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Hypertextuality in Internet reporting

Abstract

The transfer of so-called traditional journalistic genres to the Internet usually results in significant changes to their distinctive features. A good example is the Internet report, which simultaneously uses various forms of communication with recipients (e.g. text, film, image) and becomes both multimedia and intertextual material, which results in its hypertextual character. Similarly to any hypertext, because it often has a multimodal structure, it is also a kind of semi-finished product, as it only becomes a carrier of meanings and a complete work during its reception. As a result, extra tasks are set for the recipients. They must even more fully than in the case of classic literature or literary works participate in the process of decoding the meaning and become even more co-creators of the sense of the work that is being read. This article aims to demonstrate the essential features of how reports function on the Internet by referring to two specific materials that fall within the definition of the Internet report. Apart from this, the text attempts to confront the new variety of reporting with selected literary theories, such as the concept of “the death of the author” by Roland Barthes. Lastly, the article aims to cover the characteristics of the different types of recipients of hypertext forms of reporting functioning in an Internet environment.

Keywords: Internet report, intertextuality, hypertextuality, multimodality

Introduction

Media genology demands an increasingly precise description of the various journalistic forms available in the so-called new media. One of the first attempts in the Polish domain to describe the specificity of Internet genres was a vital text by Edward Balcerzan. He postulated that the essence of “multimedia genology” (Balcerzan 1999) is a search for “links between” genres of different communication systems” (Balcerzan 2013: 8). This search, in turn, is intended to lead to knowledge that integrates comparative research on “befriended” communication systems. Internet genres often have a multimedia character (because they use the advantages of different types of media to reach the recipient effectively) and multimodal (which means that the meaning of the material is co-executed by more than one semiotic code).

Distinctive features of the Internet report

In recent years, several Polish web portals have published materials described by the editors themselves as a multimedia or interactive report, and the terms Internet report or e-report are used less frequently. The two main distinctive features of this genre variety are: interactivity and multimodality. Their manifestations in specific materials vary in form and scale, but they undoubtedly make the classic form of describing facts, which is a report, a new way of talking about the world. This time, it is not just about changing where stories are published, but about creating an entirely new paradigm of communication between the reporter and the recipient, giving the latter a particularly active position.

The interactivity of the new media is particularly effective at involving the recipient in the act of communication, giving them a dominant and essentially creative role in certain situations. Zbigniew Bauer states that “the distinguishing feature of the messages encouraging ‘interactivity’ is the existence of ‘an interface’ in the form of a metatext or ‘controller’, which is the plane (or space) through which the recipient (user) gains access to the structure of the work itself” (Bauer 2009: 165). It, therefore, seems that the key aspect of interactivity is its scope. “An interactive work of art is one in which the feature in question is not limited to the sphere of perception, but also concerns the work itself, its ontological status and structure” (Kluszczyński 2002: 98). This means that the work does not predate the process of its reception. It is the recipient who creates it. Reading interactive works consists of “alternating information exchange between the user and the computer. The user gives commands to the computer, the effects of which the user can observe and make decisions dependent on them on an ongoing basis” (Płoski 2002: 167).

The second distinctive feature of Internet reports is their multimodality, which should be interpreted as involving many “means and methods of presentation and control, such as text, image, sound, animation, film, icons, scripts” (Płoski 2002: 153). A multimedia work depicting the reality presented using text, sound, images, film sequences takes on an entirely new meaning. And there is no consensus as to whether works labelled as reports that contain all these elements are more like journalism or literary creation, or whether, in their essence, they are becoming increasingly similar to, for example, a computer game.

Report as hypertext

An essential feature of the Internet report is also its hypertextuality. Before proceeding to this term, it is worth analysing the classic definitions of the term ‘text’ from which the term ‘hypertextuality’ originates. A popular ‘pragmatic’ definition of the term ‘text’ was adopted by Maria Renata Meyenowa who pays attention to the interpretative tasks assumed in the text, which oblige the interpreter not only to know the code but also to possess extralinguistic knowledge allowing to read the meaning hidden in the text (Mayenowa 1971). The premise about the autonomy of the sentence sequence that is supposed to carry a semantic message independently lies at the heart of her definition of the text. Teresa Dobrzyńska, in turn, points out that the text ‘becomes an integrated sign whole due to the assumptions made by the sender and the interpretative hypotheses formed by the receiver’ (Dobrzyńska 2001: 11). Just as Mayenowa, she assumes a correlation between the sender and the receiver in the process of deciphering the meaning from the text. According to the linguistic definition, the text is ‘a supra sentential linguistic unit, a macro sign

with a given generic and stylistic markedness, which is subject to holistic semantic and communicative interpretation and exhibits structural integrity and semantic unity' (Bartmiński 1998: 17). Teun van Dijk presents a broader view of the term text, postulating its analysis in terms of global structures functioning in formal and semantic dimensions. Global structures enable their further division into superstructures that constitute a formal realization of the text and into macrostructures that reflect a global meaning of the text (van Dijk 1980: 128–131). The current reflections on the text, also in the context of its presence in the audiovisual media or the Internet, for instance, naturally lead to the category of the hypertext. Already in the literary criticism, they contributed to the emergence of the deconstructive model according to which the autonomy of the text is only illusory, a single reading is impossible, and the interpretation cannot detach from other texts. This model naturally leads to the category of intertextuality based on the thoughts of Bakhtin and his concept of dialogism as well as the works of Kristeva (1969), who developed Bakhtin's idea. According to her, the text is a 'mosaic' consisting of different texts, and its intertextuality bases on the fact that it derives from all the texts written earlier. As claimed by Kristeva, reading a literary text cannot be detached from other texts.

De Beaugrande and Dressler (1980) believe, in turn, that intertextuality is the interdependent way in which texts stand in relation to one another (as well as to the culture at large) to produce meaning. The authors of *Introduction to Text Linguistic* have a broader perspective on the term intertextuality. As claimed by them, it is one of the seven criteria of textuality (among cohesion, coherence, intentionality, acceptability, informativity, situationality), and it refers to the assumption that both the production as well as the reception of the text depend on the recipient's knowledge of other texts.

An important conception of intertextuality was also proposed by Gerard Genette. He defines hypertext as a text that is the result of intertextual games. It is generated by the sender through axiologisation and violation of the semantic space of the earlier text (hypertext) ([1982] 1997: 5). In this sense, hypertext becomes material that creates its own distinct meaning—or somewhat meanings—by continually referring to the present meanings and those conveyed by other texts or materials.

The researcher of hypertext novels, Małgorzata Janusiewicz, points to three essential features of hypertext:

- alinearity that puts the reader in a situation where they always choose the route of reading the message, which at the same time causes individual interference in the text, making it an individual experience each time.
- fragmentation of the structure, i.e. presentation of the material in small volume fragments, without defining a fixed beginning.
- the multimedia character of the work in the structure of connections of different elements, and thus the possibility of using various literary, visual and sound tricks (Janusiewicz 2013: 12–14).

Thus, due to the frequent multimodal structure of hypertext, it is also a kind of semi-finished product, because it only becomes a carrier of meanings and a complete work during its reception. Its essence, on the other hand, determines the specific form of the individual elements that constitute the work.

Polyphony of reporting

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When creating the concept of the polyphonic novel, Mikhail Bakhtin ([1963] 2009) pointed out that the narrator talks about the characters in such a way that they gain significant autonomy, e.g. at the level of the way they talk about reality. It is similar to multimodal reports on the Internet. They are based on the co-existence of several equal narrators who report on events from many points of view. What is more, e-reports often involve more than one author, which significantly subjectivizes the story and allows it to be viewed from many different perspectives.

While in traditional press reports, the plot pattern consists of a specific, precisely defined by the author of the work, relational order, this principle is overturned in the case of Internet reports. Narrative lines do not limit the plot in them. There may be many of these while maintaining a logical sequence of hyperlinks.

For example, the report entitled *Boskie światło* [*Divine Light*] by Jacek Hugo-Bader (2016), devoted to the Broad Peak expedition that was organised to search for the missing bodies of two Polish Himalayan mountaineers, Maciej Berbeka and Tomasz Kowalski, allows the recipient to see several videos, which are most often either statements by the relatives of the missing persons or interviews with the relatives conducted by Hugo-Bader. When the reader interacts with the story and watches one of the available videos, they forget for a few minutes about the Broad Peak expedition, which, as it might seem, is the focus of the material. The reader's attention is focused on a long statement of, for example, the mother of the missing Tomasz Kowalski or his fiancée. They are the ones who are becoming narrators, creating their own story, seemingly separate from the main story of the report. In their statements, they sometimes make no reference at all to the expedition in which Hugo-Bader took part; they commemorate, for example, only the deceased Himalayan mountaineers. These videos are a kind of rhizome in which Hugo-Bader is moved to the side, handing over the role of a storyteller to somebody else for a while. Rhizomes in the content of which the recipient of an Internet report may delve into but may also omit them. The second solution will not cause the recipient to get lost in the sequence of events plotted by Hugo-Bader. This one is consistent in its basic outline, most of the added film and photographic elements are enriching, complementary, but it is never essential to listen to or watch the materials. Notably, the order of contact with them is not crucial either. *Boskie światło* can therefore be interpreted in its basic version, which means a text by Hugo-Bader with photographs, that cannot be omitted in reception when moving the page scroll bar. The reader can also delve deeper into its subsequent elements, prolonging the reception of the entire report.

The ergodic discourse

In reports published on the Internet, narrative discourse is often replaced with ergodic discourse¹, meaning the conscious journey of the recipient through the successive choices, the adventures of the text. The concept of Bakhtin's polyphony, therefore, continues to be implemented in specific texts, but while Bakhtin ([1963] 2009) wrote about polyphony in the semantic layer of the text, reports published on the Internet very often implement this polyphony in the operational layer. Contemporary interactive

1 The concept introduced by Espen Aarseth (1997).

and multimedia reporting can also be juxtaposed with Roland Barthes' classic theory, in which the text is interpreted as a network of connections and references of successive lexias, which are carriers of meanings. The connections between these lexias can branch out and multiply, thus building up a multiplicity of inputs and outputs (Barthes [1970] 2006). That is why Michel Foucault believed that the boundaries of the text were no longer apparent (Foucault [1969] 1977). The text becomes just one larger lexia, referring in varying degrees to other texts that are separate lexias. Lexia may convey a story in a minimalist form (when the recipient confines themselves to the main text, ignoring the side-materials) or in a strongly expanded form (when the recipient would like to see all the material added by the author(s) of the report).

This is the case, for example, with the report entitled *Na Nikiszu* [At Nikisz] by Karol Gruszka published in "Dziennik Zachodni". The main character of the material is Nikiszowiec, a district of Katowice. The material consists of a text that tells the history of the district, its specificity and contemporary functioning. It is enriched with photographs depicting people described in the material, buildings and architectural elements reflecting their specificity. Additional elements are recordings of conversations with selected characters: a historian from the Museum of the History of Katowice, who talks about Nikiszowiec, an ethnologist from that museum, local artists, as well as ordinary residents. These recordings, in addition to their cognitive and unambiguously informative value, provide an insight into the dialect that is used by the residents of Nikiszowiec. Part of the material is also a video showing a traditional Silesian living room, which can be seen in the Museum of the History of Katowice.

By only reading the text, the recipient will receive basic information about the Katowice district, its specificity, some information about the community living there and it will be a coherent message that guarantees the acquisition of certain information. The decision to click on additional, unwritten elements (audio, video) will provide the recipient with more detailed information on selected aspects of the subject described in the report.

Na Nikiszu is also an example of a report with imprecise borders, which means that the recipient of the text is sometimes transferred to content not created by the author. This happens, for example, when we meet Ania and Maciek Muszwil, residents of the described district, and by clicking on a hyperlink in the highlighted fragment of the text, we move to websites with photo galleries of those characters whose passion is to photograph and immortalise Silesia and its monuments. When we decide to click, we somehow leave the report; its boundaries let us go, although we stay within the subject matter of the material.

"The death of the author"

In *Boskie światło* by Jacek Hugo-Bader, there are certainly fewer words spoken by the author than the characters whose words are either written down in the main text by Hugo-Bader, or presented in the form of videos in which the characters talk either about the tragic Broad Peak expedition, as a result of which two Polish Himalayan mountaineers died, or about an organised expedition to find the missing bodies. So the people who describe the expedition, talking about personal experiences, feelings and opinions are, among others, Adam Bielecki, one of the participants of the first expedition, Krzysztof Wielicki, leader of the first expedition, Alicja Kowalska, mother of Tomasz Kowalski who went missing during the first expedition, Jacek Berbeka, brother of the missing Maciej Berbeka, Krzysztof Tarasiewicz, one of the

participants of the search expedition, Agnieszka Korpala, fiancée of Tomasz Kowalski. Their statements form the basis of a story that begins with preparations for the first winter ascent of Broad Peak, which took place on 5 March 2013 and ends with a search expedition carried out in June and July of the same year.

The polyphony of the report entitled *Boskie światło* by Jacek Hugo-Bader significantly diminishes the role of the author of the text. The author's position is mostly confined to the role of the person who builds a formal frame for the story and decides the order of speech. However, those who express themselves, often in a very elaborate form, paint a more detailed picture.

The diminished role of the author in multimedia and interactive forms of reports enables one to refer to Roland Barthes' well-known concept of "the death of the author" (Barthes [1967] 1999). The French scholar, above all, with his salutary metaphor, wanted to point to the autonomy of the text and the freedom of reception. For him, the text is "a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, 'blend and clash'. The text is an tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture" (Barthes [1967] 1999: 146). The dispersion of the author's perspective and the weakening of the author's position strengthen the role of the latter in the dialogue between the described reality and the recipient. The recipient increasingly needs to be active, to decide how to interpret the text, to select specific elements of the story in any order. Contact with many contemporary reports published on the Internet is therefore reminiscent of a journey with "convolutions of the linking" (Janusiewicz 2013: 121) in search of the meaning of the story presented. Obviously, the role of the recipient of e-reports may be different in specific situations, as it depends on the pattern of the journey through the text outlined by the author. However, Nikolaj Jensen defines four types of hypertext readers, i.e. hypertext reports:

- a caught reader (behaving like a rat in a maze), wandering along the paths set by the author, not fully aware of the situation in which they find themselves.
- a resigned seeker of meaning, impatient and target-oriented, often abandoning the text if they do not find logical links.
- a reader who is aware of the specifics of a hypertext situation and the rules in this environment is thus able to interpret meanings.
- an ideal hypertext reader, someone who recognises and plays with style, who reads patiently and understands the author's intentions (Jensen 2001: 12–17).

It can be assumed that in the context of disappearing reading competences two first types of the recipients of hypertext reports are dominant. This results from the novelty of these forms of story, which are demanding, require patience and skilful selection of materials - in a situation where the recipient wants to resign, for example, because of lack of time, from certain elements proposed by the creator of the report as a whole. The new poetic reading "requires a reader who is well-prepared to deal with ambiguity, open-endedness, and lack of closure. (...) The excess of indetermination, produced by textual fragmentation and lack of structure, augments the difficulty of some of the functions normally undertaken by the reader, such as the creation of cohesive² hypotheses and their later verification" (Goicoechea, Sanz 2009: 537).

It seems that the new kind of creativity—more than traditional forms of journalistic or literary communication—will demand that recipients acquire the competence to find a balance between chaos and order, superfluous and relevant information, and ultimately find their own meaning in all this. Both e-reports and e-literature, therefore, create a new type of reader, whose functions in contact with a literary

2 According to the authors, the term 'cohesive' refers to semantic connectedness, unlike Beaugrande and Dressler (1980), who propose 'coherence' (semantic) in opposition to 'cohesion' (syntactic).

work or journalistic material extend from reader–user–player–co-author. In contact with the report materials referred to above, each of the designated characters must be activated at selected moments for the full reception of meaning.

Furthermore, in the context of the considerations on the multimodal forms of the report, the characteristics traditionally assigned to the texts take on new meaning. As mentioned earlier, Beaugrande and Dressler regarded the following features of the text, namely, cohesion, coherence, intentionality, acceptability, informativity, situationality and intertextuality essential (1981). It can be assumed, however, that the Internet report described in the present paper fulfills all the above mentioned conditions of textuality. Even intentionality, understood as an undertaken by the author assumption to create a text with a specific semantic load, is usually fulfilled by the multimodal forms of the report. Sometimes only the way to decipher a planned meaning may not be identical to the assumptions made by the author. The recipients of the e-report may follow their own ways to decode the final sense of the journalistic material.

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