CHAPTER 6

Multimodal Writing in the Newsroom: Paradigmatic, Syntagmatic, and Navigational Variants

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1 Introduction

Newspapers and radio programs are becoming user interfaces for content management systems, for databases of journalistic stories, and for multimodal public storytelling (Singer, 2008). This development is unstoppable, just as when communication markets switched from black-and-white to color photography, from silent movies to sound films (see Gilje, chapter 7 this volume), and from letters to e-mail.

The research on professional practice in the newsroom (e.g. Quinn, 2005; Brannon, 2008; Tunstall, 2009; Perrin, 2011b) shows that mastering this change requires a multimedia mindset (Perrin, 2013), which results in three key competences: writing on all channels, working in teams (e.g. Perrin, 2011b), and finding emergent solutions (e.g. Perrin, 2012b). This has consequences for the design of writing environments.

This chapter focuses on the first of the competences, writing on all channels. First, I explain the relevance of this competence from theoretical and practical perspectives. Then, I outline a theoretical framework to systematize writing competence and activities. This framework is grounded in empirical data from two decades of writing research in the newsroom. After explaining the methodology and tools applied in our research, I exemplify in detail why and how context can foster micro change in multimodal text production, which, in return, feeds back to the macro context of newsroom policy. Finally, I discuss such findings as illustrating the dialectic interplay of innovation and universalities.
Throughout the chapter, I draw on a case study of newswriting that analyses an early phase of dramatic change in the dynamics of media use and policy at the Swiss national broadcasting company, SRG SSR. The analysis reveals how variation in one single text production process initiates a shift of newsroom policy and practices towards multi- and transmodal writing in a globally connected and mediatized world.

2 Writing on All Channels as Multimodal Writing: The Yogy Case

Components matter. Even digital (hypertext) media need coherent texts, moving images, and suitable sounds. Editors-in-chief of leading publications in media convergent journalism say that writing will be the key competence in the journalism of the future (e.g. Moser-Wellman, Vahlberg, Durkes, & Edwards, 2008). Such an understanding of writing, however, includes all editing at the interface of text, sound and pictures. Writing, thus, has become a multimodal activity of encoding semiotic entities that can be edited and shared using a variety of increasingly interconnected media (e.g. Hicks & Perrin, 2014). This multimodality includes transmodality and processes of transcoding: communicational offers are transformed from one code and semiotic system to another.

On the one hand, writing in such a broad understanding succeeds by using and combining the familiar media- and code-specific strengths of print, radio, and television journalism. As paradoxical as it may seem, these strengths are more urgently needed in multimodal and multimedia environments than ever before. If journalists nowadays opt for a media item with sound but no images, they must know and make clear to their audience why audio information alone conveys the topic in the best way. On the other hand, writing gradually develops from the traditional form of purposeful writing, such as writing a piece of news, towards a new hybrid form between the linguistic modes of writing and speaking.

Purposeful writing has long been a key competence of professional life: people sit down at their desk in order to write good texts. They use pen and paper, a typewriter or a computer and start with a draft. Then, they edit their text until they consider it to be well done. Finally, they send it off or publish it, as a carefully designed piece. Unlike speech, purposeful writing is decoupled from traces of fighting with thoughts and words—a close-to-perfect communicational offer of written language and, in a wider understanding of the term writing, of carefully chosen and edited pictures and sound. This traditional way of producing texts can be termed focused writing.