



The peritextual literacy framework: Using the functions of peritext to support critical thinking



Melissa Gross^{a,*}, Don Latham^b

^a Florida State University, School of Information, 246 Louis Shores Building, Tallahassee, FL 32306-2100, United States

^b Florida State University, School of Information, 248 Louis Shores Building, Tallahassee, FL 32306-2100, United States

A B S T R A C T

The peritextual literacy framework (PLF) is a tool for accessing, evaluating, and comprehending the content of media using elements that frame the body of a work and mediate its content for the user. Paratextual elements are the focus of research in classification, bibliometrics, reader's advisory work, and in studies of authorship and publication. However, paratextual theory is just beginning to be acknowledged in LIS. The PLF closes a gap in paratext theory by categorizing the functions of peritext into six types: production, promotional, navigational, intratextual, supplemental, and documentary. The PLF is unique that it provides both a framework for further research on peritext, as well as a pedagogical tool that supports teaching in the areas of information literacy, media literacy and analysis, critical thinking, reading, and media design and production.

1. Introduction

The peritextual literacy framework (PLF) is a tool for accessing, evaluating, and comprehending the content of media using elements that frame the body of a work and mediate its content for the user. The concept of paratext was defined by Gérard Genette (1997) as common elements provided within a book (peritext) and elements outside of the book (epitext) that refer to the book and can affect individual, as well as cultural, perceptions of a text (pp. 4–5). Examples of peritextual elements include the foreword, table of contents, index, and source notes. Epitext refers to communications outside the book that can influence whether and how the text is read. Examples of epitext include book reviews, interviews, author websites and letters, and critical literary analysis. Genette's theory defines paratext as follows: Paratext = peritext + epitext (p. 5) (Table 1).

Genette saw functionality as the most important concept in his theory, noting that “Whatever aesthetic intention may come into play as well, the main issue for the paratext is not to ‘look nice’ around the text but rather to ensure for the text a destiny consistent with the author's purpose” (p. 407). The functionality of paratext is important to library and information science (LIS) as paratextual elements are the focus of many of its research areas. However, these subfields generally have not considered the role paratext theory can play in both research and professional work. Examples include classification, bibliometrics, reader's advisory, and information literacy, and are discussed below. The PLF isolates peritext for examination and builds on Genette's work

by organizing peritextual elements by function as an aid for media analysis and as a scaffold for teaching critical thinking. It is unique in that it provides both a framework for further research on peritext, as well as a pedagogical tool that supports teaching in the areas of information literacy, media literacy and analysis, critical thinking, reading, and media design and production.

Genette describes paratext as a threshold at which, a reader can decide whether or not to enter the work (p. 2). While Genette applied his theory to printed books, paratext is an aspect of many media types. An analysis of peritext can help users to understand how those elements that frame a work influence whether and how media is consumed. Further, examination of paratext allows the reader to think critically about the author or creator's intent as well as the veracity of the work, and, when used to consider a work, can allow readers to reflect on the role of individual paratextual elements that help the reader to identify, navigate, and connect the work to the reader's interest as well as the resources that support the author's presentation. Peritextual elements can illuminate a reader's understanding of how the author knows what he or she knows about the subject and how that knowledge was attained.

1.1. Problem statement

According to Birke and Christ (2013), “Paratext is now one of the basic analytical tools taught in textbook introductions to the study of narrative and explicated in handbooks of literary analysis” (p. 65).

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: mgross@fsu.edu (M. Gross), dlatham@fsu.edu (D. Latham).

Table 1
Examples of paratextual elements.

Paratext = Peritext (comes with the text) + Epitext (outside of the text)	
Preface	Reviews
Foreword	Interviews
Table of contents	Author websites
Index	Correspondence
Acknowledgements	Diaries
Source notes	Critical literary analysis

Although paratextual elements also play a role in information skills instruction, methods for incorporating paratext theory into instruction have been few. The PLF provides a type of literacy that mediates engagement with a work in a way that promotes critical thinking. While the individuals involved in the production of works are not obligated to provide paratext, and readers are always free to ignore paratext, many may be unaware of its function and utility as well as the opportunities it provides for critically assessing a text. Genette notes that “just as the presence of paratextual elements is not uniformly obligatory, so, too, the public and the reader are not unvaryingly and uniformly obligated: no one is required to read a preface” (p. 4). However, readers who understand the functions of peritext are better prepared to use peritext in both the consumption and the production of texts.

In his 2014 article, “The Paratext’s the Thing,” Doherty examines the increasing importance of paratext in mass media production and study, and presses the point that “in today’s digital media environment the ‘text’ itself is becoming increasingly dispersed and this makes paratexts more important and more interesting” (p. B14). The importance of paratext in relation to the proliferation of media underlines its potential importance in teaching students how to approach a work, use it as an information resource, assess its aesthetics and credibility, and comprehend the intent.

2. Related literature

Genette (1997) analyzed paratextual elements as manifested in printed books. The presence or absence of these elements, however, is not uniform. For example, a work may or may not have a preface, index, or other type of paratext associated with it. The presence or absence of these elements will vary depending on various factors including when the item was produced, the culture that produced it, the genre, or the edition. This necessitates that paratextual analysis take place on a work-by-work basis. Genette suggests that “defining an element of paratext consists in determining its location (the question *where?*); the date of its appearance and, if need be, its disappearance (*when?*); its mode of existence, verbal or other (*how?*); the characteristics of its situation of communication – its sender and addressee (*from whom? To whom?*); and the functions that its message aims to fulfill (*to do what?*)” (p. 4).

Others have followed suit across a variety of disciplines to integrate paratext into investigations related to the history of the book, the book as artifact, the marketing of books, and literary analysis. Moreover, although the theory as described by Genette related to printed books only, paratext is now seen as playing a role in a variety of media and interest in paratext continues to grow. Paratext theory has been used to study fan fiction (Fathallah, 2016; Hill & Pecoskie, 2014; Leavenworth, 2015), videogames (Rockenberger, 2014), film (Gray, 2010; Kummerling-Meibauer, 2013), DVDs (Benzon, 2013), digital texts (Malone, 2015; McCracken, 2013; Strehovec, 2014), networked media (Nacher, 2014), transmedia (Nottingham-Martin, 2014), and more. The literature demonstrates the utility of paratext, examines the types of paratext that are associated with specific types of media, and explains how paratext can affect the user’s relationship to media. Authors also point out that paratext is critical when thinking about the design of interfaces and in supporting orientation to and immersion in a work

(Malone, 2015), as well as in designing the work itself (Stanitzek, 2005). While much of this work is published outside of LIS, this work is relevant to LIS scholars interested in media.

Specific elements of paratext have also been the subject of research in LIS as well as in communication and education. Examples of such research include authorship (Cronin & Franks, 2005; Cronin, Shaw, & La Barre, 2003; Weber & Thomer, 2014), book jackets and covers (Martinez, Stier, & Falcon, 2016), endpapers (Coifman, 2013; Duran & Bosch, 2011; Sipe & McGuire, 2006), acknowledgements (Cronin, 1995; Cronin et al., 2003; Desrocher & Pecoskie, 2014; Salager-Meyer, Ariza, & Berbesí, 2009), blurbing (Cronin & La Barre, 2005), and dedications (Gifford, 1988). In information science, paratext is referenced in works on classification (Paling, 2002), bibliometrics (Åström, 2014), and reader’s advisory work (Pecoskie & Desrochers, 2013), and has been promoted as a research tool (Nottingham-Martin, 2014; Pecoskie & Desrochers, 2013).

The role of paratext in materials developed for children and how these paratextual elements support interactivity with a text, as well as emergent literacy and beginning reading skills, has also been the subject of study pointing to the importance of understanding paratext as a support for basic literacy. The role of paratext in picture books is recognized as particularly significant as the paratextual elements “frequently carry a substantial percentage of the book’s verbal and visual information” (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2001). Since emergent literacy is an area of special programming in libraries, paratext in picture books is of concern to researchers in LIS.

Several authors explore the unique role that peritext plays for readers of picture books (Higonnet, 1990; Martinez et al., 2016; Sipe, 2008) and conclude that paratext supports comprehension and appreciation of texts, and that attention to paratext can deepen the experience of the story and assist in immersion in the text for readers. In the library literature there are calls to include paratext in storytimes in order to offer children “a richer and more gratifying reading experience” (Coifman, 2013, p. 21) as part of a “whole book approach” that encourages children to consider paratext as part of their experience of the work (Lambert, 2010). Notwithstanding the potential benefits of examining peritext, it has been observed that little attention is paid to paratext in educational environments (Kummerling-Meibauer, 2013; Martinez et al., 2016) despite its importance for media literacy (Kummerling-Meibauer, 2013).

Another way authors have responded to Genette’s work has been to fill in gaps in the theory. For example, Sipe and McGuire (2006) created a typology of endpapers based on their analysis of picture books. Their typology focuses on whether the front and back endpapers contain illustrated material and whether the front and back endpapers are identical or not. Duran and Bosch (2011) presented their own typology of picture book endpapers, differentiating between endpapers that provide epitextual content related to the story and endpapers that provide peritextual content related to the story. They defined epitextual content as that information related to collection, series, or publisher, information about the author, the dedications and any tribute, as well as spaces that invite children to write their names (for example “this book belongs to....”). Duran and Bosch identified endpaper peritext as any content related to the story, including how it related to characters, location, or theme, the preface and epilogue, and any bonus track (similar to what is seen on music CDs, with bonus track here referring to added content, such as a game provided with the book).

Recently, there have been several authors who have explored the concept of functionality regarding paratext and how paratext might be further categorized. These authors refer to “paratext” and do not differentiate between peritext and epitext in their typologies. Birke and Christ (2013) sought to explicate the function of paratext by categorizing it into three types: Interpretive, commercial, and navigational. The interpretive function describes how paratextual elements guide the reader’s understanding of the text. The commercial elements influence decisions about purchasing based on elements such as

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