NEWS CONTENT & THE "PRODUCERLY POTENTIAL" OF FACEBOOK

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Introduction

Over the past fifteen years, the emergence of intermediaries has transformed the circulation of news content. Social media platforms and news aggregators have become main gateways to news content. This article aims to contribute to the ongoing academic discussion regarding how intermediaries contribute to add meaning to the news accessed by their users (Bødker, 2016; Carlson, 2020; Hermida, 2020). More specifically, it focuses on the reason why snippets of news content available on intermediaries after circulation are identified by users as news. Drawing on social semiotics, this study uses the concept of genre - as a tacit and conventional system of categorisation of texts or discursive practices (Neale, 1980), which provides clues regarding how to interact with a text in a specific cultural situation (Martin, 1984)- to understand the complex nature of the snippet of news produced by intermediaries.

Using Facebook as a case study, I performed a multimodal analysis, using the Genre and Multimodality model (GeM) (Bateman, 2008) on the sample of over 157 Facebook posts containing a link towards a news article, collected from the Facebook newsfeeds of a sample of participants composed of seven voluntary young French undergraduate students in journalism practice. The GeM is inspired from computational thinking and offers a systematic form of multimodal analysis. This is often considered as "somewhat mechanical" (Gibbons, 2012, p. 19). However, what is usually considered as its main limitation, appears to be a valuable asset in the context of this study to recreate the systematic logic underpinning the design of automatically generated posts on Facebook. Therefore, I followed the four layers of analysis: 1/ base (listing the base units contained in the multimodal composition (e.g. pictures, pieces of texts, icons)), 2/ layout (spatial composition), 3/ rhetoric – that is the interaction between the different units of meaning- and 4/ navigation - which serves to uncover the points of salience and possible entries to a composition.

The paratextual and intertextual nature of Facebook posts

The GeM analysis highlighted that Facebook posts are composed of paratexts (Genette, 1997). Those are multimodal elements of discourse (e. g. verbal, iconographic) which are intrinsically linked and subordinated to a reference text (the core article in this case) but they are not part of it. Their function is twofold: transition and transaction. First, they constitute an entry point or "threshold" (Genette, 1997, p. 2) used to transition to the text they are attached to. They provide some initial information regarding it, which helps reader to decide to read the reference text or to move on to another content. Second, they play a transaction role. They provide information that quickly help the user to qualify the referent text and to make sense of it.

Those paratexts, authored by different agencies, feature vertical intertextuality (Fiske, 1987). The original paratexts authored by a news media outlet - which include the title, the illustration picture, the by-lines and the source - could be labelled as 'primary' because they are directly extracted from the news article. The identity of the post sender and the post status could be considered 'secondary' as they provide a comment on the original texts and paratexts. Finally, the comments and reactions located at the bottom of the post such as the number of 'likes', comments and shares are tertiary as they answer to either the secondary and the primary level. In turn, performative paratexts such as the icon share, like and comment, offer the possibility to users to integrate the intertextual dialogue as secondary or tertiary interlocutors.

News posts as a genre

The use of primary paratexts directly extracted from original news articles leads users to quickly label the content of the post as news and to react accordingly. In other words, the layout of Facebook posts borrows the most recognisable parts of existing news articles – the picture, the title and the by-lines- to appeal to "horizontal intertextuality" (Fiske, 1999). Establishing explicit "cross-references" (Jensen, 2011, p. 191) to news article within Facebook posts helps users to identify at a glance the genre of the message. While the horizontal intertextuality of primary texts serve to identify the genre of the message, the vertical intertextuality of secondary and tertiary texts provide social endorsement, that serves to evaluate the relevance and trustworthiness of the news in the absence of traditional editorial cues (e. g. place, size or format of the article) (Messing & Westwood, 2014).

The specific design of Facebook posts, mixing horizontal and vertical intertextuality, may be compared to a process of "selective contextualisation" (Lemke, 1995, p. 86). Building intertextual links between texts to trigger genre recognition and between paratexts to trigger social endorsement serves as a "contextualizing practice, a making sense of texts, or portions of them, by placing them in the context of only some and no other texts or recurring discourse patterns" (p. 86). Therefore, Facebook seems to express its "producerly potential" (Fiske, 1999, p. 67) over existing texts via its design by prescribing a set of meaning relations to its users to make them interpret the original piece of news. In doing so, the social platform claims its "cultural authority" (p. 67) over the content of the news post and imposes its representations. Therefore, Facebook posts are likely to consist of a form of quaternary text, proposing an interpretation of

primary, secondary and tertiary texts by associating them in a certain way. In other words, Facebooks is not a simple gateway to news. Facebook is the author of a quaternary level of intertextuality.

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