

## **Convergence Content in International On-Line News: Thematic and mythical recurrence in *The New York Times* and *BBC On-Line News***

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### **Abstract**

This paper analyzes the presence and absence of thematic and mythical recurrence in online news, considering that online news production is under the influence of transmedia storytelling and, for this reason, could be affected by the presence of myth, as a cultural production that News are, and as receiving the influence of themes and myths in this new sphere. The methodological design consists in determining the extent to which themes, genres and myths are interrelated in the construction of the story. The methodology is divided into the diachronic analysis (relation with genre, plot, obligatory and optional regularities) and the synchronic analysis (thematic recurrence, myth, identification of recurrent themes) and the references are structured and classified. The research concludes that the maintenance of the generic regularities in the quality press in the sample analyzed (*The New York Times* and *BBC On-Line News*) reinforces the quality press features, even though the nowadays' journalism crisis and opposite to the introduction of spectacular and banal characteristics in TV news.

**Keywords:** Online news, convergence culture, thematic recurrence

### **1 Introduction**

'Convergence culture' is nowadays one of the main paradigms used to analyze several forms of communication. The term comes from the technological transformation of telecommunications and is, at the present, used and applied in several fields of research, the cultural one, for instance. As a new and polisemic term, it still lacks of a unique and accepted definition. Instead of this, its definition varies depending on the field of research.

We are interested especially in the cultural field, that is, fiction and non-fiction applications of this concept. One of the main differences between this two great areas is referring to space: researchers of fiction analyze this new space, that is, the Internet; meanwhile researchers of non-fiction focuses on work and professional changes, as well as its effects on "the elaboration and distribution of contents on different platforms, the professional profile of journalists and the forms of accessing contents" (Díaz Noci, 2011b: 101).

From the first point of view, it has been studied specially in terms of a new space of interaction for both producers and fans; as well as media producer and media consumer (Jenkins, 2006). One interesting point in this field of research is how franchises developed upon fictional products, such as TV series or movies

(Jenkins, 2006; Long, 2008; Perryman, 2008; Scolari, 2009). One of the effects of the convergence culture is being studied under the name of 'transmedia storytelling' by the same scholars (Jenkins, 2007; Scolari, 2009), which, as far as we know, can also be applied to fiction or non-fiction issues, as we will do in this paper.

Convergence is also a matter of interest by researchers on online journalism, such as Boczkowski (2004), Díaz Noci (2011b), Salaverría, Masip and García Alivés (in López and Pereira, 2010). According to these authors, journalistic convergence is studied as the "implantation of digital communication technologies", where "journalists can elaborate contents in multiple platforms" (Salaverría *et al*). And has to be seen as a "process of integration of traditionally separated modes of communication" (Díaz Noci, 2011b: 101). These scholars do research on how convergence is affecting media production, from newsrooms' ethnography (Domingo, 2010; Salaverría; Masip *et al*, 2010; Masip, 2008) to changes on content (Díaz Noci, 2011b; López, Pereira, Portilla, 2010), also studying changes related to the public sphere (Eliás, Ruiz; 2011).

In this paper, we do analyze to which extent convergence culture influences on on-line news production, trying to apply some of the research of fiction to non-fiction issues. As well as some of the scholars quoted have studied narratology on on-line news (Díaz Noci, 2011-a), the purpose of this paper is to analyze to which extent myth and thematic recurrence remain in international digital news production. To do so, we have to bear in mind several steps:

1. Mythical and thematic recurrence are present in cultural production
2. Mythical and thematic recurrence are present in nowadays fiction products, such as TV series and transmedia storytelling
3. The presence of myth in news production has been already studied (Knight and Dean, 1982)
4. Online news are influenced by convergence culture changes

Bearing these statements in mind, we do have to answer ourselves if mythical and thematic recurrence does remain in online news. Some of the transmedia storytelling scholars quoted have studied the expansion of narrative programs, actants, from one media to another, that is, applying narratology tools to the study of transmedia products. As Scolari said, in this intertwined field of study, "The scientific objective of semiotics and narratology coincides with the economic interests of media producers" (Scolari, 2009: 601).

Some of the features highlighted by Long are that extensions of transmedia storytelling should stay in canon (if they are not) part of the same narrative universe, and that should maintain the tone of the world (Long, 2008: 163-164). These features will be reminded in the conclusions.

So, the principal objective of this paper is to analyze the presence of myth in the news stories of digital newspapers. With the aim of determining the structure of myth in the news stories of online media, the methodology employed is mediological analysis (previously tested by the author), in order to determine the extent to which the themes of digital news stories are related to myths. The analysis is made concrete in the application of a sample of the online media *The New York Times.es* and *BBC News.co.uk*.

Mediological analysis consists in determining the extent to which themes, genres and myths are interrelated in the construction of the story. The abovementioned methodology (principally based on Ginzburg, 1989; Nagy, 2006 and Lévi-Strauss, 1958) is put to the test, with the novelty that it is applied to news stories, also employing studies previously carried out on the question that might be useful for the analysis (Knight and Dean, 1982). The methodology is divided into the diachronic analysis (relation with genre, plot, obligatory and optional regularities) and the synchronic analysis (thematic recurrence, myth, identification of recurrent themes) and the references are structured according to the already established typology (serious/ironic, descriptive/metaphoric, quotation or isolated allusion, explicit/implicit).

The presence of myth in narration is an undeniable fact and, at the same time, those who carry out research in this question themselves consider it to be subject to the interpretation of the reader (Duch, 1995, 2002). In accordance with the postulates of this anthropologist, the human being is constantly narrating herself to herself and she establishes herself in society as in the theatre of life, that is, carrying out a determinate role or function. In these configurations, the person is a limited being, due to adverbial conditions (due to the space and time coordinates that determine us), since she can confront the need to narrate and the theatre of life through a limited repertoire of themes, myths and stereotypes (Dufays, 2002: 12).

In the field of fiction, the importance of myth in narration has been shown on different occasions and by different academics, to the extent that several lines of research have been created. In this respect, we can draw attention to the work of the specialists in mythology (Campbell, Dumézil, 1970, Lévi-Strauss, 1958; Duch, 1995, 1996, 2002; Blumenberg), as well as the semiologists (Eco, 1962, 1984, Calabrese, 1987, Todorov, 1975, Neale, 1980) and the theoreticians who have analysed the presence of myth in fiction (Gubern, 1993, 2002, Balló, Pérez, 1995, 2000, 2005) amongst whom the author of this communication would situate herself, in her analysis of myths in the current U. S. fiction series.

Amongst the considerations of this analysis, the following can be underlined:

1. The presence of myth was established as an initial hypothesis, which was indeed found in the five United States fictional dramatic series<sup>1</sup>, repeatedly in some cases, demonstrating the applicability of thematic and mythic recurrence.

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<sup>1</sup> *Lost, CSI: Crime Scene Investigation, The West Wing, Desperate Housewives and House, M.D.*

2. The study of thematic recurrences and references also confirmed that the literary, traditional and mythic recurrences coexisted with specific and current characteristics of television, especially with respect to self-referentiality (see below: metatelevision intertextual recurrence).
3. An analytical grid was configured with the reiterated references and recurrences in each of the dramatic series analysed, which we reproduce below and which we can divide into two broad groups: television references that constitute a new field (a) and traditional references (c).

a. Metatelevision intertextual recurrence

- a.1) References to other television series
- a.2) References to other programs
- a.3) Cinematographic references
- a.4) Heterogeneous references
  - a.4.1) Lynchean
  - a.4.2) Videogames
  - a.4.3) Internet
- a.5) References to news programs
- a.6) References to comics and cartoons
- a.7) References to musicals
- a.8) References to sports
- a.9) References to competitions
- a.10) Advertising references

b. Socio-cultural referents

c. Traditional and literary recurrences

- c.1) Literary intertextual recurrences
- c.2) Scholarly references
- c.3) Biblical and religious references
- c.4) Thematic and mythical recurrences
- c.5) Timeless themes

## 2 Variables to be studied

When it comes to transferring the methodology of analysis that led to the construction of this grid (which we could call a palimpsest due to its similarities with television, specifically the first part, (a)), consideration should be given to the most relevant aspects whose applicability is effective, as well as to the earlier studies made on the subject. Amongst the bibliography consulted on the analysis of myth and news (Knight and Dean, 1982; Luengo, 2009), we underline what interests us, particularly the presence of myth in journalistic news stories, and which we consider, *a priori*, that its sociological and ideological aspect, developed by these authors, should be considered as part of a subsequent analysis. Knight and Dean analyse the function of social legitimation carried out by the news, in consonance with the postulates of Durkheim (1964) especially.

In an attempt to keep to the initial thematic formulation of our methodological proposal, we have configured an analytical file that has a theoretical substrate that we will define next. The research, in our understanding, should start with the verification of the presence of invariants – the term proceeds from the theory of literature (Villanueva, 1991: 208) – with which thematic and mythical recurrences are defined, the themes that are reiterated in human cultural production. These invariants can principally be analysed from two basic points of view: through diachronic analysis (the relation of the text with its genre, the inscription of the concrete cultural product in a determinate genre, its genealogy) and through synchronic analysis (mythological comparison and, especially, the updating of myth in cultural production).

The exposition of the two analyses answers to the need for realising an investigation into the relation of the text with its genre and the genealogy of the product, in order to understand it in its dimension before placing it in relation with myth, following the methodology proposed by Ginzburg (1989) and Nagy (2006). Once the analysis has been made, it can be observed that the updating of myth belongs to the level of content (signifier), and in these cases we speak of serious thematic or mythical recurrence (communication really takes place), and that the reiteration of stereotypes or themes belongs to the level of expression (signifier), when it is a case of the mere repetition of a theme, barely communicating anything (this occurs in the framework of parodic referentiality or in reference to a shared field of knowledge, in order to guarantee the receiver's pleasure).

To be able to confirm thematic recurrence it is necessary for there to be isomorphism, the identification of a recurrent theme and its form (Ginzburg, 1989: 54), since isomorphism founds identity. In the diachronic analysis one can go more deeply into obligatory, optional or independent regularities (Ryan, 1979). *Generic regularities* are the ingredients that delimit genre, which they constitute through their contribution. These recurrences have no relation to intertextual thematic references (through which one comes to define the presence of myth). Ryan (1979:261) divides generic regularities into obligatory (the genre requires them),

optional (for example, with the recreation of a subgenre within the genre) and independent (contributing difference and novelty to the genre).

A question of vital relevance for the analysis of news stories, with respect to their content, is thematisation and the postulates of agenda-setting (McCombs and Shaw, 1972). Tomasevskij (1928) differentiates between themes of current interest, which do not withstand the variability of the public's interests, and themes that are "resistant in time", "timeless themes", which guarantee the viability of the work, thanks to emotional realism (the themes continue to be of current interest because they are updated through the feelings of the public), and which have an unalterable content (love, passion and death). Umberto Eco reminds us that the first popular prints of the sixteenth century were ephemeral (first characteristic of media culture) and dealt with the following themes: love, death and passions, presented according to the effect that was sought after (Eco, 1965: 16).

Facing the differentiation of Tomasevskij, Bakhtin (1979) prefers to reduce the opposition and integrate it into one single postulate: themes of current interest are formulated according to those resistant in time, which could be considered a criterion for being newsworthy. Since the updating of myth occurs at any time and in any human production, and all the versions of the myth are valid (Lévi-Strauss, 1958: 199), a news story and a narration are two materialisations of an archetypical theme.

**3 Analytical file**

We believe it is opportune to apply the foregoing methodology and to test its basic and pertinent elements in the news stories analysed. Thus, the methodology of analysis is developed through the following proposals:

<b>Recurrences</b>			
Cultural recurrences	Literary		
	Biblical		
	Religious		
	Artistic		
	Erudite		
Social recurrences			

Mythical recurrence	Sacrificial	
	Heroes	Traditional hero
		Hero who doubts
		Anti-hero
	Antithetical	
	Sin and	
	Others	

Themes	Love			
	Deaths			
	Passions	Sentimental relations	Maltreatment	
			Gender violence	
		Family dysfunctions	Sexual abuse	
			Sexual promiscuity	
			Doubts about paternity	
		Crime	Robbery, crimes	
			Prostitution	
			Sex and Internet	
			Kidnapping	
			Suicide	
			Prevarication	
			Murder	
			Humiliations	
	Animal instinct			
	Drugs			
	Sexual dysfunctions	Rape		
		Incest		
		Others		
Others				

	Others		
Degree of isomorphism	Formal homology		
	Coincidence of		

References	Cinema				
	Music				
	Advertising				
	Media	TV	Fiction		
			Non-fiction		
			Competitions		
		Radio			
		Newspapers			
		Internet			

Typology of references	Serious	
	Ironic	
	Descriptive	
	Metaphorical	
	Quotation	
	Isolated allusion	
	Construction	
	Explicit	
	Implicit	
	Verbal	
	Visual	
	Scenic	
	Others	



**Diachronic analysis**

Genres		
History of the genre	Informative [news]	
	Interpretative	
	Dialogic	
	Argumentative	
	Others (literary)	
Regularity	Optional	
	Obligatory	
	Independent	

**4 Sample. News stories analysed**

Afghan Guards Face an Inquiry Over Ties to Insurgents	The New York Times	7-6-2010
Legacy for one Billionaire: Death, but no taxes	The New York Times	8-6-2010
Estonia Raises Pencil to Erase Russian	The New York Times	8-6-2010
Plumes of Oil Below Surface Raise New Concerns	The New York Times	9-6-2010

The empirical analysis is carried out in the framework of the research group \*\*\*\*, taking as a sample a selection of news stories from the online media *The New York Times* and *BBC*. This selection is carried out from amongst the front page information of five days during the months of June and October, 2010, and is applied to the front page news stories, without attention being paid to news flashes or the latest news.

**4.1. The New York Times**

The news story by Dexter Filkins on the investigation into the relation between Afghan guards and insurgents ("Afghan Guards Face an Inquiry Over Ties to Insurgents") is based on institutional sources, especially NATO and the Afghan Interior Ministry. It deals with suspicions about private security in Afghanistan relating to the Talibans (in the form of bribery) and suspicions that these same companies

increase the sensation of insecurity on the roads. It notes that the rule when dealing with the Taliban is confrontation if the attack is small, and agreement if the Taliban presence is too great, according to the anonymous source from the Interior Ministry.

The presence of thematic recurrence is observed in the following palace intrigues: the complexity of the plot is constantly adduced (Afghans, Taliban, security firms, drug trafficking). The situation is complicated by the family links of the Afghan rulers with the Taliban (the reality of the country prior to the war), or due to the connection of the Afghans (powerful families) with the profitable business offered by the private security firms –but no mention is made of the participation of U. S. firms. In a report on a war situation like this, mention of palace intrigues constitutes an optional regularity, as there is a certain tradition in the war genre that involves such regularity, which constitutes a strengthening of some of the premises of the report, and which we corroborate due to the absence of references to a similar complexity in the U. S. social, political and military framework.

The news story that refers to the Estonian language exams for schools in Estonia, by Clifford J. Levy, is a totally negative exposition of the “imposition” of the Estonian language in Estonia: especially in the headline (“Estonia Raises Pencil to Erase Russian”) and in the first part of the news story. It stresses that the Russian language is discriminated against, that the exams have been “unpleasant”, that older teachers have to learn a “diabolically complicated” language, and that Russian was used to unite disparate peoples (“The tension over the status of Estonian reflects a debate across the former Soviet Union over the primacy of native languages and the role of Russian”). It is not until the end of the news story when the point of view of the agency's director is given (civil servants must know the language, there is no wish to discriminate against anybody) and the headmistress of the school (no one likes the exams).

We can thus observe that a case of formal recurrence (the inverted pyramid) is used with the intention of stressing, in the first place, certain specific positions, without reaching the extreme of ignoring any of them, but using the abovementioned structure to reduce their importance.

The news story by Justin Gillis on the spillage of petrol in the Gulf of Mexico (“Plumes of Oil Below Surface Raise New Concerns”) is an example of the absence of thematic or mythical recurrence, and of adscription to the obligatory generic regularities, neither optional nor independent (Ryan, 1979). The report is accompanied by several video and infographic compilations, a map, an interactive map, an interactive and diachronic review of similar catastrophes and a multimedia collection, all of them demonstrations of the capacities for storage and rapid consultation of current and past news on Internet, with the corresponding consequences with respect to the production and reception of the information.

#### 4.2. BBC

Rousseff falls short of outright win in Brazil election	BBC	4-10-2010
Militants attack Nato tanker convoy in Pakistan	BBC	4-10-2010
Trapped Chilean miners 'could be reached by Saturday'	BBC	8-10-2010
Japan stimulus to inject \$60bn into flagging economy	BBC	8-10-2010
Security contractors in Afghanistan 'fund Taliban'	BBC	8-10-2010

The first news story that has been analysed on BBC's webpage, "Rouseff falls short of outright win in Brazil election", shows an impartial point of view towards the presidential elections in Brazil, apparently. During the whole news story the idea of fight is emphasised, for Lula's continuist candidate ("We are warriors, and we are accustomed to challenges"; "We do well in second rounds"), as well as candidates Silva ("We defended a victorious idea and Brazil heard our cry") and Serra ("For Serra's supporters, a second round is an achievement in itself"). The impression of open fight is upheld during the information, but there is also an emphasis on the superior possibilities of winning of Rouseff –unless she is involved in a scandal ("Many analysts believe a scandal involving her directly would be the only scenario under which she could lose a runoff"). The idea of political fight must be considered an obligatory regularity in a political and electoralist news story, as this is the news story's genre. On the other hand, a mention to a scandal is a thematic reference linked to passions.

There is absence of thematic or mythical recurrence, and adscription to the obligatory generic regularities, in the news story "Militants attack Nato tanker convoy in Pakistan", through war lexicon: "incident", "attack", "threat", "troops", "carrying supplies", "convoys", "a new wing of the Group".

The news story about the Chilean miners ("Trapped Chilean miners 'could be reached by Saturday") emphasises, on the first place, the progresses that have been made to rescue them, followed by the claim of patience to the population and the encouraging messages ("Mr Manalich also praised the "maturity and manhood" of the miners"), to end up with the story's *background* and details related to its imminent resolution. Mine's lexicon is used specially at the beginning of the information ("Carved", "rock", "engineers", "surface", "mine hammer", "coated", "metal"), but it is not superior to rescue's lexicon ("rescue capsules", "drilling gear", "final rescue equipment") nor to the lexicon related to social and media expectation. The obligatory regularities are as well the ones related to mine's lexicon as the ones related to

the rescue and the social expectation, due to the long-lasting news about the miners accident, which occurred three months before this story news (august, 5th).

Minister Golborne is one of the main sources of information, as we can see through the direct and indirect quotation, in five occasions. Also the Health Minister, Jaime Manalich, is being quoted in four occasions. At the end of the news story there is a reminder of the theme's importance: "The miners have now been underground longer than any group before".

There is a cinematographic reference in the news story "Security contractors in Afghanistan 'fund Taliban", to Quentin Tarantino's violent film *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) ("The document gives several notorious examples, including a man the Americans have nicknamed Mr White - after a character in the violent film *Reservoir Dogs*"). In fact, this is also a social reference, as the BBC's journalist is interpreting and quoting the reference of the "americans".

From the beginning of the information we can observe an opposition between the "local recruits" and the "warlords", in relation to the "personal security service". This opposition articulates this news story, as it emphasises the warlords link to the talibans ("Heavy US reliance on private security in Afghanistan has helped to line the pockets of the Taliban, a US Senate report says"), as a threat to U. S. troops ("These contractors threaten the security of our troops and risk the success of our mission," he added.), their little training ("The report paints a disturbing picture of how some of those hired have little training or experience in firing weapons") and with the fact of being a cheaper option ("The tendency among Congress is simply to go for the cheapest things they can find, the cheapest contractors, and that undermines, I think, the more quality contractors"). The opposition leads to think what is the "personal security service" which should have been hired (more expensive, trained, not linked to the talibans, and not threatening to the U. S.)

In sum, this news story is a severe critical to U.S. troops in Afghanistan. The sources of information placed at the beginning are constantly legitimated (Study by the Senate Armed Services Committee and the Chairman of the Senate Committee, Democratic Senator Carl Levin) through a continued critical towards the "risky" situation in Afghanistan ("These contractors threaten the security of our troops and risk the success of our mission," he added; "The report paints a disturbing picture of how some of those hired..."). Criticisms are tough and specific: "The report also says that - by funding warlords with their own private militias - the US is undermining its declared aim of creating a more stable Afghanistan". It is also being explicated that private security business in Afghanistan has been lucrative and dangerous. Finally, through the inverted pyramid, as we analysed in the Estonian language news, the other point of view is exposed, at the end of the information.

Doug Brooks, who represents private security contractors, argue that they have no option to contract somebody apart from warlords or "headman", as they would become targets immediately.

This news story contrasts with *The New York Times*' "Afghan Guards Face an Inquiry Over Ties to Insurgents". The BBC news story focuses on the U. S. responsibility, meanwhile the other one focuses on talibans' palace intrigues.

## 5. Conclusions

This paper has been focused in studying thematic recurrence in online news, as a form of transmedia storytelling. The author also wanted to prove the usefulness of the convergence culture paradigm to study this concrete issue.

In several cases, there is absence of thematic or mythical recurrence, and of adscription to the obligatory generic regularities. This is the case of "Plumes of Oil Below Surface Raise New Concerns" (*The New York Times*) and "Militants attack Nato tanker convoy in Pakistan" (BBC). Some information use obligatory generic regularities but adding some thematic recurrence; as "Rouseff falls short of outright win in Brazil election", which uses fight lexicon according to the electoral/political genre, and has some reference to passions –the scandal which would be the unique possibility for Dilma for not winning Brazil elections.

Another interesting case related to generic regularities is "Trapped Chilean miners 'could be reached by Saturday". This BBC news story deals with three different types of obligatory regularities: mine lexicon; rescue lexicon and social and media lexicon related to the expectation generated, as it is a long-lasting news. In some other cases, formal recurrence (the inverted pyramid) is used to stress one point of view ("Estonia Raises Pencil to Erase Russian" and "Security contractors in Afghanistan 'fund Taliban") and, consequently, to give less importance to the other argument.

There are two (opposite) news stories about war and security contractors in Afghanistan, one focusing the palace intrigues and being critical to the talibans (The NYT), and the other one being critical to the U. S. (BBC). The only cinematographic reference (*Reservoir dogs*) must be analysed as a social reference, as the BBC's journalist is only interpreting and quoting "the americans" that nicknamed someone as "Mr. White".

In sum, there is few usage of thematic or mythic references in the news analysed, so, they can be considered more "diverse" than "traditional", but, when they appear, there is a relevant consequence of this usage. For instance, the scandal in Brazil elections news, refers to passions, which leads to other scandals related to political news. On the other hand, the usage of thematic recurrence is not related with the stress of some argument, as the two news stories about security guard, talibans and U. S. troops in

Afghanistan show. In Chilean miners' news, we can see that some generic regularities come from the duration of the news –three months.

So, the research concludes that the maintenance of the generic regularities in the quality press in the sample analyzed (*The New York Times and BBC On-Line News*) reinforces the quality press features, even though the nowadays' journalism crisis and opposite to the introduction of spectacular and banal characteristics in TV news. This few usage of thematic and mythic recurrence in news stories is an interesting issue to analyze, probably in some other further research. As we have seen, there is more maintenance of generic regularities than usage of myth in the sample analyzed. As Long (2008) states, to stay in canon is an essential characteristic of transmedia storytelling. We do consider that this feature must be related to the fact that online journalism, despite its crisis (Starr, 2009), still can maintain its generic regularities. Probably, if we studied absence and presence of thematic and mythical recurrence in some other news production, such as the TV ones which have been switched to a spectacular and banal model (Pomares, 2010; Oliva and Sitjà, 2011), we should have found more results in our sample. Even though this is another research, we can state here and now that the lack of usage of thematic and mythical recurrence is, at least, not bad news for the journalistic model, the qualitative one. At least for now.

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