

Publicity and Advertising, are they at war?*

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1 Facts leading reflection

Let us start by observing facts we are familiar with but which never get really looked at. Let's have, anyone of us, a look at himself / herself when reading a paper, and then while watching an advertising spot on TV. We do not feel really challenged when reading the paper: the texts in it can be interesting, they can be educational, shocking, funny, but they do not require imagination to get the point. It is simply informational. Unlike the journal reading case, watching advertising spots on TV can be a real challenge. I said "can be" as it is not always the case, but more than often such a spot can shake you quite a bit because understanding it could require the use of all your acquired knowledge, of all your experience of life, of all your competence of making analogies. Has language use anything to do with that?

Is there any possible explanation for this?

Think now of the beautiful, unique architecture of Ancient Greece! Think of the columns on the Acropolis! So high, so perfectly right, so well balanced! Each of them, a perfect cylinder! And now, the truth: they are not so! The basis of each column is smaller in diameter than its top, but the artist didn't seek the idea of representing THIS reality we live in; he wanted to give access to the essence of perfection itself to all of us, no matter the imperfection of our perceptions. And he did so, he succeeded.

2 Looking closer

These differences can be explained as rhetoric and levels of fiction, and also as different systems of probabilities in fiction. The journal is perceived mainly as non-fictional (fiction level 0), while the advertising spots are more or less fictional as content (fiction level >0). Rhetoric in journalism is part of what they call "the truth well said". Journalists tell us what they actually say, only they tell it well. Rhetoric in advertising is used to make the message be provocative, to make the audience know from the begin-

ning that they are told something different from the actual content of the message, and that they are given access to worlds they only dream of. As said by a character from an American film, “for a young boy from New York, going to college in Arizona is like walking in a commercial”.

Then there is the issue called “truth”. The journalists are – or should be – concerned with the truth of facts, which is non-fictional. The advertisers are concerned with the “making the image of “, which means manipulating the truth by merging universes, fictional and non-fictional. Don’t take it the wrong way: the two categories only seem to be irreconcilable, they are both serving the community in this sense that both of them are forming and informing the people.

3 Language in Journalism vs. Language in Advertising

The human language allows us to speak about anything, and I mean ANYTHING! One can refer to things from this universe, from this reality we can call “the world as we experience it” or s/he can invite us in another universe, instantiated by his/her discourse, populated with things and beings of his/her creation, coming from his/her own imagination and capacity of invention. The later is the presence of fiction. Everything and anything can happen in a fictional universe.

They are parallel universes – the real one and the fictional ones – but they are not without suggesting influences between them. Fictional universes take their ideas and even a lot of their material from the real world; the real world is informed by what happens in fictional universes, through symbolic influence, and this helps us to get different “glimpses” of our world.

The media could not escape reflecting this situation, where multiple universes coexist and interact. Different sections of media are dedicated to represent different universes: in the news section, it’s the world as we know it; in the entertainment, it’s a fic-

tional universe; in the advertising section, it's fiction, but more than this, it's the relation suggested between the fictional story they tell and the reality from "down here" they want us to look at. The language itself helps in differentiating these sections: an almost zero degree of expression, figures of speech just to underline the importance of the message, in sections dominated by journalism (news, reports), while in sections of advertising, for example, we can expect suggestive metaphors, crossword-like definitions, puzzles of all kind. Different kinds of language are used in those two areas of public discourse, journalism and advertising. Everything is called by its name in the journalism section, and almost nothing is named by its real name in the advertising section. We only have to pay attention to the message in the news in order to understand it. We have to make (sometimes wild) guesses to get to the message of an ad. In a scheme related to the Jakobson model of communication, the language of journalism should be that use of language that privileges the referential function of it, and maybe, from time to time, its metalinguistic function. The advertising is more about making use of the poetic, the conative and sometimes the phatic functions of language.

Different contracts are established between the enunciator (journal or advertising agency) and its publics, and this can even lead to different content classes the recipient can set up in his / her interaction with the media (in reading information or in watching advertising spots). The unsigned "trust deeds" relying on evidence concern the content class *news*, and they are rarely extended over the content classes *advertising* or *entertainment*.

According to the literature¹, a content class is a contextual variable that serves as a cue during cognitive processing of mediated messages. Looking closer to Hallahan's paper on the matter, from the *Journal of Public Relations Research* (vol. 11/1999, no. 4), we find that a content class is defined as a classification variable for differentiating media content based on the PERCEIVED

¹ Authors like: Gandy (1982), Moran (1990), Soley & Craig (1992), Hallahan (1996 and 1999), Cameron (1994), etc.

PURPOSE OF THE COMMUNICATION. Each of the major categories of media content follows a distinct set of conventions and different rules (or “contracts”, as said above) apply between the message producer and its audience. Under **the reality contract** (for news), audiences believe information is real, important, and could affect their lives; under **the advertising contract**, the sponsor’s persuasive intent is understood and invites to reluctance to the messages. Of course, we can go further on and think of what comes within **the entertainment or fantasy contract**: audiences understand that they should suspend belief. But this is another discussion. This is how a variable like content class was confirmed as a tool in cognition processes. Content class operates as a contextual source variable, where one should think of the context as being defined as all aspects of an experiential environment presented concurrently with a stimulus. Seen like this, and corroborated with the personal capacity of cognitive processing, context modulates the control exerted by other stimuli. Stimulus generalization is among the ways context operates, wherein the physical context in which a stimulus occurs affects perception of the stimulus, and thus, the relationship between the cue and the context defines a physical stimulus. Content class operates latently, i.e. without being manifested or contained in the message itself, and is inferred (correctly or incorrectly) by the audience. Staying with the opposition news / advertising, we should add that individuals readily distinguish between them and process them differently: individuals impute meanings from ads (to be found in the section called *advertising*) that are different from news (to be found in the section called *publicity*). Advertising allows a message sponsor to create and place a message in the media, on a repeated basis, with a high level of control, assuming the disadvantage of having it centered around the fact that people sometimes avoid ads and react negatively to persuasion attempts, or discount messages through attributions about the sponsor’s persuasive intent.

By contrast, publicity involves obtaining editorial coverage of a product or service in the editorial section of a media, particularly

in the form of news. Publicity appears as part of media content that people actively search to obtain information. It is in the publicity section that a message's ultimate source is ambiguous to audiences, who often attribute the source to the media presenter or channel. We could assume that audiences do not understand how information sources shape and subsidize media content.

All this concerns the use of language in different ways, and different purposes. The limits of language use have been more than once pointed out. Take for example a paper presented in 1986 by Yuri Manin – at the time, president of the Academy of Sciences of the Soviet Union – at an international congress of mathematicians, on language as metaphor. To get to the mathematical language, Manin makes some considerations on language in general, saying that language itself is a metaphor, as it stands for things. Then, we can have a look on the way Gérard Genette walks on Plato's paths when he says:

“In contrast with dramatic representation, no narrative can ‘show’ or ‘imitate’ the story it tells. All it can do is tell it in a manner which is detailed, precise, ‘alive’, and in that way give more or less the **illusion of mimesis** – which is the only narrative mimesis, for this single and sufficient reason: that narration, oral or written, is a fact of language, and language signifies without imitating”².

And this is how we come around to neo-rhetoric and to pragmatic of discourse. A short reference to the matter will be presented with the help of a short passage from Monika Fludernik's *The Fictions of Language and the Language of Fiction. The Linguistic representation of Speech and Consciousness*³ :

“Pragmatic research and discourse analysis have recently demonstrated the limits of prescriptive systematicity in linguistics, but even their apparently so unassailable empiricity (...) does not escape the snare of the observer's entanglement with the object

² Genette, Gérard, *Narrative Discourse. An Essay in Method*, Ithaca, N.Y., Cornell Univ. Press, 1980, p. 164.

³ London and New York, Routledge Inc., 1993, p. 25.

of analysis. No linguistic analysis, not even the most scientific, can eschew the requirements of relevance (...). As in other disciplines (Einsteinian physics, post-Heisenbergian quantum mechanics, or medicine), empiricity here encounters both its limits and its ultimate self-determinacy. Models of language, like models of universe, cannot but remain provisional theories that may help to explain, or help to direct, but can no more lay claim to an ulterior truth than can the theoretical system of mathematics or medicine or astronomy. Language, like everything else, needs to be studied in its linguistic and human context. Recent developments in cognitive linguistics have in fact taken cognizance of the boundedness of language within cognitive parameters, proposing a ‘natural’ perspective from which language and cognition are structured in existentially relevant terms. Although such a model (...) does not escape the ‘binding’ of subjectivity, it does account for human situatedness in language on the theoretical plane – certainly a major advance over non-pragmatic linguistics, which generates an illusion of empirical objectivity”.

Let’s keep focused on linguistics, pragmatics, and the intentionality in discourse, and have a look over the relation with truth in journalism and in advertising.

Few efforts are made to give the correct representation of the two occupations. The problem seems to come from the relation to the truth, and from the relation each of the two parties sees itself in with the other one. While observing several courses given to young journalists, I couldn’t help noticing that the discourse was full of metaphors from the language of war, like “fight”, “enemy”, “vigilance”, “domination”. On the other side, in the PR specialists and advertisers’ camp, the discourse changes: “make friends among the journalists, keep them close, make them love you!”. Why? Because neither the journalists nor the PR and advertising specialists know of each other that they are seeking the truth. In fact, this is what they do: they seek the truth, each of these categories, its own truth.

4 Bits of memory to share under the theme

Things from books and films, things I loved and I kept in safe places, come to mind.

First, I want to tell you about something I read in a book⁴. Paul Klee said about modern painting that it is characterized by “[...] the intention not to reflect the visible, but to make visible”.

There is also that book, *Gog*, by Giovanni Papini, where you can read about some masterpieces of universal literature in an unexpected way: it's like reading news in a journal, and there is no chance to understand what the real value of those books is. It's like a game Papini plays with us, and this game relies on the property of language of presenting the reality in suggestive ways, by the use of metaphors. Instead of developing a theory of reading, Giovanni Papini surprises the reader with possible understanding of some of the most popular creation of universal literature. The shock is really big: you read and you understand the possibility, for some people, to find completely different messages in books you are familiar with and the interpretation of which seemed to be the same for everyone on Earth.

Then, I will tell you about a film on the life and art of Paul Gauguin, who also knew to express his opinion on art. For him, modern art had nothing to do with reproducing the reality. He said that the painters who were trying to reproduce the reality were false painters, false artists, photographers (which in French sounds better: “Faux peintres, faux artistes, photographes”). Art is the most obviously personal way of expressing a vision of the Universe. It means to give back to the world the essential of a representation of what you had as a representation of it in your head. That can vary, and there are thousands of reasons for this : the structure of your mind, your state of mind in the moment of your perception, the act of perception itself, the things you've lear-

⁴ H. Read, *A Concise History of Modern Painting*, ed. A 9-a, London, Thames & Hudson, 1974, p. 8.

ned, the things you just happen to know from being around for a while. Almost everything counts.

In the examples above, the issue is art and its relation with truth. This a tricky one, because art doesn't give the same (photographic) representation of the truth as science or journalism do: art means options for some of the features of the reality, those features which are considered to be the most appropriate to the intention of the artist of creating an image. The key-word here is "image": the representation of something from a certain point of view, under a certain light, trying to provoke a certain effect, and maybe inviting the art consumer to enter another universe.

Bearing this in our minds, let's read now a text, which I will present to you in two separate sequences.

First:

"Full of remorse, a woman threw herself in front of a train. Details in ...";

second:

"*Full of remorse*, a woman threw herself in front of a train. (*Details in Anna Karenina by Lev Tolstoi*). Read a book! Something sensational awaits you".

Suddenly, what appeared to be the *chapeau* of some news in a journal (used to attract your attention and make you go page... and see the details) becomes part of the text of an ad promoting the idea of the benefits one can find in reading books. The humor and the register named "games" make us feel interested by the offer, and so we read books. We shall read *Anna Karenina* not because we hope to find the real story of that woman who threw herself in front of a train, but because we understood the game in the ad, and we feel provoked⁵. We know we are not to get more

⁵ Promotion for the activity called *reading* can be done in many ways. Re-

informed about what happens in the world around, but we know this reading will add to our personality something very complex, more than just information about a suicidal gesture of a woman called Anna. What counts is the content class where we will find the message. The context always counts. In fact, nothing makes sense without a context. Messages signify by themselves, but they mean only in context.

You should now try to find out what it is about in the next ad: “Dazzled by jealousy, a black man strangled his wife. Details in “

But more than this you should go to see in *Gog*, that particular chapter on Masterpieces of literature!

5 Summing up

Getting back to what we were discussing at the beginning, we can now say that the language of journalism differs from the language of advertising by the register each of these languages has in presenting the truth: journalism is concerned with the bear truth and its language falls somewhere in the strict descriptive register, while the advertising is concerned with creating images, so its language falls into the category of rhetoric expression. This is

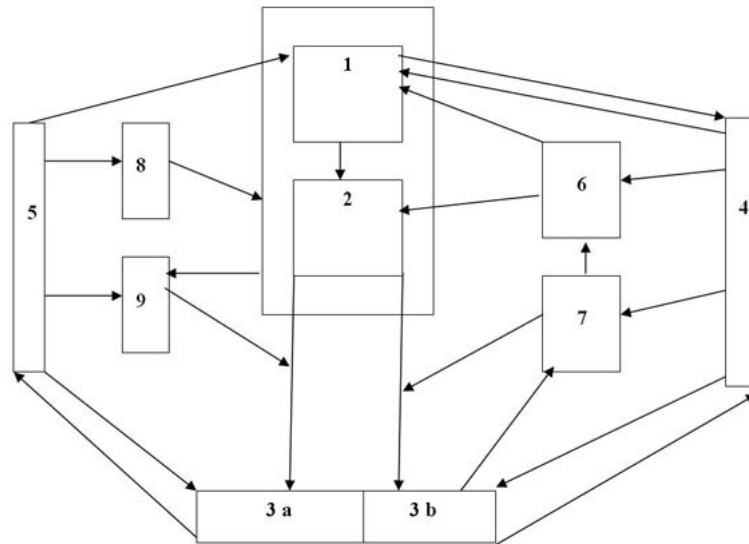
member the message we could see behind the President George W. Bush, in that school where he was meeting with little children from Florida at the very time the Towers were attacked: it read “Reading makes a nation great”. It’s not an ad text, and we couldn’t think of it as of a good ad message. It works because of its context: a school, a place where all efforts are made to educate the children, to make them become good citizens, a place where patriotic discourse (about making the nation great, for example) can and should merge with didactic discourse (about the virtues of reading, for example) in order to prepare the future of the nation. Associating reading to the greatness of the nation is bold, but it is not a difficult message to understand. It can make a child want to read, but without the context (the school) it could hardly provoke the interest of a large audience, as ads do. Patriotic, inflammatory discourses have little effect on large audiences unless they are performed within election periods or within dedicated meetings with political goals.

also why the public of the journalistic discourse is not necessary the public of the advertising discourse. He who chases the truth in its direct expression will not always appreciate those “half-truths” advertising proposes. Conversely, he who likes being provoked to use his imagination to get to the point of some crossword-like definition will not enjoy the (too) direct exposure of the truth, as the practice of journalism is. Rhetoric seems to give the key to understand all of the above. On a scale of the presence of rhetoric in discourse, one can easily see that the discourse of the journalists is closer to the “degree zero”, while the discourse of advertising is closer to the other edge. No one of these categories of discourse is at the farthest end of this opposition: there is rhetoric in journalistic discourse, used to get the attention on the presentation of the facts; there isn’t so much rhetoric in advertising as it is in poetry or in any other field of artistic expression, because advertising is not about impressing people only, but about impressing people in order to orientate their buying behaviour.

6 It’s all part of a system

There are numerous books and journals that cover the field of advertising, but the majority offer little more than practical instructions. As a specialized field of scientific research, advertising developed in the second half of the 20th century. In the most eminent textbooks on advertising that are grounded on scientific theories and research, as well as in more theoretically oriented books, an emerging body of knowledge about advertising can be discerned. It can be described as an interdisciplinary approach based on social, psychological, and language sciences that are applied in research and theory building in order to describe, explain and criticize professional practice. Journalism, on the other hand, is mostly seen as a practice requiring a good understanding of life and society as well as solid backgrounds in language use, and also in political, social and economic sciences. Only the later seems to be more of a practice, and the first seems to be more of an art.

Journalism gives the “photographic” image of the reality, while advertising gives an image chosen to impose a certain representation of the reality, forming more than informing the audience. The two professions often collide, but they cooperate more often. The competition is about what to present from the truth, in good faith, and with the maximum of effect.



In a simplified DeFleur diagram of mass communication systems⁶, we can now visualize the relations between the compounds of the system, and thus see how it functions. In the above scheme, **1** and **2** are the media (producers and distributors), **3 a** and **b** are the audience (which is the mass of consumers, when seen from the financial backers' point of view), **4** are the financial backers (who put money in media productions and in advertising, and who want to sell products and services to as many as possible), **5** are the legislators (voted by the audiences in order to ensure their protection against any attack from the media), **6** are the PR and advertising agencies, **7** are the market research and rating agen-

⁶ Apud R. A. Vogel & M. A. Krabbe, *Mass Communication*, Menlo Park, CA, Cummings Publ. Co., 1977, p. 4.

cies, **8** are the official regulative agencies which make sure that the media observe legislation in producing and distributing content (news, entertainment and advertising) to the audiences, and **9** are voluntary non governmental associations with a role in smoothing the cooperation between legislators, media and audiences.

It works like shown on the scheme: producers produce contents (news and entertainment); PR and advertising agencies add their creation to what distributors distribute to the public. As target of news and entertainment contents, the public is audience, but they become consumers taking decisions as target of advertising content, and as buyers of products and services from the financial backers; the financial backers place their money in promoting their products and services, through PR and advertising agencies, in those media that are revealed by the rating agencies as getting to large audiences, which ensures optimal exposure to their promotion messages. All this could go off control without the legislators who must keep their promises to their voters that they will protect them against every possible attack from the media. The legislators' control of the media is performed through the action of control agencies and voluntary foundations which mediate the communication between all of the parties involved. In this way no abuse can be done by the producers, by the distributors, the advertising agencies, the legislators or the public. This is why audiences feel protected and vote the legislators, and this is why the media cooperate with the voluntary associations in order to be well represented in their relation with the legislators and with the audiences. The key factor seems to be the financial backers (nothing can be done without money!), but this would be ignoring the audiences/consumers which everybody needs: if they like the content of news and entertainment, they will have a look at the advertising too, and this will – in most cases – transform them in consumers, which is what financial backers expect. The audiences vote the legislators who are supposed to serve them by protecting them from exaggerations from the media. They are the reason of the existence and of all the efforts of all the rest in the system.

7 Sort of a conclusion

Our intention here is to see whether there is a relation between publicity (news) and advertising. From the above scheme and explanations we can clearly understand that they are interrelated in the sense that advertising agencies use the services of those media who can insure maximum exposure for their creations; in other words, they use those media who are the most appreciated for the quality of their news and entertainment content. These two activities can even “merge” in the promotion discourse of PR structures of the financial backers: these structures could offer to the media promotion information under the form of news, which will make the media pass them on within the news content class. Then, the exposure is at its maximum, and the costs are at the lowest level. Advertising by publicity is a technique founded on the capacity of language to be used to say the same things in different ways. Changing the register does not lead to a change of the truth, but to a change of the perspective on the truth. Everything is in the language use. The qualities of a discourse is given mainly by its style. Style communicates with a certain nuance that is read only by an “insider”, and in this sense style shapes how one identifies oneself and to what communities one claims belonging. This point of view offers a complex image of the situation, with style in language, with position to the truth, with access to information and with habits in media consuming.

In his play *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Oscar Wilde tells us, through the mouth of Gwendolen: “In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity, is the vital thing”.

Don’t take it by the letter, but don’t you ever forget it!