
Chapter 6

A contract in transition: online press and its audience

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Introduction¹

For quite a few years, it has been announced (Igarza, 2011; Jenkins, 2008; Jenkins and Deuze, 2008) that we are at a transition period, in which a new media ecology is being built, more hybrid than the previous ones, for several reasons that, in a way, are dealt with in the different chapters of this book. In this sense, the Latin American media system is not an exception.

With this in consideration, it is proposed in this chapter to reflect on the way the newspaper-reader relationship is being re-defined, focusing on understanding the place – or the role – the reader's intervention and participation spaces (as we have decided to name the journal areas where the audience activity is materialized) have, within it². As it is known, with the arrival of the newspapers to the web a progressive and exponential multiplication of the said spaces was observed, situation that also reveals and intervenes in – the complexity of the situation is such that it is impossible to recognize what determines what – the way in which the relationship between the press and its audience is being redefined.

With this aim, two central features were joined: on the one side, the reader's participation possibility conditions that every newspaper gives – from the particular arrangement of the reader's intervention and participation spaces – and, on the other side, certain recognition grammars (Verón, 2004: 41) that can be recovered from the reader's speeches that are materialized in the said journal areas.

Brief initial considerations

In order to specify the (theoric-methodological) place from which we began asking the questions that underlie this text, we will start by recalling that Luhmann (2000) was the one that took into consideration the massive media systemic quality. According to his opinion, as far as autopoietic social system – “that reproduces itself and it is no longer directed at communication between presents” (p. 21) –, the mass media are a “communication galaxy that has its own code” (p. 20), and its main characteristic is to create a “momentous illusion” since “the information that comes from the media is necessarily a construction of reality” (p. 22). Under this impression, in the media semiotics area it is used to say that we are at a stage of increasing mediatization complexity (Valdettaro, 2007), in which we can say the disappearance of certain limits within the different media. In this context, Verón's semiotics perspective is recovered – also known as socio-semiotics – (Verón 1998, 2004).

As it has been thoroughly analyzed in another research work (Raimondo, 2011), the strategy that each journal carries out helps to build up its ‘personality’ – a personality which is completely different to that of other journals with which the first journal competes – and, therefore, to shape the way in which the media is related to its audience, in this case its readers. Consequently, the notion of discursive strategy is linked to another term of the same value: the reading contract. Both concepts are related to the way each medium manages to build up its uniqueness against its ‘rivals’. On the other hand, the notion of contract “puts emphasis on the relationship building conditions that, with time, join a medium to its consumers... The aim of this contract... is to build and keep the consumption habit” (Verón, 2004: 223).

Moreover, in order to establish successful relationships between the mass media system and the technological and cultural environment of an era, ‘technology sociology’ statements are recovered, framed under the umbrella of ‘social constructivism’. These statements determine the need to stop considering technology and society as two independent domains, since the relationship between them is one of ‘co-construction’. Thus, it is affirmed that “societies are set up technologically, exactly at the same time and level in which technologies are constructed and applied” (Thomas and Butch, 2008, p. 10). This perspective about the socio-technical, allows us to understand clearly – and without determinisms – the constant mutations concerning the media ecosystem. As Boczkowski (2006) asserts: “The media innovation is developed through the technology, communications and organization interrelated mutations... A new medium arises from those changes in that ecology” (p. 29).

On the other hand, it is implied that we live in highly mediatized societies, more and more pierced by media-technological convergence processes. This convergence represents a cultural change; that is to say, a modification in the logic with which culture proceeds “every time it encourages consumers to look for new information and to establish connection between dispersed media content” (Jenkins, 2008, p.

15). As it has been stated at the beginning of this chapter, we are immersed in a transition stage – a “between” (Jenkins and Deuze, 2008) – in which a new “media ecology”, more hybrid than the previous ones, appears: a scenario full of contradictions that make it difficult to analyze this situation lightly. This hybrid characteristic is visualized with more sharpness when we focus on the considerable diversity of new ‘objects’ – a notion introduced by Manovich (2006, p. 58-59) in media analysis – which maintain different relationship levels with the traditional mass media – the television, the radio, the cinema and, of course, the press. In this scenario the so-called ‘new media’ appear, among which we can name the digitalized versions of the traditional media, the electronic journals, the social media – the personal blogs or social networks such as YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, etc – and the content syndicators. As Jenkins (2008) claims: “Welcome to the convergence culture, where old media clash with new media, where popular media crisscross corporate media, where the producer’s power and the media consumer interact in unpredictable ways” (p. 14).

In this panorama we can glimpse what appears to be the other side of the convergence process in the production level: the reception divergence, as a result of more personalized consumption practices. In the same perspective, Verón (2006) claims the existence of certain “disturbances in the relationship between the media production and the consumer” (p. 39). This trend has been present since a couple of decades and has been slowly modifying the relationship between production and reception which began at the mass media times at the end of the 18th century: “The audience as it appeared, it disappeared and the consumer will be in charge of creating the schedule” (Verón, 2007, p. 40-41). This divergence is increased by the constant creation of new technical devices that allow people to access to the same content in different ways (notebooks, netbooks, smartphones, social phones, tablets, etc.). This divergence, it is clear, should continue being discussed and analyzed in the academic environment because even though, as asserted by Verón (2007), the relationship between media production and reception that has been in force for almost all 20th century has been altered forever and we are against an increasingly fragmented and individualized demand³, it is also undeniable that at least in the last three or four years – especially since 2008 until present time – the audiences have begun to share their consumption experiences through the online social networks. And that has changed all again.

The trend of establishing new kinds of social relationships through the web – at least in the youngest sections of the population –, is arising with more and more strength. These relationships are established, partly, in which Castells (2009) calls “auto communication of the masses” (p. 88). As noted by Igarza (2008) “the increasing population of digital natives has given a new boost to the group mania in the Internet” (p. 185), even changing the use we give to the network”. The progressive predisposition to creating virtual communities has been therefore described. This phenomenon is not new, of course, though nowadays its impulse is much greater. For example, according to the last pieces of research about the situation of Internet in Argentina (IAB, 2011 and Irol, 2011) the social network related activity has been the one which grew the most between 2008 and 2010, spending 30% of the internet consumption time in the last months of 2011.

In this context, and as explained in a Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism report (Purcell, Rainie, Mitchell, Rosenstiel and Olmstead; 2010), the relationship between the audience and the news is becoming portable, personalized and participatory, with more presence of mobile access devices – smartphones, notebooks, netbooks, tablets – and a strong raise tendency in forwarding and content spreading through social websites like Facebook or Twitter. This, as claimed by Fogel and Patiño (2007), confirms that “in the Internet, the information is modified as it circulates” (p. 150). Unlike the almost immutable content offered by traditional media, “this does not happen in the Internet, where the answer joins the content that raised it on the screen” (p.150).

The press and its audience

For more than a decade, within the mass media system, a series of modifications in the classic press modalities have been evidenced. Gradually, the press left its position of Modernity-related institution, where it was a formation body of an audience potentially submitted to ratio (Valdettaro, 2005), evidencing the emergency of a contact discursive strategies group (Biselli and Valdettaro, 2004); that is to say, a peculiar way of setting up the enunciative link which is strongly anchored in the technology of image-sound live transmission imposed by television, “a kind of affective and personal appeal whose communicative efficiency is measured not in terms of manipulation, influence or persuasion but of

seduction” (p. 219). Time has passed and transformations distinctive of the Internet followed those made by the television. It is considered that we are before the creation of a new direction in the mediatization process that has characterized Verón for twenty years. Clearly, nowadays it has become more complex and thorough. It is worth noting that we call ‘mediatization process’ to the historical sequence of media phenomena, from the birth of the press (the first mass medium) to the present day and that has always been complex. Verón identifies a first change in the mediatization process in the 70s and 80s of the past century, when the semiotic television register altered the established order between the mass media system and what was considered “real” extra-media (Verón, 2001; Valdetaro, 2007). Thus, today it is possible to state that the Internet/mobile devices/social networks group produces a new scale rupture in the established relationship between the post-industrial society institutions, which is also now a post-mass mediatized society, and the media ecosystem. We can also add that as well as the repercussions of the first change scarred for life the credibility conditions of the political system, the area that was most impacted is now the belief in which “the construction of the media truth plot” was settled (Escudero, 1996, p. 53), of that “external reception pact where the verification moment is [today we can say “was”] generally unfinished” (p. 53). Verón (2001b) also warned that it is in the circulation area where the symptoms first appear and the changes are more visible (p. 128).

As seen in previous research (Raimondo, 2009, 2010), ever since the newspapers arrived to the “cyberspace”, the digital journals have multiplied their efforts to build a reading contract that allows them to maintain the relationship with the readers through time and thus escape from the pessimist predictions about their future (Raimondo, 2012). As the users acquire new abilities or ‘practice’ other spaces or media (blogs, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, among others), the journals have been incorporating those modifications in one way or another. What was previously stated has been evidenced in the analysis of the reader’s intervention and participation spaces disposition in *Clarín* as well as in *La Nación*, which allowed us to distinguish, among this online journals, a set of invariant disparities on which we will not be focusing on. Nevertheless, we will be devoted to point out a series of central aspects (in order to be brief and clear will be enunciated in items) in the definition of the current conditions of the newspaper/reader relationship.

The unit formed by the text-news has changed and we are, as proposed by Simone (2001), before a new “textually conscience” that enables new penetrability levels: not only allows its disarticulation, but also enables those “body of the text predators” (Simone, 2001, p. 139) which in this case are the user-readers, to leave marks on it. Nowadays, digital journals allow the readers’ comments to interpolate within the article and together become a text that makes it possible to observe the circulation established between production and recognition of meaning. We take into consideration the changes produced in the circulation of texts that compose the articles of the online journals, which no longer can be consumed only within the framework of a newspaper.

Even though it is true that nowadays the journals give the reader more spaces to intervene, the discourse produced by the reader does not hold the singular statue that, within our culture, it is required to be entrusted with the journalist function. This function as well as the author function (Foucault, 1985), is related to a particular way of existing, circulating and functioning of certain speeches in society.

According to what we have observed in our research, the readers’ opinion recovery in the plot of the informative discourse will contribute to what Charaudeau (2003) calls self-justification discourse (p. 38); that is to say, as part of the medium legitimation strategies and which, thus, in Luhmann’s terms, contribute to the system’s autopoiesis itself. The recovery of the audience’s voice in the editorial spaces seems to match, from the point of view of enunciative strategies, with the characterization of the current television stage proposed by Verón (2009); that is to say, with the stage in which the recipient’s individual world bursts into the media discursive strategies and works as an interpretant, in a Peircean sense, as a symbolized third one.

From the study of recognition grammars of the readers’ comments in *La Nación* and *Clarín* (Raimondo, 2009, 2010), a series of “reader categories” could be distinguished⁴, which will refer to different audience response logics to the media enunciative strategies that, together, reveal a kind of audience whose nature is more hybrid than the journal in paper. The online journals’ audience is no longer limited to those readers with similar medium editorial ideology, but it also includes an increasingly heterogeneous group that includes users that choose the journal not necessarily because of its ideology; hybrid audiences (Mancini, 2011) also made up by those who arrive at the website by been sent by the random

algorithms of a search engine or the suggestions of his group of friends⁵. This situation, also present in the gap or breach between the selection and the hierarchization of information established by the media and the audience, leads to certain unavoidable consequences for the media discursive strategies.

The reader categories that have been described do not represent all possible readers, but correspond to a media consumer group that has a higher participation level in the journal's contents than the rest of the audience. Also, as an 'interpretative community' (voluntary, temporal and tactical), according to Jenkins, (2010) they "debate and negotiate opposed interpretations of common texts" (p. 109). Readers can be also distinguished as "activists" because of their tendency to "question" and tactically oppose, occasionally, to certain media decisions.

In the mentioned study (Raimondo, 2009, 2010) the audience response discourse also provided us information about the new habits of cultural consumption in which the relationship journal/reader is set: the need to research, deepen or check the information that they have interest in, the reading experiences related to the consumption contexts that no longer limit to home, and the loss of credibility towards a concrete concept which characterized the relationship with the journal in paper.

We could also noticed that the readers recognize the added value that is for them to be able to know other readers' points of view, express and share their own opinions about it or just let off steam and go through a catharsis. Now, once the journals give the reader a set of spaces to intervene and participate, in order to get their attention or at least part of it, they can no longer completely control their use and their usufruct is often far from what the medium expected. That is to say, certain conflict between the logic proposed by the medium and the participation logic(s) of the audience is evidenced. This partly explains the constant actions (mostly of control) that online journals often carry out in order to re-channel the audience communicative flow that takes place in the comments – through the users ranking, awarding of medals or the link with the Facebook profile.

On their part, the media increasingly attempt to position themselves as communal links, aiming to create experiences that go beyond the news and information consumption. This leads us to retake Verón's idea which claims that in our societies the only thing the media system does is generating groups, day after day. In this sense, there is a particular group that is gaining more and more importance, within the discourse as well as in the audience: the community.

What about taking a look at the contract?

Finally, in order to give a closure to this chapter about the type of relationship online press currently has with its audience, we will talk about the semiotics concept of reading contract. Because, just as journalism is currently examining its basal concepts, we should examine and re-discuss the relevance and aptitude —to comprehend the current social phenomena of understanding and interpreting— of certain concepts that were 'legalized' in a context very different to the one we know today. In the field of media semiotics, one of those terms we could began to discuss, is the reading contract, postulated by Verón at the beginning of the 1980s.

Following Verón (2004), the discursive strategy carried out by a journal contributes to build up its 'personality', therefore, to mould the way in which the medium relates to its audience. It is with this perspective that the renowned Argentinean semiologist links the concept of strategy with the concept of contract, since the latter "puts emphasis on the relationship construction conditions that, with time, link a medium to its consumers.... A medium should manage that link through time, keep it and develop it... The aim of this contract... is to build up and maintain the consumption habit" (Verón, 2004, p. 223).

Now, as we can see from all the previously stated, the reading contract in digital journals is particularly unstable, because it is constantly altered, stressed and redefined by the reader's participation that comes from the journal's interface, through the intervention and participation spaces. Therefore, we consider that even though this concept continues to be useful to unravel, from a semiotics view that deals with the social functioning of discourses, the way in which the media "propose" a link to their audience⁶ – audiences that, in turn, contribute to consolidate, because in every contract always underlie certain conjectures about its reception, it is also true that we should make at least, certain considerations about it.

On the one hand, according to what is proposed by Bitonte and Demirdjian (2003), we believe that “the reading contract method starts as part of a discourse socio-semiotics analysis in order to formulate, from the hypothesis made up from it, a possible inquiry in reception”. Nevertheless, we consider necessary to point out that the validity of the information provided by the analysis of the contract is significantly more perishable than ten or twenty years ago.

Escudero (1996) states, in one of the initial chapter of her book *Malvinas: el gran relato* [Malvinas: the great story]: “It is evident that, as far as social contract, the media contract is basically stable, and this stability is what allows the circulation and information consumption in the contemporary world without manifest cases of communicative collapse” (p. 48). But allow us to suggest that it is exactly that stability that the author underwrites which becomes a quality, of the media contract, that has become obsolete. We could take a risk and say that this lost is associated with another announced death: the ‘faithful’ reader. This reader that followed faithfully a medium in which he had put all his “trust” is currently in irremediable danger of extinction because, as suggested at the beginning of this chapter, there is something about the concept of belief⁷, which in the past was placed in the mass media, that nowadays is fading.

Notes

¹ This chapter is a reflection based on an investigation carried out within the PhD thesis “The newspaper / reader relationship in online press. Analysis of the reader’s intervention and participation spaces in the Argentine newspapers in Clarín and La Nación (argentinian journals)”

² The *reader’s intervention spaces* have been defined as those newspaper sections that have been “intervened” or “pierced” in some way by the reader’s activity through some kind of action carried out by the reader himself which has left a print on the journal’s interface —with exception of the enunciation production—: rankings (of most read, most commented or most voted articles), surveys, article polling, comment abuse report and related readings list. Likewise, the reader’s participation spaces are the journal sections where the reader can express discursively by producing enunciations: letters from readers, discussion forums, blogs, comments (in articles, surveys, etc), social network related spaces, online interviews and citizen journalism sites, among others.

³ In which the user decides which information to consume, at what time of the day and through what technical device.

⁴ These are: the integrated faithful reader, the excluded faithful reader, the dissident reader and the judgmental reader (in *La Nación*); the inquiring blogger, the isolated or recluse blogger, the beginner blogger and the usual blog reader (in *Clarín*).

⁵ According to Alexa’s *Clickstream*, looked up on August 31st 2011, 12.35% of the users accessed from google.com, 12.25% did it from google.com.ar and 12.25% accessed via Facebook. As for lanacion.com, 14.78% accessed from google.com, 10.91% from google.com.ar and 10.97% via Facebook. . (<http://www.alexa.com/siteinfo/clarin.com> and <http://www.alexa.com/siteinfo/lanacion.com.ar>)

⁶ Verón claims: “there is an enunciator that proposes a recipient to fill in a place” (2004, p. 179).

⁷ In order to see the relationship between *contract*, *trust* and *belief* established by Verón (2004, p. 223).

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