

Hypertext and newswriting: a methodological approach

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¹ I just act as a representative of the whole research group, that includes Koldo Meso Ayerdi (University of the Basque Country), Ramón Salaverria, Rafael Cores and Charo Sádaba (University of Navarre), Xosé López, Xosé Pereira, Manuel Gago, María Luis Otero (University of Santiago de Compostela) and María Ángeles Cabrera and María Bella Palomo Torres (University of Málaga).

Journalism is present in the Spanish University, as is present in the United States and in the Spanish speaking area of Latin America. This means that the only European country where Journalism is studied, as a degree, at the University is Spain –although there are some other European countries where Communication subjects are also taught. Despite its youthness (the first Journalism faculties in Spain date from the 70's), we have, to some extent, paid a considerable attention to the theoretical aspects of Journalism and Communication. In fact, we have had from the beginning of our university studies two trends, two traditions that right now are beginning to receive each other's fruits: the first one, a more theoretical, European one, that pays more attention to matters like Sociology of Communication, Semiology or Communication Theory, indebted with a European (it means, French and Italian²) way of thinking; and the second one, a more practical, empirical, American tradition, concerned especially with journalists' training and represented, at the first moment, by the importation and adaptation of the American newswriting classics, like Mencher or Warren. It has something to do with the second language traditionally learnt at school in Spain: the oldest scholars learnt French, and are more influenced, thus, by that intellectual style; we, the youngest scholars, have learnt English, and this is the intellectual style we know better.

Anyway, both traditions are not incompatible, as is trying to be demonstrated by most scholars involved in teaching and researching on digital journalism (we prefer *cyberjournalism*, a most precise and economic word): on one hand, we must teach our students how to write, or how to build the discourse, of the journalistic information they are going to offer through the Internet; on the other hand, we have to determine which are the characteristics of the new information newswriting style, and how it must be as well. Thus, we have to be practical and form professionals, but we have to be theoretical and wonder where, why and how the new information is to be done. We are convinced that, if hypertext theory is necessary, it is more needed in a job where the World Wide Web –a limited version of the possibilities of hypertext, if we want, but which has begun to become true the dream of a universal library where all texts can be linked through hypertext- has imposed an everyday new style of doing things.

² Vide BETTETINI, Gianfranco; GASPARINI, Barbara; VITTADINI, Nicoletta. *Gli spazi dell'ipertesto*. Milano: Bompiani, 1999, p. 29.

The research group I represent³ (composed entirely by Journalism teachers from the Spanish universities of Navarre –the first one that offered Journalism studies in a Spanish university, Santiago de Compostela, Málaga and the Basque Country, where I come from), amongst some other matters, is trying to develop a hypertext theory especially focused in Journalism. We are conscious that probably it is better not to talk about newswriting, although the Spanish word (*redacción*) could cover a more widespread meaning than just “to write texts”, and to give another definition, probably “discourse construction”, as the new journalistic discourse is essentially multimedia, composed by text, images, sounds, databases, and also interfaces, design⁴, search engines and programation language. Some others (our Galician colleagues, for example) tend to include it in a more comprehensive term, “information architecture”, that is to be about structures (the hypertextual theory we use and try to develop focuses especially in the most efficient, and thus typical, structures) and organization. As they underlined in the COST project Congress held in Pamplona in June of 2003⁵, “research in Spain did not focus in the last years on the information architecture. This concept was defined by Richard Wurman in 1962, in his book *Information Architects*”⁶, and it deals with “the problem of representation of complex schema of information”, thus, with conceptual maps, and, in general, with a good representation of the way human being is supposed to be thinking, this is, regarding in some way to the proposals of Vannovar Bush and to those of cognitive linguistics: “As we may think”, actually. The practical translations of such abstract theories must be, as Gago and Pereira underline as well, “the structural planification of the content map: the definition of its content items, of the relations which run among them and, in a general way, the organization of all the back-end which sustains the system”. The example of *El País*, that presented a payment model just when they found a multiple way of offering information, is a case of particular interest, but there are some others: for example, in Catalonia we have the cases of *El Periódico de Catalunya* (both in Spanish and in Catalan, a good example of parallel structure) and of *La Vanguardia*, one of the oldest diaries in Spain (its complete archive can be consulted on the Internet). A reticular way of presenting

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⁵ The congress, *Towards new media paradigms. Content, producers, organisations and audiences*, was organised by two of the members of our project, Ramón Salaverria and Charo Sádaba, both from the University of Navarre, where the encounter took place.

⁶ “New trends in content and design at the Spanish cybermedia”. *Towards new media paradigms. Content, producers, organisations and audiences, II COST A20 International Conference Proceedings. Pamplona (Spain), 27-28 June 2003*. Pamplona: Eunat, 2004, p. 48.

information (*net* is a keyword in this new field of knowledge, as it has been recognised by, for example, Manuel Castells) must take very much into account a new way of thinking, or a new way of accurately represent the way we do really think, not in terms of unilineal sequences, but in terms of different *trails* (we are now using the word proposed by V. Bush), and using different kind of information, not merely text. Times they are a-changin', and the ancient Thomas Hobbes' conception is getting older and older.

This may be a first approach to our effort: some structuralism, yet we know well that, not being a totally perished theory, this is not a very popular one. Anyway, we cannot say that we are totally structuralist. As it happens in linguistics and philology, where –at least in the Spanish language dominion- the style handbooks of the media are accused of being the last reducts of “normativism” in Grammar, it is necessary a combination of both tradition and innovation, of prescription –in the sense of norms- and research and innovation. We cannot forget the enormous role that computer games are playing in the education of the future readers, and how the structures, characteristics, techniques of them are preparing the way to a real multimedia, interactive, hypertextual language, the way to hypermedia. New genres are, in our opinion, arising: infographics, for example, as studied –he is preparing his doctoral thesis, and he is going to the United States to improve his knowledge on the subject- by Rafael Cores⁷.

We do know, of course, that hypertext theory is not an exclusively European effort, and in this old continent we are indebted with, for example, George Landow, whose books have been translated into Spanish and are of common use amongst all that are working on this field, and, not to be said, by pioneers like Vannevar Bush or Theodor Nelson. But, I would say, it has been in Europe where the hypertext theory has had some success. We have some scholar literature on it here in Spain. I would like to mention the pioneer in this field, Professor Antonio Rodríguez de las Heras, now in the University Carlos III of Madrid, that wrote a seminar book on the subject, *Navegar por la información* (*Navigate through information*). He has also tried to become theory into practice with a digital book on the subject, *El libro de arena* (*The sand book*; the title is taken from a Jorge Luis Borges' tale⁸), accesible on the Internet.

⁷ “Shaping hypertext in news: multimedia infographics”. *Op. cit.* , p. 27-46.

⁸ We have to mention that some precedents of the hypertextual literature were originally written in Spanish: *The garden of forking paths* and *The library of Babylon*, by Jorge Luis Borges, and *Rayuela*, by Julio Cortázar, both of them Argentinians.

Literature and hypertext in Spain is a field that has received some attention. In this year a couple of good books were published in Spain: one is a reader⁹ which includes texts of both Spanish and international scholars, whose editor is María José Vega (Autonomous University of Barcelona)¹⁰ and another one¹¹, based on the doctoral thesis of Susana Pajares Tosca, currently working as a university teacher in Denmark. We are obliged to mention the effort of the digital journal *Especulo*¹², Complutense University of Madrid. This kind of scholarly production is also of great help for us; in the Spanish faculties (we prefer this name rather than “schools”, probably in order to confer the prestige that some other older disciplines already have) the theory of the genres was, and is, another important field in which some Newswriting professors have worked in these three decades. The main inspiration is, of course, the theory of literature, a mainstream coming from the precedents of Roland Barthes (*S/Z*) and Jacques Derrida and from the seminar studies by George Landow. We do now need a new theory of genres, both in Literature and in (Cyber)Journalism. We need as well, and this is indeed a very classical word, Rhetorics. The path was traced by Chaïm Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca in their *Nouvelle Rhétorique*, published in Belgium in the late 50's, and, since it wants to be a renewal of a discipline usually considered as fossilised, going back to the old Aristotelian concept of Rhetoric as an auxiliar science for Philosophy¹³ -this one considered as the search of the true, by the way a rhetorical category which, dressed with the word *objectivity*, is the main goal of Journalism- in our opinion this is a basic background we need to explain the way Cyberjournalism works, or must work. Probably a Rhetoric based mainly on associations and not so much in the logical cause, as Barbara Gasparini insists¹⁴. Some historical approach, in my opinion not incompatible with all the others exposed here, about the (hyper)document and the process of production, in the line of the cultural studies by Roger Chartier, now so interested in this concrete research field (and in the relation author-reader), or by Robert Darnton on the other side, he himself so

⁹ VEGA, María José. *Literatura hipertextual y teoría literaria*. Barcelona: Mare Nostrum, 2003.

¹⁰ http://www.webpersonal.net/lit_hipertextual/index.htm

¹¹ PAJARES TOSCA, Susana. *Literatura digital. El paradigma hipertextual*. Cáceres: Universidad de Extremadura, 2004.

¹² <http://www.ucm.es/info/especulo/>

¹³ CODINA, Lluís; ROVIRA, Cristòfol. *Sistemas de navegación hipertextual*. Barcelona: Editorial UOC, 2002 (this is a digital book, by the way).

¹⁴ Aristotle is not the only one to be taken into account, there are some other (very) minor authors which can bring us some light to Journalism teaching, for example the *Exercises* proposed by Teon, Hermogenes and Aftonius. There is one Spanish edition: TEÓN DE ALEJANDRÍA; HERMÓGENES; AFTONIO. *Ejercicios de Retórica*. Madrid: Gredos, 1991.

confident with the new technologies, to the point of proposing some theories for the new documents.

Another research field we try to follow, or to begin, is that of the textual linguistics applied to Journalism, as proposed by the Dutch professor Teun A. van Dijk. Let us take into account that currently Van Dijk is living and teaching very near to the place we are now discussing these subjects, in the Pompeu Fabra University of Barcelona. In some way, if hypertext is a supperation of text, we consider indispensable to develop a theory of the journalistic *hypertext* as Van Dijk did with the journalist *text*. Especially we focus in the macrostructures and microstructures of news hypertexts¹⁵, as Van Dijk did with the texts of the news in the press¹⁶. This is also supposed to be related to cognitive models and to their representation, the conceptual maps. A couple of doctoral theses are currently being prepared, at the University of the Basque Country, regarding to this concrete question and using as a basis the methodology of Professor Van Dijk. One is the doctoral thesis project by Andrea Martins da Freitas, from a more linguistical approachment, and the other one is the project by Ainara Larrondo, from a more journalistic point of view, insisting in the structures of the report and trying to adapt the theory of journalistic genres into a theory of *cyberjournalistic* genres, and effort that was just mentioned in the introduction we made to our *Manual de Redacción Ciberperiodística (Handbook of Cyberjournalistic Newswriting)*. Manuel Gago is finishing his doctoral thesis on the cyberjournalistic genres at the University of Santiago de Compostela, so in a few years we will probably have a seminar *corpus* of a theoretical ground, where a new bibliography is to be produced, probably, and hopefully, in the form of handbooks for students.

We have a handbook which is a synthesis of all we have been able to do until now, the mentioned *Manual de redacción ciberperiodística*. Based on the work of the mentioned research group, we tried to trace a map of most of the scholars that currently teach this subject (Cyberjournalism, Digital Journalism, Journalism on the Internet, all these names receive this new practice) and offer them a chapter of a book that could be used as a starting point for new research and as a basis for teaching – which is, in our opinion, another methodological point of view that could of interest to be discussed here. We divided the book in three parts:

¹⁵ BETTETINI *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 30-31.

¹⁶ Especially, DIJK, Teun A. van. *La noticia como discurso: comprensión, estructura y producción de la información*. Barcelona: Paidós, 1996, but also *La ciencia del texto. Un enfoque interdisciplinario*. Barcelona: Paidós, 1997 and *El discurso como estructura y proceso*. Barcelona: Gedisa, 2000. Cfr. BETTETINI *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 4-15.

- 1) The first one is devoted to the theoretical approach: first, the characteristics of the digital information: multimediality, interactivity, etc., a chapter written by Elvira García de Torres and María José Pou, from Valencia. Secondly, we proposed a brief theory and models of hypertext applied to journalism, especially a typology of structures, based on the essential elements, nodes (or lexias) and links, as essayed by Martin Engebretsen (it is a pity that his doctoral thesis, probably the first one completely dedicated to the subject, is published only in his mother tongue, Norwegian), but also in the theories of, for example, the Italian professor Luca Toschi, and the books of two Spanish researchers, Lluís Codina and Cristòfol Rovira¹⁷. Thirdly, Lluís Codina himself – coming from the documentation field- explains the composition and characteristics of a hypertextual document, and proposes a model to evaluate websites, which usually gives us a preliminary view of the quality of the media we investigate. And four, Manuel Gago, Xosé López and Xosé Pereira deal on architecture and organisation of information.
 - 2) The second part of the book is on language, style and rhetoric of Cyberjournalism. Spanish is a widespread language, the third one in terms of speakers and countries where it is official, and also very important on the Internet. The point of view of Francisco Yus, a linguist from the University of Alicante, based on pragmatics (a current especially important in the English speaking area, where David Crystal, for example, is working on it), is especially attractive, in our opinion. The changes that the Net is producing on language, deeper than we could probably think, are another research field, which is not to be discussed by us in this New Research for New Media meeting.
 - 3) Finally, we dedicate all the third part of our book to the different genres of cyberjournalism. We must confess that we have not been able, and not wanted, to break with the printed press model, with the classical one. Nevertheless, we have made some changes in the criteria we chose to classify the genres. If, in the Spanish tradition –not very different from the American one- we accepted that the genres were divided into information genres (news and interpretative features: report, interview, the Latin chronicle) and opinion, we prefer now, based on rhetorical criteria, to talk about informative, interpretative, dialogical, argumentative genres, plus infographics. We know that this proposal can be
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quite risky –and we were delighted to discuss this subject here-, but that a first step is also necessary.

This is the state of the question –just a brief exposition.