DIGITAL EVANGELIZATION IS A SOCIAL, LINGUISTIC, NEW MEDIA EVENT!

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Revision History

Revision 0.1	20 April 2009	JF

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Part 1: new, social media event

St Francis de Sales is at least one forerunner of the daily newspaper in France and one of France's early pamphleteers (85 pamphlets gathered under the title *Catholic Controversy* which he began publishing on 25th January 1595). Faced with a hostile audience of renegade Catholics who had *gone over* to Calvinism, Francis adopted a simple measure by way of response: combatting the errors of the Reformation and calling his flock to re-conversion by means of pamphlets he wrote and mass-produced then delivered personally to the often closed doors of villagers and mountain dwellers in the Chablis, his chosen mission territory over-looking the beautiful Lac Leman which now divides France from Switzerland.

Combine this memory with Don Bosco's desire to *spread good books*, and his every effort to write and mass-produce good literature of all kinds, from biographies to refutation of Waldensian errors, to the Salesian Bulletin, and it must be evident that the Salesians of Don Bosco have a thorough publishing pedigree to be proud of. Yet this very pedigree can be a trap if it is interpreted in old media terms alone. The world of communications has changed dramatically from 16th or 19th century pamphleteering and printing. Today our messages have the Internet for their highway and the Web as their carrier.

The social factor

We have the power of social media, which might once have been mass and broadcast media but which now, in narrowcast forms have converged with low cost and even no cost technologies to help any individual publish influentially, accessibly, and in a way that scales from mailing lists for a restricted few to a million YouTube viewers overnight. As I write, the world is still marvelling at the overnight success of Susan Boyle's video clip. Susan Boyle is the frumpy, smiling, ordinary face of the online sensations of the 21st century. The 47 year old never-been-kissed (she says) Scottish woman was discovered to have the voice of an angel when she appeared last week on a British Television show. Within days she became the poster girl of how the internet age has re-written the rules of overnight fame. Within a week her clip was viewed by more than 20 million on YouTube.

Be it Francis or John or Susan, there is a common factor, the social factor. We do well to wonder about the personal factor in the formation of young digital natives, and for that matter older digital immigrants and even digital tourists, but we err badly if we overlook what personal, convergent media are in function of: new social media.

New social media, as understood in today's digital culture, enable every user to be a publisher, yet this very factor is often overlooked, or rather the power of the movement towards social media is often overlooked by the average individual. New social media may be changing the ways we organise society since they enable everything from loose confederations of people solving problems and sharing solutions, to individuals reaching a global audience when they want to or need to.

Given our publishing and pamphleteer heritage as Salesians of Don Bosco, we want to and need to reach that global audience.

Evangelize the new continent

Something is changing. New social media have enabled new and strengthened relationships. Consider that I could be writing this for someone in Argentina who wishes to think up an appropriate web space for a Salesian youth movement, but am writing it from Australia to also share it with Salesian publishers from all around the world in Rome. Consider too that new social media have brought about a new view of centralised institutions who have controlled publishing in the past. Today I can produce a website, for nothing, as good as media magnate Rupert Murdoch might produce one for the millions he has to spend on it.

It must be self-evident, then, that Salesian publishing on the web today needs to take account of and abide by the conventions of new social media publishing. The opportunity beckons and will continue to beckon; it will not go away any time soon. The conventions involve a high degree of interactivity via an increasing range of technologies. These can be described in varying terms: as *web 2.0*, *user-generated content*, *social networking*, *peer-to-peer*, *one-to-many*, *many-to-many* and perhaps in other ways too. Social media publishing forms today include personal publishing like *weblogs*, *email*, *instant messaging*; collaborative publishing like *wikis* or *online APIs*; social network publishing like *Facebook*, *MySpace*; feedback and discussion as in *forums*; aggregation and filtering as we find with *RSS*, and other personalised media like *social bookmarking*, *tagging*; *widgets* and *mashups* where content can be packaged from other sources or newly generated; personal markets like EBay.

Pope Benedict XVI has used a happy phrase in his 2009 message for World Social Communications Day. He has invited the young people of the world to "evangelize the new continent", by which he means the universal digital culture they inhabit. Almost certainly unknown to him at the time he wrote this, a book has been published in English this year bearing the title: [[Content Nation]] and yes, the square brackets are part of the title. It is by John Blossom, Wiley Publishing Inc., Indianapolis, 2009. Blossom estimates, with the help of the authoritative Alexa.com, that we now have via YouTube, MySpace, Facebook on the one hand, and any other form of social media like SMS or even email on the other, a new *nation* of content with an estimated (2008) population of around

73 million people. That puts it on a par with the population of a European nation like Italy. If this new *nation* or *continent* is to be evangelized, we already have the indication from an earlier Pope that it will require *new evangelization* with its appropriate techniques. I am suggesting that new social media publishing is one of those techniques.

This new *nation* or *continent* has a common language, programming, but with the advent of wikis, weblogs (blogs) and the search engine, which has levelled the playing field, the ordinary web and new media publisher has little need to know the intricacies of the language, since other aspects of today's technology make that almost as simple as point, type and click. But of course if the user does gain more fluency in the language, then the power to use it increases almost exponentially.

Salesian publishing in the digital era will continue to have a strong paper base, but it must also now take on a web base, and the important realisation (not yet fully realised) is that the two can co-exist but must not be confused. The particular power of social media publishing is to increase access, influence and audience. In terms of evangelization these are powerful tools.

Access, influence and audience

What is so different about new social media in publishing terms? They get their value from their ability to create countless contexts for content which are influential and highly scalable, far more than traditional media can achieve. They affect the social order differently. A myth that should be quickly put to rest is that such publishing is chaotic. New social media abide not by the law of the jungle, but by the law of the campfire. Engage with new social media; plunge in rather than merely dipping your toes and you will see how they handle conflict and competition via codes of conduct, protocols and peer moderation. One may of course reject all these, and then the result becomes chaotic, but communication of that kind inevitably does not last.

A useful metaphor for thinking about the relationships amongst social media is the starfish. Our organisational thinking is rather too much directed to the spider instead! A spider has 8 legs, it it could survive with one of these cut off, but it also has a head, and the spider will not survive if we cut off its head! The starfish, on the other hand is a distributed *animal*. Cut off one of its protrusions and you have two starfish! The *centre* is not the centre! This distributed, networked creature helps us understand how social media are different from more traditional media.

The social media product never, in a sense, leaves the factory. This means it is a true *project*. Indeed, and I can speak to this from personal experience, there is the phenomenon of the so-called *long tail*. The term comes from a study which saw the economic benefits of online material long after the more material products which are fixed in time and place have ceased to attract. But the effect of the *long tail* in digitalised online products is that they can be updated regularly, and are accessible to millions of small markets due to their wide distribution capacity and general openness. Change the model from one of economics to one of evangelization and we see the potential. My experience of the long tail is that a book published online but not advertised, found precisely the right readers who were then prepared to use the material effectively for purposes of evangelization, and were prepared to outlay the funds required to do this in a major way. The exercise was never about personal financial gain, but creating influence. It worked.

Another important difference is that in social media, content is seen in context, where *context* is defined as an audience that values the content. Traditional paper publishing pushes the *water* of content through the *pipe* of printing technology, leaving it to people to come to the *tap* when they need it. In the case of the *Salesian Bulletin*, the *tap* is often the Salesian community upon whom the distribution of the SB depends, so maybe we extend the metaphor to a garden sprinkler instead of a tap! Whereas new social media publishing, so widely and easily distributed (no Rector or Salesian community needed here), aims to put content more directly into value contexts by building a closer relationship between the content and its audience. The key factor here is that the value of the content really depends on the audience's perception of that, and to some extent on the way they experience it, something which can be varied through multimedia.

Think of how the *Salesian Bulletin* is usually published around the Salesian world. It tries for a wide audience but in a specialised context, the Salesian Family. The choice of wide audience may be motivated by two factors, one being of course the *spread good books* motivation of its founding publisher, but possibly also the desire to attract funds to maintain and further the Salesian mission. To a large extent the value of the traditionally published *Salesian Bulletin* depends on the work of the editor and the distributors. Think now of how a new social media online *Salesian Bulletin*, or for that matter any Salesian website will try to increase the value of its content by working on its context in a way that the paper edition cannot (due to its accessibility, scalability, and its influence potential). The *Salesian Bulletin* or the interactive, Web 2.0 website with its potential for user-generated content, rapid exchange, now becomes even more the content for a networked *vast movement of people* who share a com-

mon motivation, and it therefore has an increased range of potential micro-contexts within that vast movement, since it can respond more flexibly to them as they arise.

Influencing a conversation

I guess one of the fundamental differences, one which I have been hinting at all along, is that social media publishing is rather more about influencing a conversation between people than dictating some imagined results to them, no matter how good or fundamental or desirable we believe those results to be. This presents any hierarchically organised institution with a not-so-subtle challenge! We Salesians are perhaps too used to dictating the results via legitimate forms of traditional publishing. But what happened within traditional publishing at the time of the invention of the printing press between two centralized groups, Church and Publishers, is now extended to the mass of humanity, so it has become decentralized or *democratized*, but the result is similar. Church lost a great degree of control to what became conventional publishing. New social media are more adept at guiding a conversation than dictating a message. Think about that and its implications for Salesian digital publishing. The implications cannot be easily overridden; instead they must be worked with.

Social media comprises two terms. The latter term, *media*, tends to dominate our thinking overmuch. Media means broadcast or narrowcast technology. But it is also true that new media technology has become much more people friendly, so let's focus a little more on the *social*. One hears this appeal anyway, as I recall from a recent meeting of Social Communications delegates when a *traditional* Salesian publisher made just that point: "Let's not overlook the *social* side of communications; Salesians are well trained in ordinary communication skills". Of course he was pointing to the danger of over-fascination with media of any kind, and under fascination with real face-to-face communication, but his point has other implications. We also need to translate our nicely honed social skills into new social media outlets.

If the Salesian is good at social skills, we now need to do some re-skilling to convert all that to profit also from social media which are as much communication patterns revisited and enabled by technology as they are simply the technology itself.

Of the *new audiences* we can reach out to, some are travelling in the same direction as us, though for different reasons. Or they may be going in different directions, but with compatible motivations. If Don Bosco had already indicated that we need to help people join forces for *the glory of God and the salvation of souls* and would have been prepared to tip his hat to the devil to achieve that, he might have even genuflected to social media with its enormous potential in this field!

Having focused on the term *social media* thus far, let me now take it as understood that I am referring to Salesian websites and other manifestations of the social media phenomenon, though I am certainly indicating that the websites will essentially involve some if not all the new technology possibilities in this regard. A *Salesian Bulletin* online will need to be another Salesian website of the social media kind, not a fish-with-feet confusion of old and new media.
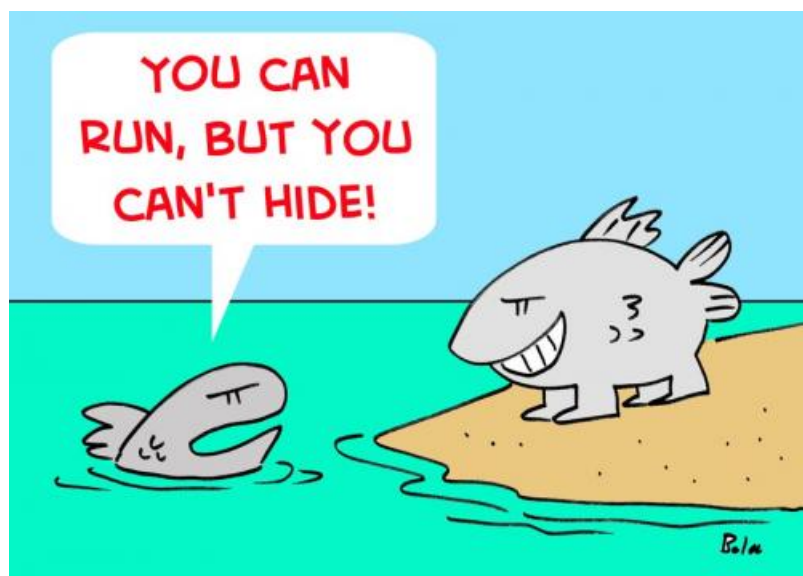
Salesian new media publishing creates *third spaces* where people congregate and where local influence can become global influence. It will invite people into public space in a way similar to the better known social networking sites, but it will do so in a way that can be undeniably Salesian, reclaiming that public space to help define a new sense of society in Salesian and religious terms. Habermas, who had long argued that religious people had to *translate* themselves into the secular to inhabit the public sphere, has now shifted strongly to the view that they may and should *explain* themselves in their own terms. Democratic society depends on it!

Facing the consequences of new social media publishing

New media are about having influence over others through publishing. It follows that they affect power structures in human groups, especially groups already prone to publishing! A traditional editor is likely to be suspicious of new media publishing because it is likely to diminish the power the editor appears to have. This does not mean anarchy, or rule by the mob. It may mean something as simple as a more collaborative or team management, where members of the team may in fact be some of the users who emerge as leaders, or catalysts, or major contributors rather than being picked from central administration for that role. The experience has been that social media thrives when influence is based on what the participants (those we might have once termed *the readers*) choose to have as influence over their participation. This does not mean that the central organization, in this case the Salesian Congregation, no longer has power in its particular new media publishing venture. What it means is that this power is now exercised in a different context, a context where we can assume that the users are using the venture because they want to build a closer relationship, which becomes an invitation to study how influence in both directions may be exercised.

The challenge is to do with Salesian new media publishing what it offers as its greatest opportunity: finding the right persons at the right time in the right contexts so they will pay attention and trust what is being offered.

This challenge involves insights into new media design.

Part 2: language event

New media should be structured by invisible underlying patterns that connect image, sound and text into meaningful wholes. We are used to the linear structure of human languages. New media *language* is best expressed by non-linear models. But these non-linear models are all accessible to us, since we are all speakers of a natural human language.

And here lies another of the major differences between traditional paper publishing and new media publishing. The traditional publisher's time and effort is taken up with collecting text and pictorial material, and arranging that according to long-established layout principles. The editor may need or want to edit the text and images, and will do so according to intuitive understandings and competence with language and layout.

In the case of new media design, these intuitive understandings and competencies with respect to language will need to be more explicit, because the task involves two separate *translations* of either existing or implicit (i.e. lying behind the existing design, even if never written down) textual material. The first translation is from natural language into the underlying patterns expressed as a non-linear model; the second translation is of this to the interface. Avoid those two steps by simply intuiting a web (or CD/DVD) design, or worse by asking some Firm with no real knowledge of our Salesian *language* to do it, and the result is more likely to be a traditional publishing effort masquerading as a web one. Fish with feet!

The two translation cycles

A web page may involve text, images or other media (audio or video), but it invariably must *tell a story*. This story may be mostly in text, in which case the textual element is explicit, though already a translation of an underlying text pattern into a narrative style interface, or it may be partly or almost hardly at all in text, in which case the textual element becomes implicit, and expressed through image, sound, video with or without some text.

At this point the new media designer (who is often, in Salesian circles, the webmaster) needs to call on his or her mother tongue skills! We know the basic structures of our language, and that verbs, nouns and other grammatical categories give us all kinds of information. It is this information which now becomes crucial for new media design. I am writing this text in English, but it will eventually be translated into other languages. Some aspects of grammatical categories and relationships are universal, others are particular (e.g. some languages write right to left). But the native speaker will understand and have studied these. If not, he (or she) should not be designing websites!

Language is patterned to represent three broad types of meaning: Ideational (information), interpersonal (interactive), textual (achieved by foregrounding, where we highlight something, perhaps by first or unusual position in a sentence, coherence, where the story *holds together* or makes sense, and cohesion, which is a system particular to grammar for signalling relationships, like pronouns or other reference). There are systems of choices that the web designer can make for each of these, choices which will be driven by both communicative purposes and the target audience. In fact, making these choices is what we will call the *first translation*. They are choices to do with meanings shared by the conventions of language and the people who speak those languages in, as we have said earlier, certain contexts. For the Salesian web designer and user, the Salesian story and mission is what adds certain value to language-in-context.

The first translation

A website's or a CD/DVD's contents involve meanings which are derived either from real text or implied text. If I am faced with turning a printed product into a web site, for example the printed version of the Salesian Bulletin, I will have failed new media criteria (except the desire to have a digital archival repository) if I simply convert the real, explicit text and images to pdf and present this as *the Salesian Bulletin online*. Instead what I need to do is to first analyse the printed text(s) for the way their grammatical categories suggest particular meanings. This will involve semantic relationships as expressed by verbs (e.g. *having* or *being*, *part of*, *kind of*, comparison, and so on), or nouns and their position in the sentence as subject, object, actor, agent, and so on. Then I need to look at the use of images and their relationship to the text and its meanings. In the end, it is desirable for a web designer to have studied how his or her language handles cohesion and coherence. There are any number of good textbooks available under the general headings of either or both *discourse analysis*, *text linguistics* in many of the world's languages. Study in this area will repay well.

However, no need to panic at this point! The best thing to do is to avoid too much detail and spend time with the already given text or the idea that you would express in text, considering its overall structure. What stands out? Is it fundamentally a classification of material, in which case use a tree diagram to represent it, or lots of attributes of a central idea, in which case use a star, or is it a comparison of entities according to their attributes, in which case use a table, or all kinds of different relationships in which case a network or combinations of models (most texts will end up being this latter). Do not overlook a basic Given-New and/or Ideal-Real possibility either.

If I do not have explicit text as a starting point, and am instead wanting to start up a new website from scratch, I do actually need to turn my ideas into explicit text, to write a paragraph or paragraphs, and then analyse what I have written as suggested above. The level of analysis involved does not have to be to the degree that the trained linguist might do. We are not speaking of a university degree in linguistics here but a deeper appreciation of the structure of one's own language as natural speaker. Otherwise how would we *translate* textual/image meanings into new media interfaces?

The meanings that I extract are now turned into non-linear models. This two-phase analysis (meanings and models) thus far is the first translation. There is a finite list of non-linear models:

- **Given-New**: My explicit text (originally explicit or ideas ultimately converted into such) presents information which includes the given or the already known (and usually unproblematic). In web design this is usually placed on the left. The new, on the other hand is unknown, a challenge, and is placed on the right. This scheme works similarly for images. Speakers of right to left languages will work in reverse. A navigation list on the left is usually *given* material, known material, while other links, for example to other sites (the *unknown* or even *problematic* or *future* in this context) are on the right. The links themselves then are *given* with respect to their information on another page, which is new, so the Given-New non-linear model is three dimensional as well.
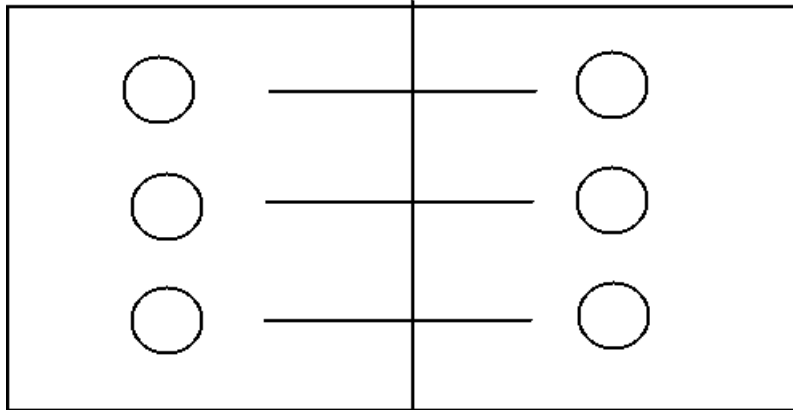
Given and New

- **Ideal-Real**: The more idealized versus the details, or documentation, or the real. The Ideal is usually found on the top of the page and the detail or documentation below. This scheme is found also in images such as certain religious images (think of an image of the Virgin on a statue, with someone standing looking at it - below, in the image). Advertising also exploits this model. In a website the Institution's logo or key personage (Don Bosco?) may be found in the top-left corner of the page (also combines with the *Given-Real* model then). Where a site has both image and text it often has the image on the top, and the text below. Major task buttons will be found at the top (ideal) and subsidiary task buttons below (real - practical).

- **Star**: (centre-periphery; nucleus-satellites). This model is mostly a relationship of *characteristics, attributes or material which defines identity* (modes of being and having, or actions, activities). It is often also used for a splash page. The star format can combine with Given-New and Ideal-Real. A common way of navigating is with an alphabetical index put on left (given) with less usual and more innovative navigation modes (maybe a gallery) on the right.
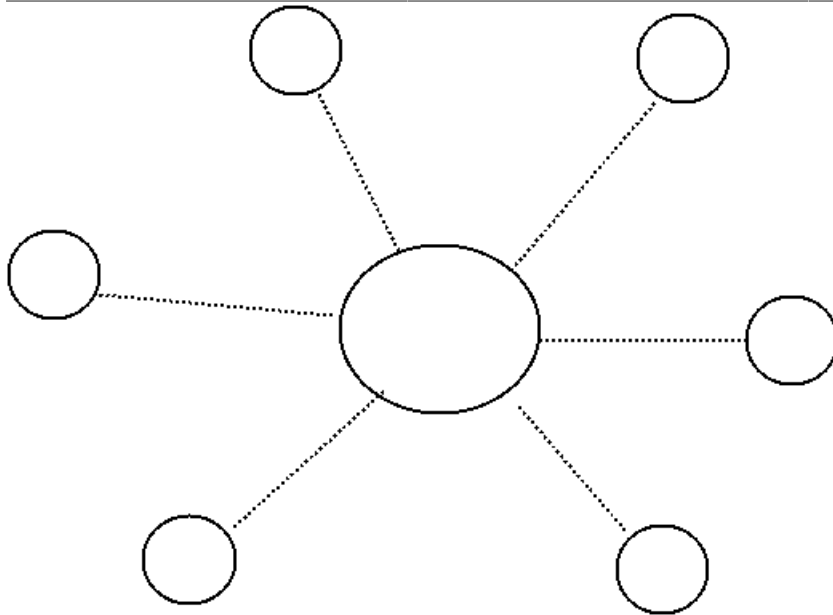
- **Tree**: The tree model *classifies into hierarchies*. The semantic relation is always one of inclusion: *kinds of* or *part of*. Trees lend themselves to demonstrating differences. But careful here: tables of contents in books tend to be trees only in a physical sense. When a book's contents are analysed for semantic relationships they tend to be complex non-linear models which I will explain further on. A frequent error in web design is to take a *book* idea of navigation, work with a *tree* and think that this ensures clear semantic relationships. It usually does not.
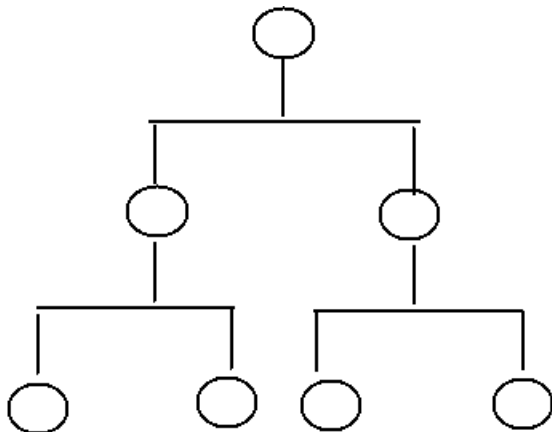

- **Table** (Matrix): Tables are used for *comparing different items* of information. Key elements may be listed vertically. Attributes may be listed horizontally. This non-linear model is good where there are lots of attribute details involved.

	Feature	Feature	Feature	Feature
Entity 1				
Entity 2				
Entity 3				
Entity 4				

Table

- **Network** (web): This model is good for showing relationships between items that are *not hierarchical (not trees) and that are distributed (not stars)*. Relationship between nodes can be *a is like b*, *a combines with b*, *a co-occurs with b*, *a does something to b* or something else of the kind. Some nodes can be more important than others because they have more links, so there is not total equality in network models.
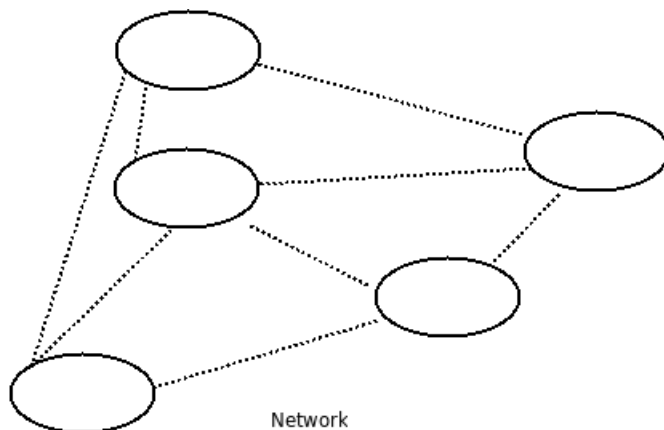
Network

There can also be complex non-linear models where it might be the tree, or star, or table or network that is the main component, but another model or models is/are also involved. How do we tell all this? Again, it goes back to a careful reading of the explicit or implicit text, and a certain degree of interpretation of this. Extracting non-linear models from text is never intuitive. We need to learn a new skill, one which linguists always apply: look at the first paragraph, the first sentences in the paragraph, the first clauses in sentences - these will usually give us the required information. But as indicated earlier, it is up to the designer what level of analysis to apply - and probably it only needs to be basic, leaving out what might often be very complex non-linear models. The important thing is to clearly express the semantics of a text in an appropriate non-linear model which is consistent with those meanings.
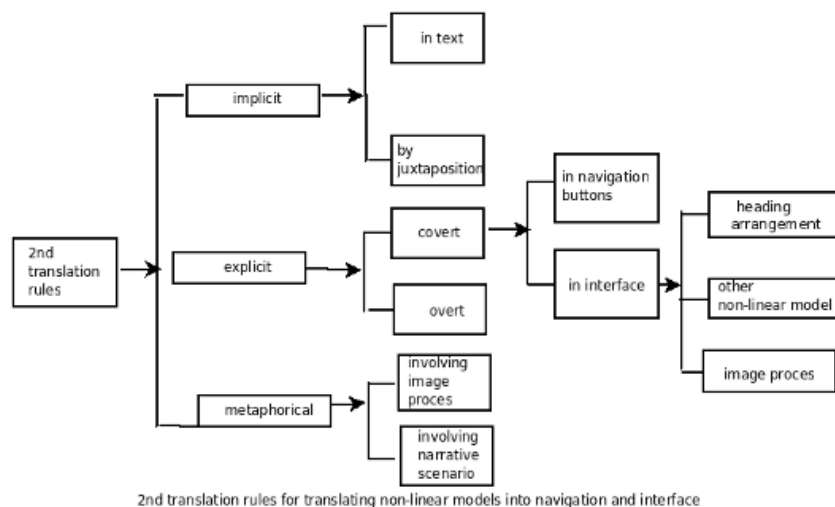
The second translation

Now comes the interesting part from the web designer's point of view, turning the non-linear model into a new media product. This translation consists usually of two parts, though it is possible to telescope these into one: storyboard, product itself. The storyboard is a sketch of text and image with indications of which pages lead to which.

Second translations are motivated by the model and the target audience. The list of possibilities is finite at one level but of almost infinite creative range at another. The finite list of possibilities is as follows:

- Implicit and explicit: An implicit second translation converts part or even all of the non-linear model back into linear text. This could be text somewhere on the screen or text expressed by navigation links (underlined words or nav buttons or images). In this case the nodes in the non-linear model are being re-expressed on screen or parts of the screen and the relations between them are links. However, note that the precise relationship between two nodes will not be expressed simply by clicking from one page to the other, therefore it has to be expressed visually on the page from which the link proceeds. The relations might also be expressed by juxtaposing text and image or image and image-text. Explicit translations use a variety of ways to express the model

- **Overt and covert**: In overt translation, the non-linear relations are translated iconically into a form resembling the non-linear model itself, so for example if the non-linear model is a star, then something that looks like a star appears on the screen, even if it is not exactly a star. There are various types of covert translation:

  - **navigation** (device, bar, or underlined words; the nav bar itself determined in various ways, for example as a tree, achieved by relative positioning, typeface, font)

  - **interface** (headings, or by another non-linear model such as Given-New, image processes such as a familiar and less diagrammatic form. It could be a classificational process. The relationship in the semantics remains explicit but the translation is covert). Remember that non-linear models represent how we understand texts. New media products should be based on a well-thought-out non-linear model adequately representing the underlying semantic structure of a text or domain. But the *second translation* also requires some familiarity with *graphicacy* - language, visual communication and navigation devices.

  - **Metaphorical**: A metaphor involves transference on the basis of a perceived analogy. These translations may involve an image process or may even be based on a narrative scenario. An excellent example of this was achieved some years ago by Belgian Salesians when they produced an interactive CD meant to tell the Salesian story for young people.

2nd translation rules for translating non-linear models into navigation and interface

Some clues as to second translation possibilities

Given-New does not translate into covert or metaphorical forms, it seems.

Stars are often overt, but they can be covert in various forms, and metaphorical. How many metaphors of a star can you think of?

Trees as overt do not seem to have taken hold much in web design, though it would be interesting to take another look at the Strenna video for 2009 to see how it has been achieved, then think of how to represent the same ideas on a website. Covert trees are amongst the most common of web designs but often do not realise the semantic relations and tend to be like books. Implicit translation of tree into text is common, or into nav buttons. It could also be achieved through an arrangement of headings. Trees can also be translated into other non-linear models (Given-New, Ideal-Real, image process, metaphor)

Beware covert trees masquerading as semantic but in fact just showing physical inclusion as in a book index or table of contents.

Tables must not lose their semantic *comparison* relationship. They could translate into text, juxtaposition. They could also be overt and achieved through navigation even, or by arrangements of headings, image process, metaphor.

Network models are rarely translated as overt, though you will find this translation in something like the visual thesaurus. They are often expressed as a horizontal navigation bar. Rarely if ever do we find network translated into interface.

An advantage of this systematic approach, quite apart from the fact that the resulting new media design is clearer, often more creative, and semantically truer, is that it brings gaps to light.

Putting it all together

The first and second translations will have already suggested the need to think of how the web site (or CD/DVD) looks from a three dimensional view, or in other terms, how screens connect as the user drills down through the site. How does one screen generate the next? This also needs to be true to the semantic pattern that has emerged and been expressed through the *translations*. There are alternatives to the over-used Main heading and row of navigation buttons!

In other words, some attention needs to be given to how screens are sequenced, and how this sequencing remains true to the non-linear model. Think of the *flat* model now as a three-dimensional model. A page will tend to outline a main concept, then condense that again through your navigation choices to be expanded again at the next levels down.

Fundamentally, though, think of this in terms of mapping the model (its nodes) to your chosen interface. And consider which layers of structure are to be left out. Web design does not attempt to include everything. Depending on strategy and target audience, some levels of structure may be inferred rather than included and made explicit. But do the links you have chosen remain true to the semantic relations between the nodes that have been expressed in the first translation? Does the second translation suggest how you might do this? These are the questions to ask.

Hopefully the end result of the entire exercise can be Salesian websites which are a powerful tool for the glory of God and the salvation of souls.