New Environments of Media Exposure – Internet and narrative structures: from Media Education to Media Pedagogy and Media Literacy*

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Índice

Introdução

By observing some of the new environments of media exposure, such as the internet, the mobile communication devices and situations, or the console games' interaction patterns, we discern that there is a great need for research into, and development of, the field. In order to gather better knowledge about our individual and social situation in the private and public spheres of daily life, the emergent new media usage, or their appropriations, and the levels of credibility surrounding the information sources connected to those environments available everywhere, on-line and off-line, need to be studied in a multi-disciplinary approach.

Since mankind knows itself as mankind, such knowledge has probably been constructed and expressed through different narrative communication layers, structuring themselves one upon another and giving rise to new patterns of narrative strategies. Simultaneously, new communication instruments and devices emerge, such as, new gestures, sounds, images, words, languages, discourses and all the new channels of communicative diffusion and exposure. These range from ancient theatre to modern film, or post-modern mobile audio and video messages deconstructed within computer pro-

cessing networks, that is, the media as we know them in their evolution until today.

When we speak about new media, we generally speak about devices that have emerged in our daily life environment rather recently. They have, however, rather quickly accomplished a reshaping of some of our ancient habits of personal communication and our most common communicative patterns of media usage. At first glance, these new patterns of communication and media usage seem many times to be so complex that we feel tempted to claim that we are entering, with them and via them, into a new paradigm of personal and social communication. It may well be so, and that is why we must observe and study them. However, when we look more closely at these new patterns, we see that although they are developing devices and postures upon new complex and differentiated channels of communication, these new environments of media exposure may not have developed, apparently, any new narrative functions that would differentiate the new from older and more canonical environments, like the folktales or the various narrative arts and genres. This probably implies that although we have definitely got some new complex environments of media exposure we may still study them and their processes, in accordance with some of the best known narrative structural dispositions and their analytical models. However, we really don't know if this is so, and therefore there is an urgent need for research and in-depth studies into the new environments of media exposure and their publics, that is, their dramatis personae. If, however the functions appear to be essentially the same, we already know that the structures of exposure and their patterns of reception are much more fragmentary than before. Therefore, the knowledge we may glean about the appropriations of new media, in terms of a better understanding of the public sphere of media literacy, may also come in fragments, and so are not necessarily included in a global context of comprehension and understanding of this new literacy. Aiming at such a global context of new 'literary' comprehension is, in my opinion, one of the most important roles of the actual research within media and communication studies.

The geo-cultural context of the studies

In the field of Cultural Studies in general, and in Communication and Media Studies, in particular, it is possible to develop different analytical approaches according to the main goals relating to the different cultural, pedagogical and mediatic contexts.

At the Centre for Research in Communication Sciences at the University of Algarve, CICCOM[1], we have been developing some projects concerning various themes of pedagogical interest and cultural, or 'literary', implications. They are related to the primary characteristics of the information available in new public spaces, such as the Internet, the Bloggs, Mobile/Virtual Communities and Strategy Games. We aim to compare them with other characteristics already known from older media and communication contexts. These studies have also been concerned with the question of emergent risks,

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[1] CICCOM was later integrated in CIAC – Research Centre for the Arts and Communication.

namely in terms of information credibility and reliability within the adequate contextualization of the available information, as well as the correct identification of the respective sources and channels.

We therefore introduce some media pedagogical approaches and propositions for analyses especially related to the Internet and its character as a public platform of communication. The present article presents examples of new cultural communication environments of media exposure in southern Portugal, showing that, in fact, there is little difference between these and other new European social and cultural environments of media exposure.

The Internet as a new communication platform within a new paradigm of media literacy

Digitalization is the basis for modern day communication, presenting a technological system of digital treatment and information control programs. The Internet and its components (in particular the World Wide Web), must be included in the set of mass media, on account of its production and archiving capacities, its social system and economic characteristics, thus improving its capacity to extend the categories already defined in relation to the communication channels, technologies and processes including their narrative structures.

Therefore, one of the main questions must be: what are the new skills and competences that individuals and groups must acquire in order to allow them to participate as active, or passive, members of the new media literacy public sphere? While trying to find some answers to this question, we have realized that some very old narrative aspects and functions contribute to shaping the communication processes. Whether they depart from the traditional world of verbal narrative, such as folktales, or from pictorial iconography, they still play a very important part in these new environments of media exposure. Such completely different sets of channels also include the photographic composite imagery or the filmic montage of images and sounds, verbal and non-verbal.

The Internet must be recognized as a communication platform, a multimedia galaxy undergoing permanent expansion and reorganization. This enables millions of people to partake in the dissemination and exchange of information via conventional telephone network lines, optical-fibre, satellite links and radio waves, but also between individuals in a virtual peer to peer close relation. Its existence has become so common-place as to be considered ubiquitous, replacing man to man communication experiences. Its human-machine-human mediation interfaces are not always obvious, what with innumerable computers, mobile devices and software possibilities. For many of us, it has become part of every day life in terms of ease of access and information consultancy, and also for the multitude of communication services it provides.

Email is a remarkable process, to send and receive, in a fast and cheap way, instant and/or elaborated information over short or long distances. It has almost replaced the old reliable postal services, but it can also, very easily, become an incredibly troublesome tool. What then are the skills that every

citizen has to develop to be a critical, independent and literate user of this tool?

Newsgroups are structured communication platforms, on most varied subjects, where the users can discuss and receive information about their favourite subjects via their personal mail, mail-lists or newsletters. But who filters and scrutinizes the information flow? And who confronts the sources, or how?

Internet Relay Chat rooms allow conversation among individuals in groups and peer to peer in real time on the most varied subjects, through written messages, generally in SMS formatted language and dialects, that are grouped in diverse channels, available for whoever may find it on the net. However, even if the user is a skilled SMS user and has a good knowledge of the majority of the acronyms in local and global usage, how does he, or she, recognize different aims in similar narrative strategies? And how can he/she decode if those aims are related to common daily life issues or are, instead, hidden narrative strategies of harassment, personal trespassing and deceiving? But, on the other hand, are those strategies so much different from the Big Bad Wolf's deceiving narrative towards the Little Red Hood?

Because of its characteristics, the Internet is actually the largest database for information support in the daily life of individuals but even institutions and services. Among those we can count students and teachers, but also media and opinion makers, as well as information providers including journalists. When it is essentially used as a path for communication channels for electronic messages, the web contains a series of useful information, presented by individuals, institutions, governments, associations and all types of commercial and non commercial organizations. But who are the gate-keepers of that electronic flow? Who makes up the major streamlines of the global agenda? How and where are the most powerful editorial lines shaped?

Beyond the boundless and instantaneous allocation of data, the Internet developed new ways for cultural, economic and social life. This development is related to communication instruments and access to the communication and information industries. It is apparent in politics, education, commerce, and in many other fields of public and private character. All these areas contribute to the rapid change of our traditional paradigms of public sphere and space and we don't know yet if our position as individual and social actors in the above is changing as quickly and maybe we are not yet completely aware of the implications of such changes. The potential threat of widespread alienation in such new environments of media exposure should not be dismissed lightly.

The mass media established the traditional idea of message transmission from an emission centre to a plurality of receiving individuals. Contrary to this immediate personal communication, the Internet redefined this mode through the incorporation of a communication system that can embrace the media systems previously known, and the individual's facilitated capacity to produce online content. The Internet is usually seen as the "net of the nets", displaying an apparently organic and dynamic development towards a "supra net", where the source of the message no longer displays a steady, central and explicit character, and where the methods of production and reception are available and accessible at any moment, in any place, at

reduced costs and higher returns. However, it may also be regarded as a vast quantity of fragmented, non structured and non scrutinized information. This means that the Internet is frequently used as a source that disseminates the information or distributes subject matter, such as the transmission of manifestos, conferences, concerts or congresses. In so doing it complements the information offered by the press, radio, television and other media. However, it is seldom looked upon as a pedagogical medium in itself with its non-structured function that may shape fragmented cultural patterns of message reception and of message production in the most open, non regulated and apparently free environments of media exposure. It can be seen as the most available example of what may be termed an open work of multimedia texts, or text of texts and hypertexts.

The Internet as a World Wide Open Work

This proposition that considers the internet documents, or texts, to be open works refers directly to the methodological strategy of text analysis once presented by Umberto Eco, before we could even dream about the internet. However, that can be defined as the analysis of the relationship between the contemplation and the utilization of any «work of art», or «text», or «communication document» with the qualities of an «open work» – *L'oeuvre ouverte*[2].

This notion of «open work» is, of course, also influenced by Eco's later writings deve-

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[2] Eco, 1962.

loping the subject in relation to the notion of «absent structure»[3] and to the structural role of «metaphor» in a broader sense of *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*[4].

The implications of such a relationship that Umberto Eco called the «poetics of the open work» were already the object of study in his early book *L'oeuvre ouverte* and introduced a complementary notion of the work as a pedagogical metaphor of knowledge, which can be summarized with the following quotation:

> "...si une forme artistique ne peut fournir un substitut de la conaissance scientifique, on peut y voir en revanche une métaphore épistémologique: à chaque époque, la manière dont se structurent les diverses formes d'art révèle – au sens large, par similitude, métaphore, résolution du concept en figure – la manière dont la science ou, en tout cas, la culture contemporaine voient la réalité"[5].

For this proposition, it is most pertinent to identify the epistemological metaphors that the documents can represent within the field of human communication, and consequently to determine how those metaphors can be contemplated and utilized within a contemporary cultural context, like the «internet culture».

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[3] Eco, 1968.
[4] Eco, 1984, pp. 87-129.
[5] Eco, op. cit., p. 28.

The Internet as a Work of Tales

Some of these metaphors cannot be analyzed using the traditional instruments of literary criticism, which have been used too frequently as instruments of traditional literary criticism and are therefore marked as such, despite their unsuitability for their actual narrative forms. To approach the pedagogical value of the Internet multiple text imagery requires more than a mere identification of the tenors and vehicles within the metaphors. Essentially, it requires the identification of functions and themes, patterns of information structure, signs and contexts of signification. This implies that, on occasions, we are not too far away from Vladimir Propp's study of the folk tales, which he defined as a "study of the folktale according to the functions of its dramatis personae"[6].

The Internet metaphors (and the modern multimedia in general), indeed, often assume the role of the ancient folk tales in their relationship to myths, religion and transcendental mysteries. They are modern tales and parts of modern myths with specific functions, and we can find some structural similarity between these and those analyzed by Propp in the folk tales, which he formulated as follows in his first thesis and which we could easily adopt as a point of reference for the narrative nature of the Internet multimedia functions:

> "Function must be taken as an act of dramatis personae, which is defined from the point of view of its significance for the course of action of a tale as whole" ... "Func-

[6] Propp, 1928, p. 18.

tions serve as stable, constant elements in folktales, independent of who performs them, and how they are fulfilled by the dramatis personae. They constitute the components of a folktale"[7].

Unfortunately, we cannot apply Propp's second and third thesis so easily to the Internet. The number of functions known to the multimedia components is not necessarily limited, even if it can, apparently, be so in the case of the most closed genres and structures, nor is the sequence of functions always identical. Quite the contrary, the Internet multimedia texts, in their quality of open works, are examples of non-identical unlimited sequences of functions. They are, in fact, «heretical» approaches to the folk tales, but tales nevertheless. This means that we can also find some theoretical support in Propp's formalistic and structural approach, but we cannot completely follow his method for the analysis of our material. However, although it has not been our aim to accomplish a morphology of the internet «tales» (which, per se, is a very interesting task for future research), it would nevertheless appear that we could use some of Propp's functional nomenclature to designate the most relevant functions in some internet genres, exactly as has been done for other media, namely in the field of film and photographic studies, i.e. a work of tales or their equivalent metaphors.

[7] Ibidem, p. 20.

The Internet as an Equivalent of Social Information and Metaphor

The shortcomings of the methods of traditional literary criticism and of formal structuralism, when applied to multimedia and hypermedia analysis, may be compensated with elements that determine another specific matter of expression embodying the virtual metaphors' imagery. For this purpose it is especially interesting to determine the metaphoric implications of the notion Equivalence, and here we could borrow some of the work that has been done in the field of photographic studies, namely by Susan Sontag in relation to the notion of «photographic equivalents» by the great north American photographer Alfred Stieglitz:

> "«Equivalents», that is, statements of his (Stieglitz) inner feelings." ...
> "Photography is the paradigm of an inherently equivocal connection between self and the world - its version of the ideology of realism sometimes dictating an effacement of the self in relation to the world, sometimes authorizing an aggressive relation to the world which celebrates the self" [8].

The available readings of these texts are in fact wide open and it is necessary to tutor the reader (the user) to find the patterns of narrativity that may exist in the text structure of real referents, their metaphors and/or equivalents. Or, last but not least, to understand the function of their absence. When doing this,

we usually find ourselves in a learning process, in the widest sense of the expression, and that is why the pedagogical dimensions that are involved and relayed in the different multimedia channels usually prove to be highly effective, especially if the readers are not quite aware of them.

The Internet facilitates the information research, but it requires a redoubled attention to the verification of the information. The credibility and authenticity of the data found on the Internet is one of its greater problems. It is generally ignored in favour of the idea that the present information is free from errors, and therefore, freely available for gratuitous use without any type of verification. This is really one of the greatest dangers that our students are exposed to, probably, at a much higher degree than they are exposed to more explicit "dangerous" contents like pornography and similar subjects. The diversification of the production, and the absence of evaluation filters, articulate a redistribution of data, less conditional and therefore more prone to suffer from all types of negative or "positive" influences.

The databases and the Internet contents allow access to innumerable quantities of information in a simple and fast way, but they can become useless, without a previous ability to use them. Moreover, the easy and free access to all sorts of information does not mean that the user will be able to contextualize it, in face of its cultural universe. This possibility is, therefore, as important as the acquisition of the necessary skills to look up and to know what to make of the collected data. The technological system of the Internet and its auto-legitimacy, resolve an extensive set of questions and inequalities concerning information access, transforming

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[8] Sontag, 1973, p. 123.

the technological performance into the guarantee of content veracity, which is often assumed by many national and even international authorities as a safe way of regulation and self-regulation. However, such an assumption can be misleading and instead of knowledge, skills and competence, we may find ourselves working within a maze of ineffective rules and dubious laws at the global level.

The democratization of the communication channels discloses the capacity to exceed the receiving condition and move to an individual reflection, allowing also an individual leading form of participation, while individual users who interact through the multimedia channels are free to assume different positions and opinions, which is not always seen as a very "healthy" characteristic of the Internet. And these phenomena, along with the digital divide, also need our attention and research.

The Internet as a Research Object and as a Research Environment

In this context we may now refer to the «Educaunet»[9], «Glocal Youth»[10], «Mediappro»[11], or even the «European Charter for Media Literacy»[12], all projects that attempt to relate different situations of media usage to the common local and global outcomes and in which the CICCOM has been deeply involved.

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[9] www.educaunet.org
[10] www.glocalyouth.net
[11] www.mediappro.org
[12] www.euromedialiteracy.eu

Educaunet was a critical educational programme, researching and teaching about Internet and its possible risks. It was developed in collaboration with several European countries to implement an awareness campaign and training sessions for educational publics. Its educational model advocates an active commitment to risk-taking, based on a set of pedagogical tools and activities produced in close cooperation with all the participants – schools, teachers, students and parents. The major objective was to train the children's ability to assess and become aware of the risks when using the net. The Portuguese approach to these problems was a bit different from other European countries, specially the Northern European ones, where children were already familiar with the Internet and frequently used it at home and at school when the project started. In those countries, the Educaunet project had its focus especially on the Internet hidden risks, because the challenges of usage were already known. In Portugal, we had to focus both on the risks and on the challenges, since many children, some young people and some adults even had not yet used the Internet, or had only done it a few times. Part of the Portuguese population still do not have any computer link to the Internet at home. Using Internet at school, or in other public places, is a good way to bridge the common situation of digital divide.

The major aim of the Glocal Youth project was to study the different social and geographical appropriations within similar age groups. However, there is a common belief that the use of computers may contribute to a decline in social differences. However, it is not that simple since the circulation of the information through the net is not universa-

lized and often presents two distinct features: development and exclusion concerning access to, and the capacity to select and operate the different information channels. Although there is a global process of production and diffusion of the main information streams, there is no exact parallel on the receptive side and those who do not master the techniques may even be suppressed, regarding the languages and the narrative devices used to communicate. The online communication patterns have produced a new specific net culture, which in turn introduced new patterns of social and personal communication within the public spheres of different countries on different continents.

Those patterns are frequently cultural forms of narrative absence in a structural sense, and of close communication boundaries leading to processes of unawareness and even alienation that can still be observed in some geographical, cultural and generational European contexts. These are apparent in some more recent research approaches like those studied in the Mediappro project. They revealed an impressive amount of information on new media usage, skills and appropriations by the younger Portuguese population concerning the cultural and generational use of mobile phones, especially with SMS language, video and strategy games, Bloggs and other interactive devices.

That fact led some of the participants in the project to start a movement towards a European Charter for Media Literacy, which is just beginning, but which may well become an important platform for discussion and intervention towards the acquisition of general media literacy skills and concepts in the most problematic fields of media exposure.

In this context, it would be both interes-

ting and fruitful to connect these reflections to other well known cultural environments of media exposure that have not always been regarded as such given environments of literacy, mostly because of their «lack» of canonical literary structure, which has frequently been apparent in the case of some specific film genres and languages.

The Internet as an Absent Structure, its Filmic and Pedagogical Functions

This proposition is an exercise that, isolated from the organic structure of the object, may function as a source of information in direct connection with the study of its most important components and their respective equivalents of virtual transfiguration. They serve as an instrument of evaluation, comparison and assessment of the information flow connected to content and form of the multimediatic «themes», or genres, and to the group of functions assumed by the characters within the themes. They are generally very difficult to define because their number varies with the nature of the themes and, sometimes, even with their apparent absence in the main structure. In this context we should focus on those that embody the requisites of the moralities, abstractions of vice and virtue and other ethical values, or those that in their «heretical» relationship with the themes make their contribution to generate a sense of absence of values. Again, it is very important and useful to be able to identify the functions, from the structure of the old

folk tales that emerge from such a modern fragmentary structure[13].

The titles, for example, that, according to the notion of the «open work», are absolutely determinant factors in the interpretation processes, can open or close the structure of a work completely[14], turning it into virtual absence.

The pedagogical dimension of such devices may be a result of the character of their structural function within the «open work», and it may assume, in fact, some aspects of education values that can be developed within the process of confrontation between the expectations, or apparent reasons, and the answers (or the lack of them) that strike the reader, or the user. This process includes the manipulation of thematic and semantic items and, generally, it is an embedded way of conditioned literacy and pedagogical awareness. We can say that the «poetics of the open work» may constitute the pedagogical dimension of such a reading process. Either it is wide open in its significance or apparently absent of signification. Luis Buñuel's comments on the constrictions relating to the understanding of neo-realist film could be used to help us fathom some of the constrictions within the internet approach and its pluralism of signs and of contexts of signification which turns the semiosis behind the «obvious» meanings, and their denotative and connotative paradigms, into a useful instrument that offers some accuracy to this kind of analysis. Although Buñuel hated such jargon, it was he himself who exposed this problem as an argument against the "monolithic"views of the neo-realist ci-

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[13] Propp, op. cit.
[14] Eco, 1962.

nematography and of the daily media, and we could add – the internet, where apparently «a glass is a glass and nothing more»:

> ". . . this same glass, contemplated by different beings, can be a thousand different things, because each one charges what he sees with affectivity; no one sees things as they are, but as his desires and his state of soul make him see. I fight for the cinema which will show me this kind of glass, because this cinema will give me an integral vision of reality, will broaden my knowledge of things and people, will open up to me the marvellous world of the unknown, of all that which I find neither in the newspaper nor in the street"[15].

In fact, we should also be fighting for a world wide media that could give us such an integral vision of reality and therefore broaden our knowledge, as has been proposed in other visionary works like those of Ted Nelson, Nicholas Negroponte, or Serge Proulx. However, we'll always need a global critical approach, as well as an ethical one, as in the sense of the work of Neil Postman and Ignacio Ramonet. as well as a multiple media cultural and critical perspective, like the ones offered by the more specifically aimed media educational tradition but also by the more general media pedagogical perspective. Nevertheless, whichever methodological or theoretical approach that we may choose from any of the abovementioned, we will only be attempting different processes of approach to media pedagogical

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[15] Reia-Baptista, 1987, p. 9.

problems, because the common goal to aim for is, and will always be, a better and more developed general state of media literacy.

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