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“Letter to the editor” No more ?

Editorial roles and models in the web era

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1. Introduction

Ever since the invention of the web, it has been anticipated that the Internet would become the place where everyone could participate in building the global knowledge of tomorrow. However, the lack of technical ability has long prevented most people from producing online resources.

Things are quickly changing now, as new tools like blogs or wikis give anyone the opportunity to become both a writer and an online editor; without having to deal with complicated client/server transfer protocols or to take encoding and mark-up languages into account. The latent desire for such collaborative publication spaces explains the success of projects like Wikipedia® and the exponential growth of weblogs.

Nevertheless, merely providing adequate tools is not the main issue as far as online publishing is concerned. Recent hackers attacks against collaborative sites have shown that not all of us share the same views of a better tomorrow. Questions raised by Wikipedia® fans regarding regulation and means of preventing malevolent writers from interfering with their collaborative project, have shed light on an Internet specific practice: the massive use of *nicknames* behind which anyone can hide. To whom may one turn when authoring and editing responsibilities can no longer be clearly read from the traditional masthead but often have to be deciphered through anonymous web pages.

Our aim, in this paper, is not to address the numerous potential misuses of totally anonymous a media sphere, but to show that new authority markers emerge on the web. Markers that one must learn to look for, in order to measure the credibility of a web site.

Having put our focus on the editing world, it seemed logical for us to initiate our investigations with actors from the paper industry, having to adapt their practices to new contexts. We then chose to study two ambitious projects especially conceived for the web by newcomers but having strong links with emblematic realizations in terms of publication and knowledge diffusion: that is the encyclopedia and the newspapers.

2. Legitimizing fields and forms

Since the middle of the 15th century, when printing became an industry in Europe, professionals have invented multiple editorial processes to give texts a better chance to widely spread among the general public. These inventions related to work distribution, as well as tool improvement or page making up. This is not the place to develop the historical aspects of this evolution. We just want to stress the importance of those craftsmen and specialists in the process of selecting manuscripts, designing fonts, assembling pages in volumes, and, more generally, always innovating by introducing new tools and techniques. Even if printer and publisher became two different jobs later on, the interaction between what could be called the “editorial intention” and the printing means has always remained strong.

The very justification of the publisher¹ is, of course, not only to be aware of technical modernization. He mostly plays a major part in the emergence of opinions, theories and knowledge. Apart from the technical processes that turn a manuscript into a printed book, the editorial corporation has created its own chain of selection, and validation in order to legitimate and bring texts to life. In this way, the editor takes a high responsibility. If we consider things from the reader’s point of view, the very fact that a work or text has been published might legitimate its existence, if not its content. Someone (the company as a trademark or a famous name in the editorial field) has finally decided that, for some reason, such a text has or has not to be brought to the public. As a reader, I rely on the specialist and trust his choices. The brand name, the reputation of the company, the previous texts published in the same collection, give me clues about the sort of works and texts I am to find in a new publication.

Thus, the publisher has conceived a whole organization, built on a chain of responsibilities, to assert his legitimacy and professionalism. Every actor in the chain has an assigned role. The reader does not question this organization, whether he exactly knows how it functions or not. This is not a concern for him, except when the product is obviously corrupted.

¹ French language does not have the distinction made in English between the publisher and the editor. Both roles are confounded under the single denomination of “editeur”.

In the same way, readers and consumers apprehend books, newspapers and magazines as almost natural “every day” items. Their structure and form have been integrated for so long that they are now considered as obvious. Habits and acculturation forged from childhood and enforced both by school training and a frequent use lead us to forget that they are cultural forms invented and refined for years and years by highly qualified professionals and specialists, who have created complex editorial processes, starting from the basic invention of the printing press during the 15th century.

The way we comprehend a book or our favourite magazine also has a spatial and a corporal dimension. Varied tools, such as table of contents or page numbers, as well as “paratexts”, guide us through the pages. We therefore find it easy to directly access the cultural or sport section when opening a newspaper. These tools and forms have been remarkably stable for years, even if, formally, the look of a modern newspaper, with colours, photographs, and a spaced out design has little to see with, let’s say, the sixties’ layout. The main editorial marks have not changed: a newspaper will assert the legitimacy of its content through elements such as its name (“The Times”, “Le Monde”...), the reputation of its columnists, its editorial line, or its deontology codes or charters. They sometimes let the reader know what the rules are for printing such or such an article. For instance, one of French daily paper “Liberation” principle is never to publish the criticism of a book written by one of its employees.

The logic of legitimacy is highly developed in the case of scientific literature, with the principle of peer-review, double blind reading and so on. Thus, one usually accepts that information published by “Nature” or “New Scientist” is “true”², or at least validated by the scientific community.

However, these editorial marks are not the prerogative of scientific, intellectual or elitist contents. One may also identify multiple and more trivial genres, at first sight, from their particular layout and distinctive formal characteristics. Readers, and even non-readers, have integrated these codes and marks as cultural referents, which contribute to guide them and help them in their choices and activities. A novice reader will consider a thick book, printed in small fonts as “intellectual”, while a university teacher will look at a highly illustrated publication, with contrasted colours and heavy printed titles, with some kind of despise.

Lastly, the very place where one can find a printed work says a lot about its content. Newspapers stands, bookshops or libraries, are also important actors in the assertion process. Selecting books, building a collection, putting certain publications in display and others in a stockroom, destroying unsold copies are decisive actions in the process of guiding readers.

The main issue for us is not to question the effective part played by these different factors in the process of reaching and convincing readers, but to analyze how habits, places, and actors have adapted to the digital age. How have readers and publishers dealt with this radical transfer from a support, with its own standards and forms, to another support that has nothing to do with the first one, except to mix lines of characters and pictures, so as to build a text and bring it to potential readers. More widely, how have the rules that governed the printing industry for centuries adapted to this new environment and how have readers built new strategies to know where they are in this new publication space?

3. Publishing on the Web

We chose to focus on newspapers online publications to get a better understanding of what had been the web sites policies of actors from the paper” world. We then analyzed their consequences in terms of relations to readers.

When they first came to the Internet, about ten years ago, newspapers firms did not fully invest it as a new medium or an additional publication space. In the nineties, the web was not the place where one had to be seen yet. Due to the lack of user-friendly tools and the absence of on-line publishing teams, site development was often delegated to computer specialists, not so well versed in the art of site design and publishing. If one adds that the first generation of HTML gave only few editing possibilities, the result was far from the paper products demand. The graphical quality of the first sites was quite poor and the editor's know how could hardly be seen from the average layout.

A visit to “the Internet Archive” gave us the opportunity to take interesting screen shots from old age newspapers sites. One can easily measure the gap between the first generation lay out and today's. The 1997 “Financial Times” site background was deep black; far from its ochre paper-tone and “Le Monde” graphical charter is only merely applied on the homepage of its 1996 site. Readers were thus often confronted with texts that could not, at first sight, be clearly seen as complementary to their usual newspaper contents. The financial times site might as well have been a fake, as Domain Names had not been protected yet. Anyone could thus have easily bought this trademark dot com name and made a very different use of it.

Nevertheless, regular readers are not so easily fooled. They have developed such closeness to their favourite publication that they have integrated its usual structure, organization and contents. Therefore, they know what to expect from the site and although the graphical arrangement has nothing to do with the paper copy they quickly make the link. For example, the Business Week oldest site only displayed a simplified table of contents, made of blue underlined titles that were nothing but the basic format for any hyperlink with no specific attributes. However, both the style and structure of this simple table of contents gave sufficient clues to make sure that it was the newspaper's

² Though, from time to time a scholar tries and beats the validation system, whether to denounce its subjectivity or weakness (as Alan Sokal, whose hoax essay was published in “Social Text”) or to gain a questionable renown (as Jacques Benveniste’s essay about “the memory of water”).

very site.

Within a few years things changed dramatically. Both technical improvements and the Internet development brought companies to reconsider their strategy. By 2000, Web sites became a first range concern and financial means were affected to their development. Nevertheless, they were still seen as showcases, aiming at driving readers back to the paper edition. There were no Internet specific contents and, seemingly, no clear comprehension of the potential of this new medium.

Publishers tended to reproduce the schemes they traditionally relied on and screens reflected the paper pages layout. Headlines and sections were thought as electronic equivalents of those found on the paper editions. Though the scripting space had nothing in common with newspapers pages, sections were calibrated according to the old rules. This had heavy consequences on the way people comprehended the online contents versus the paper ones. For example, the graphical links created by placing items on the same page and under the same headline had not been rethought for screen display. Consequently, articles belonging to the same section were often placed one after the other, preventing readers from bringing together different points of view or seeing the complementarities between two articles. In the same way, contents were not adapted to their new editing context and one could often find markers such as “see above”, “read next page” or “to be continued” that referred to nothing on the screen space. Hyperlinks were merely used as page-turners and navigation was mostly considered, on a top down basis, from the home page to specific sections. The relationship with readers was still one of “emitting/receiving”. The possibility of interacting with journalists had not been thought of at all and updating followed the paper edition periodicity.

In the meantime, the web has grown to a much wider extend. New editing tools, like blogs and wikis, made it quite easy for anyone to become both a writer and an online editor. Formerly confidential newsgroups can now easily be reached through the web and queried via search engines. The right to speak seems to be potentially offered to all of us. Emails, chats, and messengers have diversified the ways we can interact with others and the demand for interactivity has grown accordingly.

Newspapers could not stay behind. They now provide a wide range of tools thought to ease interaction between editorial offices and readers. Traditional “letters to the editor” often take the shape of emails, but new kinds of relations have also been initiated. Journalists have extended the range of their contributions and now often animate blogs on current affairs, giving readers the opportunity to react and give their opinions online. Yet, journalists keep the main part in the talk. Things are still initiated from their side as readers are only invited to comment. Comments are thus given a second range place as they are often presented on separate pages, only sorted according to their date of issue. Furthermore, there is a strong opposition between the

journalist’s name and the reader’s nickname, leading to a symbolic hierarchy. The former builds his reputation on his name; the latter is only given the right to react. The discussion does not take place on equal terms. The figure of the journalist prevails against the public’s opinion.

Regarding contents, things have also taken a different path. The web edition is now seen as necessary to offset the “freshness less” of the paper edition. Sites are updated every minute and dated agency dispatches scroll in continuously, attesting of the awareness given to the newest news. Sections are reordered along the day, according to events and scoops. The paper issue is still the support where events are analyzed and commented, while the site seems closer and closer to a press agency. Priority is given to reactivity and a greater proximity to readers, which leads to new offers, like instant opinion polls or online auctions

Conclusively, we could roughly distinguish three main periods, as far as newspapers web publication is concerned:

- The *Pioneer stage*, when both tools and experience were rather poor and led to quite tinkered sites.
- The *Xerox age*, with sites totally depending on the paper edition contents;
 - The *Agora era*, the site now being the place where readers and journalists share opinions and get in closer touch, while the number of web sites grows on an exponential scale.

4. A world-wide publication space

Nowadays, with millions of sites potentially at hand and multiple services converging on portals, it has become harder and harder for a provider to take his place on the web. All the more since the screen is the one and only support, its very size commands any choice made as far as layout is concerned. Part of it is obviously taken by software frames, which diminishes the space devolved to contents. In the domain of making up, any parameter that has not been thought of by the conceiver will be overcome by “default” values. This goes from the choice of fonts to the place where images will appear on the screen. These different constraints lead to a sort of layout “normalization”.

As sites are now countless, it becomes harder for users to find their way. Not only have specific markers faded out, but also a great number of signs that were external to the support itself, but of great importance to qualify and differentiate information sources, have disappeared. One now finds mail order catalogues, phone directories, accounting software, encyclopedias, mail, corporate information and so on and so forth, at the same place; this place being both the screen itself and the spot where the computer sits.

When confronted to more traditional media, readers were not left alone. They were guided both by the materiality of the item, should it be a book, a magazine or a newspaper, and by the spatial context where this item was to be found (the library, the bookshop or the newspapers stand). Thus, the web site plays multiple parts that were originally assumed by

social actors, like librarians or booksellers. They also have to represent the “scene”, that is to give users the necessary keys to envision the editing and publication context, when space has become text. This leads to a great semiotic complexity, as signs have to represent multiple types of information on an average 17’ screen. A reader must then learn to decipher overlapping signs strata, and to relate them to the right context, so as to correctly interpret the situation he is confronted.

Therefore, information literacy at the Internet era would not only be the ability to find the appropriate information but above all to master the interpretation of the utterance “framework”. That is to understand the situation in which the information is laid out, when every needed sign can only be found on the screen. Things are getting more and more challenging, as an always wider range of services are made available through the web, transforming navigators into mandatory gateways to any content, should it be on personal computers, local servers or the Internet.

That means hard work for providers; today’s challenge being both to keep one’s hand in and to remain visible among billions of potentially reachable documents. What we call “Editorial Utterance” is thus a first range concern: The screen has to be organized so as to give information and meta-information about the communication situation, as well as tools to interact with it. Signs must thus give multi-level indications, ending on a complex pluri-semiotic system. Our observations indeed show that sites only rarely give a comprehensive view of this intricacy.

Furthermore, search engines make things notably more complex. On one hand, a site is built as a whole: Pages are logically linked to offer reading courses. For example, if we go back to newspapers sites, the front page is seen as the mandatory starting page to envision their entirety. On the other hand, pages are only seldom reached this way. Consultation mainly begins on a search engine site, which means that any page could become “front page”.

This parameter is only seldom taken into account by conceivers. People must thus develop strategies to validate information found on somehow unknown places. We have for example noted that students use the University Library OPAC as a validation tool: They start their book-search using Google® and when they find a seemingly interesting reference, but cannot clearly identify its source, they test it on the OPAC. If the book is referenced, it’s certification enough for them, as they have a clear representation of the catalogue as being the very finality of the whole library validation cycle.

As we can see, to legitimate a text is a back and forth process. On one hand, providers might or might not give enough clues to assert their legitimacy. On the other hand, users might or might not be reassured by what they see on the screen. When things are not made clear enough for them, they find ways to complement their findings and cross their sources; exactly the way journalists do... Things then come full circle and seem to conform to the ideological project

underlying the very project of designing a World Wide Web; that is to give anyone the opportunity to communicate directly, without the help of an intermediate.

The World Wide Web is indeed presented as the first place ever where everyone is given the opportunity to express whatever he wants to tell or demonstrate. The editorial or validation circuits that were presented earlier in this text are thus seen as constraints and limits that technology has fortunately permitted to overpass. Everyone might thus become a first range actor in the public space. If we follow this thesis, the only admitted mediation is a technical one. Difficulties and contradictions, that are bound to happen, are quite logically attributed to a lack of technical improvements.

For instance, it is clear that HTML 1 or 2 offered only few layout options. At this time, sites tended not to be so different one from the other. For the main part, pages appeared poorly organized, with a pre-eminence of “courier” or “times” fonts, white backgrounds and blue underlined hypertext links— as previously said about first generation newspapers sites.

This in-differentiation often generated disorientation and reading difficulties. But, solutions to these problems were mostly envisioned from a technical point of view and “new versioning” was, and still is, the most frequently suggested answer to any handling problem, including those coming from a misinterpretation of the screen layout.

5. Web editors

Even more, technical evolution, as XML for example, is easily presented as a mean to automatically dominate forms and structure and to organize and to hierarchize information. Yet, material organization is not a by-product of support evolution. It clearly appears as a dramatic necessity. Even newcomers have to admit that “forms affect meanings” and that the structure of written material is more than helpful to build a general comprehension of the way the support is organized and has to be used.

The look and feel of today’s sites have little to do with the appearance they had a few years ago. A study of this evolution shows that newspaper sites tend to mix forms that can best represent the paper media they are related to with internet specific ones. They will exhibit summaries and organize pages as sections, in order to imitate the paper structure. They seek marks that may help readers to quickly identify the kind of support they are consulting. For instance, a publication that is already well known outside the World Wide Web will insist on its reputation by obviously installing its logo or any other sign of identification. In the case of magazines, the paper copy is often quoted, with, for example, a picture of its cover³. These “tricks” can even be used to mislead the user. For instance, when comparing the layout of a site devoted to environment protection with the site of an international company, selling genetically

³ The hyperlinks associated with these images often directly open a PDF file, containing a picture of the front page as it appears on the paper support

modified seeds, we found the same graphical choices, including a green colour-based graphical charter, and the same type of discourse, offering, in both cases, all appearances of “neutral” points of view on the matter .

As far as newspapers are concerned, Google News® is an interesting case of mimesis. This service is presented as the most accomplished information tool. The main argument being that gathering news on a “computing” basis is the most “objective” way to be informed since selection does not depend on any editorial project, information hierarchy or human selection. At least this is the way the concept is being explained by Google itself:

“Google News gathers from more than 4,500 English-language news sources worldwide, and automatically arranges them to present the most relevant news first. Topics are updated every 15 minutes, so you’re likely to see new stories each time you check the page. Pick the item that interests you and you’ll go directly to the site which published that story”.

Google News is indeed a highly unusual information service: News is solely compiled by computer algorithms. As a result, varied sources are gathered together, regardless of political viewpoints or ideologies, so as to enable readers to see how different currents of thought, report on the same story.

In the same time, in order to avoid intellectual property problems, Google stresses the fact that it does not deliver direct access to the content of the 4500 sources that are quoted, but only links to the site they belong to. This is a good way to transfer its editorial responsibility to others. Yet, the choice of the sources themselves is already a selection and a qualification of information. All the same, the “neutral” and “automatic” algorithms of Google gather articles in large categories, incredibly looking like headings and sections of classical newspapers.

As a matter of fact, “Google News” home page is designed to look like a newspaper site front page. Thus, even if “robots” are meant to avoid subjectivity in the “choice” of headings and titles, the very existence of a structure is a clear indication to readers. Main titles are reinforcing signs. News reported under them will anyway be considered as being more important or more relevant, should they have been chosen automatically or not.

The very fact that Google News tries and imitates the editorial format of a newspaper site confirms that, after ten years of trial and error, the online newspaper has found its own shape. Readers recognize this new generic model as easily as they identify their newspaper. For them, the site now belongs to the general category of “the press”.

6. A way to abolish space and time?

The credibility of the project is thus based on a closeness/distance duality. The newspaper model is strongly sought-after, but online specificities are used to break away

from it. The Wikipedia project⁴, founded a few years ago by Jimmy Wales, is quite different from Google News. However, it has similar characteristics, speaking of this “distinction/mimesis” dialectic between classic and new media.

Our investigations show that both space and time are frequently put forward to praise the qualities of online publication projects, in contrast with their paper counterparts. When Google News, insists on the importance of its reactivity⁵ – as an attempt to almost abolish time – to add credit to its project, Wikipedia, uses exhaustiveness – as an attempt to almost abolish space – to differ its model from the classical, paper-based encyclopedia.

“The most obvious difference is that there are, in principle, no size limits in the Wikipedia universe. It is quite possible, for example, that when you finish typing in everything you want to say about poker, there might well be over 100 pages, and enough text for a full-length book by itself. This would certainly never be tolerated in a paper encyclopedia, which is why Encyclopaedia Britannica has such limited information on the topic (and on most other topics)”
(Wiki is not paper, Wikipedia FAQ)”

The traditional paper-based encyclopedia is explicitly criticized; it’s supposed lake of exhaustiveness and subjectivity being attributed to technical barriers and limitations. The choices made by an encyclopedia publisher are not considered as an editing policy. The intellectual decisions leading to stress specific aspects of a domain are merely seen as spatial constraints. Thus, once technology allows the publication of a boundary less text, a potentially “infinite” encyclopedia could be built. In its FAQ, Wikipedia gives the example of an article about the “Simpsons” TV series, and pleads for a general cover of the subject, comprising as many articles as the series has characters, or episodes and so on. This may appear as an opportunity to develop infinite knowledge, especially if we consider matters (TV series) that are not “noble” enough for a classical encyclopedia.

The concept which lies behind such a project is that any of us may be an expert in a specialized domain, should it be horror movies, gardening or Heidegger’s philosophy. If errors are made, whether intentionally or not, the community will immediately react and correct the entry. The idea is that this cooperative process will lead to an almost perfect adjustment of the encyclopedia. Objectiveness, neutrality and “truth” of information are presented as the results of this collective, community-based auto-regulation. Articles are not signed and authorship is banned as anonymity is seen as

⁴ Wikipedia is an attempt to make the most out of a traditionally high valued editorial shape: the encyclopedia, to promote a democratic ideal of sharing and building collective knowledge, through the powerful means of collaborative tools. “Freewheeling”, “volunteer administration”, “online community” are keywords generally used to describe the project.

⁵ Google News site makes an extensive use of time related terms: the search bar is immediately followed by a red banner claiming « Search and browse 4,500 news sources updated continuously » and the freshness of each article is attested to the very minute « 15 minutes ago »...

the most accomplished form of democracy. The figure of the author is seen in his “authoritative” acceptance. To put contributors on an equal footing is synonymous with freedom of speech

But things are not that simple. First, none of the classical encyclopaedias, starting from Diderot’s have ever been “neutral” or objective even when they pretended to represent the whole of the knowledge of an era. Diderot and d’Alembert’s encyclopaedia was an intellectual tool against the power of absolute monarchy in the 18th century. Ideological points of view, philosophically or politically oriented opinions, or, more simply, different cultural visions of the world around, weight upon any editorial project. Wikipedia will be no exception. Its conceivers have learnt that good will is not enough to avoid subjectivity. A recent New York Times article explains that some 82 entries are now “protected” by administrators, which means that no one else is allowed to modify their content, another 179 -- including those about George W. Bush, Islam or Adolf Hitler -- are “semi protected”, that is only opened to people who have registered on the site for at least four days.

The fading figure of the editor comes back to light as selection becomes a major concern. The intervention of a human being is seen again as mandatory to authorize such or such contribution. Another attribution of the editor strongly reappears too, that is particularly interesting for us as information scientists: the “content organizer”, a professional who treats information on a hierarchical basis, reshapes and structures information contents. Speaking of its huge, free content about “The Simpsons” and all its characters, Wikipedia FAQ admits that it may be useful to have :

“a table listing every episode, all neatly cross-linked and introduced by a shorter central page (our emphasis). Every episode name in the list could link to a separate page for each of those episodes, with links to reviews and trivia. Each of the 100+ poker games can have its own page with rules, history, and strategy.”

This shows how important the question of structuring and organizing information is, whatever the media might be, paper or electronic. The technical possibilities of endlessly expanding the entries and contents of the encyclopaedia necessarily generate construction problems. As the archive expands, the need for mediation grows accordingly. An editorial know-how is more than ever required to help readers “navigate” through billions of information pages.

Conclusion

New user-friendly publication tools, such as groupware, blogs or wikis, make it easy for anyone to create a web site. Freedom of speech thus seems to be given to anyone and the web now is commonly seen as a “free”, hierarchy less, “open” editing system. Online editing would then be the very democratic way of emitting and exchanging ideas, texts, opinions and information.

Ambitious information projects, based on this vision of a potentially infinite writing space, freed from the technical and social⁶ constraints of the paper world, have thus been initiated during the past five years. However, the printer and publisher’s know-how are now called back. The once criticized figure of the editor comes back in full light, as these projects expand and become more and more complex. On the Google site, the very form of the text on the screen seeks and imitates the structure of an online newspaper; as for Wikipedia, matters of selection, authority and information hierarchy reappear, when auto-regulation shows its limits.

Information literacy in the “Information age”, greatly depends on the ability to decipher and interpret meta-information as new authority markers emerge, partly inherited from the “paper” world and strongly integrated both socially and culturally, partly created to take into account the specificity of online writing and publishing

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⁶ This may be a typically French preoccupation, as the French public regularly manifests through opinion polls a huge distance and defiance towards its information supports. The annual inquiry directed by the French newspaper “La Croix”, shows that only 48% of French population trusts printed press, and 44% television (La Croix, 23d February 2006).