Chapter 23

Hyperjournalism for the Hyperreader

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ABSTRACT

The internet has created numerous new text types. This development has not left the field of journalistic publications unaffected. The following chapter takes a close look at the so-called webzine. Other than online presences of established magazines, webzines have no counterpart. Characteristically, they are situated between being a purely journalistic publication and offering their users opportunities for online communication. The chapter analyzes this position by using representative webzines concerned with the non-mainstream music style of heavy metal. The findings, however, are also relevant to webzines dedicated to other topics. In the course of this chapter the influence of digital hypertext structures will be illustrated as well as the alternative text producer and recipient roles which are directly affected by the inherent interactivity of webzines. The chapter closes with an outlook on future journalistic publications on the WWW.

INTRODUCTION

The internet has produced a myriad of new forms of communication that challenge traditional views and ideas of communication. Exponents of CMC (computer-mediated communication) such as online forums and chat have become increasingly popular. Blogs and self-made video clips on Youtube compete with traditional journalistic products as opinion makers. Journalistic products — no matter whether newspapers, magazines or TV programs — are no idle bystanders but maintain their own online presences.

However, the internet has also created journalistic publications that have no analogous precedent: the webzines. These make use of digital hypertext features both for navigational and content-related
purposes, offer hypermedia items and rely heavily on communicational components. These are used to ensure contact between the webzine’s producers as well as to provide an online community for the webzine’s readers. Vital in this connection is the fact that the main aim of every website, be it music webzine, another online magazine or a newspaper online presence, is to generate most traffic, i.e. web hits (which are crucial regarding advertising). Interactivity and recipient participation are crucial to achieve this desired popularity (see e.g. Sundar, 2007). Thus the readers become an active part and influence the text producers and the webzine’s content, as I will discuss.

The chapter takes a text linguistically inspired look at such webzines and the way in which hypertext principles are employed by these journalistic publications. In the process, Storrer’s (1999) terminology of e-text, hypertext and hypertext net is considered as well as research on hyperlinks (Huber, 2003). Furthermore, the influence of the readers on the text producers is illustrated by referencing typical music-related webzines that offer instruments of CMC to their readers.

BACKGROUND

It is not only the new forms of CMC on the WWW (such as instant relay chat or online forums) that have sparked the interest of linguistic researchers (e.g. Dürscheid, 2002, 2003; Jucker, 2002, 2003). Their research focus also includes alternative texts that have an informative function and serve a journalistic purpose. The most prominent example of these are blogs. Although not all blogs focus on general news-related issues (see Herring 2004 for an analysis of different blog types), they are a popular addition to newspaper sites where they are a frequently-updated column (see for example www.cnn.com or also www.dagensnyheter.se, which both host different blogs). Crucial research regarding weblogs comes from Susan C. Herring (e.g. 2009, 2005). She defines weblogs as a genre (2005, p. 2) since they share structural and functional characteristics. Although the term genre is widely used and also applied in the field of art, it is generally used in English linguistics to refer to the new text types the internet has created. Besides its focus on the functional aspect, genre can also be preferred over the term text type, as the frequent use of hypertext structures in these young communicational forms raises the question of whether they are still text types and not hypertext types instead. Hence, webzines can also be considered a particular genre of the online world, which does not have an analogous predecessor and which combines journalistic (hyper)texts and CMC. Furthermore, webzines alter the roles of text producer and text recipient due to this unique combination, and offer new possibilities to their readers.

Webzines have been analyzed in German linguistics by Androutsopoulos (2005) among others. Given Androutsopoulos’ research background, i.e. youth language and youth-related publications such as fanzines and flyers, Androutsopoulos connects the nature of webzines to some of his earlier findings regarding fanzines (i.e. self-published magazines dedicated to e.g. a non-mainstream style of music, for example). He draws a distinction between professionalized online magazines that include commercial advertisements and have a consistent team of journalists working for them (see also Eisner, 2000, p. 81) and e-zines, whose characteristics are more rooted in the print equivalent of the fanzines. Often, however, these distinctions are not as clear-cut. This is due to the fact that online magazines exist which began as e-zines and later professionalized themselves, though typically their content authors cannot support themselves professionally from this writing alone (as seen in the case of the music webzines www.vampster.com or www.metal-rules.com). Due to the fact that these (semi)professional webzines have clearly changed the face of online journalism and have become an equivalent to online presences