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BEYOND 'FIXITY': OLD AND NEW GENRES ON THE WEB

The apparent 'fixity' of genres has generally been interpreted as the result of the interaction between the technologies used to produce text and a certain social rigidity (Yates – Sumner 1997). In a relationship of mutual enhancement, such interaction provides the basis for the development of genres which, in turn, contribute to fixity in communicative acts.

In contemporary Computer Mediated Communication, however, the relationship between technology, social context, and fixity has been loosened and the concept of genre has apparently undergone major changes. On the one hand it has been argued that current technology has destabilized traditional genres. With the distinction between producers and consumers of digital documents being blurred, centrifugal forces have been unleashed leading to a democratization of the concept of genre and to the rise of many highly individualized or hybrid genres (Santini 2007). On the other hand, the centripetal forces which are seen as the catalyst of the creation of genres seem nonetheless to be at work, albeit differently, in the new medium, leading to the rise of the novel/emergent genres of communication on the web.

It is against this background that the paper addresses the thorny issue of web genres compared to print technology. Using two exemplary genres (the encyclopedia and the literary review) as case studies, the centripetal/centrifugal forces at work in old and new genres on the web will be explored and discussed.

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