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A genre-aware approach to online journalism education

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Abstract

New media has brought along constant evolution to professional journalism practices and news genres. Online/digital/multimedia journalism courses, where both online and multi-platform expertise of journalism is taught, are then a core element of those convergent curriculums. Drawing upon four theoretical traditions, i.e., genre analysis, multimodal discourse analysis, the theories of media logic and communities of practice, the present study proposes a genre-aware approach to facilitate the design and assessment of online journalism courses with a methodological triangulation of classroom observation, qualitative interviews with students and instructors, analyses of students' online news assignments and a student questionnaire survey.

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1. Introduction

The news media as an independent institute has its own rules underlying the journalism profession, such as news values, news source selection and a variety of news genres (Tuchman, 1978). These rules are implicit and constantly shaped in the process of journalist practices. In addition, the code of journalism conduct is also closely associated with the resources at the disposal of the media institution.

With the emergence of online journalism in the late 1990s, the process of news production is increasingly defined by emerging features of multimodality, hypertextuality and interactivity. Online journalism here refers to journalism practice on new media platforms, such as journalism blogs, news websites, Twitter and Facebook. Though anchored upon the Internet, off-line applications, such as digital cameras, digital video cameras, mobile phones, and microphones, are also considered as complementary platforms of online journalism as they are indispensable tools for online news production. The new tools of news production and presentation afforded by the new media inevitably bring along new processes of habituation and negotiations of journalism rules.

Along with the transformation of journalism practices comes the re-configuration of journalism education. Since journalism education is a prominent channel to prepare journalist students to cope with the requirements of online journalism profession, it is therefore of educational significance to investigate the status quo of online journalism education as contextualized in the contemporary development of online newsroom practices.

Given the demands of new media on online journalism profession and education, the present paper explores the gap between journalism practices today and theoretical framing of those practices, through which research gaps are identified and a genre-based approach to online journalism education is proposed. The following section provides a

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brief review of existing literature on emergent online news genres and journalism education. In order to address the object of study, Section 3 and Section 4 respectively propose theoretical and methodological triangulation models.

2. Literature review

With the presence of new media, news genres and subgenres have undergone continuous reconfiguration and innovation. The changing professional requirements, in turn, call for convergent journalism curriculums and future-oriented teaching methods, which can effectively prepare students to cope with the increasing demand of multimedia and multitasking working environments. The present section reviews existing literature on the emergent online news genres and the reconfiguration of online journalism education in response to the presence of new media.

2.1 Emergent online news genres

Research on emergent online journalism genres has undergone a shift of focus from the extension and maintenance of traditional journalism genre characteristics on the online version to the innovation-driven emergent genre features which are unique to the non-linear, multimodal and interactive context of news production.

The existing literature on online journalism focused on three emergent and evolving sub-genres, namely, online newspaper (homepage) genre (Ihlström & Åkesson, 2004; Thurman & Lupton, 2009; Freund et al., 2011), journalism blog genre (Herring et al., 2004; Matheson, 2004) and online feature journalism genre (Steensen, 2009), aimed exclusively at uncovering the grammar of the emergent genres through content analysis of web pages and technological descriptions of the presence and/absence of certain web functions, without addressing factors involved in genre evolution.

Up till now, no genre analysis has been conducted on the emergent genres of online journalism afforded by new media, such as audio slideshows, interactive flash, twitter news feeds and WordPress-anchored multimedia feature journalism. In order to fill in the research gap, the present study will probe into these genres in an educational context. As is pointed out by Deuze (2005, p. 1), “the professional identities of media workers like journalists and advertisers have been carefully shaped through education at vocational schools and departments of journalism and mass communication”, the changing professional demands hereby requires corresponding responses from the journalism educational institutions.

2.2 Online journalism education

New media has posed new challenges to journalism education. Similar to the literature on online news production, research on online journalism education has also undergone a shift from theoretical conceptualization to empirical studies of online journalism curriculum and the relationship between journalism education and professional practices.

The theoretical studies of online journalism curriculum design (Pavlik, 2001; Deuze, 2006) argue that the online journalism courses are supposed to introduce new reporting and sourcing tools which are not yet being standardized or even used prevalently in real-time newsrooms globally. It requires both teachers' and students' creativity which builds upon their existent understanding and imagination of online journalism as an emerging and ever-changing profession. The empirical survey studies on curriculum design and assessment, on the other hand, draw attention to the impact of new media on the journalism profession has brought significant changes to the teaching content and the structure of journalism curriculum (Deuze et al., 2004; Castanada et al., 2005; Du & Thornburg, 2010).

Yet it is indicated in the literature that there is a gap between theoretical conceptualization and the survey-based empirical studies as the latter tends to address one dimension rather than taking a holistic picture of online journalism curriculum development and training practices. In particular, the potential of online journalism education as an incubator of innovation is completely unexplored. In addition, all the existing studies on online journalism

education were conducted in Western contexts. Given the uniqueness of each online journalism program, it is academically significant to conduct the present research in Hong Kong.

3. Theoretical triangulation

In an attempt to describe and analyze the emergent online news genres and the related teaching and learning experiences in online journalism courses under investigation, the present chapter proposes a triangulation model. It triangulates theoretical traditions in (1) genre analysis, (2) multimodal discourse analysis, (3) media theory, and (4) educational studies. The selection of these theoretical traditions is in line with the focus of the present study:

- The present study is a study of emergent news genres in the new media era. It requires social-semiotic genre theory and multimodal discourse theories in order to define and describe the emergent genres and their variants in specific contexts of use.
- The present study is a study of online news production as a professional construction of social reality (Steensen, 2009). It requires organizational genre theory and the theory of media logic in order to understand the online journalism profession and the judgment of online news quality.
- The present study is a study of online journalism education. As the whole theoretical framework on news genres and news production is framed within an educational setting, it requires the sociocultural theories of learning and theories of communities of practice to guide classroom ethnography and comparative syllabus analysis, and to situate the case against a broader educational context.

Four theoretical traditions, i.e. genre analysis, multimodal discourse analysis (Van Luewen 1986; Baldry & Thibault, 2006; O’Toole, 2011), media logic (Altheide & Snow, 1991) and the theory of community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) are integrated to form the genre-anchored theoretical framework (see Figure 3.1).

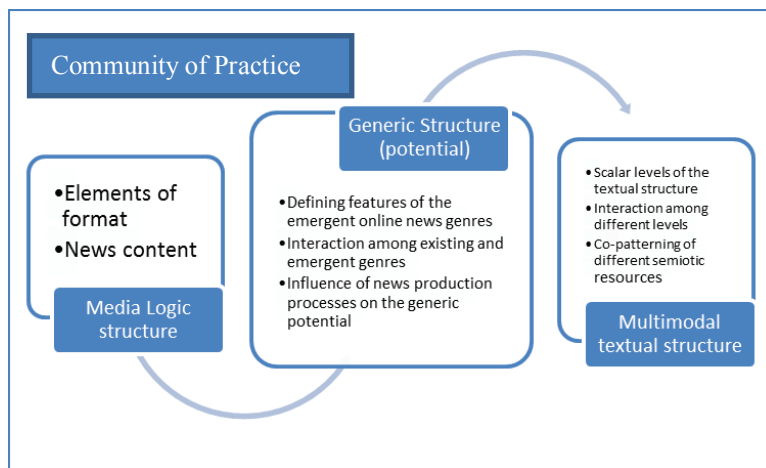


Figure 3.1 The triangulation model of multimodal news analysis

Genre analysis regards genre as the basic unit to analyse social actions. The notion of genre is defined as an ever-evolving concept, which refers to “a class of communicative events that share a recognizable communicative purpose, that exhibit a schematic structure supporting the achievement of that purpose, and which show similarities in form, style, content, structure and intended audience” (Swales, 1980, p. 58). Multimodal discourse analysis is primarily derived from the social semiotic tradition of linguistics, focusing on the integration of multiple semiotic resources for the sake of communication and the relationship between the semiotic resources and communication events. Media logic refers specifically to “forms and processes which organise the work done within a particular medium [and] the competence and frames of perception of audiences/users, which in turn reinforces how production within the medium takes place” (Dahlgren, 1996, p. 63). A community of practice (CoP) is “a system of

relationships between people, activities, and the world, developing with time, and in relation to other tangential and overlapping communities of practice” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 98).

The triangulation model follows the hierarchical structural analysis in the tradition of multimodal linguistics. The highest layer is the professional/institutional structure of multimedia logic. The institutional logic then imposes constraints on the selection of news content and way of formatting afforded by the new media technology, which then governs the generic structure potential of the mode of news production and presentation.

As “a genre is maintained by the conventions of a community, and in most cases serves specific functions within the system of practices of particular institutions of that community” (Lemke 2005, p. 46), the emergent genres are then defined in relation to existing genres and influenced by the practitioners’ individual generic experience and communicative needs. At the bottom level, the instantiations of emergent news genres are going to be analysed in terms of scalar levels defined by both the visual, audio, textual and graphic semiotic potentials and their potential of co-patterning shaped by both the media logic and the generic structure potential of the given genre.

The triangulation model hypothesizes that the institutional, generic and individual levels of analysis are under a constant process of mutual shaping. In particular, the generic structure potential of the emergent genres is constantly explored, changed and testified by the practitioners in every single instance of news production. The hypothesis will be tested in the present case study in a pedagogical context where the practitioners, both students and instructors, are relatively free from traditional journalism routines in contemporary newsrooms.

4. Methodological triangulation

In relation to the theoretical framework, the present study aims to address the research questions by triangulating the following research methods:

1. To study the multimedia logic of online journalism profession as interpreted and practiced by the instructors and students requires classroom observation, in-depth interviews and a student questionnaire survey.
2. To study the emergent online news genres requires an understanding of the news production processes, which is indirectly accessed via qualitative interviews with student and also professional informants and also facilitated by the textual analysis of online news products produced by the students and online journalism professionals.
3. To situate the present case against the overall online journalism (education) culture in Hong Kong, it requires qualitative interviews with online journalism educators and professionals and comparative analysis of the online journalism syllabuses and textbooks designed and adopted elsewhere.

The present integration of multiple methods aims at capturing “a more complete, holistic, and contextual portrayal of the unit(s) under study” (Jick, 1979, p. 603), and at “providing evidence such that the researcher can construct explanations of the social phenomena from which they arise” (Mathison, 1988, p. 15).

The study involves four data sources: 1) video and/or audio recording and field notes derived from classroom observation, 2) audio recording and filed notes of qualitative interviews with course instructors, students and experts/scholars, 3) statistical data collected via a student questionnaire survey, 4) documents and multimodal texts including online postings of course assignments and teaching materials, written assignment feedbacks, syllabuses and textbooks.

Both “between (or cross)-method” triangulation and “within-method” triangulation (Denzin, 1978) are employed. The “between (or cross) method” triangulation refers to the adoption of two or more independent methods in a study of the same social phenomenon. Both sub-types of methodological triangulation are employed in the present study. The “within method” type of methodological triangulation is reflected in the involvement of three ‘comparison groups’: the three online journalism courses under investigation, especially the two introductory-level courses with similar syllabuses but in two different journalism programmes. The two instructors have different journalism backgrounds. The students enrolled in the programmes also have diverse journalist experiences and demonstrate different levels of technological expertise. The inclusion of a great variety of participants within the field of investigation facilitates the generation of solid grounded conclusions.

The “between methods” type includes the combination of aforementioned on-site (mostly classroom) observation, qualitative interviews, questionnaire survey and textual/document analysis. The classroom observation and student/instructor interviews guarantee the holisticness of the present empirical enquiry. While the classroom observation exposes me to lecturing and instructor-student and student-student interactions directly, the student interviews allow me to access information on students’ online journalism practices out of the classroom.

5. Conclusion

The present paper focuses on three online journalism courses provided by a journalism school in a tertiary institute in Hong Kong through a methodological triangulation of classroom observation, qualitative interviews with students and instructors, analyses of students’ online news assignments and a student questionnaire survey. Drawing upon four theoretical traditions, i.e., genre analysis, multimodal discourse analysis, the theories of media logic and communities of practice, the present study proposes a genre-aware approach to facilitate the design and assessment of online journalism courses.

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