for rapprochement would have become the dominant logic of the postmodern media system. Hidden behind it, indeed, is the usury of the contemporary visual universe against which the media system tries to react by increasing the margin of visibility (a “more visible than visible” approach) which is guaranteed precisely by the operation of *zooming*. This *pornography* of the media system, as stigmatized by Baudrillard but now emptied of any negative connotations, extends from the broadcast universe of mass communication to the personal communication of the Web 2.0. The photographing and sharing photos of food on social media in a visual and sensory obsession has become a fashion practiced by millions of people around the world that goes, not by chance, under the name of *foodporn*. Blogs and social networks are, therefore, full of content whose *substantial* style marks individual posts or photographs or even entire blogs and streams on *Facebook* or *Instagram*.

The blog style semiotic square looks like this:



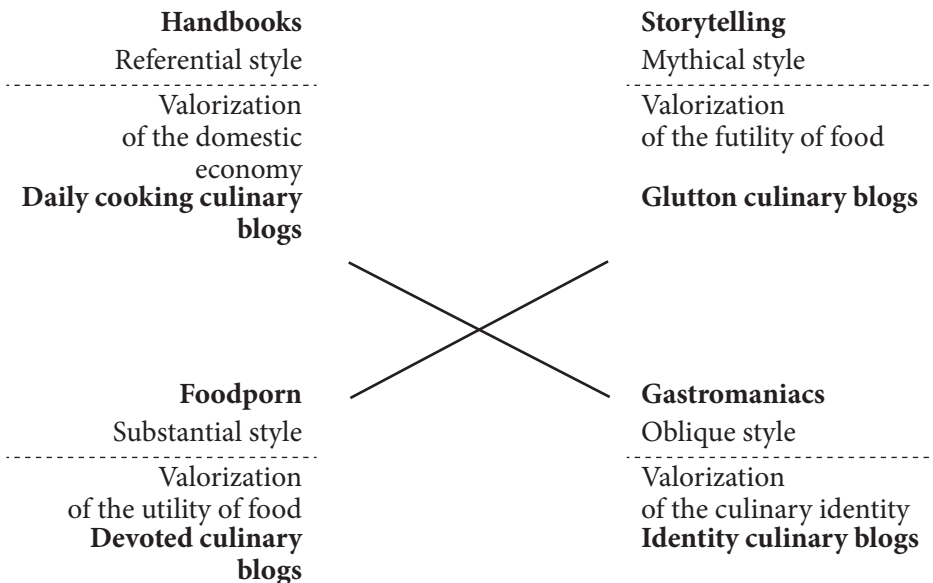
### A possible crossroad

The two squares just proposed are in all respects useful tools for the positioning of any culinary blog in relation to the others but also offer a wide socio-cultural overview explaining the emerging trends of online writing. These trends may be illustrated in even more detail by overlapping the two squares. If, indeed, every blog is free to choose what tone to assume arbitrarily, according to its specific culinary narrative, a glance at online writing practices reveals a certain convergence between the two options. It very often happens (but clearly these are not rules) that bloggers who, in their stories, value food as a daily expedient of the domestic economy tend to use

a style as descriptive and pedagogical as possible (for example successful cases such as *Giallozafferano*). Moreover, just browsing the food addicted blogs, those referred to concisely as *gluttons*, we notice that they build their discourse on making the food the object of their *adoration* a “star”, as indicated by the famous advertiser Jacques Seguela about his advertising philosophy.

Another easily recognizable cliché may be associated to the pursuing of strong culinary emotions, staged by what we have called *devoted blogs*. In our model, they consists of those blogs which submit food to a precise ideological/identity regime. They struggle to show that the food they present, despite having been selected on the basis of its compatibility with a given ideological regime and not for its taste, may (if well cooked and whether the right recipe is found) be inviting from a sensory point of view. Vegetarian blogs are among those that, in the blogosphere, more restlessly celebrate the rituals of *foodporn*, exhibiting zooms on vegetables in their posts. They are aimed at emotionally involving readers who are imagined as allegedly skeptical of the erotic/tasty charge of carrots and radishes. Finally, we come to the issue of combining culinary identities with specific idioms and group practices, presents as a shared asset. This is the case that we recognized in the “gastro-maniac” blogs and magazines that ironize about the culinary *megatrend*.

Here is, then, the intersection of the two squares, the one of culinary styles contrasted with that of food values according to complementarity (each of the semes of the first square is associated with the complementary of the other):



As anticipated above, such a crossing emphasizes the most frequent correlations. However, they are — it should be remembered — just the result of one of the many possible options that can be obtained from the overlapping of the two squares: just rotating them according to a different axis brings out further possibilities of positioning, useful both for the identification of other intersections (and therefore other practices) but also as a tool for predicting new culinary trends, in this case associated with online writing practices.

### **Autobiography and metadiscourse**

It was noted above that the “cookbook” model calls for a double commitment of its user, that of the reader and that of the cook. Constructing the value of the proposed food is a necessary condition for letting readers accept the blog’s proposal and make them act to execute the recipe. Bloggers typically constitute an autobiographical account of their dining experiences, entitled to serve as an *exemplum*, a model for the readers. The effect of such a practice, on the one hand, achieves the result of emphasizing the participatory and equalizing mood characterizing online socialization. On the other hand, it is functional to the serial model typical of the blog, ultimately characterizing the stories told by the bloggers as tales of formation, a kind of a *bildungsroman*. This implies that each of the phases which narratology typically attributes to the general structure of the tale, becomes the object of a meta-discourse attention. As such, it is then turned into discourse and manifested, thus accounting for small victories (the successful dish) and failures (the burnt plum cake) that constantly push away the limit of the glorifying proof. In culinary blogs there is almost never a glorifying culinary proof (always postponed to the next episode, in the name of the fact that one recipe leads to another).

On the contrary, the glorifying proof is carried out on an enunciative level. The sign of the success of the hero-bloggers is not, therefore, related to culinary expertise as presented in the posts, but rather to their talent of writers: successful culinary bloggers will not be appointed as chef nor will be called to perform at real stoves in a real restaurant. On the contrary, they will be “promoted” towards a writing career (their first step as inter-mediatic heroes) with the publication of a first-rate paper cookbook, likely to be announced with great pomp on their blog. It is clear that this transformation aims to raise the bar, thus propelling bloggers to more and more important publishers, right up to television appearances in the most striking cases. As “successful” professionals they are called upon to inter-



pret commercials or to manage kitchen directories (see the case of Sonia Peronaci founder of *Giallozafferano.it*, author of very lucky cookbooks who turned the testimonial of consumer products such as the famous “Philadelphia” cheese). As a seal of the accomplished transformation, the launch of their inter-mediatic career as a consequence leads to the fading of the writing on the blog. This is, for instance, the case of Chiara Bellasio, head of an Italian culinary blog (*www.ilpranzodibabette.com/*), who having just begun her affirmation as a professional food stylist and editor of important newspapers, is updating her blog more and more rarely.

### Political cuisine

How does a blogger move from an amateur status to a professional publishing career? To answer this question, it should be noted that despite the variety of the reasons why people start blogs, the very fact of online writing training is a highly socializing practice. A user who opens a blog is, indeed, immediately called upon to comply with the strict rules of the so-called blogosphere<sup>1</sup>. Such an environment is by definition jagged (as shown by the works of scholars such as Baràbasi 2002), characterized by agglomerations of relationships (which emerge as nodes of the network), often thematically sorted. However, it is jagged also for an ulterior reason, perhaps less obvious, namely because it is constituted by the interconnection of a multitude of (virtual and non virtual) *formats*, each very different from the other. Semiotic theory may describe the complex interactions of the blogosphere, digging deeper than the mere statistical-mathematical tracing (and the corresponding elaboration of maps, usually so dense as to be incomprehensible).

To this end, it is worth resuming the so-called “theatrical model”, conceived by Eric Landowski (1989). Such a model, created to explain the interactions in the political sphere, proves very useful in describing the blogosphere, which may, as in the hypothesis proposed here, be investigated as a gigantic political space. In Landowski’s theory, political discourse is articulated as the theatrical space of Greek tragedy, in which three sensitive segments are identified: the *stage* which is the space of representation, where the protagonists perform (it would correspond to the very political arena in which politicians show up in the act of carrying out their work of administrators of the public affairs), the space of the *hall*, where the au-

<sup>1</sup>This term refers to a sort of virtual ecosystem resulting from the sum of the interconnections between blogs.

dience of the representation (they are figure of the *political body*, that is delegated of electing its representatives) is positioned and the space of the *orchestra*, where, in classical performances, the *choir* resides, as a sort of voice of commentary on the story and testimony to the interactions between the characters on the scene. The *orchestra* consequently appears as a place of mediation between the *stage* and the *hall*. This is the space in which Eric Landowski positions public opinion out of metaphor, precisely defined as an instance of mediation between the rulers and the governed. However, at the end of the day, also as a *meaning without reference*, that emerges, as a mere fact of discourse, a simulacrum carried out by the class of rulers to position their work and self-target themselves. The media, in this perspective, would thus be the *mirror* allowing rulers to finalise their political proposal, just because of the relationship they stage with the public opinion. So, on the one hand, there is the problem of “showing up” to the public in a certain role (there are politicians who, for example, prefer to present themselves as cold professionals on the *stage* and others who, on the contrary, bet on an *emotional complicity* with their audience, and so on). On the other hand, there is the problem of positioning in a more or less conflictual way in the face of public opinion. In this case, according to Landowski, actual clichés can be identified: politicians who propose themselves as “voice of the people”, naturally assuming the role of spokesman for public opinion or, differently, *contrarians* who propose their work in conflict with common sense as staged by the media themselves. What, however, is public opinion at the time of Web 2.0? Can a model like the one quickly described here be useful for explaining relationships in the blogosphere? Answering this question means going beyond the rhetoric of “everything has changed”, often proclaimed by apocalyptic or integrated evangelizers of new technologies.

### **Endorsement policy**

Semiotic analysis of Web 2.0 dynamics brings back the most characteristic dimension of political discourse: that of *assessing*. Politics at the times of the Internet reveals what is called an *endorsement* in its most radical essence. It manifests itself as a matter of discourse which asks for taking sides for the sake of both individual and group identity. This may be declaring on the social media support or not for gay marriages, then, assuming a political position that has an impact on self-perception (“I am a defender of civil rights”) but also of a group affiliation (“I am among those who are the best part of society”). Web 2.0 has just extended a prerogative that until

recently was exclusive to professional politicians, that is, offering a *stage* at hand and the consequent option to “declare” a position incessantly and publicly. That is what happens to blogs and social media on pretty much every topic. Bloggers thus do not emerge as disinterested contributors to the discussion (as could be inferred by the first scientific works on this subject, see, for instance, De Kerckhove 2005) as much as parties to the dispute. Political conflict thus clearly reveals itself as something that has always been: a semiotic conflict, a conflict over the “relations of definition” (Beck 2007), in which the meaning to be attributed to events and concepts is disputed, while the goal of the contenders is to shape a “commonsense” which establishes an organization apparatus of the world. Being committed to constantly intervening in the political discourse, constantly taking sides on the most diverse issues, bloggers and their *commentators* (beloved-hated figures brought to the fore by the advent of social media) personify public opinion to the extent that their contributions trigger mechanisms of affiliation and leadership, being selected for strategic purposes in the political discourse through the most diverse media platforms (old and new media, posts, comments, interviews, newspaper articles and so on).

When a user writes on the sidelines of a recipe published by a culinary *blogstar* and exclaims: “worth a try!”, she is not contributing to the discussion (not even having tried to cook the dish subject of the post) but is playing an essential political role in the articulation of the blogosphere. On the one hand, indeed, she is exhibiting her group affiliation and her deference to the leader (the culinary blogger in question), before other users. On the other hand, she is also contributing to building the blogger’s own authorial/political personal brand. The endorsement expressed by the commentator towards the activity of the blogger will be filed together with the other endorsements received, in a sum of endorsements (*likes*) destined to be shown off to the public as a sign of a power, and, subsequently as a brick in the construction of the blogger’s inter-mediatic career. This means that the sign of the blogger’s realization is precisely the number of “reactions” that her intervention provokes. The success of blogs such as *Il Cavoletto di Bruxelles*, a springboard of Sigrid Verbert’s publishing career, was also the result of the centrality of her blog in Internet discussion; centrality, as a rule, measured, as well by the number of readers (data which, however, are generally accessible only to the advertising investors) by the number of comments or *likes* on Facebook, as well as shares, links and comments to her posts.

### Public and secret

However, the post which is finally published, as has already been said, represents only the tip of the iceberg of a dense network of negotiations that can be traced with a little patience. Being the result of political and collective writing, the problem arises, for example, of the internal coordination of the various factions raised by user debate in the discussions. This happens in the blogosphere by modulating the accessibility of the content under discussion, so that the blog post lays at the highest accessibility in a chain of interactions which progressively slips into secret (for example, emails and private messages between bloggers). Having access to the necessary information for participating in a discussion obviously has an impact on the status of those admitted to it and increases the emotional effect of being in contact with a leader (blogger or even *blogstar*). With the advent of Facebook, for example, each blog has created a Facebook page, in which published posts are usually linked. What happens is that most of the comments to the blog's articles are actually published on the stream of its double, that is Facebook (or even on Twitter). These links, far from being an unnecessary replica, end up cannibalizing the debate. There are obvious advantages of interacting on a blog's Facebook page. The readers audience is drastically reduced, relieved of most of the comments considered useless (for the general public the blog is more than enough) while continuing to maintain the interest of the actual recipients of the communication in the other bloggers who are insiders in the topic. Better still, they appear on these platforms with their actual name and surname (not with a nickname as it usually happens in the blogs) and may be personally added in the list of friends; an advantage that allows the drawing of the boundaries of group affiliation in an almost complete way. At an even deeper level, these are semi-public debate venues such as closed Facebook groups, accessible by invitation only. In these spaces, sheltered from prying eyes, group strategies, culinary manifestos, ethical statements are discussed and addressed. Any conflict between groups and people may be headed towards solution, resorting also to chat sessions. Facebook groups are also the actual virtual spaces where culinary contests, editorial and commercial strategies are ideated. Such initiatives will find a truly public existence on the blogs only to the extent that they pass the preventive screening of the community of insiders active on the groups. What is being stressed here is the importance of exclusive spaces, even secret ones, in the construction and daily management of online communities. This, it must be said, is absolutely normal

in any phenomenon of a political (collective) nature but tends to be denied by a certain rhetoric of authenticity and absolute transparency of bloggers.

### **Giveaways and contests**

The competition between culinary bloggers represents, therefore, an organizational asset of the culinary blogosphere creating solid hierarchies based on identity (up to create a proper *star system* at the top of which are the so-called *blogstars*) and equally robust internal mobility of users obsessed with the idea of climbing the pyramid of success (which on the Internet mainly appears as *reputation*). Rankings of the most influential blogs are drawn up periodically by more or less influential newspapers around the world. The aim is to offer a picture of the state of the competition which will serve as a fundamental tool for determining advertising investments, acquisitions of the same blogs by large corporations and so on.

Strategies for shaping hierarchies among bloggers are accounted for within the blogosphere itself. Reference is given to the countless *giveaways* events and *contests*, which are especially popular in the culinary blogosphere. The first of these are nothing more than mini-competitions promoted by bloggers towards their audience, in which it is not so much the difficulty of the challenge that matters since, in general, it concerns trivial proofs (for instance, the response speed to comments to the post or the proposition of a recipe...). More than anything else, *giveaways* are beneficial for their promoters who will be able to exhibit, in the face of their fellow bloggers and the general public, both their direct relationship and contractual power (as evaluated in the number of products offered as a prize) towards the providers of the awards, usually considered by the audience as proper *lovemarks* (for example, *Kitchenaid* or *Le Creuset*). In this regard, it should also be remembered that another myth of the “integrated” rhetoric on the advent of new media would describe the discussion between blogs as a sophisticated and authentic confrontation carried out by experts of unquestionable reputation (*De Kerckhove, 2005*). Commercial branding has fully enlisted (when not created ad hoc) the protagonists of online discussion to its own interests. They are seen by the big brands as channels for their propaganda, to be recruited as professionals (in cases of sponsorship or consultancy that can go as far as entrusting them entire social projects commissioned through specialized agencies) or to be targeted as *opinion leaders* of their promotion (made of invitations, offerings of trial products and anything else) with the objective, not too hidden, of influencing and writing for commercial purposes.

Even more interesting are *culinary contests* which represent more structured means of leadership negotiation among culinary blogs and a delightful opportunity for the semiologist who will consider them. They consist of a sort of competition open to everyone, presented under a banal pretext (typically, the “birthday” of the blog) by a foodblogger. *Culinary contests* are usually called for in a post aimed at presenting the basic motivations which have inspired them and the rules. In general, the contest proposes the collection of themed recipes destined to become, when the competition is over, an actual recipe book, to be downloaded in pdf, starting from the pages of the blog that has indicted the contest. The emerging elements of such competitions are evident. As already stressed, these practices are, in fact, a tool of internal socialization, as well as a means of distributing prestige among the various blogs. However, they are also interesting as an example of online cooperation in view of the construction of a complex artifact such a cookbook for their *meta-discursive* character or, even, for the fact of being vast conversations around how a *cookbook* — which represents the communicative genre on which foodblogs are modelled — should or should not be. The difference between the blog and a traditional cookbook above all lies in the forms of articulation of the narrative. While blogs are by definition made essentially of a serial story; the recipe book is offered, instead, as a paradigmatic construction. The blog asks for being “followed”, the cookbook for being consulted. It is obvious that for bloggers part of the appeal of participating in contests comes precisely from the opportunity to reconfigure their culinary discourse within a more traditional format such as that of the recipe book, extracting a finished and defined editorial *product* from the flow of the serial narration (which requires a long-term commitment to the reader), which can also serve as a model for ulterior inter-mediatic translations, as, for instance, is the publication of a book to which every blogger aspires. Moreover, *contests* represent a fundamental moment of making the judgment emerge. If, as it was said, in all serial narratives, the limit of the conclusion of the story is progressively shifted forward in the continuous rotation of posts (rarely blogs publish concluding or farewell posts; they “die”, rather, by progressively fading), a “basic judgment” is almost impossible to obtain. Contests intervene to supply this lack of conclusion, by evaluating the proposed recipes with attention and seriousness. Such manifestations then become a fundamental feedback for authors who can reposition their activity precisely assessing the judgment of their peers. Despite this *metadiscursive* relevance, the explicit discourse around the *contest* tends to minimize this aspect, emphasizing instead the entity of the generous collaboration activity of the network. “Malicious”

commentators will remind the contest's promoter that joining these projects, as well as concrete benefits (various prizes offered) offers "non-monetary" remuneration, largely rewarding the effort.

### **Blogger as Author-Curator**

Participating in *contests* represents an opportunity for the participants but also and, above all, for the bloggers that organize them. If tackling such ventures may in fact have for some people the sense of gambling (there is nothing worse than a launched contest that does not receive adhesions), the competence that the promoter implicitly shows within the blogger community is that of the "Curator", of leadership and editorial management. At stake for the success is an appropriate design of the competition and its communication strategy (choice of theme, name, possible sponsor, prizes to be paid, invitations to participate, conception and banners to be exhibited for participating blogs, etc.), as well as the editorial promotion skills of the finished product (editing and publication of the e-book, its possible paper publication and so on). Such a consideration helps to highlight a duplicity connected with the role of the blogger. The blogger's activity may, of course, be recognized in the traditional sense of an author (posts, comments, photos, etc.). However, being exercised in a format for which bloggers appears to be entirely responsible, such activity extends to include the role of the editor/publisher. This implies that the blogger is entrusted with a whole series of skills and tasks that have to do with the "framing" of their own (or even others in the case of collective blogs) authorial proposal. They must take care to give a title to the blog, establishing the graphic design, planning the editorial activity (articulating a timing of the publications, structuring their format etc.) collecting an audience, promoting its activity in the blogosphere and outside it, to manage comments etc. Precisely in this sense, the blogger stands as a "Curator", both because she builds and manages the format that contains her own writing but also because, by definition, bloggers play a filtering role (Granieri 2005). Such a role consists in including (by adding links) and "activating" (by framing them appropriately, see Fabbri introducing Goodman, 2010) contributions that, outside the format, would have no reason to exist. It is obvious that there is a risk that the publisher takes over the author, bending him to his service in a kind of obsession for seeking success. The "political" conflicts described present themselves as editorial conflicts, fully integrated with the promotional logics typical of this extent.

## Conclusions

The attempt I have tried to make here has been to show the applicability of some basic semiotic tools in the Web 2.0 dynamics, trying to elaborate models as general and reusable as possible in future works upon culinary writing on the Internet. Reference is made of the reformulation of the squares by J.-M. Floch, into the square of consumer axiology and advertising philosophies and their intersection. Such an operation of translation can, on the one hand, confirm the usefulness of these devices as tools of great depth and adaptability for analyzing culture while on the other managing to “bite on the real”, proposing original results of the reflection on new media.

Another attempt to translate and expand the semiotic tools of classical analysis carried out in the article is the readaptation of Eric Landowski's founding work on public opinion which has all but disappeared in the socio-semiotic bibliography of recent years. On the sidelines of the Urbino seminar (September 2013) celebrating the twenty-fifth year since the publication of Landowski's work in relaunching it precisely on the side of political dynamics on the internet, this article wants to show its strength precisely as a tool for analyzing community dynamics on blogs and social networks. Such an operation of translation, as has been said, is in all respects a re-articulation. This is why we have proposed an extension of the model up to identifying a bloggers' “own” space — that of the backstage within the articulation of the initial theatrical metaphor.

Again, we get into the merits of some characteristics of the blog form (verticality, autobiographical dimension, seriality...). The direction taken thus shows its analytical vocation by inserting itself into a debate too often dominated by general positions (apocalyptic or integrated, it does not matter) that do not get their hands dirty in the study of actual interactions within online communities and between online communities and other social networks. By studying actual blogs we see how their disorderly amount of comments can be traced back into a theory that represents not only their logical explanation but also their conditions of possibility and inception. The fundamental hypothesis of such an attitude aims, therefore, at reading online communities as “semiotic communities” in which action turns into *endorsement* and conflict turns into a *conflict of definition*. The result of such an approach will thus be a complex picture of positions (and strategies!) of signification which are well stratified and will survive the rapid change in information technology. In this sense, such an approach also offers itself as a possible alternative to the over-simplifications of determinis-



tic hypotheses heralding the end of the world or, on the contrary, its rebirth starting from the advent of the last platform of discussion. Continuing to use general models of cultural analysis (reviewing them, if necessary, in a profitable interaction with the reluctance of “wild texts”) is the best antidote to such attempts of simplification.

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