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The Addressee Types of the Internet Open Letters

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Abstract

The author considers open letters on Internet sites as a variation of an epistolary genre. A novel type of an open letter, a letter to the future is described. Computer mediated communication as a form of public discourse increases the number of recipients of the letters, introducing changes to the conventional model of a letter addressee. It is concluded that messages on the open letters sites, high in personalization (i.e. private) and low in exclusivity (i.e. public), allow bridging the gap between mass and personal communication, thus remediating an epistolary genre.

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1. Introduction

In the last decades the number of studies focusing on the epistolary genre has grown dramatically. The arrival of digital technologies boosting people's isolation spurred interest in letter-writing especially in western cultures with their strong sense of privacy and tacit taboo on free expression of feelings, secrets and concerns in face-to-face communication. The clear evidence of the tendency is thousands of the so-called "open letters" anonymously posted to social networking services such as lettersillneversend.com, lettersweneversent.blogspot.ru, futureme.org and others alike.

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Widely expressed opinions state that electronic mail is significantly less believable and trustworthy than printed letter form. The e-mails (rather “messages” than “letters”) are brief, written in a hurry and do not evoke great positive impressions (Moore, 2013). On the other hand, Bolter and Grusin’s theory of remediation suggests that ‘[t]he goal of remediation is to refashion or rehabilitate older media’ (Bolter, et al., 1999). It is stated that ‘...the new medium can remediate by trying to absorb the older medium entirely, so that the discontinuities between the two are minimized. The very act of remediation, however, ensures that the older medium cannot be entirely effaced; the new medium remains dependent on the older one in acknowledged or unacknowledged ways’ (Bolter, et al., 1999). In the earliest days of Internet communication digital technologies were remediating paper letters filling the text with images, photos, hyperlinks to immerse the reader into virtual reality, to impress, to make him feel “as if” in another reality. On the other hand, reduction of the speed of letter exchange resulted in worsening the quality of writing as a skill, prioritizing visual to written. For instance, letters with attached photos made it unnecessary to verbalize events, experience, emotions.

A close examination of the current open letters, as compared to private e-mails which people exchange in everyday life, shows the reverse tendency: writers invest a lot of effort in constructing their messages trying to sound sincere and authentic. The efforts are driven by the very choice of the topics discussed in the letters: family, love, personal relationship, inner problems, etc. Sometimes these letters can be as long as two pages with more than one thousand words. More importantly, they retain the typical structure of the letter, i.e. an epistolary framework, consisting of salutation, main body of the letter, closing remarks (wishes, thanks, appreciation, etc.) and signature. The amount of visuals attached to the texts, as well as “smiles”, is also diminishing.

An assumption is that an epistolary genre is remediated due to the erosion of the boundaries between private and public discourses. Writers do not hesitate to exhibit private affairs for a wide audience, directly/indirectly addressing it their inner thoughts. The change of the mode of address, alongside with pronounced anonymity on Internet sites, allows for freer self-expression, thus remediating an epistolary genre.

2. The mode of address

The mode of address is one of the distinguishing features of epistolary genre. A personal letter is typically considered to belong to a private discourse as a communicative event between a single sender (*I*) and a single recipient (*You*). A letter is aimed at covering the existing physical distance and bridging the emotional gap thus stressing the idea of separation. Traditionally, information in a sealed personal letter is intended for a designated recipient and can be disclosed only with an author’s consent.

However, since ancient times a letter has balanced between personal and public discourses. Communally read letters in ancient Greece and in the eighteenth century Europe, modern letters to the editor, open letters in newspapers, advice columns “allowed for the mutual or shared concerns of private citizens to be articulated and forwarded to a sphere of Authority” (Habermas, 1989). Computer mediated communication as a form of public discourse increases the number of recipients of the letters, introducing changes to the conventional model of a letter recipient.

According to the number of interlocutors there are four main types of communication:

- Intrapersonal communication, i.e. language use or thought internal to the interlocutor. In this case an individual combines the roles of a sender and a receiver of messages and provides feedback to himself in an ongoing internal process. Intrapersonal communication is also known as inner speech, auto-communication or self-verbalization and can run in the form of inner dialogue or inner monologue.
- Interpersonal communication refers to the exchange of messages between people (usually two individuals) who either know each other or when “you treat the other as a unique human being” (Beebe, et al., 2002).
- Group communication, i.e. a kind of interpersonal communication within groups of between three to twenty individuals.
- Mass communication, defined as “the process whereby media organizations produce and transmit messages to large publics and the process by which those messages are sought, used, and consumed by audiences” (Littlejohn & Foss, 2005).

By the traditional definition, letters posted openly on various Internet sites are likely to be defined as mass communication messages. The proofs are: a) letters are conveyed via a mass communication channel b) they can be

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