

# IS AN IMAGE WORTH A THOUSAND WORDS? NET REPRESENTATIONS OF THE BOOK INDUSTRY

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**Abstract:** *This study focuses on the book industry homepage, a digital genre which has emerged as a result of the many multimedia and technical capabilities of the online system. Traditionally, publishing firms have made use of catalogues, leaflets and brochures for information and self-promotion. With the advent of the Internet, however, these traditional methods have been gradually transferred to the digital context, which propitiates the evolution of existing genres and the emergence of new ones, the so-called cybergenres. By means of the homepage, publishing companies represent themselves and project their image on the new computer environment using a wide range of devices, such as icons, animated and non-animated images, and links, which make up the visual rhetoric of the genre. Nonetheless, the verbal element still plays a crucial role in the realisation of the promotional purpose of the genre, especially in the company's profile section.*

**Key Words:** *Book industry, cybergenre, homepage, visual rhetoric, promotional purpose.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

**O**ver the past two decades, western societies have experienced an unprecedented technological revolution as a direct consequence of the extraordinary development and subsequent democratisation of the new Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). Among these, the Internet has certainly become one of the most effective and widespread tools of modern communication, since it encompasses many innovative and resourceful features such as international scope, interactivity, non-linearity and bidirectional communication, to name but a few. Obviously, this powerful new medium has not remained unnoticed by the marketing departments of most industrial sectors which, faced with fierce

competition, have found in the World Wide Web an invaluable resource for information and self-promotion. One such sector is the book industry.

Traditionally, publishing firms have made use of catalogues, brochures and leaflets in order to promote their products and reach potential customers. With the advent of the Internet, however, these traditional methods have been complemented and gradually transferred to the digital medium, which at first tends to recreate those long-established paper-based genres (Crowston and Williams, 1997). But as a consequence of the intrinsic characteristics of the online environment, digital genres are bound to evolve and acquire new exclusive features that separate them progressively from their original counterparts, such as the possibility for the customer to order and buy online. In

other cases, the online medium allows for the creation of exclusive Internet genres with no counterparts in other media, as is the case of the website.

Previous research has focused on the websites of scholarly presses (Regier, 1998), university institutions (Ruiz, 2003), the banking sector (Fernández, 2003), the ceramic and tile industry (Posteguillo & Edo, 2005), etc. Amongst these, the work by Regier (updated 2001) is especially relevant to the present study, since it describes the standards that have gradually emerged regarding web design and offers a checklist of the most important features academic presses should include to maximize their sites, without losing sight of the fact that “[t]he primary use of a Web site is marketing.”

The present paper aims to contribute to this ongoing research by exploring the websites of a booming sector in today’s English-language-dominated market: the book industry, in an attempt to describe how publishing companies present themselves and project their image on the new computer environment, especially through their homepages.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Genre analysis has proved a most useful tool for the analysis and functional description of the conventional forms of communication traditionally used by discourse communities to convey information and to spread knowledge (Swales, 1990; Bhatia, 1993). As society changes, so do genres, which are precisely characterised by their dynamic nature. In this scenario, the

new digital media have triggered the evolution of existing genres and the creation of new ones (Crowston and Williams, 1997; Shepherd and Watters, 1998). These new Internet genres are generally known as digital genres or *cybergenres*.

Whereas traditional genres in non-digital contexts were identified and categorised on the basis of similarity in content and form, cybergenres are characterised by a third element: functionality, which refers to “the capabilities afforded by the new media” (Breure, 2001). Amongst such capabilities, the use of hypertext, the multimedia effect and an interactive audience must be highlighted (Fortanet et al., 1999). Within this genre framework, it is important to view the digital document as a text in its own right, as Breure (2001) explains:

Genre creates shared expectations about the form and content of communication and, therefore, is supposed to be relevant for the design of electronic documents. A document, here, should not be conceived as the digitized version of a text on paper, but rather as a container, which displays all kinds of content components, varying from text and images to animation, audio and video.

As regards a typology of digital genres, Crowston and Williams (1997) were the first to offer a classification of cybergenres based on a 1000-web-page sample. These authors identified 48 different types of web pages according to purpose, and classified them into two basic categories: *reproduced* and *adapted* genres.

A more insightful classification is that developed by Shepherd and Watters

(1998), which includes two main types: extant cybergenres, based on genres that already exist in other media, and novel cybergenres, which are wholly dependent on the new medium (figure 1).

Within the first category, two further types can be distinguished: those genres that are faithful reproductions of the original ones (*replicated* cybergenres) and those that have evolved by exploiting the technological tools of the new medium (*variant* cybergenres). Within the second category, there are novel emergent and spontaneous genres: the former have evolved into new genres, while the latter are completely new genres with no counterpart in other media.

One of the clearest examples of novel genres is the homepage. According to the

popular online encyclopedia *Wikipedia*, the homepage “is the window of the website and usually best reflects the site’s content.” Crowston and Williams (1997: 39) define it in the following terms: “A web page presenting personal or organizational information or the page at the hierarchical top of a website presenting this information.” Dillon and Gushrowski (2000) consider the homepage as a unique digital genre. And Shepherd and Watters (1999) include it within a typology of web genres together with the brochure, the resource, the catalogue, the search engine and the game. The main criteria for this classification are content, form and function, and accordingly the homepage is characterised as follows (figure 2).

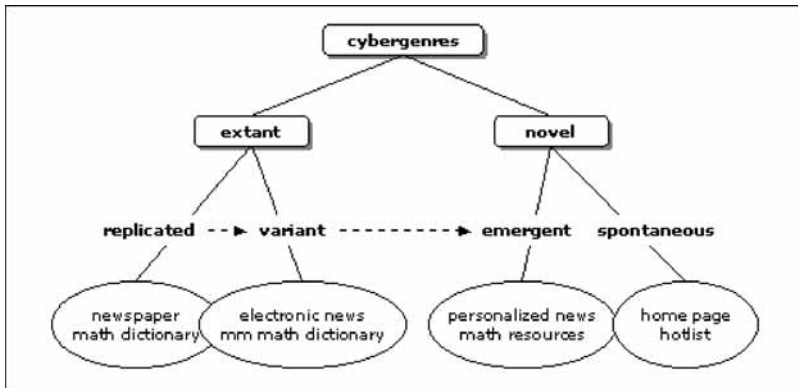


Figure 1. Shepherd and Watters’s evolution of cybergenres (1998).

| Cybergenre | Content                          | Form  | Functionality      |
|------------|----------------------------------|---|--------------------|
| Home page  | information about person/company | introduction<br>hierarchical<br>images<br>animated images | browsing<br>e-mail |

Figure 2. Attribute values for the homepage cybergenre.

These authors coincide in describing the homepage as informational in nature. However, as Bhatia (2004) argues, some informational genres may also display promotional elements, giving rise to a colony of genres that are partly promotional, partly information-giving. Therefore, book and film reviews, annual reports and company brochures would fall into the category of promotional genres, which are clear indicators of the phenomenon known as marketisation, that is, the mixing of information and persuasion for marketing purposes (Posteguillo, 2003).

Regier (1998) supports this idea when he affirms that scholarly press websites “make first impressions about what kind of press they are or what they aspire to be: sharp and clean or enormous and busy. Their site structures hint how the presses think.” Similarly, Goddard states (1998: 8) that “advertising is not just about the commercial promotion of branded products, but can also encompass the idea of texts whose intention is to enhance the image of an individual, group or organisation.” And, finally, also Breure (2001) argues that “[a]lthough the antecedents of the home page are unclear, some organizational home pages bear some resemblance to company profiles in printed material.”

Based on these grounds, the present study focuses on the book industry homepage in an attempt to determine how its structure and elements, both visual and verbal, combine to serve the promotional purposes characteristic of the genre.

### 3. THE STUDY

This paper explores the homepages of ten of the best-known publishing companies in today's English-speaking market:

Blackwell (<http://www.blackwell.com>), Cambridge University Press or CUP (<http://www.cambridge.org>), Longman (<http://www.longman.com>), Oxford University Press or OUP (<http://www.oup.com>), PanMacmillan (<http://www.panmacmillan.com>), Penguin (<http://www.penguin.co.uk>), Poolbeg (<http://www.poolbeg.com>), Prentice Hall (<http://vig.prenhall.com>), Random House (<http://www.randomhouse.com>), and Routledge (<http://www.routledge.com>).

Both Longman and Prentice Hall are brands of Pearson.

The study begins by exploring the way these firms project their image and represent themselves on the web, laying a special emphasis on the main criteria they follow to build their profile. It continues with an analysis of the visual rhetoric displayed on the homepage, especially focusing on some defining features such as logos, images, animation and links. This analysis also takes into account Regier's (1998) checklist as a main point of reference for homepage content and design. Moreover, an essential question addressed is whether the force of images overrides the verbal message conveyed. It is argued that, although the visual factor does exercise a tremendous power of attraction over the cyberaudience, the verbal element still plays a crucial role in conveying essential information about the firm and its products, and ultimately in engaging the potential buyer to order and purchase a book.

#### 4. THE VISUAL AND THE VERBAL AT WORK: AN EFFECTIVE ALLIANCE

The usability and effectiveness of a website structure has much to do with the links it offers. This feature is included in Regier's (1998) checklist for academic press websites: "Be generous with links and links to links. Link-rich sites are most likely to be kept as bookmarks." Links, which allow readers to weave through a site according to their interests and needs, are generally found on the front page, which tends to coincide with the homepage. In fact, all the websites analysed restrict the homepage to the opening screen. Another important factor is whether the website displays an accessible and easy-to-navigate structure (Ruiz, 2003), which enables and facilitates browsers to surf the site and find the information required.

The results of this study show that the typical links most frequently available on the homepage of publishing firms are the following: catalogue, shopping cart or basket, Frequently Asked Questions or FAQ (included in 'Information about the company', the so called 'About us'), contact, and copyright policy.

##### 4.1. The catalogue and the shopping cart

Since browsing is one of the key features of websites, all the publishing firms analysed offer their customers user-friendly links to access books. The catalogue functions as an index which organises products according to their genre or to the subject they tackle. Some homepages offer the catalogue as an entry within a wider index (CUP, OUP and Routledge), but the rest of them provide a direct link.

Apart from the catalogue, publishing sites generally include a section for recently-published books and bestsellers which provides technical information—regarding price, format, category or genre, number of pages, ISBN, publication date—and very often a blurb. Blurbs usually contain description, evaluation through review extracts and information about authors; they may also include a synopsis, interviews with writers, and book excerpts (Gea Valor, 2005). But bearing in mind that their primary purpose is marketing, all publishing websites offer links for ordering and purchasing the book online, usually through a *shopping cart* or *basket* represented by icons such as the following:



Moreover, all include a *search engine*, another user-friendly device which enables readers to look for more specific information or which, as Regier (1998) puts it, "allows a short jump to a sale (...). This is the greatest single convenience a press can provide for a user."

##### 4.2. About us and FAQ

The importance for any company to establish its background and credentials is evidenced by the fact that all the publishing houses analysed pay special attention to this information on their homepages. The study shows that the company's profile can be either accessed through the About us and FAQ links, or displayed on the very front page.

Publishing firms describe themselves according to very specific parameters, which include tradition and background, philosophy of the firm (excellence, innovative spirit, commitment to readership), usability, specialised subjects, and ranking in the market. The company's slogans allude to these qualities, as can be observed in the following examples:

-“Dedicated to the advancement of knowledge through publishing and printing” (CUP):



-“Excellence, tradition, innovation” (OUP):



-“The world's leading educational publisher” (Prentice Hall):



-“Poolbeg - The IRISH for Bestsellers!” (Poolbeg):



These slogans tend to be further elaborated into longer descriptions which unsurprisingly contain a high level of praise. As a matter of fact, company profiles can be equated with the very blurbs used to promote and advertise books. Examples:

“Cambridge University Press is the printing and publishing arm of the University of Cambridge, and the oldest publisher in the world. Its purpose is to further, through publication, the University's objective of advancing knowledge, education, learning, and research. Over the course of centuries at the forefront of publishing, it has established a reputation for innovation and excellence, publishing authors from around the world in every subject and at every educational level.” (<http://www.cambridge.org>).

“Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford. It furthers the university's objective of excellence in research, scholarship and education by publishing worldwide.” (<http://www.oup.com>).

“As the world's leading publisher of academic and reference textbooks, Prentice Hall is committed to providing the most innovative, flexible, and powerful educational materials available today.” (<http://vig.prenhall.com>)

“Books from Irish authors. Bestsellers, romantic fiction and new releases from Poolbeg, founded in 1976 and become one of Ireland's leading book publishers. We publish bestselling novels in the fiction, children's books, romantic fiction, non-fiction and literary fiction genres.” (<http://www.poolbeg.com>).

As can be observed, a very interesting feature in these self-promotional profiles

relates to the choice between the personal pronouns *it* and *we* to describe the company. While the former may be accounted for in terms of the firm's struggle for impersonalisation, with the latter the company probably tries to lay emphasis on its human side, portraying themselves as a collective.

#### 4.3. Contact us

All the publishing firms analysed offer customers the possibility of contacting them by means of the link *Contact us*. This link basically involves customer services, and enables users to make all kinds of enquiries—related to products and sales, inspection copies, marketing and publicity, rights and permissions, national and international branches or imprints, and even complaints about product faults, such as damaged books, missing pages or misprinting. Communication with the company has therefore become much easier and more direct than it used to be thanks to the online medium. Some websites even include information about job vacancies.

A closely related factor which is significantly present on the book industry homepage is the market or audience targeted (Bhatia, 2004). Certainly, all publishing houses work on the basis of a predictable readership but, regardless of this, some firms, particularly those that specialise in educational materials (i.e., Prentice Hall, Longman, CUP and OUP), include various user's profiles, such as teachers, students, academic scholars, children or professionals (figure 3).

Besides customers and readers, potential authors may also be targeted, so that some companies provide information about



Figure 3. Prentice Hall customer's profiles.

how to submit a proposal (Routledge), get a book published (Penguin) or send a manuscript (Poolbeg) (figure 4):

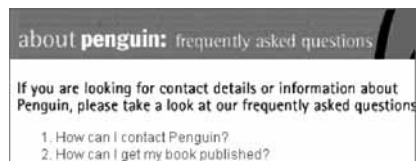
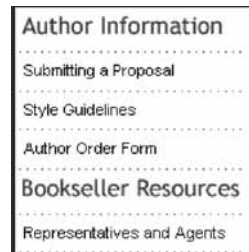


Figure 4. Routledge, Penguin and Poolbeg Contact us.

#### 4.4. Copyright policy

All the firms studied include information regarding copyright permission and legal policy, usually through a link to be found at the bottom of the homepage. This link may receive various names: Copyright statement (CUP), Copyright and Legal Conditions (Longman), Legal Notice (OUP, PanMacmillan, Prentice Hall), Terms and Conditions (Blackwell, Penguin, Poolbeg, Routledge) or Terms of Use (Random House).

This finding differs from Regier's (1998), who concluded that "[s]urprisingly, the vast majority of presses, large and small, neglect to inform users about rights and permissions. [...] Commercial presses are no better; typically the user must find the staff directory in order to locate rights and permissions." This change is probably due to the fact that in recent years publishing firms have made a remarkable effort to improve their websites, both in terms of design and information.

#### 4.5. Images and logos

Besides the links offered on the homepage, images and logos constitute another fundamental element for the construction of the visual rhetoric of the genre. The results indicate that book firms exploit the capabilities of the web by making use of images, especially non-animated ones, which generally show the front cover or jacket of new books, and photographs of the authors. In general, jacket images function as links to information about the book—usually content description and critical reviews—and online orders. When these images do not act as links, it is book titles, usually underlined and in blue print, that function as such.

Only one of the firms under study, PanMacmillan, exhibits animated images: book adverts that rotate or appear intermittently, one at a time, usually every four or five seconds (figure 5).

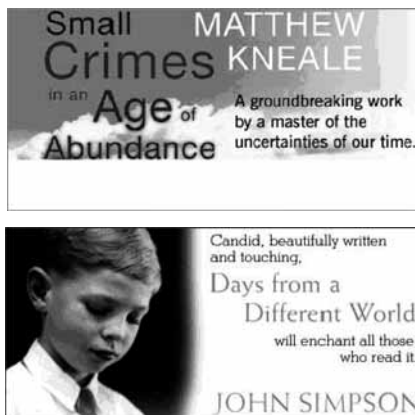


Figure 5. PanMacmillan's animated book advertisements.

This obviously functions as a more eye-catching device than non-animated images, and it is especially interesting for book browsers, who can sit at ease in front of the computer screen and be presented with the most recent products and bestsellers, without having to navigate through the site. However, the display is quite expensive, which might be the reason for its rather infrequent use.

Finally, company logos tend to be located in very conspicuous and visible places on the homepage, usually at the top of the screen on the left, which leads to straightforward recognition of the firm. Like jacket images, logos are also activated as links back to the homepage, not simply as decoration and identification devices.



In general terms, the homepages in this study follow the basic rules to maximise a website recommended by Regier (1998), especially the wide-ranging feature that reads as follows: "Include pages that answer fundamental questions: how to submit a manuscript, how to get to the press, who does what, whether the press publishes fiction, cookbooks, or poetry." Moreover, all the publishing firms update their websites

and homepages regularly, which is another key feature in Regier's checklist. Obviously, the online medium allows book companies to promote and exhibit their products as soon as they are released onto the market.

To illustrate the results obtained, Figure 6 shows the typical layout of a publishing firm homepage, which displays some of the basic links and features just analysed:

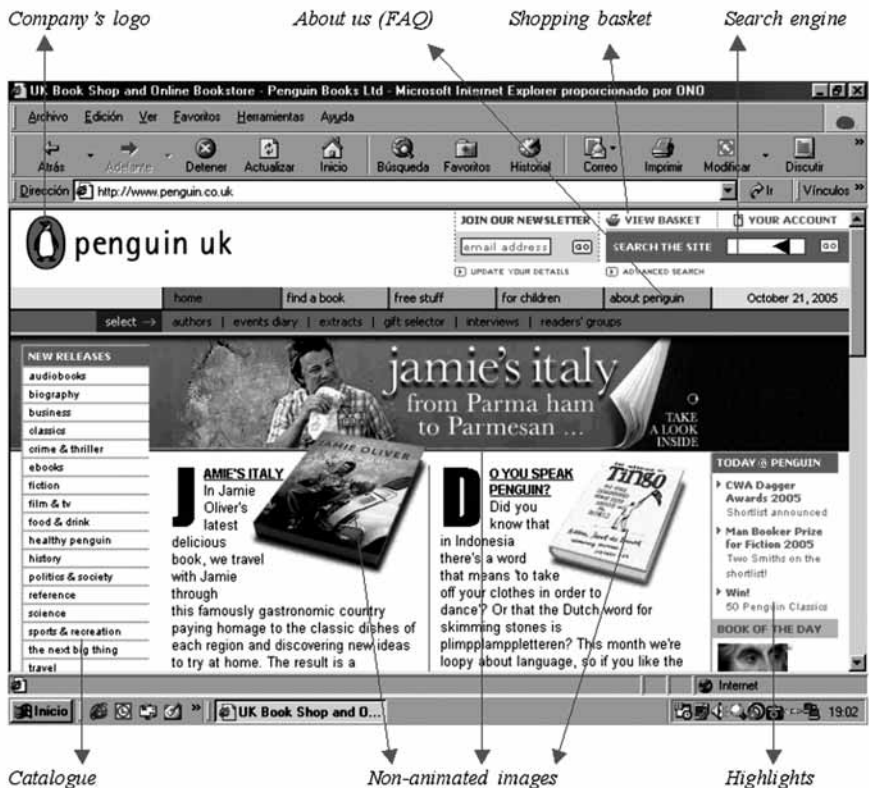


Figure 6. Penguin's homepage.

All in all, the verbal and the visual elements of the homepage are combined and work together to achieve a common purpose: the promotion of the company and its products. It can be argued that image acts both as an attractive complement to the linguistic message and as a visual aid for the browser to navigate the web more easily, whereas essential information is carried through the verbal message, so that both factors are responsible for the final persuasive effect.

## 5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In general terms, this study has tried to shed some more light onto the extraordinary impact of digital communication in traditional or long-established genres. It is undeniable that the new online medium not only has transformed old genres but has also given rise to new ones, known as cybergenres. Within this framework, the analysis has focused on the book industry homepage, which acts as a threshold giving way to more genres through the links it features. All the publishing firms analysed include accessible and easy-to-navigate homepages

whose structure includes a common set of links to guide the cybercustomer through the site.

Obviously, visual elements constitute an essential feature of digital genres, where image impact and the here and now effect seem to outstrip the capabilities of traditional paper-based versions such as the brochure or the catalogue. However, it is argued that the verbal factor still plays a key role in the unfolding of the rhetoric of the genre, so that both elements combine harmoniously in order to achieve the genre's promotional objective more efficiently.

In conclusion, the homepage appears to be a most effective platform for a company to project its image, offer its products and reach its potential customers. Further research could undertake a comparative study between traditional genres and their digital counterparts in the book industry (i.e., the catalogue) or analyse the possible differences in terms of web design and company image between publishing and bookselling firms, such as the well-established Barnes&Noble or the exclusively online bookshop Amazon.com.

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