THE STYLISTICS OF THE CYBER - DISCOURSE

Adrian Mihalache

The liberation of the discourse

The exchange of information is probably the main process continuously going on in cyberspace. People have always had much to say for themselves and to one another, but no outlet was provided for it, thus they had to keep it private. The societies based on traditional media, from the earthenware tables of the Sinai Covenant to the cathode-ray tubes of television, made a clear-cut distinction between the few who were authorized to speak around and down to, and the many who had but to listen and obey[1]. Communication was dominated by the metaphor of the umbrella (Escarpit, 1972): a few powerful entities, the emitters, covered some political-cultural space and exerted their control over more-or-less well-defined, distinct territories. These emitters seldom competed, since the technological limitations of the old times made it more natural for them to tacitly or openly divide their areas of influence. It is true that, apart from the stentorian voices of proclamations and gazettes, the cheap medium of paper also enabled even the barely literate to reliably send messages, an occupation which eventually brought about the art of correspondence. The epistolary space had been, retrospectively considered, a proto-cyberspace, because of the omnidirectional connections it created between the individual minds of men and women. Such connections could very well lead to peculiar consequences **in real life** (IRL). The encounter in Neuchâtel between Honoré de Balzac and Evelyna Hanska was preceded by quite a "hot" exchange of letters, a game not far from cyber-sex, and he first got her address from a newspaper posting, which proves that the gazette's "classified" section used to be the Bulletin Board Service (BBS) of the time.The invention of the telephone was more prone to stifle the independent voices than to make them heard. People almost put pens aside and started to talk feverishly over the phone. It seemed an empowerment, but it was not. While a letter could be passed on, copied, commented upon, eventually published, the tele-communication was essentially a one-to-one conversation, a basically private one, were it not for the officially appointed technological eavesdroppers[2].

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[1] *Theirs not to reason why / Theirs but to strive and die*, according to the well-known Tennyson's lines.

[2] The *Watergate* case was by no means a closing one. Asked if he practices telephone surveillance, one of Mitterrand's ministers said that, although no official would ever admit he does, they all promise to put a stop to it.

The telecommunication technology has less power to create a cultural space than the (snail) mail. Although it may very well be interactive, actually more interactive than the most sophisticated "voice" application software, it remains that the act of information exchange is evanescent and futile[3]. The teleconversations, meaningful as they often are, do not involve many subjectivities in a structured debate, so that the only way telephone can subvert the centralized media and, consequently, undermine the dominant power, is by unveiling secret data, not by disclosing inner beliefs.

.The advent of e-mail delighted both the visionary and the nostalgic. The first saw in it another amazing computer trick, without fully realizing its cultural consequences. The latter reveled in the thought that a sort of poetic justice brought about the technology-driven revival of a forgotten art, the art of correspondence. Both had good reasons to be happy, in spite of the fact that the reasons they believed in were false. It has become evident by now that e-mail is not just another application software, to be added to the older ones related to word and data processing. While the latter two classes of applications were naturally embedded in the real life culture of late modernity, e-mail would be the first sensible manifestation of cyberculture. Soon enough, it wouldn't be the only one, the world-wide-web would bring about the document (page) posted on a site as another form of statement, the chat-rooms and the MUD's would enhance interactiveness. Meanwhile, the electronic letter, far from being the mere revival of the old form, would soon come into its own as a specific form of cyberspace communication. As far as information exchange is concerned, cyberculture takes over from real life only the concept of discourse, that is the organization of signs in a significant pattern. Discourses in cyberspace have multiple sources and multiple targets. The time of the few centralized emitters is gone. Every cyber-person is wrung between the drive for statement and the thirst for information. You have to silence the other and lure him to pay attention to you, that is to give you his time, the most precious resource in cyberspace. On the other hand, you are also prepared to listen, sometimes you are even craving for an answer. Consequently, there is a permanent exchange of information, but it is not directly reciprocal, I may not require your information content while delighting in giving you mine. I may speak to you, then listen to another.

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[3] However, it is interesting to note that some authors, copyright-beware, have started lately to mention telephone conversations as bibliographic references. An embarrassing situation arose when author A quoted B's disparaging remarks on C, scrupulously indicating the date and time of the A-B phone call.

The only thing that mediates all informational exchanges is time. One buys my information and pays with his time, I buy my information and pay with mine. Time plays in cyberspace the part that money plays in real life, it is the abstract equivalent of any merchandise, be it information, knowledge or whatever, the sign of all the signs. The discourses do not fight each other, more often than not they just pass each other, like ships in the dark. Their peculiar stylistics is part of cyberculture.

Electronic composition and real life culture

A letter electronically composed, then printed and sent by snail-mail, a manuscript carefully typed on the keyboard, with the intention to be published in a periodical or as a book are not part of cyberculture, but of real life culture (Howard, 1997). This does not imply that the technological procedure of composition does not influence the stylistics of the informational product to some extent. We have long since assimilated Marshall McLuhan's lesson, so that we know by now that any medium exerts a specific pressure on the senses, which alters their balance and, consequently, influences the intellectual approach. This influence is manifested at both ends of the informational channel: at the emitter's end it fashions the discourse (*the medium is the message*), at the receiver's end, it acts upon the decoding capabilities (*the medium is the message*). The relationship between stylistics and technology is pretty obvious. Engraving earthenware cannot give a literature, but it can give law tables; the *stylum* and the *vellum* account for Plato's Dialogues. Shakespeare is inconceivable without his goose-pen. The fountain pen enabled Proust to write unending, tortuous phrases, leaning on his couch. Hemingway's creation implies the Underwood typewriter (the converse is not necessarily true) and Umberto Eco is the best byproduct of Apple Macintosh. Of course, one could not determine for certain, upon a blind stylistic analysis, the tool the author used. This would mean pushing too far the analogy between technology and phraseology. However, it can be said that the *cut-and-paste* commands have played a major stylistic part. They offered the possibility of developing a text starting from a core and expanding it in all directions, subverting the linear, sequential, traditional discourse. The word processing technology enabled the easy insertion of incidents, which stressed upon the grammatical infrastructure of the Romance languages. The convenient adding of footnotes favored lateral wandering. Continuous digression subverted the linearity of the discourse, announcing the prevalence of the hypertext on the web.

Moreover, the lay-out of the page, previously a concern of the publisher, came suddenly under the author's control and gained perhaps a little too much of his or her attention.The margins, the indentation, the fonts, the distribution of paragraphs, all that

sometimes the written text seems reduced to a mere comment of the illustrations, instead of the latter being an auxiliary to the text. This tendency is important insofar it points to a subversion of the digital by the analogical. The images are analogical, because their variety ranges in a continuous space, while the text is digital because it results from the combination of a finite set of elements. For the past four hundred years, ever since the advent of the printing press and of the Scientific Revolution, the digital approach has been prevalent. It is nothing short of ludicrous to realize that the computer - a purely digital device - was precisely the instrument of this analogical come-back.

The computer as a tool for textual composition influences to a considerable extent the process of discourse elaboration, but keeps it definitely within the limits of the present-day, postmodern culture. The stylistics of the discourse is little modified by the computer techniques, if at all. However, in cyberspace, the stylistics of the discourses that cyber-agents address to other cyber-agents have such features that would suggest their allegiance to another culture, the cyberculture. We shall consider in the sequel four types of cyber-dicourse: the e-mail, the posted paper, the home-page and the chat.

The e-mail

The address

The first ingredient of e-mail is the address. A good cyber-address shows cyber-people who you are. The name which reproduces exactly your RL (real life) identity may be convenient to remember, but is usually too long to type[4]. Use of first names is childish, especially as they seldom single one out[5]. Next come together the ISP (Internet Service Provider), which should be prestigious and the TLD (Top Level Domain), which should be dignified. Their combination gives you the position in cyberspace, similarly to a good address in real life. M-me de Sévigné, who seems to have been the greatest letter-writer of all times, could have proudly used as an address *sevigne@ marais .fr*.since she lived Marais,one of the most fashionable districts of Paris. However there are important differences between a good real life address and a good cyber-address.

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[4] *Adrian_Mihalache* is punctilious with its two capitals. *adrian_mihalache* is long and by no means euphonic. I also use the alias *mad*, which may be funny and, I think, mnemotechnic, but many complain that it is cryptic.
[5] I have never thought *Adrian* was so common

The fact that you live in East Village, Bloomsbury, Schwabing or St Germain des Prés does not necessarily imply that you carry on with the literary people who also live there. On the contrary, being appointed to a specific server simultaneously means that: (a) you can afford to share the services of precisely this ISP with a specific, hopefully restrained, group and (b) you belong to the category indicated by the top-level domain. Usually, the two meanings are strictly connected. For instance, in the case of *malbright@whitehouse.gov* the TLD *gov* could not be changed to either *edu, com, org, net,* or *mil.* Moreover, if one belongs, let ussay, to the academic world, one's address will be naturally related to the TLD *edu*[6]. As a private person with a commercial ISP, one will get the TLD *com*, irrespective of the fact that one is in trade or not. *aol.com,* as a popular provider, does not lend any sparkle or distinction to the address. The free e-mail provided by many a site may be convenient, but it is by no means distinguished: *hotmail.com, netscape.net, yahoo.com* are practical, but common[7]. A cyber-address resembles to the combination title-name of a nobleman. Both suggest a spatial localization, but signify a social position. Edmond, Count of Monte Cristo is not necessarily the owner of the island Monte Cristo, neither is he supposed to live there. However, Edmond would be a beautiful name for a cyber-agent, "of" an old-fashioned @, Monte Cristo a sonorous ISP, and "count" (or "baron", "duke", "prince" etc.) plays perfectly the part of a TLD. In summary, a good e-mail address should satisfy the following requirements: (a) it is euphonic, so that it can easily be remembered and (b) it suggests one's position in cyberspace by indicating the type of interest and/or the kind of people one is involved with.

The content

The e-mail is by no means the come-back of the old, elaborate letter. Usually, it has a title, which is in fact more similar to a *motto*. The choice of this *motto* compels the author to focus on the content, a focus which is rarely encountered in real-life letters. The *paragraphemics* play a minor part, if at all, in e-mails. The iconicity of the page is irrelevant, considering that the arrangement of paragraphs, the indentation, the fonts often change during transmission. However, there still is a paragraphemic rule imposed by *n-etiquette*: one should not write only in capitals, it is not considered polite, but sort of shouting. The electronic letter is not a bordered page to be filled in, but, like an antique manuscript, an unlimited scroll.

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[6] It is very rare that the ISP should impose a specific name on the cyber-agent. In spite of my protestations, I had to accept the non-euphonic name *mihalachea* as a condition for belonging to *wmich.edu.*

[7] The address *adrian_mihalache@hotmail.com* is my favorite as far as speed and user-friendliness are concerned. However, I inscribed *mihalachea@wmich.edu* on my real life card.

.   It follows quasi-synchronously the stream of reasoning and, afterwards, naturally unfolds the writer's thoughts. Sometimes, orthography is disparagingly dismissed, and even grammar is treated carelessly. The result is a concise, spontaneous and prompt statement[8] of a particular observation or experience, rather than the laborious condensation of a lived history. It is not a narrative, but a confession, closer to the anecdote than to the essay.

The way the content is developed depends, of course, not only on the personality of the writer, but also on the identity of the reader. When the latter is known, the sender tends to comply to his expectations - he tries to be funny when writing to a friend, respectful when writing to a boss, seductive when approaching a prospective client etc. However, there are also some general features, relatively context-free, which also hold when the message is not specifically directed, but is distributed around within newsgroups or BBS's. The process of writing is easy, it lacks that kind of inertial resistence that lends to an activity the label of labor. Consequently, the style is decontracted and, without necessarily being witty, is often amusing. The wooden language, best fit for glossy cards, is discarded in favor of the lighter sketchiness of the cyber-discourse.

The signature

The signature of an e-mail is a meaningful issue, because it challenges the hermeticity of the border between cyberspace and real life. Communication by e-mail may be tricky, since the spontaneous remarks from a supposedly private letter could be passed over, or re-posted in contexts the sender could find embarrassing[9]. This would tempt one to use only one's first name or an alias. However, such a procedure would prevent reciprocity: a cyber-agent is nothing like a Cupid, happy just to shoot his arrows, he wants to be contacted, to receive something, at his turn, from the process of informational exchange. Moreover, he hopes for the unexpected message, the one which would make a big difference to his existence. Consequently, he takes care that his coordinates are duly mentioned in the letter. In spite of the fact that the source location in cyberspace is automatically specified, the signature reiterates it, includes possible secondary addresses and often specifies the sender's personal site. It is a debatable question whether the signature should mention or not the real life address and position of the sender. The communication via Internet is supposedly egalitarian, so that any mention of the social position, age, employment, honorary titles or academic degrees of the cyber-agent seems inappropriate. Howard (1997) provides a good case-study of this issue.

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[8] An *aperçu*, as Goethe liked to say.
[9] Howard (1997) calls this *cyber-rape*

Some of the members of the newsgroup he monitored claimed that ignoring the real life references would make the, communicational process more informal and relaxed. Others argued that the mention of the actual positions would make people more self-aware and, consequently, more responsible and also would highly improve the informational content of the letters. Actually, both camps missed the really significant point. Taking advantage of the real life position can, on the one hand, make exchanges of ideas more meaningful and, on the other hand, can also stifle many an interesting voice. However, the dilemma lies elsewhere, that is in the way one defines the limit between cyberspace and real life. The two spaces, though clearly not isolated, are however distinct. This implies that specific rules for border-crossing should be either overtly specified, or tacitly accepted. In both cases, one has to be aware of them. Mentioning real life positions is less vital to information quality than to the reproduction of the existing power relations in cyberspace. Conversely, ignoring real life hierarchy is less an attempt to informality than a contestation of authority. As a space which simply mirrored the present symbolic configuration, cyberspace would be redundant. As a compensatory realm for the dissatisfied, it would be insignificant. Cyberspace should be neither the Connaisseur's, nor the Speaker's Corner, but it could very well include, as sub-spaces, specimens of both. That is to say, it should be up to each cyber-community to observe its own rules for border-crossing, provided it is aware of their actual meanings, as disclosed by the above stylistic analysis.

The correspondents

Prestige depends not only on who you are, but also on whom you talk to. Upon receiving an e-mail from someone I know, I may notice that he sent it around to a large number of people. Considering the list of recipients may prove useful: if it is homogenous enough, I may be able to infer the cyber-category people I think I belong to. Subscribing to newsgroups and BBS's is a manner to state one's own desired cyber-position, by selecting a certain class of correspondents. However, the actual standing of each one of them remains obscure and, by subscribing, I consented to be the helpless recipient of all their messages, whatever their content or their sender. Avoiding spam does not mean only protecting one's time and one's privacy, it also has to do with maintaining one's position. In real life, there are social filters maintained by public relations agents, who protect the VIP's. In cyberspace, one is either too isolated, or too vulnerable. Esther Dyson (1997), who is well impregnated of free-market ideology, suggests that she might consider automatically charging the unknown people who attempt to send her mails. She admits, however, that this could unfortunately filter out

the unexpected, marvelous announcement. Recently, the apparition of viruses which reside in word documents and, thus, can be transported in the body of the e-mail not only in its executive attachments, has increased the mistrust towards unknown messengers. One can still rely on those newsgroups which are strictly monitored, but nobody knows for how long. The situation resembles love in the times of AIDS. The more dangerous it is, the more exciting, the more precautions one takes, the more one regrets the lost opportunities.

The web presentation

The web presentation is essentially a hypermedia document. It includes text, icons, animation, sounds, all inter-linked into a more or less intricate pattern. It stimulates more senses and, more important, does not direct the visual sense only along the linear path of textual interpretation. Each page of the document is designed according to an iconic perspective, which would suggest that the web-presentation is closer to the electronically composed pages, overheads or slides than to the e-mail or any other type of cyber-discourse. The purpose of a slide or overhead-based discourse and the one of a web-presentation are the same: to seduce and to persuade the audience. However, given that a static comparison between them points out few differences, the web-presentation has distinctive characteristics, when compared to the slide-based or overhead-based one, which qualifies it as a cyber-discourse. These peculiarities stem from its dynamics.

The page of a web-document, when contemplated, looks like a pattern, when explored, becomes a discourse. The multiple and reciprocal text-icon-sound links account for numerous and distinct trajectories, only one of which being actualized at each inspection. Thus, the exploration is not only multisensorial, but also multidirectional. The web-discourse emerges from the intricate arrangement of sounds, images and words according to the ad-hoc rules of a new grammar. While in traditional printing the image illustrates the text and in electronic composition the text comments the icon, in a web presentation one is able to "write" directly with icons and sounds, just as they were words. In a cyber-discourse, the images, the sounds and the words are not merely different voices superposed in a poly-sensorium[10], but elements of a homogenous vocabulary articulated in a discourse. Wolfgang Wackernagel[11] suggested the term *icography* or *virtual calligraphy* to designate the art of image ordering in a possible visual discourse.

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[10] We suggest this term for the multisensory equivalent of polyphony.
[11] Cf. http://www.cicv.fr/SYNESTHESIE

He makes a clear distinction between *icography* and *iconography*: the first is "writing" with images, the latter is writing about images. The grammar which would provide the rules for ordering such a rich multimedia vocabulary is still to be invented. Going back to the Rosette stone and to the system of hieroglyphic writing to find inspiration may be a good suggestion. It is well known that this had two basic features: first, representable objects were portrayed as pictures (ideograms) and, second, the picture signs were given the phonetic value of the words for these represented objects (phonograms). It resulted a sort of rebus system in which letters and pictures were combined: although Egyptian writing was originally composed of symbols that represented a phonetic value, the system was transmitted in the form of word pictures. Thus, the web-presentation, in spite of its volatile flicker, could recover the dignity of the pyramids.

The interactivity is an essential characteristic of any cyber-discourse. The intricacy of hypermedia remains inert if it does not provide the means for reader feed-back. The simplest way to do it is to include the inviting "e-mail-me" button, or to provide space for the on-line insertion of the visitor's comments. However, a web-presentation which would make use of VR techniques could very well point to really enticing perspectives. The hypermedial interactivity could make "true" the most wildly extravagant fantasies of the baroque[12], or even the magic of the fairy tales. The following fragment taken from Andersen's tale "The Swans" anticipates in a seductively artistic manner the charms of interactivity via VR:

Once upon a time, there lived an emperor who had eleven sons and one daughter, named Elisa. The princes wrote with diamond pens on golden tables and memorized easily while reading. Elisa, their sister, sat on a crystal stool and looked through an illustrated book which had cost her father half of his kingdom. When you opened the book, everything in it came to life, birds were singing, people got out of the pictures and talked to Elisa and to her brothers. But upon turning the page, they regained their place, so that the initial ordered was recovered.

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[12] Savinien de Cyrano de Bergerac's extraordinary voyages to the moon could be considered typical baroque multimedia systems. Cf. Mihalache (1997).

The homepage

The personal web page, a specific type of web-presentation, which contains the self-description of a person or of an institution, is most appropriately called the homepage. The corresponding item in real life is either the personal resume (Curriculum Vité), or the brochure, which accompanies an event or describes a company. While these are composed according to more-or-less standardized rules and handed-out on precise circumstances, the homepage is a place to lure visitors to, to thrill them while there, to keep them as long as possible. It is a home, thence the name, but not the present-day home, which is essentially a place for retirement, rest and tempered amusement, built around a dormitory and provided with a screen. It is more like the old country cottage, where people lived, worked and also entertained. A more proper name for it would be the home-site, because the self-descriptive document usually has several pages. The main one, the index, is the parlor, the place where one receives. A common mistake as far as cyber-stylistics is concerned is to make this page very intimate. Most main pages are filled up with pictures of the happy master-of-the-house, his wife, kids and other loved ones. More often than not, funny little comments and well-meaning mottoes occupy the rest of the space. One must always keep in mind that, quite similarly to the case of the page-owner, the interest of many a person is turned towards herself, so that putting forward intimate facts upon receiving could discourage most visitors and compel them to take too rapid a leave.

The main page should suggest the broader issues the host is involved in, the general ideas that underline his or her various activities, the key notions and concepts which govern his intellectual life. This also holds in the case of institutions. The products and services one offers should not be abruptly introduced, but presented in the framework of a meaningful approach. A shade of mystery enveloping one's abilities, expertise and know-how would only make them more appealing. That is not to say that a main homepage which states downright that the host person or institution could solve any of the visitor's problems, you-name-it-we'll-see-to-it, is more credible or more enticing. It is a matter of content quality to keep the right balance between the general and the specific, between the abstract and the concrete, between the hyper and the understatement.

The excessive high-tech effects of a main homepage should definitely be avoided. Flickering images stress the eyes, animation which requires special plug-ins to download are just a nuisance, excessive richness of texture and too contrasting colors make the visitor doubtful and ready to wander away. A tasteful main page, like a beautiful room, should be

elegant and airy, without being bare, comfortably furnished, without being stuffy. As always when visual quality is at stake, one requires examples to support one's theory. We mention in the sequel, without any reference to content quality:

· two main pages of sophisticated beauty: *http://www.cicv.fr/SYNESTHESIE/* and *www.MediaStudies.com*

· two sober, dignified, user-friendly main pages: Resource Center for Cyberculture Studies (*http://www.otal.umd.edu*) and *http://www.Cybersociology.com*

· two stuffy, excessively baroque main pages:

The main page, like the parlor of a home, is linked to the other pages (rooms) of the personal site. One of them may contain elements of personal, intimate life, if the host cares to display them. The others are sort of specialized workshops, which present various areas of expertise of the host (person or institution). It is to be noted that the personal site recovers the old harmony of the countryman's house which, unlike its urban counterpart, was not restricted to the function of restoring the working capability, but also provided an appropriate environment for information processing, whether in solitude (reading or writing), or with company (making conversation).

It is not advisable that these secondary pages should, at their turn, be linked to more specialized ones, or the architecture of the personal site becomes too chaotic. However, links should be provided to samples from the host's own production: multimedia description of commodities or postings of narrative products - articles, even books. Such samples may form the third layer of the personal site and, as such, they should provide links back to the main page. It is possible that some of these samples have already been posted at various sites, such as web-zines, e-shops or information centers. In this case, links have to be provided to the relevant pages belonging to those sites. However, it may not be possible to provide return links, if the people responsible of those sites choose not to permit it. This brings about the very important issue of linking the homepage with other sites, which contributes to its positioning in cyberspace.

The pragmatic efficiency of any cyber-discourse highly depends on the localization of the site that harbors it. The address of the site is as significant as in the case of the e-mail and has the same meaning, which was already discussed. In spite of a refined stylistics, the presence of a long string of symbols followed by a "/~ name" in an address clearly suggests a subordinate position and thus undermines the message[13].

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[13] The Design / Analysis Consultancy, Inc. may very well be a high-brow, high-tech company, its address: *http://www.cyberspy.com/~daci* does not show it. Moreover, the sketchiness of the information provided, the lack of exemplifying flavor diminish the impact of their discourse

On the other hand, the symbolic position of a site in cyberspace does not depend only on its URL address, like in the e-mail case, but also on the quality of the sites it is linked to. A link is never innocent, claim those who have long known that "evil communications corrupt good manners". Linking business sites to political ones can prove risky, as this could infringe the laws concerning political campaign funding. Linking to trashy sites, however popular, soon amounts to going down in the cyber-world. On the other hand, an isolated site is like an island still waiting to be discovered. It is very important to continuously create new links to prestigious sites, to maintain the old ones and to eliminate those which point to declining sites. Similarly to real life, social success is based on a continuos inclusion / exclusion process: one cuts the troublesome, cultivates the high-and-mighty, keeps up with the Jones'.

Once one has a well-situated and stylish site, the only problem remains to make people come. Contrary to the common opinion, the number is irrelevant. The hosts who proudly present the automatically registered number of visitors are as pathetic as those who ardently beg one to sign in their honor guest book. In order to have high quality visitors, one has to be well connected and duly included in the most popular search engines, such as *Yahoo, Excite, NorthernLight, Askjeeves, Altavista, Goto* etc. Moreover, the site should be mentioned under meaningful key-words, that point to interesting general ideas, not to irrelevant personal issues. Last but not least, it should be submitted for reviewing to a respected rating-site, as have recently appeared on the web.

Dexterous manipulation of Java script enables one to attract people to one's site against their will. The random activation of a link at another site could command the automatic pop-up of a specific site, while disabling any button command for a certain amount of time. While some claim that such procedure is an infringement of the property rights[14], it seems to me closer to some sort of cyber-kidnapping.

Somebody's *habeas corpus* is encroached upon, and he is obliged to watch a content as a helpless prisoner. While this may seem satisfactory to a sponsor who computes the time people spend in front of his commercials, the method would only harm its author and compromise his otherwise acceptable site.

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[14] David Newman, *Impersonal Interaction and Ethics on the WWW*. Preprint Communication. WMU, 1999.

The web-zine

The Internet and the world wide web started within the academic community to enable rapid exchanges of ideas between people in distant places working on similar subjects. However, it soon extended its offer, by providing a convenient alternative to scientific publication. It is common knowledge how slow the process of reviewing-editing-publishing of printed scientific bulletins can be. By and large, two years elapse between the submission and the publication of a paper. Moreover, most boards take very seriously their status and filter out most attempts at transgressing the limits of "normal science"[15], or even at departing from the usual style of the dominant group. Consequently, posting relevant scientific papers on a site seems not only a shortcut to peer recognition, but also a clever attempt at subversion.

The hypertext itself was actually modeled on the typical scientific discourse. One very seldom reads a scientific paper or book in a linear manner. One has to jump to past mathematical relationship, to go to a diagram, back to the text, then to a reference and so on. Moreover, if the author makes use of somebody else's results, it may not be possible to go on reading, without checking the quoted publication first. Writing a scientific paper is not much different.

One first gets the general picture, orders the math, figures and graphs in a conceptual pattern, then starts to write the linking text, which is a combination of hopefully meaningful comments and standard reading instructions[16]. This clearly shows that the Hypertext Markup Language is nothing else than a conceptual model of the scientific discourse, which it mirrors in a codified manner.

Soon, the web was to become a place for posting any kind of discourse, by no means restricted to the scientific content. We have examined the self-presentation type of cyber-discourse, hosted on homepages. We shall take up now the discourses posted on web-zines. At its beginnings, the web-zine was nothing more than a web-version, selective and abridged, of the hard copy. Now, practically every magazine or newspaper has its web-version, some of them very elaborate.

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[15] The term is employed in the sense given by Thomas Kuhn (see *The Structure of the Scientific Revolutions*).
[16] E.g.: *Replacing the left hand side of relationship 3.12 with the statement (3.10) derived by Smith (1998), we get the trajectory depicted in figure 3.9.* This sentence is equivalent to two commands and four hypertextual links. The text of a textbook has gradually come down to the Help of a piece of software.

It is impossible for anyone to cover the entire multitude of such web versions in order to make a quality assessment. However, when taking into account the content, the organization pattern, the user-friendliness (which includes download speed and ease of navigation) and the artistic design, one cannot but admit the excellency of such sites as *ft.com* (*Financial Times*) *nouvelobs.com* (*Le Nouvel Observateur*) or *nytimes.com* (*New York Times*)[17]. Such web *doppelgängers*[18] are only of little interest to us because, apart from the site design, they do not bring anything new to the rhetorics of the discourse. The first genuine web-zines were maga-zines which decided to go cyber, that is to hold exclusively to their web-site. They started, unsurprisingly, on the West Coast and soon became the fun and the excitement of the web, contributing to the development of a specific stylistic and of a durable solidarity.

At first, a multimedial focus was prevalent. Site design, whimsical interactions and playful effects overcame other stylistic considerations. However, the baroque intricate combinations of images and sounds started to look dated, the moment when application software for web-page design became readily available. Now, the most flamboyant sites are not the web-zines any more, but the homepages, which embody the vanity of self-exposure and the desperate commitment to marketing. An example of a web-zine which focused rather on sophisticated design than on meaningful content is the now expired SYNESTHESIE[19].
The present high-quality web-zines have a much more sober look and a clear separation between images and text, to avoid cumbersome download. The interactivity is circumscribed to the feedback e-mail and to the postings within the discussion groups (*table talk*). The vast majority of the web-zines are free, the support coming from sponsors, in exchange of advertisements and access to virtual stores (e-commerce).

That is why each page is bordered by advertisements which do not necessarily reflect the artistic taste of the editor. Content is the lure which attracts customers They are supposed to plunge in it cautiouslessly, while being exposed to commercials and tempted by on-line purchases. The attempt to offer high-valued content for a reasonable fee[20], more typical for East Coast periodicals, was soon dismissed.

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[17] On the other hand, one is surprised by the indifference some quite respectable papers treat their web-sites. See, for instance, the case of *The Independent*.
[18] Doubles, accompanying, redundant entities.
[19] The site with the URL: http://www.cicv.fr, which used to harbor it, has the same vain look.
[20] Microsoft's web-zine *Slate* unsuccessfully attempted it.

The outspoken, popular, free West-Coast-based web-zines laughed uproariously at the pretentiousness of "those people who think their opinions are so valuable that they can be disclosed only on charge". Now, practically all web-zines are free, only registration is sometimes required, mainly to please the sponsors. The focus on careful literary composition has considerably improved. As James Poniewozik remarked[21], the most unexpected thing to happen to web-zines was that people started to read them, not just to go through them. This increased the commitment to literary quality and narrowed the gap between web-posted and printed texts. However, in spite of the fact that some web-posted papers have been subsequently published, presumably in an attempt at legitimization, the good cyber-discourse differs considerably from the well-tailored, real-life one.

Amy Gahran founded *Contentious*, a web-zine concerned with the awareness of the specific issues of web-publishing. She welcomed there Alysson Troffer's useful guide, entitled: *Editing Online Documents: Strategies and Tips*, an overview of what online editors do, how they do it, and why it matters.

The study is focused on editing non-sequential content, structure and navigation, links etc., but it also contains valuable guidelines concerning online writing style. However, most of them could apply as well to usual real life discourse. The advice to write in a clear, straightforward manner, to avoid indirectness, passive voice and double negations, while undoubtedly sound, is not very surprising. The tip to structure the discourse in relatively autonomous, inter-linked chunks is also of the kind everyone would have expected. The specific stylistic features of the web-zine discourse can be better assessed by the analysis of some characteristic samples taken from several web-zines, which are definitely committed to literary quality, duly adapted to the new cyber-profile: *nerve.com, salon.com, slate.com* and *spark-online*.

Few of the authors of the elaborate cyber-discourses really believe that brevity is the soul of wit. Polonius advocated this rule, without observing it[22]; cyber-authors, spoilt by disk-space availability, can afford to disregard it[23]. The modular conception, which governs the cyber-discourse, is responsible for its organization in self-contained fragments. The ordering of these fragments mirrors, unconsciously, no doubt, the main structures of the computer's software: the sequence, the bifurcation (based on an IF instruction) and the iteration. Within a fragment, as well as in the

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[21] In Salon Magazine, at the URL *http://www.salon.com.*

[22] *Hamlet,* act II, scene 1.

[23] Most of them could however claim that impropriety is the soul of wit.

sequence structure, the dominant rhetorical figure is the list. The enumeration of similar entities within a statement is supposed to cast a spell on the audience, intoxicated with the vapors of synonymity. Moreover, the statements in a sequence - arguments, examples, exhortations - are also organized in a list, instead as in a logical tree and this, together with the minimal syntactical variation, have the effect of paralyzing the resistance through criticism. Here is an example: *But I haven't taken the big risks. I've erred on the side of safety and respectability. I knew exactly what I could do and did it reasonably well. I experimented with "something else" in small ways: giving no exams, sitting out in the classroom rather than in front of the room, holding classes in bars, restaurants, homes, parks and beaches, allowing students to grade themselves, giving no lectures, having no textbooks, abolishing attendance, wearing T-shirts and boots, cooking food in the classroom, having pizza delivered, serving tea and bagels, deliberately not showing up for class, arranging for various deceptions such as pretending to be somebody else, being paged during class and having beautiful women come in and kiss me. I even staged a standing ovation for myself during an evaluation, wowing the college president in the bargain.* (David Alford: *Experimental lesson*. salon.com, November 19, 1999).

Interspersing rare, precious terms within a smutty list and concluding it with a refined image (as in the above quotation) or a sophisticated cultural reference (as in the below example) is so frequent in cyber-discourses, that it almost touches the cliché:

Thus, I'm a practicing heterosexual (well, most of the time), who nonetheless likes gay and bisexual sexually-explicit literature as well as bestiality, necrophilia, transgender imagery inter-generational sex, psychoanalysis, continental philosophy, fetishism, etc. None of these interests have had much effect on my more intimate pursuits in the real world (well, most of the time), but as far as literature and the life of the endocrines goes, permanent revolution -- as Trotsky described it -- seems to be the best approach. (Rick Moody, *Polysexuality*. nerve.com, archives.)

The occasional splitting of the cyber-discourse along various paths is enabled by the links provided by the author and activated by the reader, according to his options for specific modules of the discourse, determined by his or her previous information. The tree-structure of the hypertext stems from the IF branching nodes included as links in the cyber-discourse. Apparently, the reader has a greater freedom of choice concerning the text he activates out of the virtual hypertext. Actually, people have always skipped words, paragraphs, even pages, while reading. Moreover, nothing could prevent them from going straight to the end (for instance, to learn who the murderer is or to see if a happy-ending is provided) and resume the

lecture from where it pleased them. Now, they are so-to-say compelled to take liberties only when the author thinks it is appropriate and along the directions he deems acceptable.

The iteration of arguments, similarly to the DO-cycle structure, takes the conclusion of a statement and works upon it in the same way that proved successful before. The tediousness is avoided by the directness of tone and the personalized account which try to capture the reader: *If he's lucky, the once proud ship-worker is now peddling his buff body to porn movie agents, praying he'll maintain his hard-on through the sex scenes all the way to the money shot, so called because, Faludi reports, remuneration is entirely contingent on successful ejaculation. No come, no pay.* Emily Eakin on Susan Faludi's *Stiffed* in salon.com, archives).

The same glittering, iterated discourse is to be found in Camille Paglia's column from salon.com: *Well, first of all, I think Naomi Wolf's parents should sue her alma mater, Yale University, for malpractice. If we judge by her clarity of reasoning and command of language at age 37, her education was a fraud. She was injected with passé feminist and post-structuralist doctrine at an impressionable age, and she never received the kind of disciplined training in high-level philosophy and intellectual history that she desperately needed.* (November 17, 1999.)

It is amusing to note that this kind of easy, self-repetitive, allusive, elegant and witty prose had been popular in French magazines, like *Le Nouvel Observateur*, even before the advent of the web: *Le mur de Berlin ou plutôt sa chute, personne ne l'a anticipée, prédite, ni même envisagée. Mais on s'est bousculé pour la célébrer, même en France où cependant personne n'y est pour rien [...] Invités: Gorbatchev, principal artisan de l'effondrement de la RDA, George Bush, qui lui a donné le feu vert, et Helmut Kohl, le réunificateur. On avait un peu l'impression de voir des fantômes. Rostropovitch leur jouait du Bach pour remercier Dieu.*[24] (Françoise Giroud, *Le Nouvel Observateur*, November 18, 1999.)

Giroud's texts are modularly organized. In the fragment above, one can notice the well mastered repetition, close to the list but not quite, the reiteration of diminishing assessments and the overtones of naughty witticism.

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[24]The Berlin wall, I mean its fall, is something nobody anticipated, predicted, or even imagined. But everybody rushed to celebrate it, even France, who had been the least concerned. Special guests: Gorbatchev [...], George Bush [...] and Helmut Kohl [...]. One would have thought to see some *zombies*. Rostropovich played Bach for them, presumably to thank God.

The Anglo-Saxon intellectual has always prided herself to be less frivolous and more consistent[25] than the Latin one. Consider, for instance, the knowledge-dispenser standpoint of the author in the following excerpt:

Art is the objectifying of the will in a thing or performance, and the provoking or arousing of the will. From the point of view of the artist, it is the objectifying of a volition; from the point of view of the spectator, it is the condition of an imaginary décor for the will. (Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation.* Farrar, Straus & Giroux, New York, 1969, p. 31).

Now, a simple comparison shows Camille Paglia, the Queen of anti-political correctness[26], closer to Françoise Giroud than to Susan Sontag. The cyber-discourse melted down the traditional opposition between commonsensical Anglo-Saxon wisdom and flippant French *esprit*. Once gone cyber, like stars in Heaven, one is bound to shine.

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[25]Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont's book on fake intellectuals is the latest evidence concerning this aspect.
[26] Conformism is still persistent: even Camille Paglia would shrink from being acclaimed the Queen of political incorrectness.