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The concept of hypertext in digital journalism

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Abstract

Hypertext writing is one of the main characteristics of digital news sites that makes them different from other news media. However, the concept of hypertext has been developed more from documentation and literature than from journalism itself. An important part of the hypertext theory comes from these areas, connected with journalism but different from it. These hypertext theories are often applied to journalism without analysing the real effects of hypertext on the organization of the news and its actual contribution to the news themselves.

In this paper we approach the concept of hypertext from a double perspective: first, we analyse the possible effects of hypertext on the news and then, we consider the changes hypertext may introduce in the construction of the news. With this aim, we critically examine some ideas of the classic theorists of hypertext such as Jay David Bolter (1990) or George Landow (1995, 1997 and 1998) who associate this concept with a unique textuality, organised as a network, open, not linear, and without a centre, as opposed to an assumed hierarchical and linear textuality of the paper.

Instead, we propose that there is not just one type of hypertext but a variety of hypertexts which have different effects on the news. We define hypertext as a multilinear discursive construction based on the interconnection of digitalized text blocks. We

consider the notion of an “ideal hypertext” for digital journalism which is the hypertext that allows an extension of intertextuality, offers new ways of access to the contents, promotes interactivity and, therefore, gives the reader more power in the construction of the news.

Definitions of hypertext

From a technical point of view, hypertext is an informatic tool to put multiple texts in connection automatically and instantly¹.

There are no disagreements when authors define the concept technically. However, the problems appears when they go more deeply into what implications hypertext has for writing and reading of texts, what real power hypertext provide to the reader, and what the differences are as compared to traditional printed texts.

The concept of hypertext has long time (see Caridad and Moscoso, 1991; Nielsen, 1995). The first antecedent dates back to 1945, a year before the first computer was created. A literature professor Theodor Nelson coined the term. He defined hypertext as “non sequential writing-text that branches and allows choices to the reader, best read at an interactive screen” (Nelson, 1993, 0/2).

Since then, a mythical position has prevailed. According to Jay David Bolter (1990) and George Landow (1995 and 1997), for instance, hypertext is a unique textuality, organized as a network, open, not linear, and without a center, as opposed to an assumed hierarchical and linear textuality of printed paper. They not only get enthusiastic with a lot of attributes they see in this informatic tool but also as a pathway to liberate us from the hierarchies imposed by the printed word over the centuries. “Hypertext has no canonical order”, affirms Bolter “[E]very path defines an equally convincing and appropriate reading, an in that simple fact the reader’s relationship to the text changes radically. A text as a network has no univocal sense; it is a multiplicity without the imposition of a principle of domination” (Bolter, 1990: 25).

Landow is as conclusive as Bolter. He underlines the “democratizing power” of hypertext against the hierarchical model of printed text. Landow interprets that with hypertext we can achieve the “ideals of textuality” of poststructuralists, because it replaces the notions of center, margin, hierarchy and linearity by others such as multilinearity, nodes, links and networks. According to this view, the printed book is seen as imposing

¹ To underline the multimedial characteristic of hypertext, you can use *hypermedia* (Nelson, 1993).

monologic reading, while hypertext facilitates participatory or dialogic reading (Miall, 1997).

Three observations we can we draw from this position:

Firstly, and paradoxically, while trying to underline the power of the reader, these authors end up overshadowing his or her hermeneutical capacities. Bolter and Landow describe the reader of printed book like an individual that is at the mercy of a hierarchical organization, closed and linear, comparing him to what they perceive as an active and revolutionary reader of hypertext. Doing so however, they end up attributing a crucial and extraordinary power to technology **forgetting the receiver-side of this process**. This approach has little in common with the multiplicity of signifiers that poststructuralist tend to see into the same printed literary work, because of the symbolic nature of the language as well as the cultural context in which the act of reading is taking place.

Secondly, this multilinearity, exclusively attributed to hypertext, has clear antecedents in the printed culture. Many printed texts do not have an expositive sequential order. Foot notes, indexes, and summaries of books as well as encyclopedias and dictionaries are often mentioned as examples. But the contemporary printed newspapers are a more evident case of multilinearity: they are designed like coloring mosaics that offer simultaneously multiple levels of reading allowing to the reader his own pace and his own order of access to the news.

In the third place, according to these authors, every hypertextual structure has a non hierarchical nature. This ideal of hyperconnected textuality has found its best expression in the world wide web (www). However, if we critically examine how this textual organization operates, then we can realize that **there are different hypertextual structures in the web sites** and not always organized as a decentralized network. On the contrary, the contents of many sites are closed and autistic in order to keep the reader caught. Many sites prefer hierarchical structures that are user friendly to the reader avoiding him to get lost while he can clearly receive certain messages. In short, each site arranges his symbolic contents in a different way, and this affects the possibilities of reading the user has. **So, there is not just one kind of hypertext, but a multiplicity of hypertexts** which have different consequences on the news.

In the case of digital newspapers, we could demonstrate in other work that digital newspaper are far from just being structures organized in networks, openly interconnected to other sites, decentralized, with infinite paths of reading (Rost, 2001). On the contrary, the hypertextual structures in the analyzed cases are different in many aspects but have a

common characteristic: its contents are organized in a strongly hierarchical manner. There is not a network of free and random associations in the news web sites. Even more, a given web site could not admit too much free associations if it wants to deliver a clear and precise information. And the reader wants to have a quick and not ambiguous access to the available information. Far from being a network, the links set layers or levels of importance so that the reader can receive and clearly find certain information, without noises in the process of decoding. A verticalized structure gives an easy order to understand information, avoiding thus the risks of *desbordamiento cognitivo* (cognitive overflowing), in terms of Codina (2000).

On the other side however, a hierarchical structure without horizontal links does not allow to use the possibilities of associations that hypertext gives limiting the participation of an interactive reader in his own construction of the reality. An Interactive Digital Newspaper must arrange the discourse in layers offering alternatives of navigation and exploration to the reader. Therefore, we could talk about an *ideal hypertext* for the digital newspaper.

An ideal hypertext

We can propose a tentative definition of hypertext with his basic characteristics but also with his discursive potentials, that is to say his “ideal form”.

Hypertext is a multilinear discursive construction based on the interconnection of digitalized text blocks. In his “ideal form”, **hypertext allows an extension of intertextuality, offers new ways of access to the available contents, promotes interactivity and, therefore, gives the reader more power in the construction of reality or, as I would suggest, his own construction of *actualidad*.**

It is a “**discursive construction**” because it is a way to display contents. It is “**multilinear**” –and not “non linear”, in terms of Nelson- because it offers multiple paths of reading among which the reader will do one of this possible levels in a linear and sequential mode. That is to say, the reader will construct his own linearity based on the multiple options that the media proposes. This way to construct the discourse is supported by the **connection of blocks of texts** which are digitally stored.

What are the advantages that hypertext can offer to the process of constructing different *actualidades* in digital newspaper? In its ideal form, the hypertext contribute to:

-**emphasize and extend the intertextuality**, setting an infinite variety of association of texts. In the case of digital newspapers, we can connect not only mutually related news, but also associate its contents with other sites in the web, with the archives of the newspaper, with first-hand documents, or with others sources of information.

- **provide other unexplored forms of access to contents**. On one hand, navigation by itself and, on other hand, retrieval of the information. Navigation involves exploration, grouping around for information that can be interesting, selecting among possibilities that the hipertextual design allows. Retrieval comprises the search of a specific data and information that the reader wants (Codina, 2000).

- **promote interactivity**. Hypertext is the informatic fabric of interactivity. It allows to promote interactivity with the contents (*selective interactivity*) as well as with other individuals (*communicative interactivity*) (Rost, 2001).

Hypertext is not a magic remedy against an assumed tyranny of the paper. But it can be a fundamental expressive tool for digital newspapers as well as other media. With hypertext, the media can associate contents, hierarchically organise the news, promote the participation of the reader, open the media to other sources and personages, and provide a meaningful context for the contents. If the media tend to an *ideal hypertext*, then they can extend the horizons of reality, emphasise intertextuality, offer multiple possibilities of access of contents, and enable the interactive participation of the reader.

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