

The news on webjournalism

A reading on image and architecture of information

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Abstract

To speak of webjournalism is to speak of a journalistic practice, which demands of its profession new skills and proficiency. The need for these skill results from the adoption of a new base-language – what I call an intelligent text – because it includes word, sound, images and hyperlinks.

The incorporation of these elements in the text raises some questions related to the reading possibilities of a text with these characteristics. Knowing that reading implies a comprehensive effort and an effort towards comprehension and incorporation, it is necessary to identify an architecture applicable to news written according to a writing model and which grows distant from the linear schemes composed by graphic elements of the same family, be they characters or images.

This paper aims to understand the influence that the introduction of non-verbal elements, and various levels of readings may have in the process of understanding a new system.

Key words: webjournalism, on-line journalism, and electronic journalism.

Introduction

One of the potentials of journalism on the Internet is the use of hyperlinks, offering different levels of reading to the text. However this potential may also be an obstacle, as it implies/forces a non-linear reading which goes against a tradition of four millennia deeply rooted in our culture. The multi-dimensional character of symbolic thought, originally manifest/obvious in the non-linear written code of pictograms and hieroglyphs, has been lost though time. After a progressive detachment from the iconic forms of language, alphabetic writing ended up also detaching itself from the syllabic system and form, focussing action on a small number of signs organised linearly.

If, as Derrida argues, ‘the formal essence

of meaning is presence' (1967,31) then the introduction of images can bring together text and 'presence' or, in other words, reality, thus establishing a connection with the original action and writings that work as direct inscriptions of the meanings of thought.

However, within this apparent benefit some difficulties may arise, relating to the form in which images must be introduced in the text,. Thus the importance of analysing this process is at two levels:

Interfaces and architecture of the new / News interface and architecture

What type of changes must be done or occur in the construction of a new format as regards screen reading?

Incorporation of non-textual elements

Does the integration/incorporation/addition of non-verbal elements such as hyperlinks and consequent multi-dimensional readings demand a different spatial organization? What proficiencies/skills must the reader have to interpret the image?

News interface and architecture

It is almost agreed that a hypermedia product interface is paramount to the success of the product. It is not enough to have a bold/daring or innovative design, it is necessary that the design incorporates all the questions related to the artefact to do certain actions, e.g. it must have as a base its usability. For that, it is essential that the visual messages guide the user in the search of information, leading him/her to what he/she seeks, telling him/her that it has arrived, where to

go and how to get there. Basically we are talking about system syntax1, about the creation of interfaces that must be sufficiently intuitive/instinctive so that the user can reach his/her goals without interruption.

This question is even more important when applied to journalism on the web as other problems related to the news arise. Jakob Nielsen argues that screen reading is 25% slower than paper reading. In the same study the author argues that the majority of people that surf the web do not read the news word by word (79%), only scanning the page looking for words or phrases (Nielsen and Morkes 1997). Thus, if the reading is not a complete or total reading then it is necessary to know if the scan can still be considered as reading, as we do not know if the reader holds on to the data.

Syntax1 is understood as the actions that the user must perform to reach his/her aim

1 Screen reading vs Paper reading

To answer this question a small experience was put together with a class of 4th year students of Communication Studies degree of UBI.

A new from the society section of Público newspaper of 5 March 2003 entitled 'Consumption/use of anti-depressives duplicated on the last decade' was chosen.

The class was divided into two groups of 20 students. Half received a photocopy of the page where the news was 1/1 scale, on 4 row columns. The other half read the article online on a 17"screen. It was made sure that both news were presented with the same

character and size, and students were not informed of the next stage.

The aim of the study was to measure which of the structures facilitated a faster reading and in which of them students concentrated more on the contents of the news.

At the end of the reading time (2'30), the students were asked to mark the place where the reading had stopped.

Afterwards, questions were asked relating to the information spread through the one of the four quarters of the article to measure concentration levels. The students were also asked two questions concerning reading speed on both structures, so as to compare the results of the experiment with the opinion of the subjects.

The results obtained went against the opinion exposed/defended/argued by Nielsen. In general, students using the screen were able to read 58% of the news, while students reading on paper were only able to read 46%. Excluding the results of the two faster and two slower readers of both groups, the results maintain similar values: the screen group was able to read 54% of the text while the paper group only read 43%. It can also be mentioned as a curiosity that the fastest student read 91% of the text and belonged to the screen group, while the fastest reader on paper only managed to read 66% of the article.

In relation to the concentration levels, the results showed that the fastest reading on the screen led to less/smaller concentration levels as the students gave wrong answers to 13% of the questions asked, compared to only 3% of the ones given by the students that read paper.

Part of the experiment aimed to compare the results obtained with the perception the

students had about this topic, two questions were asked:

1. Do you consider it to be faster reading a text on screen or on paper support?
2. Do you concentrate better on the reading on screen or on paper?

Concerning the speed indicator, the students' opinion went against the results: 65% considered reading on paper faster. This opinion was found particularly amongst those who read it on screen, as 75% considered reading on paper faster.

Regarding the concentration levels, the opinions agreed with the results: 85% found it easier to concentrate reading on paper. As a curiosity, it can be added that 25% found it faster to read on screen but were more able to concentrate when reading on paper, this opinion was supported by those that read the news on paper (35%). Although this is not a significant sample, we can conclude that reading on screen is faster although less concentrated.

This less concentrated reading, which Nielsen calls 'scan the page' and looks for words or phrases, led him to advise web journalists to use a scannable text, beside the use of subtitles and lists. Nielsen emphasises particularly the use of key words through hyperlinks or colour.

Responding to the need to highlight certain parts of the text, we would like to argue that by the introduction of image to a text, in this case through icons that sign the existence of complementary information, the text can be made more appealing and as we shall see, clearer in the sense that the web-reader knows exactly what kind of contents he/she can access through that link.

However, the introduction of these icons will have to obey specific rules, so that it fits on the design of the new format.

2 Design on web news

One of the markers that distinguish a journalistic work from another covering the same subject is the so called ‘approach’ or ‘news angle’. This is the way that the journalist tries to distinguish his/her work from competition, using an original or unexpected approach to a specific event.

Besides the approach, the journalist of traditional media – written press, radio and television – can also use other strategies such as the organization and the elements component of the news. In the written press a journalist can play with photos and boxes, for instance.

On radio, difficulties are bigger as the ‘other resources’ are limited to the use of sound. On television it is possible to use all the latter variables, but also to try different angles of caption of images, animated charts or summary images, just to name a few of the possibilities.

In any of the cases the reader/ listener/ spectator –viewer is limited to following the story as it is related through a certain approach, following the course previously defined by the journalist.

On webjournalism the situation is quite different. The use of hyperlinks allows the user to built his/her own course through the reading, as such the approach, one of the bigger worries of journalists and also one of the areas most concentrated on in schools of journalism, loses its chief importance.

What becomes paramount is that journalist undertakes a thorough research of ele-

ments, so as to make it possible for the user to find his/her own version of the news inside the account of the events.

This form of constructing the news meets what the editors usually call for: to leave the facts to do the talking for themselves.

It is a curious fact that this construction of ‘free surfing’ answers a concern posed by the students during the experience undertaken. During the talk that followed the experience, students belonging to the paper reading group revealed that usually they just read the lead and jumped to the final paragraphs of the article. This observation/remark expresses the readers wish to create his/her own course of reading, searching only some data on the overall news.

Web news answers this wish, as it allows for large amounts of information to be available, with the advantage of allowing each one to read/see/hear only what he/she wants.

Two facts allow this freedom of the news: on the one hand the existence of an available space tangentially infinite and on the other hand the fact that hyperlinks allow the use of elements characteristic of all other media.

Although this removal of the constraint of proper journalistic writing is important and allows more freedom in the news production, there exist basic journalism rules that prevail. Webnews still has a title and preferentially a lead. It is through this that various parts of the news, text, image or video will follow.

The lead must answer four basic questions: what, who, when, and where. The answers to the how and why questions can and must be, part of the second level of information.

Following the answers to the four questions, the information may evolve or travel anywhere the user wishes/wants, through the

use of the available hyperlinks. However, the availability of these contents from the lead must obey some basic rules.

i. Information must always open a new window on top of the previous one.

The aim is to give the reader the chance to always go back to the base document, through the closing of the new window. In the end it is the translation to the web of a gesture of those who read a book or a paper. If the reader finds something that interests him/her, a finger will mark a page while he/she keeps on reading. The alternative would be to place a button or switch to load the page on the browser favourites – the equivalent to putting a book-marker in a book- but this solution would cause system entropy.

ii. The window must include a map on how to surf the news.

Putting up a navigation map of the news allows the user to move to any part of the information which he/she finds more interesting, at any moment.

These two rules are no more than an attempt to keep the user in contact with his/her path of reading and the open possibilities remaining available to understand the subject in question, at any moment.

Another of the questions that arises is how to mark or highlight hyperlinks. One of the more commonly used hypotheses is the underline. However, this marking ends up not being sufficiently explicit as it informs the users of more information available but does not give any hint about the type of information that follows or will be encountered.

Various studies reveal that rather than arguing how to mark the hyperlink, it is neces-

sary that the hyperlink is explicit and suggestive. For that, it is advisable to use pictograms which represent the character of the complimentary topic available: sound, video, photo, text box or hyperlink (external or internal).

The difficulty may be the creation of a universal symbology, but if it is true that the large majority of experiments to create a universal visual language have failed, it is not less true that a large number of icons have managed to impose them at a global level. The Internet's own history proves a predisposition of the users to use a group of signs accepted in all cyberspace, and as such it is only a matter of time till an assemblage of journalistic pictograms may be recognisable by users anywhere in the world.

This integration of non-verbal elements – pictograms- on the news, should not interrupt the reading, as this integration of non-informative elements does not require special reading attention. In truth they are not much different from other visual elements, such as spacing between words or the different size and type of lettering use.

Hyperlinks on the other hand require a non-linear and multidimensional reading. When we follow the links suggested by pictograms we access another level of reading which appears in a new window. If the information offered on the new window is another text, the reading process is as likely to be the same as when we stop reading a text to read the footnote.

If the supplementary information available is an image, the perception process is different. When focusing the reading on certain aspect of the text, the user does an action that leads to the opening of a new area of observation and this momentary break may cause

loss of concentration. Adriano Duarte Rodrigues argues that if ‘on the one hand the reading of a text implies a specific work of imagination, the perception of images does not exclude the need to elaborate a speech’ (Rodrigues 1999, 122). As such, it is thought that although a change in plan occurs it will be equivalent to a blink.

Human thought seems to be able to include a moment in which mental associations between the speech and image observed, happen. The availability of an image addition allows the individual to take advantage of it without causing any change in the perception of the news.

3 Image reading

Although the loss of concentration may be acceptable, other questions arise relating to the available contents. The image summoned by the pictograms may be static or in movement and assume different functions in relation to the written text, and, as such, demand new reading efforts/labours.

In a simplistic way we can say that reading is the de-codification and understanding of a group of signs. In the case of images, reading can take different form and reading may be done in different ways. One of them may be the deconstruction of the image to its basic elements so as allow a group analysis. As Dondis argues, this process may lead to ‘deep visions on the nature of any visual media as well as of the individual labour (Dondis 2000,5 3). (...)’. Dondis continues that ‘to analyse and understand the total structure of a language it is useful to centre/focus oneself in visual elements, one by one, so as to have a better understanding of its specific qualities’ (Dondis 2000, 53). What are

these visual elements? According to Dondis they are the dot, line, shape, direction, shade, colour, texture, scale, dimension and movement. These elements represent the basis of visual language development, which results from its special organization/arrangement.

To interpret this visual language, the reader must have some skills and expertise. In the case of photographs, Lorezon Vilches argues that ‘different levels of interpretation which must be found amongst the different skills of press readers are required by its levels of information’. (1984, 174)

These skills are, according to Vilches, of iconographic, narrative, aesthetic, encyclopaedic, linguistic and modal order and can be described as follows:

1. **Iconographic** proficiency – the simplicity of certain visual forms allows the reader to interpret/understand basic iconographic forms.
2. **Narrative** proficiency – based on visual narrative experiences, the reader establishes logical relationships between players and image objects involved in the event and players which only look at the event related.
3. **Aesthetic** proficiency – based on aesthetic and symbolic experiences the reader provides a dramatic sense to players involved in the event.
4. **Encyclopaedic** proficiency - the reader identifies and contextualises the image based on his/her social and cultural memories.
5. **Linguistic** proficiency – communication – based on his/her linguistic know-

wledge, the reader gives a verbal form to the image

6. **Modal** proficiency – based on his/her space-temporal proficiencies, the reader interprets in a twofold way the image, relating the event with the space and time where it happens.

With these skills the reader is able to interpret the images on the videos at various levels of understanding and read them when they appear isolated from the text.

3.1 Fixed images

3.1.1 Photos

The choice of an object to photograph, the angle of the views, the background and the distant from the lens result from the choices and interpretations of the photographer and of his/her relation with the model. The image is not, as such, a reproduction of reality, but the creation of a certain point of view or perspective which the photograph adapts to the reality. (Rodrigues 1999,85)

Although Rodrigues points the difference between image and reality, there are also major differences between artistic photography and journalistic/press photography, which concern us here. If an artistic photograph can have a high level of abstraction and demands some proficiency from the observer so as to interpret it, journalistic/press photographs converge in a real representation.

Lorenzo Vilches argues that ‘ a photo can be studied as a visual text, based on the separation between syntax marks (its expressive or significative plan) and the actual sign (its denoted mean)’. (1984,35)

The large majority of images on the press, stops at the syntax plan, as it characterises a more informative and real representation of reality. Público’s style book underlines that in this journal photography is not ‘a minor genre or a simple illustrative support, but an informative and dramatic counterpoint to the text’. Some pages later, the same book says ‘Público privileges the informative and dramatic dimension of photography’s (...)’. However ‘on those more ritual or predictable scenarios, photojournalists of Público must always seek surprising or unpredictable angles’.

The search for those angles may lead to abstract files of the image with difficult interpretation, but the narrative, aesthetic and encyclopaedic resources allow for its interpretation.

3.1.2 Graphics and infographics

Graphics are the visual expression of analogical information, as they are dimensional representations through easily understandable analogy.

Infographics are described as ‘graphic expressions more or less complex, of information about facts or events, the explanation of how something works, or the information about how certain thing is’ (Peltzer 1992,128)

In this case, iconographic, linguistic and communicative skills are required of the reader.

3.1.3 Maps

Maps are the geographical representation of the earth or part of it in a plane/flat surface. It expresses part or all the information com-

ponents according to a geographical order' (Peltzer 1992, 135)

Here also the reader is required to have iconographical and modal proficiency.

3.1.4 Illustrations

Finally, we consider illustrations which are considered as graphic or graphical representations of people, sketches or BD. In this case the proficiencies required of the reader also vary. If graphics, infographics and maps can work as information supplements which help the understanding of the text, illustrations can introduce new data of difficult interpretation, as they reflect a specific opinion of point of view.

So besides the iconographic proficiency the reader must also have aesthetic, encyclopaedic, linguistic – communicative and modal proficiency.

3.2 3.2. Moving images

3.2.1 Animated graphics

Animated graphics (produced by flash for instance) can be read as the maps or infographics earlier explained. They are fundamentally the same element but, in this case, with movement, thus facilitating reading. Anyway the reading of these elements supposes that the reader is familiar with a series of proficiencies and with these kind of elements.

To do this, as noted above, animated graphics offer the possibility of interactivity. By allowing the reader to interact with the news, webjournalism also becomes proactive, requiring the users participation/intervention. It should be remembered that the available text complement, in this

specific case the animated graphic, is not an essential element to the understanding of the text and is read as an independent unit. This means that the possibility is not, simultaneously, an impossibility, i.e, that the user can access the content, but if he/she does not do it, still has sufficient information to understand the news.

3.2.2 Video

When the resource provided is a video, the reading process of the image is identical to what happens in television, although with some important differences. On television image can assume a synchronic or not synchronic character. It is synchronic when the sound we hear corresponds to the situation we are watching in the image block, which is what happens on-directs.

It is an not synchronic process, when the most perceivable sound is the off voice of the journalist, although in the background it is possible to hear the background which keeps with the semantic of the image. This happens in certain parts of the news piece where the images help only to 'paint' the piece, i.e. to illustrate the text read by the journalist.

According to Vilches under certain coherent circumstances, the image presents the structure of an independent text. Vilches notes 'the image in general, can be readable and understandable without the need of a subtext or a written text with a contextualising function.' (1984,190) This is what happens with webjournalism, as the image blocks assume only a synchronic and have their own lives.

In webjournalism, the video assumes a legitimating character of the information given in the text, not being only complementary. It serves to corroborate and validate

the text, but it can also be read separately, as long as the essential contextualisation has been done, for example through the title.

One important question in the field of moving images is the choice of plans/shots. Although speed on the web can allow the visibility of video windows with the same size as on TV (720x576), the chief part of users is still connected through slow connection to Internet.. Thus, it is advisable to compile of video contents in smaller windows. According to Jespers 'the image on TV is an excellent vector of emotion (affection, violence, feelings, sensations).' (1998, 72). The reduction of window size dilutes the emotion referred to by Jesper. As such it is advisable to use detailed shots/plans in the editing of complementary video, so that it does not lose completely the feeling of the real image in movement.

4 Conclusion

When talking/speaking about text assimilation we use the verb to read. When we speak about the same in relation to a photograph, a film or a painting we apply the verb to see. When dealing with sound we use the verb to hear. It is impossible to understand a text by only seeing it as it is also not practicable to hear a image. However, when speaking about reading we can connect all those fields. It is possible to read a picture, a movie, a painting or a song, thus departing from the semiotic hypothesis that the world is a text open to be presented under different forms. When looking at a picture, for example we understand immediately a visual structure which when interpreted becomes a text. Looking at a picture of George W. Bush, we immediately build a text

where, according to our knowledge, we link to the image of the president of the USA, to some of the previous presidents, to the Iraq war and according to our political ideology, a judgement on the person. This semantic competence results from the contextualisation of the image from the completeness of our memory information. This action grouping which follows reading, can be more or less complex, according to the needs which the user wants to satisfy.

- a basic level where it is only aimed at knowing what is happening
- a second level of demand where the reader, knowing the players or places involved wants to remember/ascertain the person's or place's characteristic mentioned in the news.
- a third level in which the reader deeply analyses the image aiming to understand better the circumstances in which the event happened.

'Understanding requires attention, that all the explicit information is processed and retained and that the person will be able to infer the implicit message i.e. extracting more than facts presented on the screen, but also the inter-relationships between them.' (Del Rio 1996, 329) In this case the importance of the image inserted into a textual group becomes clear. Because although it is possible to make the subject take notice of the news, it's understanding requires a textual complement that leads him/her to the implicit information thanks to the establishment of cause-effect relationships between the presented facts.

We speak about interpretation, about the need each one of us has to filter the media news/events, looking for a reading of the

event which is not limited to the textuality, temporality and spatiality of the news. According to Paul Valery 'the true meaning of a text is something that does not exist; there is no author's authority. Whatever he may have meant, he wrote what was written. Once published, the text becomes similar to a device that any one can use whenever wanted and according to its own aptitudes' (Scholes 1991, 69)

Considering those aptitudes which are the interpretative skills earlier enunciated as the proficiencies allow the global and local reconstruction of a text or image. To those (iconographic, narrative, aesthetic, encyclopaedic, linguistic-communicate and modal proficiencies) are added, in particular for webjournalism, technical and technological skills related to the media which support the contexts. The technological proficiency needed to access the news on other media are few: to know how to turn pages (journal), synchronize a station (radio) or choose a channel preciously memorised (TV), do not require any special skill from the subject. However, when speaking of webjournalism the proficiency level needs to be higher due to the chances of interaction with the medium. Nevertheless, for that interaction to happen it is necessary that both the sender and the recipient share a certain amount of convention that facilitates communication, this requires a 'standardization' of web news through the establishment/organization of rules which will be connected to the conventions already established on the style books of various communication media.

'An inadequate message to the cultural context of the receiver and which, does not satisfy its expectations, will lead to an erroneous decodification, the meaning will not

be understood or it will have a different understatement than the one intended by the author, but an incorrect use of language and of its codes both by the author or the recipient will produce a confused decodification, and thus erroneous, which will also happen if the recipient does not know totally or partially, the code in which the message was elaborated.' (Garcia 1992, 205)

Thus webjournalism practice must be based on a set of rules known by the recipient and the writer. Langer writes that 'routine in the creation of news turns the events unintelligible through the complete selection of structuration and understanding proceedings.' (2000,35)

In webjournalism this routine must follow the following rules.

A. The base text of the news – the only one visible without the intervention of the reader- must be short and direct. The first paragraph must answer the questions Who? When? What? and Why? Given that, the two first questions must direct the reader to additional windows.

The second paragraph must answer the How? and the Why? in a brief way with hyperlinks with multimedia complements.

B. The information provided by the hyperlinks must open in a different window.

C. Each window must include a site map of the news which allows the access to other parts of the news at any moment.

D. The hyperlink marks must be made through icons which represent clearly the contents available: text, photography, video, external pages, etc.

E. The integration of multimedia contents in the news must be done so that the characteristics of the resources enrich the information. The question is when to use each resource?

Video – Video clips must be used every time that, by their importance, they become paramount to confirm the information. The used of videos is justified also in situations of difficult description, or that require very large texts. Sports, for instance, are a field where their use is advisable: it is easier and more objective to show part of the game or action rather than to describe it.

Virtual reality – using synthesis or summary image it is possible to create and /or predict virtually certain situations such as meteorological phenomena or buildings under construction. Synthesis/summary images allow the reconstruction of historical events or accidents for which there is no record, as, more than ever, these are the cases in which ‘an image is worth more than a thousand words’.

Graphics (static, animated or interactive) –a news story that includes large amounts of numbers or large numbers, such as economic information, can take advantage of graphics. News about the rise of interest taxes can be completed with a credit simulator so that the user appreciates his/her own situation. This is one way in which to take advantage of journalism in proximity.

Audio – it is not always easy to describe the emotional state of the interviewee. By resorting to an audio file it is possible to broadcast the ‘colour of words’ as sound

also lends interpretation. Music publications are those which can gain most by using this resource.

Comments – the Blogosphere is directly linked with the notion of Freedom of Expression. There everyone can contribute with opinion without any form of ideological, economic or technical constraints. Its success is based on three points:

- **Simplicity** – editing a blog does not require much *html* knowledge
- **Low cost** – the editor of a blog only pays for the internet connection and does not have any expense related to housing or space maintenance.
- **Opinion** – the large majority of papers have an opinion about the different subjects and blogs offer the opportunity for these people to have a space to voice their opinion.

This is exactly why it is advisable to have a space which allows for the readers opinions/comments. My personal experience with a blog reveals that after the opening of space for comments, visits increased c. 40%. Once, when the backlog web server was down, visits decreased to the values previous to the opening of the comments space. This experience which is not alone in the blogosphere reveals the importance of space for comments.

One visit to Portuguese daily papers online allows observation that none of them includes space for comments or the journalists’ e-mail. The only way to make contact is to send a message to the e-mail address of the paper.

However there are also interesting cases of attempts to interact with the readers. Although not giving journalists' e-mails nor the space to comment, each news feature Journal de Notícias has created a space for the reader; the Reader Section. Here various options are offered; Talk to Us, Readers Corner, Your News, Talent Door, Post, Science Frontier and All Man is my Brother. Each space has its own characteristics and has had a significant amount of participation which mirrors the readers need to express his/her opinion.

In *Politique et Morale de l'Information*, Marcel Voisin defines the public usefulness of information: 'help Man to understand and dominate himself, to know and dominate the world that surrounds him, to locate himself and act in the society to where he belongs'. (Jepers 1998, 25)

In this context journalism is seen as the answer for the right of each citizen to information, independently of his/her economic, cultural and political context. The answer to this contextual variety may be achieved through the exploration of the interactivity offer by journalism on the Internet and by the providing a news unit, which though a simple form associated with fast reading – the lead- may then evolve into a web of hyperlinks which answer every readers expectations or the technical characteristics of the news access point.

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