Hartmut Stöckl

'There may be More to this Story than Meets the Eye' – Cognitive and Social Styles of Letters to the Editor in the National Geographic

1. Studying responses to media texts – rationale and objectives

Linguistics has traditionally been interested in the study of written texts as semiotic artefacts and structured products of human communication. The pragmatic, cognitive and social effects produced by them in the reader, although recognized as a concomitant aspect in any genre of communication (alongside production), have invariably confronted text linguists with difficulties. Of course, borrowing from psychology and media studies is one necessary way of alleviating the problems involved in studying reception. Yet solutions will mainly be found within the realm of Applied Linguistics as it is the linguist who commands efficient, meticulous and sufficiently complex models of communication, text, and methods for their analysis.

It is my claim here that letters to the editor provide a suitable genre for studying effects of text reception. As individual responses to media texts they are a kind of mirror of a reader’s cognitive activity and a window onto how textual information is perceived, processed and assessed upon reading. In popular science writing as practised by journals like National Geographic or GEO (in Europe) texts are addressed to a diverse readership. Some kind of transfer of knowledge between expert and non-expert is clearly at the heart of this kind of communication (Wichter/Antos: 2001) although other functions like entertainment or aesthetic pleasure come into play as well. Depending on a number of factors like social identity, previous knowledge of a given subject (expert, interested non-expert etc.), cognitive abilities, perception habits, communication and media awareness, motivation for reading science, text types etc. recipients will respond to a popular-scientific article in different ways. Prominent parts of these responses, mainly as compact evaluations of the author’s or editor’s journalistic (i.e. linguistic, visual and graphic designing) capabilities are made explicit in letters to the editor. With respect to the variability of responses both in terms of different takes on a subject (text topic)

---

1 For a detailed survey of English text linguistics see Thiele (2000).
as well as various views of accessing and appreciating content and design, textual style seems an apt concept to apply to the study of such letters.

Because of my interest in the analysis of visual communication (Stöckl: 2001, 2002a), I have sampled letters to the editors of the National Geographic which are primarily concerned with judging visual elements of selected articles ranging from photographs to maps and diagrams. This specific orientation is a reaction to a strong trend in popular science writing towards the inclusion of ever larger numbers of pictorial and graphic design elements (Jahr: 2001, 250-251). Generally speaking, I am interested in finding out how readers deal with images cognitively and which communicative roles visual elements play in the text total. This kind of approach can also shed some light on how relevant and valid in the widespread scepticism towards a greater reliance on the visual and its critique (Roß: 2001) really is with respect to the genre of popular-scientific journalism. Using letters to the editor as a means to gain insights into the perception, cognitive appropriation and evaluation of media texts, I open up a whole range of possible questions, only a few of which can be addressed in this contribution.

i. Which textual patterns are characteristic of letters to the editor and how do they support their pragmatic orientation towards evaluation and criticism?

ii. How are the letters embedded into a wider communicative process? Which factors of the situational and contextual set-up have to be taken into account?

iii. Which types of specific references can be made by the writers, i.e. which parts of the articles commented on (e.g. illustration of an entire article, individual photograph, relation between visual elements, relation between visual and verbal elements etc.) are focused on in the letters?

iv. What do the letters reveal about how we perceive images, how we talk about their properties and their communicative impact?

v. What kinds of cognitive operations engaged in by the recipient upon understanding and evaluating visual elements do the letters make explicit?

vi. Which assumptions about the production and design of the images and their link with the verbal text are constructed in perception and implied in the letters?

vii. What kinds of properties, i.e. critical appraisals of visual style, are attributed to the images commented on? How do recipients describe visual content?

viii. What kinds of typical arguments are constructed during the evaluation of visual elements? From which angles (i.e. views of communication, media, subject etc.) can writers approach the assessment of pictorial designs? Which general stances are taken here?

ix. Which linguistic features constitute distinct textual, cognitive and social styles in letters to the editor and what are their communicative strategies in tackling the evaluation of visual elements?

x. How do editors or authors of the reviewed articles respond to the criticism expressed in the letters?

In what follows I will mainly concentrate on the global communicative set-up and textual structures of letters to the editor, and most importantly on a description and typology of their basic cognitive and social styles. Remaining aspects will be cursorily addressed, however, when helpful in the discussion.

2. Genre specifications: letter to the editor

Letters to the editor naturally come in different forms crucially depending on the type of text they are supposed to comment on (along with the type of medium) and the pragmatic function they follow. They are a truly inter-textual genre in that they refer to the preceding reception of a text and generate the production of new texts in the form of ensuing responses or further letters (cf. Fix: 1993, 42). Ranging from short comments to complex interpretations, letters to the editor can pursue a great variety of discourse functions. Among others they can ask questions, request the clarification of details, correct mistakes, deliver missing information, share personal experience, express public feelings, offer alternative interpretations of subjects, appeal to the editors and the readership or express gratitude for journalistic performance. Depending on those communicative intentions they will employ different strategies. In essence, letters to the editor are a genre mix combining properties of letters (more or less direct address) with features of reviews (evaluative structures). They are located at the crossroads between person-to-person and mass-communication (Kniffka: 2001, 257). In order to detail these general observations to some extent, I will look at the wider communicative situation of letters to the editor and their textual structure.2

2.1 Communicative set-up and processes

Unlike most correspondence, letters to the editor are produced in direct response to a mass-media text, whose subject as well as linguistic properties, like readability, comprehensibility, explanatory and rhetorical techniques, entertaining and narrative qualities, and graphic illustration become the focus of evaluative comments. The style of the referenced text will thus crucially affect

2 Literature on letters to the editor is scarce, as Kniffka (2001, 269) points out, too. General linguistic properties of the text type are surveyed in Bucher (1986), Gläser (1990), Kim (1996, 811), and Wetzel (1998, 22f).
the nature of the argument developed in the letter. Text reception and text production are closely intertwined. As writers of letters to the editor are fully aware of the ultimately public nature of their piece of communication, they will set great store by presenting their ideas in an effective style that shows off their linguistic and cognitive skills as well as their social identity and ideological stance to their best advantage. In fact, this kind of verbal and ideological self-presentation can often be seen as a central motivation for writing the letter, which thus stands at the intersection between the private and the public. 3

The editors as the addressees of a letter do not confine themselves to reading and replying. According to an agreed media policy and to the specific circumstances they will select from a collection of letters and arrange them in a certain order, which will affect the way the individual letters are perceived. In addition letters might be complemented with a response, adapted to common standards of style and text design, cut down to size and given a heading. As a result original letters may be considerably altered. At the editors’ side of the communication the boundaries between reception and production clearly blur, and the private letter is transformed into a public statement.

Finally, printed letters to the editor become texts of their own whose reception fosters social identification and contributes to building a kind of readership culture. Their publication closes the communicative cycle as they act as a reply to the original letter (even when there is no actual response formulated). On the other hand individual letters or a whole set of them can initiate the production of new texts. So again there is a close unity of reception and production mediated by public discourse in a mass medium. The processes and relations just outlined are summarised in Figure 1.

It is interesting to note here that the editorial intention of stimulating the social exchange of ideas on subjects discussed in a given article is not really borne out well in the printed medium. In internet-based communication, however, a genuine forum for discussion can be provided by virtue of its new media potentials, i.e. ease/speed of communicative exchanges, immediate feedback, multiple address and unedited or unmediated transfer (cf. Brock/Seidel, in this volume).

---

3 Fix (1993, 32ff) emphasises the ritualistic aspects of the communicative processes at work in letters to the editor.

---

![Figure 1: Threefold units of reception and production in the communicative set-up of letters to the editor](image)

**2.2 Textual structure**

Despite their variability on the surface - a result of style at work, potentially manifest at all levels of text - letters to the editor display a rather stable textual pattern. This is due to a common pragmatic goal of the writer, namely judging a text on the content and/or form plane, which entails certain basic linguistic actions. An example from my corpus will show which obligatory and optional parts the text structure comprises. In practice, the adaptation of this basic pattern to the needs of a specific communicative situation is a function of many factors, e.g. social identity/social style, cognitive abilities, subject matter discussed, 'culture' of a medium etc. The specificity of some elements in the textual structure is due to the nature of the letters selected here, i.e. comments on visual elements.

**Sample text 1:** (1) Hunting with eagles (9/99)

(2a) I have always enjoyed your articles and found them to be informative, (2b) but the photograph on pages 98-9 troubled me. (3a) It looks like there is a strap around the neck and a strap around the muzzle of the fox, (3b) restraining the animal so it can't get away. (4) This is not the way to demonstrate to your readers that the force of talons can rip apart a fox. (5a) I am not an animal rights activist (5b) but concerned when any photographer re-creates a situation that is intentionally cruel.

(6) Donna Harrison, Pine River, Minnesota

(7) The photographer did not tether the fox, nor did he request that it be tethered for this photograph. (8) Capturing and restraining foxes to be used for hunting practice is common among this group of Kazakhis. (National Geographic 1/00: forum)

The text opens up with an editorial heading (1) indicating the reference of the comment. The actual letter then starts out by remarking on the quality of images in the *National Geographic* from the vantage point of a long-standing individual experience with the medium and its aesthetic and journalistic appraisal (2a). Against the background of this general statement reference is made to a specific photograph, whose quality is obviously in contrast to the accepted standard and
thus identified as the object of the critique (2b). This utterance expresses an emotional reaction to the image (cf. "troubled me"). What follows is a description of perceptual experience, registering pictorial content for one thing (3a, cf. "strap around neck ... muzzle") and the pragmatic implications of the state-of-affairs visually presented for another (3b, cf. "can't get away"). The ensuing utterance (4) then contains the actual evaluation which comes as a comment on the suitability of the picture chosen to illustrate a verbal statement. In (5b) this critique is intensified by insinuating that the picture was stage-managed, an assumption arrived at by judging possible modes of pictorial production (cf. "photographer re-creates a situation"), and expressing an emotional reaction (cf. "concerned") once more. The illocutionary force of the criticism is toned down by anticipating a social stereotype and denying to identify with it (5a, cf. "animal rights activist"). The letter conventionally closes by giving name and home of the writer (6). Finally, the editors' or author's reply (7-8) counters the criticism by rejecting the writer's assumptions (7) and pointing to the depiction of real life practice (8). From this relatively straightforward analysis the following text pattern can be abstracted.

1. explain general perception habits, media awareness or actual circumstances of reception
2. identify object of reference and evaluation
3. describe perceptual experience (emotional, cognitive)
4. evaluate the object referred to (explicit or implicit)
5. indicate authorship (varying degrees of specification)
6. reply to the evaluation (direct or indirect)

Figure 2: General textual pattern of letters to the editor in their published form

Clearly, the core of this textual structure is made up of 2 to 6, a basic combination which Bolivar (2001, 137) calls "triad" and splits into

the Lead (L) that initiates and selects the topic and a modality, the Follow (F) that continues with the topic, and the Value (V) that has the structural function of closing the segment and the discourse function of giving an opinion. (Ibid.)

Of course, the individual steps of the pragmatic procedure can be combined and some of them may also change position within the sequence. Whereas 2 to 6 are obligatory, even though sometimes in heavily condensed form, all the others may be omitted. Whether responses to letters are given seems to depend, among other factors, on the pragmatic orientation of the letter (request or correction versus criticism) and on the force and relevance of the critique.

---

Fix (1993, 42-43) also assumes a tri-partite division of letters to the editor, albeit different from this one.

3. Style: linguistic and social

The phenomenon of style remains somewhat nebulous even though it has been intensively investigated. Definitions of style are usually avoided (cf. Haynes: 1995) for, chameleon-like, it changes colour as we look at it from different angles. At least two major strands of research seem to be crucial for an understanding of textual styles. One concept of style can be labelled pragmatic or communicative and forms the focal point of much of linguistic-rhetorical thinking on style over the last centuries. The essential idea here is that style is the specific way of performing a linguistic action by adapting it to the concrete circumstances of a communicative occurrence. In this view every possible level and facet of a text can be the target of stylistic choices that text producers make in order to optimise their piece of communication. Aims pursued by style, then, are to reinforce its illocutionary impact or effectively convey its content. Bell summarises the essence of style in this conception in the pithy question: "Why did this speaker say it this way on this occasion?" (2001, 139; emphases in the original), and as a kind of rule he postulates that "speakers design their style primarily for and in response to their audience." (Ibid., 143)

Another important view of style is the socio-linguistic explanation of language variation, which is closely intertwined with the afore-mentioned pragmatic style concept. Here, style is seen primarily as a communicative means to signal social identity and define relationships between social groups (Kallmeyer: 1995, 9).

Moving beyond linguistic style into other semiotic forms, sociologists have coined the term social style (Schulze: 2000), which refers to distinctions marked through social behaviour as in dress, gesture/posture, consumption, intellectual activity or cultural preferences, including linguistic habits (cf. Hebdige: 1979).

The notion of communicative and social style entails that text producers are

agents in social (and sociolinguistic) space, negotiate their positions and goals within a system of distinctions and possibilities. Their acts of speaking are ideologically mediated since those acts necessarily involve the speaker's understandings of salient social groups, activities, and practices, including forms of talk. (Irvine: 2001, 23-24)

For a study of text and discourse this has a twofold implication. First, style can be seen as an expression of a writer's personal identity which is shaped by her/
his belonging to an ideologically relevant social group. Secondly, as style is essentially an audience-orientated entity, it can be deliberately stage-managed in a text so as to correspond to the producer’s assumptions or knowledge about the communicative and social style of the recipients addressed. The second use of style is particularly relevant for media text types, like advertising or news reporting, where purposefully adapted style serves to ensure communicative success in the way of sales or circulation (Habscheid/Stockl: 2002; Stockl: 2002b). Linguistic enquiries cannot afford to ignore the social component of style as “style is not just the product of the construction of social meaning, or even the locus of the construction of social meaning; it is what makes the negotiation of such meaning possible.” (Eckert/Rickford: 2001, 126)

Applying communicative social style to letters to the editor first of all means that an analysis ought to highlight ways in which the authors express personal identity and mark their affiliation with social subgroups of National Geographic’s collective readership. Textual levels to particularly look to are the subject(s) negotiated in the letter, the way the linguistic actions are performed (unfolding of textual pattern, see Figure 2), as well as rhetorical and aesthetic design (lexis, grammar etc.). However, I believe the social aspects must be complemented by cognitive factors that bear on the production and reception of the letters. Questions to be addressed here include the kind of logical arguments constructed, presupposed knowledge, level of emotional involvement, utilisation of one’s own experience, humour etc.

4. Three styles in practice

From my observations on the letters to the editors of the National Geographic printed in the issues of 2000 it seems useful to distinguish three different social and cognitive styles. They can each be described as a specific cluster of linguistic and pragmatic attributes that constitute distinct social meanings. However, overlaps and mix of stylistic traits will inevitably occur, as we are dealing with approximations, not with clear-cut categories. Using suitable examples, I will describe the three textual styles, which, for clarity, I have labelled by socially stereotyping the writers as the aesthetic moralist, the emotional narrator and the professional or knowledgeable expert. No claim to completeness is made here, and my approach has been structured by my interest in comments on visual elements.

4.1 The aesthetic moralist – moralising style

The styles at issue here can probably come into clearest focus when different reactions to one and the same popular-scientific article are set off against one another. This is because stylistic analysis is an inherently contrastive endeavour. Alternately, the traits of one style come out best when two similar responses to one article are compared and scanned for common features. Let me begin with what I have labelled the moralising style, an example of which has already been given in Sample I. The following two letters comment on an article about the botany and general geography of New Caledonia and show opposing views of the same phenomenon in the same style.

Sample text II: New Caledonia 1 (5/00)
(1) Thank you for not self-censoring the photo of top-free Western Caucasian women on a New Caledonia beach (pages 56-7). (2) This is a welcome break from the ethnocentricity of the past, when only “primitive” women of color were shown bare-breasted. (National Geographic 9/00: forum)

Sample text III: New Caledonia 2 (5/00)
(1a) Pardon me if I sound like a puritanical prude, (1b) but I found your inclusion of topless Frenchwomen to be less than classy. (2a) While there have been many photographs of topless women – and sometimes fully naked men – in National Geographic, (2b) nudity in primitive cultures is hardly intended to titillate but has a degree of innocence about it. (3) These cultures are not sexually charged or obsessed like our own. (National Geographic 9/00: forum)

Both letters are similar in that they evaluate the appropriateness of a particular image in relation to the overall content of the article (cf. Sample II: “welcome break”, cf. Sample III: “less than classy”). Although they both notice the stylistic salience of the image in question, Sample text II endorses partial nudity in the National Geographic, whereas Sample text III voices strong reservations about it. The basis for the evaluations phrased is a fixed personal point-of-view grounded in the attitudes and resulting expectations of content and design of a mass medium. The writers thus exhibit meta-communicative media-experience and -awareness. With a view to the textual pattern of letters to the editor (cf. 2.2), it becomes apparent that both Sample texts put their evaluation first and then justify it by giving reasons. Despite being partially implicit, the arguments developed are quite straightforward as they pursue clear-cut functional orientations, namely praise in Sample II and rejection in Sample III. The moralising letter’s illocutionary force is the ethical imperative of the ‘You should you should not do x-type, which is, after all, derived from a private aesthetic bias taking into account a medium’s public image and its tacit code of conduct.

Both arguments presuppose assumptions about the effect of the image on the potential recipient and its underlying process of perception. Whereas Sample II views nakedness as a general index of naturalness that functions independently from ethnic contexts, Sample III shares the conviction that nakedness when associated with contemporary culture is of an inevitably titillating kind and must, therefore, be avoided. Depictions of primitive peoples in a state of nakedness, on the contrary, are innocent and natural. Hence they may be shown.
As a rule, these kinds of hypotheses about the alleged impact of images are not spelt out explicitly, as they are more a matter of individual taste and sentiment rather than references to media theory on which one could build a solid argument. They reflect, however, popular folk notions of picture perception and visual culture that wield enough plausibility to sustain an argument. Cognitively, personal attitudes, tastes, bias, and homespun plausibility arguments make up the foundation of the moralising letter. Emotionally, however, concern or admiration created by content and/or design of pictures, which either grossly disappoint expectations or meet them completely, are at its heart. Most importantly, the moralist appeals to the editors and implicitly demands the conformity to privately defined standards of visual culture.

Invariably, moralising style addresses discrepancies between alleged authorial intentions and the communicative effects in actual perception as in the following example (Sample IV). Consequently then, the moralist’s critique is one of a misfit between form and content and between verbal and visual means of communication.

Sample text IV: Great White Sharks (4/00)
(1) You wanted to de-demize great white sharks and show that they are not the ruthless hunters of humans they are usually thought to be. (2) Yet you chose the ferocious and all too common toothy photo of the great white on your cover (2b) when inside you had some beautiful and mesmerizing photos of the sharks. (3) The cover photo and many of the larger photos inside do nothing but remind us of their toothier bits. (National Geographic 8/00: forum)

In Sample IV the author attributes an intention to the article as a whole (cf. “de-demize great white sharks”) and then goes on to claim that some of the images are not instrumental in achieving this goal (3) as they communicate contradictory ideas. Besides pointing out this discrepancy she also notes an inconsistency in the selection of the article’s images. While this judgement is intuitively plausible, it nonetheless remains private and based on individual taste. The social identity of the aesthetic moralist is primarily construed as belonging to the initiated group of the media-aware and the sensitive critics, for whom visual form needs to conform to personal taste and point-of-view.

4.2 The emotional narrator – narrative style
Visual elements of popular-scientific articles can also spark another kind of rather private response which aligns pictorial content with personal mental images of the realities depicted. Let us first look at another letter in response to the article about New Caledonia already referred to in Samples II and III. This contrastive approach will bring out the differences between moralising and narrative style quite clearly.

Sample text V: New Caledonia 3 (5/00)
(1) The beach in your article was Anse Vata. (2) During World War II it was populated by soldiers and sailors, all properly clothed, and – unfortunately – no women. (National Geographic 9/00: forum)

Instead of judging the appropriateness of the ‘topless women picture’ the writer in Sample V relates private memories connected to the place shown in the image. Rather than being meta-communicative he volunteers relevant information, which stems from distant memories of the site. The beach had not been located in the article, but used as a generic place to illustrate a point. Instead of taking issue with this practice he merely recalls experience which is in contrast to the depicted character of the beach (cf. “all properly clothed, unfortunately no women”). Here, a private ‘story’ is attached to an image.

Letters in a narrative style prototypically provide additional details connected to the chosen point of reference from a genuinely private angle. They take no specific critical stance other than sharing usually positive emotions or personal experience noteworthy in some way. Consequently the emotional narrator does not develop an argument, he merely pursues the communicative intention of venting his feelings. The paramount linguistic actions taken here are praising, congratulating or thanking the authors for taking up a subject or including a visual detail that has the power to spark off cherished memories.

Most prominently the narrative style reflects in the unfolding of the textual pattern. Whereas in moralising letters a certain view is advocated by developing an argument that naturally relies heavily on causal structures, narrative style chains events in a sequence and describes circumstances or settings of past actions and experiences. In the next, more comprehensive example (Sample VI) the writer refers to an article about Cuba, especially photographs of Trinidad, a place to which she feels a personal attachment.

Sample text VI: Cuba’s colonial treasure (10/99)
(1) Congratulations on your striking photographs of Trinidad, Cuba. (2) I was particularly thrilled because I owe my existence to similar photos from an earlier era. (3) My father, an artist from California, travelled to Trinidad after being inspired by photographs of the town in your January 1947 issue. (4) There he met and soon married my mother, whose family has lived in the region for centuries. (5) I have often wondered how many bicultural children owe their lives to the wanderlust triggered by National Geographic! (National Geographic 2/00: forum)

The letter – besides judging the quality of the images as particularly relevant personally in (1) and (2), and musing over the possible practical impact of National Geographic’s images in (5) – exhibits a prototypical narrative in (3) and (4). Seeing older images of the place that trigger wanderlust, moving there, and meeting and marrying a woman are the elements of a family biography, which directly bear on the writer’s ‘story’. Past orientation of the events, time-related actions, the singularity of the events and, perhaps most importantly, the
uniqueness of the story, which renders it worth relating in this context, are the core ingredients of any narrative (Stockl 2002a). On top of these the emotional involvement of the narrator becomes especially apparent in the Sample, as the author characterises the images as striking and thrilling. This perceptual impact is explained in the somewhat dramatic phrase "I owe my existence to similar photos," which underlines the emotional and genuinely personal attitude of the writer towards the article's content.

As for a writer's possible cognitive operations inherent in narrative style there is first of all the retrieval of private memories and experiences provoked by the perception of the images. As these memories come back in the form of mental images, they can be compared to the material images in the articles. This comparison then is the basis for a subjective judgement of pictorial (and verbal) content, which aims at comments on authenticity, typicality and emotional impact. Hands-on experience with a subject-matter is thus mentally set against mediated armchair experience. Social identities of emotional narrators are primarily personal identities, which are presented as the main point of the letters. No group affiliation, neither media-critical nor professional, is implicated here. At the receiving end, the editors will mainly perceive the narratives as testimony to the general relevance and positive impact of their articles, which is mirrored back to the readership as a kind of advertising for their own cause.

Letters in narrative style can also provide additional or contradictory information about an article. This is demonstrated quite aptly by the story of a mother who reports her outdoor zoological adventures with her three sons (see Sample VII).

Sample text VII: Earth Almanac (8/00)
(1) As the mother of three very active sons who are interested in anything that creeps, crawls, flutters, or flies, I often get close-up encounters with all kinds of critters. (2) Some of the more unusual ones prompt a quick trip to the library for identification. (3) This spring we were stumped by a salamander the boys had caught. (4) Imagine our surprise when we found a picture of the critter in question in the August issue! (5) Ours was a perfect twin of this threatened species, and described in an area where it is not supposed to exist. (6) All I can say is that it was very fat and healthy and seemed to be doing just fine in the pine flatwoods of East Texas. (National Geographic 12/00: forum)

Despite relating mundane personal experience, this letter has a professional ring to it, as it calls into question or corrects facts put forward by the article (cf. (5) "in an area where it is not supposed to exist"). Professional relevance is indicated by the practice of zoological identification in (2) and the description of the salamander's habitat in (6) (cf. "pine flatwoods of East Texas"). Otherwise the letter is a standard narrative, which typically confirms to Labov's (1999, 227) narrative structure with orientation and evaluation indicating some kind of affiliation with a professional readership.

4.3 The professional expert - expert style
So far I have discussed styles that do not seem to reflect specifically the nature of National Geographic as a popular-scientific medium. Exchange and discussion of special subject-matter related information is neither at the heart of the moralising nor the narrative letter to the editor. This is not true for the expert style of communication practised by professionals or well-read amateurs. Sample text VIII demonstrates the nature of this style. It refers back to the article on New Caledonia and can, therefore, be directly contrasted with moralising (see Samples II, III) and narrative letters (see Sample V) on the same subject.

Sample text VIII: New Caledonia 4 (5/00)
(1) You printed an article on New Caledonian botany with only one interesting picture of a New Caledonian plant. (2) Fascinating. (National Geographic 9/00: forum)

We cannot know whether the writer of this letter is a botanist, but his yardstick for judging the illustration of the article in question is clearly informed by professional ideas. At any rate he needs to have knowledge of New Caledonian flora to evaluate the selection of the images. Rather than just a comment on media design (as in the moralising style) his letter reads as a rejection of the unprofessional standard displayed in the illustration of the article, although moralising seems clearly involved here, too. Direction and strength of his brief argument can be gauged from the ironic tone (cf. (2) "fascinating"). Usually, though, expert style takes a rather neutral, matter-of-fact stance and elaborates rather compact arguments, as displayed by the next example (Sample IX).

Sample text IX: Feathers for T. rex? (11/99)
(1a) After observing a new feathered dromaeosaur specimen in a private collection and comparing it with the fossil known as Archaeopteryx [pages 100-101], (1b) I have concluded that Archaeopteryx is a composite. (2a) The tail portions of the two fossils are identical, (2b) but other elements of the new specimen are very different from Archaeopteryx, in fact more closely resembling Sinornithosaurus. (3a) Though I do not want to believe it, (3b) Archaeopteryx appears to be composed of a dromaeosaur tail and a bird body.

(4) Xu Xing, Institute of Vertebrate Paleontology and Paleoanthropology, Chinese Academy of Sciences, Beijing, China

(5) Xu Xing is one of the scientists who originally examined Archaeopteryx. (6) As we go to press, researchers in the U.S. report that CT scans of the fossil seem to confirm the observations cited in his letter. (7) Results of the Society-funded examination of Archaeopteryx and details of new techniques that revealed anomalies in the fossil's reconstruction will be published as soon as the studies are completed. (National Geographic 3/00: forum)

This letter highlights some general characteristics of the expert style. Its subject is informed by professional insight into the discipline discussed here and consists of expert knowledge, which can reinterpret and even call into question points made in the article on dinosaur fossils. The professional expert justifies
his conclusion by describing observations and outlining his argument from a knowledgeable and seemingly objective perspective. The professional stance is particularly obvious in the way the author exercises caution in expressing his conclusion: in (3a) he concedes his disbelief and in (3b) he hedges the crucial statement by saying “appears to be”. The argument developed in the letter pursues the communicative intention of outlining a theory and thus presenting an alternative view of things. In essence it is a causal structure, which links observations (1a, 2a, 2b) to a logical conclusion (1b, 3b) and thus generally follows the textual pattern established in 2.2.

While the letter is largely unmotivational, it explicitly spells out the kind of cognitive activity the author engages in upon and after reception of the relevant information. The fossil depicted in the article affords detailed inspection and can be compared to other specimens, a mental operation that demands visual skill and experience along with profound knowledge of paleontology. A number of stylistic features hint at the social identity construed in the letter. First, the piece of communication is full of special terminology connected with the field of enquiry, naming dinosaur species (“archaeoraptor”, “dromaeosaur”, “sinornithosaurus”). The same holds for the reply which refers to the examination technique used (“CT scans”). Secondly, the writer gives his institutional not his private address, signifying professional status and interest in the matter discussed. The same kind of explicit attribution of an expert social identity is made in the response, where the writer is identified as one of the scientists involved in the examination of the dinosaur fossils. Implying access to a private collection of fossils in (1a) also contributes to establishing the image of a highly engaged and dedicated professional.

Sample IX also affords a look at how the editors/authors of the National Geographic handle replies to letters. It is probably fair to say that there is a strong tendency to answer primarily those letters that ask direct, subject-matter relevant questions, which are of general interest or provide additional expert information complementing or reinterpreting parts of the original articles. Moralising and media-critical letters are obviously presented as an illustration of private tastes that do not warrant any replies. This also has to do with the editorial practice of publishing predominantly positive evaluations, which can then function as collateral advertising. Similarly, emotional narratives are regarded as self-evident comments and add-ons to article contents, private and idiosyncratic enough not to merit debate. It is the expert letters which lend themselves particularly well to responses as they contain sufficiently precise and erudite information, which can spark off feedback. In Sample IX the letter corrects theories put forward in the article referred to. Here, the response cautiously confirms the letter’s judgements by reference to similar research and emphasises National Geographic’s involvement in the entire project. It also serves the purpose of announcing forthcoming publications and thus keeping interested readers up-to-date.

The social group of experts can naturally not be a homogenous one, but rather represents a broad and graded spectrum. Whereas Sample VIII marked the ‘lower’ part of the continuum, i.e. people who can act as professionals because they are in a position to contribute relevant inside knowledge on a given, not necessarily academic or scientific subject, Sample IX indicated real expertise and professionalism stemming from their scientific involvement. The following letter (Sample X) demonstrates an interesting phenomenon within expert style that reflects the diverse and seemingly unpredictable pathways of text reception.

Sample text X: CartoGraphic (1/00)
(1a) When I looked at the map of the Internet, (1b) I was struck with an almost physical reaction that the graphic is undoubtedly what the map of connections in the human brain looks like in simplified form. (2) It seems to be one more confirmation of how random and non-linear our world is. (National Geographic 5/00: forum)

Here, a map of the internet provokes thoughts inspired by a different knowledge domain, namely neurophysiology/psychology or neuropsychology. For the writer to arrive at this morphological analogy, obviously an instantaneous and inevitable mental operation (cf. (1b) “I was struck with an almost physical reaction”), he needs to command at least some rudimentary knowledge of current theories of brain psychology. What hints at the semi-professional status of the writer is primarily the factual stance conveyed by his degree of certainty (cf. (1b) “undoubtedly”), the description of the brain map as a reality not just a model (cf. (1b) “looks like in simplified form”) and the somewhat bold and vague conclusion drawn from the analogy in (2). This kind of cross-domain association and reasoning is a good example of how popular-science writing facilitates communication across academic disciplines and fields of knowledge. Professional style, then, also functions as a means to integrate various degrees and shades of expertise.

5. Summary and conclusions

Discussing a number of text Samples, I have highlighted and described three distinct styles of letters to the editor of the National Geographic. Although there is some overlap and mixing between these styles (e.g. Samples VII, VIII), they mark different approaches to the reception and appropriation of popular science writing.

The aesthetic moralist shows an interest in the overall judgement of journalistic and media quality, which is primarily based on an evaluation of form and its appropriateness to an article’s content. He is also concerned with home-
made hypotheses about plausible communicative impacts of certain forms of presentation and media-literacy. The emotional narrator approaches media content from a genuinely private angle, which is informed by personal experience and memory. His take on the world is determined by sentiments and is focused on being part of a story. Finally, the professional expert takes a prime interest in the correctness and reliability of facts reported in articles. Based on knowledge of a given subject, he interprets media content, adds his own inside information and evolves alternative theories thus furthering communication within one professional group.

As a kind of practical summary the following three letters – all in response to an astronomical map of the Milky Way – illustrate the styles discussed.

**Sample Texts XI-XIII:** Milky Way Map (10/99)

The aesthetic moralist:
Would it be possible to send a copy of the Milky Way map to every self-absorbed politician, sports star, televangelist, and entertainment figure in the country? Galileo would be proud of you for this extraordinary document.

The emotional narrator:
As I looked at the Milky Way and envisioned it spiraling through space, I felt strangely at home. It looks just like the hurricanes that spiralled across the Gulf of Mexico on the way toward my childhood home of New Orleans.

The professional expert:
Why is there no hint of the Sagittarius dwarf galaxy, which is the closest known galaxy to our solar system? It is a major 1994 discovery that I think would interest most readers. (reply omitted)

(National Geographic 2/00: forum)

It was my claim throughout the paper that these styles must be recognisable by a set of features mirrored in the linguistic structure of the letters. The following table lists some of the most prominent categories which underlie the description of the three styles.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Moralising style</th>
<th>Narrative style</th>
<th>Expert style</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>content/argument</td>
<td>misfit of form and content/intention/medium's image; judgement – justification (causal)</td>
<td>personal experience and memories related to the image; chain of events</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>stance/viewpoint</td>
<td>personal taste, attitudes; subjective</td>
<td>private</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>illocution</td>
<td>praise, criticize appropriateness</td>
<td>express private feelings, appreciate content</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>emotionality</td>
<td>concern, admiration for media design</td>
<td>high emotional involvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cognitive operations</td>
<td>hypothesize about media effects, access fixed attitudes</td>
<td>retrieval of memories, comparison between media images and own experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>social identity</td>
<td>the media-aware and socially concerned</td>
<td>individual identity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3: Categories underlying the stylistic description

As style – in production as in reception and assessment – is always relational (Sandig: 2001, 22-23), that is dependent on a number of communicative and text factors, the utilization of one or the other style cannot solely be explained as a function of the writer's social identity. One of the most prominent variables influencing the choice of style in a letter to the editor is the text type and the content of the article responded to. Some text genres in the National Geographic, like short reports, photo stories or graphically presented material will certainly be open to all three styles and identities. Others, on the other hand, will set clear limitations and will only be accessed by a certain kind of reader.

Features about the social geography of countries or regions, for instance, which could be described as 'soft' popular science writing, will lend themselves particularly well to comments from the aesthetic moralist and the emotional narrator. 'Hard' scientific reporting from individual domains of academic enquiry, however, will mainly call on the professional expert.

There can be no doubt that further sub-styles and their finely-grained features would emerge if more variables influencing the responses to the perusal of popular science writing were taken into consideration. Yet the basic stylistic distinctions drawn here seem valid even beyond the domain of science writing. What appears to be central to studies of letters to the editor is that, invariably, they open up a panoramic window onto socially conditioned media responses and bring to light distinct sub-cultures of a mass medium's readership. The joint
publication of stylistically different letters in a kind of forum provides a mirror of a journal’s inter-culture, that is the shared cultural practices of a diverse readership. To the editors, likewise, the professional analysis of letters could yield a concrete idea of the socio-cultural width and depth of their readership and distinct ways of cognitively tackling and appropriating editorial content.

**Bibliography**


