



“Minding the Gap”: Reflections on Media Practice & Theory

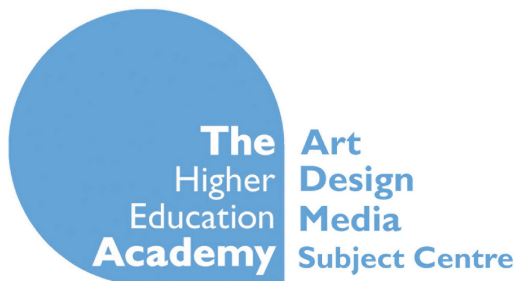
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Daily or Diary? Towards a New Profile in e-Journalism

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To be, or not to be [*journalism*]: that is the question:
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
And by opposing end them? To die: to sleep;
No more; and by a sleep to say we end
William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*

“Who’s There?”

“Who’s there?” These are the first words in *Hamlet* by Shakespeare. But even this was always the question about manhood. The social sciences try to clarify densities, depths, dimensions of that shadow slowly approaching. It is a vaguely human figure. Time, fashions, methods and sights change while light and truth, mist and concern lead us through confusion: What are we? Who are we? Who’s there? Asked with that 'who' that gives permission to a human figure. It is the spirit of Hamlet’s father: a ghost.

Technologies, *scenarios*, fashions and forms are constantly changing. The shape that once gave form to gods, and afterwards formed the souls, is more or less the same human figure that was later incorporated at the end of the evolutionary line of living beings. That human figure provided by the divine faculty of opinion and discussion; the one supplied with the light of thought and the possibility of good. This anthropomorphic being became, body and mind, completeness and virtue, purpose and product, evolution and permanence. Today, as always, the times keep on changing and however, the question from the social sciences has to be the same: “Who’s there?”.

Journalism and in general all mediated communication have played a special role and taken advantage of a certain 'right to tell' since the very beginning of humanity. But it was not until yesterday (a ‘yesterday’ one hundred and fifty years ago, now) that this narrative mediation got the name and the form of something that we still, here, call Journalism. For that reason, the question about that shadow coming closer 'who’s there?' moves us from

Journalism to the social world and vice versa. This is where the next question emerges: Journalism 'is it [still] or it is no [more]?' .

The wonder between 'to be or not to be' is always a transcendental gesture. The abstract and folded question cannot be simply answered. It cannot either be solved building a simulacrum of linearity: from certain causes to certain effects. Thus is how we are used to narrating, so where the rhythms of the traditional narratives: short scientific stories or journalist essays, they always played linear. But this tradition, facing these questions, cannot help us. The synergy of transformations is so complex that it would not stand up to an easy narration: pretending it would mean taking a caricature of truth. This document cannot be more than another proposal of a possible interpretation. Unavoidably biased, profoundly ironic, and perhaps blasphemous, this proposal may be faked, just as a caricature. But, taking some anthropologists' word, we have, at least, an interpretation. The unique desire is to stimulate other new interpretations. It is the only possible purpose: suggest an approach to the ghost, another reflection about Journalism. The sole goal is to keep thinking: that is it, thinking is a good way of changing ourselves¹.

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From the media tradition, the route to the humanoid figure, divides, at least intuitively, in three possible lines of discussion. All three ways can help the comprehension of Journalism in its solid mechanisms of narrating the world. Down there, the anthropomorphic figure guides us through the mist: the first of the lines, the structural transformation we called 'scenarios'. Out of the structural perspective, the communication industry has become a financial core on a worldwide scale. It has been organized in commercial logics and interests, merging and concentrating in conglomerates obeying systemic models: complexes of power and money colonizing the lifeworld.

We take as the second line, communication itself: processes of exchange and interaction, systems of codes and links, meanings and values, understanding and explanation,

¹ Ibáñez (2001:31)

comprehension and representation, sense and repetition. These all have changed in the last years.

Of course, the third possible line of discussion to consider this transformation is the one we called 'people'. This one should be, apparently, the closer to that mysterious shade: society, grouping, symbolic structures and practices, models of organization and collective or individual networks, shared values, rituals and tradition and collectivities along time this transformation has also affected them all.

These three helpful possible ways of stretching the thread of the transformation are intertwined and confusing: they are not three, they are not one, but we dare to suggest three, we dare to follow one. The time of undoing the mysterious knot would steal us the possibility of following them. Here we will leave the mess as it comes, and with the promise of working on this later, we will discuss provisionally the second as a reference. It is not the moment of trying to unwind them. The other two lines of discussion: scenarios, people, and the obvious methodological discussion about how should we draw a comprehensive landscape are to be developed in further works. Right now, here, the purpose can only be to diagram the road to that unclear end: 'Who's there?' again, still there, this suspicious anthropomorphic shade.

Globalization Veils

To combine the interest for the present and the interest for change is itself contradictory. We disguise our interest for the present with concern for the future while we turn any explanation or justification for the present into past. The present is that uncertain fold of time that does not hold the moment of its own formulation. And past and future, history and possibility/threat, are nothing else but its deformed projections. On the other hand, change slips inevitably, moves and escapes and has to be methodologically settled and frozen if we want it to be explained. This theoretically possible point between present and change comes with a great degree of incertitude. Anxiety there is so high that the point is a never-ending source for ambiguous concepts and for the invention of hopeful formulations.

We should see the iterative reoccurrence that makes us talk about globalization in between these cognitive strategies (the creation of concepts, the needs for formulations, high uncertainty). Globalization has become a very useful concept and almost unavoidable if one tries to consider the deep changes or transformations lately originated. However with the calm of archaeology and the critical raised eyebrow it is not difficult to detect that the concept itself is sufficiently ambiguous to cover a wide range of veiled synonyms. This makes the concept more difficult to explore or, at least, we should consider this synonymy suspicious: what weird intention lies behind this veil? Considering the best of the discursive traditions, the suspicion does not only fall on what is said but also on what is hidden: the concept of 'globalization' works as a rich veil that sometimes disguises with 'cosmopolitanism' and 'cultural diversity' a form of cultural colonization. This has been repeatedly marked and denounced by well-accepted authors in the studies of culture. Amongst them must be mentioned Stuart Hall (1991), Michael Billig (1995) or Homi Bhabha (1996 and 2004).

Stuart Hall comments that globalization is not an abstract force, but that the global, transnational culture is predominantly American, presenting 'what is essentially an American conception of the world'. (Billig, 1995:149).

Between these veiled synonymies lies the notion of decentralization of power and that of the decentralization of the hegemonic culture as well. None of them have anything to do with organizational questions but with an intuitive loss of correspondence between territory and the core of power. In some circles 'globalization' has been used as a synonym for deterritorialization. Anyway, well consolidated research traditions on cultural geography and colonialism have dismantled with forcefulness this prejudice:

[...] globalization, far from causing the 'deterritorialization' has as main point of reference and as main beneficiary a *centre* constituted by a reduced nucleus of nation-states (the triad the USA, Europe and Japan). This nucleus spreads unevenly towards the

periphery according to the bigger or smaller degree of integration/marginality of other regions. (Clua, 2001:234).

Taking advantage of its ambiguity and its conceptual flexibility, some have preferred to echo a recent 'globalization' younger than two decades. As usual, the gesture is closer to a strategic option than to an acceptable argument: the 'gobsmacked' promise of technological transformations has been confused metonymically with some desirable effects. Again, the (good) intention eclipses the reflexive attention. One hundred and thirty years ago political powers have divided the worldwide communication market according to their areas of influence:

The international conference of 1870 divided the world in areas of influence according to the interest of the four powerful empires at that time (the American, the British, the French and the German). Simultaneously the representative international agencies (AP, Reuter and Havas & Wolff) divided their sources for news and markets. (Vázquez-Montalbán, 2000: 159).

Promises and Effects

But it is not appropriate to mistake promise for effect, possibilities for fate. Long ago, we should have freed this thinking about media from its technological determinism. For some it seemed more comfortable to sell 'freedom' instead of transmitters or to preach for 'democracy' instead of talking about megabytes. More than fifty years ago, Adorno and Horkheimer solved and denounced the aspect of alienating hypnosis of technology: 'A technological rationale is the rationale of domination itself'². As time goes on, even if their approach has been considered apocalyptic³ their argument pioneered consideration of the reproductive role of stereotypes and mythologies of social communication.

It is not possible to understand social media without inscribing them in a frame of symbolic exchanges: meanings, values, cultural practices and above all narratives that tie

² Adorno, T. & Horkheimer, M. (1979: 120-167).

³ Eco, U. (1985)

collectivities, traditions, history and stories all together. Separating or liberating any reflection about media from the society where they are inscribed is a simplification. It is the sort of broad thinking that often penetrates banal discussions and extends along and too very easily toward areas of scientific and academic density. They have usually forgotten 'the mundane character of the receiving activity'⁴. This sort of immediate reflection is easy to recognize. It tends to culpabilize media –only media- of perverse socio-cognitive effects. They usually fill with footnotes articles and pamphlets of arguable validity and worse honesty disguised in scientific researches. These simple approaches tend to camouflage between tones of data and percentual calculations effectively represented in full-colour graphics. These works that like to separate media from society usually come in form of researches parochially concerned with handicapped or sentimentally effective collectivities: television and children; television and violence on teenagers' behaviour, techno music on synthetic drug consumption at youth, e-mail and delictive tendencies, pornography and erotic perversions.

So much effectism can only be installed on a strategic division between media and the society in which they intervene and develop. This gap is invented: media are part of the social world and help to weave it symbolically. But this is not possible without the active intervention of certain publics –people- who live around, with, media messages:

Media messages are usually discussed by people in the course of its reception and as its consequence; they are, so, discursively elaborated and shared by a wider circle of individuals who may be (or not) involved in the initial reception process. (...) Media messages can be repeated further from their initial context of reception and can be transformed through a continuous process of narration, repetition, commentary, discredit and critics. (Thompson, 1998: 67).

The process of transformations in the communicative landscapes and communication processes has to be thought from this hermeneutic perspective. This approach is the one that considers media in their role of sowing the comprehension of the world. It is not enough to think only technological or structural. It is neither enough to fall into that

⁴ Thompson, J.B. (1998:61)

promise of ideological freedom –or submission- that accompanied every wave of technological innovation ever since the hieroglyphic writing in Egypt⁵.

The prosecution of clarification and the feeling of uncertainty generated from the recent changes in communication technologies have usually been taken too seriously. Technophile sights try to suggest –and usually preach- this promise (of freedom, democracy, participation, equality) that symmetrically, has been presented as a danger or a loss (quality of language, for instance, or of rationality, integrity or virtue). With media we sew the world and they help us to understand it –humans, people, journalists, receivers, researchers.

Social life seems more uncertain, insofar that people ask themselves what is going to happen tomorrow, before realising that the future will keep looking like the past, as always did. (Thompson, 1998: 249).

Without promises, we can collect and reproduce arguments and interpretations that will send us once and again to some form of collective memory. We keep reformulating the past and the future in order to make the jump onto the understanding of the present less brusque: “the blasting of a monadic moment from the homogeneous course of history, establishing a conception of the present as the time of the now”⁶. This is the same argument that allows us to go back, as usual, to the future⁷.

Those kind of grand pronouncements around technologies have reached the Internet too. New possibilities of convergence of electronic languages and the worldwide reach of computer networks have generated, together with the decentralization of the accumulated information, a quite optimistic trend. But before such a reaction we should recommend caution. It seems that the confusion about the chances of technology has been mistaken for the uses and social effects the Network should (or could) provoke. This is why it is so usual to find this sort of especially promising and happy formulations:

⁵ Fischer, S.R. (2003)

⁶ Walter Benjamin quoted by Bhabha, H. (1994:6)

⁷ “Go back to the future”(Kurtz, H. *Washington Post* reporter)

[...] Internet is a postmodern technology that offers people the opportunity of rebuilding the world by making a new kind of global politics, instead of national. This is done through a more decentralized media than those controlled by the government. It allows discourses getting across the limitations of social inequality. (Curran, 2005: 181).

Providing the internet with all these possibilities is an exaggeration, but despite this, there is still something in this quotation that begs further consideration. One of the most brilliant (and successful) interpretations of the development of print –and afterwards the printing press- was suggested by Benedict Anderson⁸. This specialist in history and Indonesia explains that the communicative conditions originated with print and the first periodical press permitted the 'imagined' construction of a community. This new form of community –national- emerged from several processes of cultural and linguistic homogenization, etc. that the new technology permitted. This type of community based on the possibility of being 'imagined', and repeated could help to comprehend some questions linked to the reproduction of the discourse of the Nation-State model. But this same notion of 'imagined community' could be useful towards a rethinking of Internet – without forgetting, of course, the symbolic and comprehensive role of media.

The convergence of capitalism and print technology on the fatal diversity of human language created the possibility of a new form of imagined community. (Anderson, 1983: 46).

One of the aspects this project has to do with is the possibilities of 'imagining' a form of community that breaks the modern model of the Nation-State. The question turns around the identification of mechanisms and roles played by diverse forms of communication – new, traditional, electronic, interactive, institutional, personal, collective- in the configuration of this 'collective imaginary' that becomes the landscape of a community – at least, *mythically* possible. It is taken for granted that this discussion will not start here. We can anticipate, although, that this thinking will have to ground its discussion in the always remote conception of identity configured through media practice: reception, production, repetition, reproduction, representation.

⁸ Anderson, B. (1983)

And this can only be done if we realize the technological possibilities and availabilities combined with the facilities and closeness (until the cybernetic integration) that individuals, people, collectives, and the antropomorphic ghost establish with communication, the *machine*, and the contract of truth they sign. These practices, these distances and availabilities, these contracts, they all have changed. From the side of the machine, new models of human-computer interaction have been generated. This new interaction basis does not stop presenting itself as a project of body-integration: the promise of absorption of the invisible (unexisting) interface.

My computer likes me: do not deceive yourself, the videomatic seduction is not caused only by the magic of new technologies, but is also deeply rooted in the way of getting individual autonomy; in the possibility of everyone to be a free agent of their own time and less attached to the organizational rigid rules. The seduction in course is exclusive (Lipovetsky, 1986: 21).

This tendency towards a technological promise has empowered the receiver that until now was considered only a passive recipient. This process has questioned the value of truth of the professional erected on the *right to tell* (the journalist?) and has modified the contract of communicative exchange: the game is not anymore around truth, objectivity, honesty or rigour. Journalism is only another voice, acknowledged but uncertain in this polyphony: a voice like many more.

Because the individual, that 'other' who expected sitting the message from the media has exploded. That receiver, always presented as a monolithically faithful element, paternally protected by the goodness of the professional, has multiplied. Nobody considered its capacity of thinking. But that receiver, simply dumb and unprotected, has vanished. He has volatilized in a cloud of active presences, moving reflections, uncertain incomprehensible anxiousness's enriching but inconvenient. In this multiplicity and explosion it is easier to understand the appearance and progressive reinforcing success of the so called 'citizen journalism': not more than a new narration activity held by those who where not formerly institutionalised with this right.

This new subject – the ghost? - is organized in communities, member of clubs, collectivities, practices a 'second life' a third and a fifth life, uses forms of interaction that go further the limits of the body presence and at the same time he/she is capable of accommodating in a permanent absence and as well as projecting him/herself into a thousand fronts. The use of traditional simple categories, man, woman, friend, lover, young, old, student, Catalan, German, French are part of the non-traumatic possibilities of organization and provisional anticipation. The integration of categories has led to their relativisation. These categories are empty, now, they have lost that deeply sentimental and dogmatic truth they appealed to. They have now a curious and nostalgic value. Operative aspects are always more important for that new defining figure: the technical possibilities of the appliance to stand this multiple living; the understanding of the speech; the acquisition of competencies for the permanently updating and changing languages. This new integration builds up a new individual: who's there?

An android, the ghost that fills the texts of social sciences, that leads the role in novels and that forces us again against the question: who's there? This new figure doesn't accept any more being grouped in a mass, a class or in a party; he doesn't accept being isolated, atomized and humiliated in his individual disabled and Pavlovian form.

Modern states, multinational corporations, military power, welfare state apparatuses, political processes, fabrication of our imaginations, labour-control systems, medical constructions of our bodies, commercial pornography, and religious evangelism depend intimately upon electronics. Micro electronics is the technical basis of simulacra; that is, of copies without originals. (Haraway, 1991: 165).

This individual that forms the active in the communicative practice is a reflection without essences. That ghost comes close slowly and quietly and does not accept more conditions than those of an identity with right of being negotiated. Its identity can only be defined through a performed and iterated unanticipatable practice: 'do not ask me who I am; don't even pretend me to remain like this'⁹. This unpredictability frees him from that essentialist

⁹ Apocrypha but usually conceded to be from Michel Foucault: see http://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michel_Foucault [25.05.07]

–and melancholic- representation. Only through this multiple projections of beings can the ghost conquer the rights it didn't have: a voice to narrate and the possibility of rewriting himself.

'At the centre of my ironic faith, my blasphemy is the image of a cyborg.' (Haraway, 1991: 149).

'Who's there? ' And the happiness of the narrative possibilities ends in the silenced voices. While the modern western subject was the main character of the enlightened narration the silence covered the irrational privacy of feeling. While that golden member of the mediated narration exploded, multiplied and became active, the silence eclipsed that shadow of the closest figure. Right behind our cyborg with a new conquered right to tell there is someone else, this one more human than ever. This 'new other' is unable and impeded from the right of having the voice of the one that belongs. While arrogance and technology have given and erected in universality and omni(multi)presence this cyborg; immigrant, displaced, refugee, colonized, are extirpated from the right of being and from the possibility of narrating themselves.

No name is yours until you speak it; somebody returns your call and suddenly, the circuit of signs, gestures, gesticulations is established and you enter the territory of the right to narrate. You are part of the dialogue that may not be, at first, be heard or heralded –you may be ignored- but your personhood cannot be denied. (Bhabha, 2004:xxv).

Conclusion: Daily, Diary; 2b or Not 2b?

But while realising that there is still work to be done, we should go back to that new contract of narration. Let's return to the suggested route. Let's go back to the ghost that now has acquired the provisional form of a cyborg. This temporary conclusion should not but work as an overture for these appearing to be the new suggestive research fronts:

On the one hand, the matter of the underlying values in these new practices and forms of narration. How are the mechanisms of truth presented? Where are they and how are they

reproduced? And how does this syllabical, ideographic, language evolve in the initials of short *txt* messages? How do hypertextuality, diversity and polyphony work inside this seemingly fragmented, contingent and deep down contradictory new narratives?

On the other hand, the question linked to subjects playing the lead in this new story reconstructed and diversified also in electronic extensions. How do they explain themselves and how are they explained? As cyborgs, varied and multiple, superficial and uncertain, how would we answer to the question: 'Who's there?' Would we appeal to nostalgia –we still do so- of a monolith being formed between the must and the fossil, between necessity and the museum piece?¹⁰ Which are, then, the procedures of the construction of identity?

And finally, about the right to tell, the power of narrating stories: Who provides and who is provided with this right? How is this right to tell practiced, and how are those voices without this right silenced? What do the narrators explain about the world and how do they do it? As an accepted narration, where is Journalism placed? Which are the procedures that play the part of Journalism?

The question, the shadow of which the paper has followed up all the time, adopts here its main form and its best meaning: 'daily or diary?', 'to be or not to be?' Writing, narrating, weaving the world and providing it with sense was not this, the goal?. Does this practice still accept the traditional journalistic codes based on particular principles of removal of the subject in favor of some universal, natural and objective determinism of facts? Or maybe it is the moment of abolishing (minding?) the gap and reconsidering a responsible narrative but leaving space to the subjective caution? Should we play closer to a *diary*? Or stay close to that anonymous nineteenth-century practice of news on sale called *daily*?

The deep disagreement between practice and theoretically correction has been for long time solved with *connoisseur's* corporative secrecy of the expert (disguised in what we called *know-how*). This *connoisseur (practitioner)* has been for very long the resonance

¹⁰ García-Canclini, N. (1995)

box of an explosive contradiction: the theoretical insufficiency of the possibilities of objectivity react against the rhythms and routines of practice. This practice is now configured with an accidental and deeply personal alienation. All around, the world went on turning and the ghost “who’s there?, who’s there?!” changed its own form with the light, the mist, and technology. So the good answer to the main question –Daily or Diary?- is probably that it is already too late to pose it. We should better –now, cowards, pale of thought and awry-, remember [its] sins and devise, very soon, something else.

Thus conscience does make cowards of us all;
 And thus the native hue of resolution
 Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,
 And enterprises of great pith and moment
 With this regard their currents turn awry,
 And lose the name of action. - Soft you now!
 The fair Ophelia! Nymph, in thy orisons
 Be all [*its*] sins remember'd

William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*

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