

Conversation with Francis Pisani: The Popular Custom Journalist Serving the Web

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PISANISM, the new "Larra" conceptualization approach to depict the social Web.

Anyone who's read Francis Pisani (<http://www.francispisani.net>) in any of his three working languages of French, Spanish, or English in publications like *Le Monde*, *El País*, and *Reforma*, or at *Soitu.es*, or through his blog (<http://www.transnets.net>), might be convinced that he is an exquisite, pedagogic journalist-artisan of last-minute information on new social media and technology, fed by a portfolio of excellent contacts, simple prose within a descriptive one based more on his verified, "open air" (and unconventional) field laboratory, conventional, empirical detract one iota from the intellectual savoir-faire to the level of a everyday Web user's narrative somehow to the literary virtual relations with his followers. (commonly known as Larra, 1809- would undoubtedly do on the Web freelance blogger rather than as an newsroom.



Francis Pisani

relations, and primary sources. He uses genre to give form to his opinion — the extensive, and genuinely personal work experience than on any indoor scientific evidence. But this does not value of his writings. He elevates his methodic, autobiographic, and routines, rituals, manners (similar *costumbrismo* style), and compulsive It's as if Mariano José de Larra (1837) were writing today, which he and probably as an independent and editor or reporter employed in a

Pisani does not get into the psycho-cognitive and statistical realm of the perceptions and sensations directed at determining the conditioning factors of market segmentation and satisfaction, loyalty, and repetitions of visits or purchasing trends, probably because he doesn't need to and because that's not his ontological research interest. His objects of study are individual and collective social Web and Internet content and digital devices transformations, as seen through the individual testimonies of industry leaders, entrepreneurs, executives, educators, regulators, and especially, mainstream Web "users" (probably a more apt description than "consumers"). He interviews his subjects face-to-face, as he started doing in the 70s, both in the Sandinista Revolution in Nicaragua and the Carnation's one in Portugal, and much more recently online. His basic informal research technique is trial-and-error, yet his theoretical framework, based on field work, is reminiscent of grounded theory that has been applied by cultural anthropologists such as James Clifford. But after exploration, he tends to internalize results

instead of externalizing them, as if he were an analytical philosopher who, following the process of "Internet logic," shapes his worldview on the language of the Web in order to give it "common sense." Only then does he journalistically proffer his vital and professional conclusions.

Based on his journalistic-operational structure, he invents a term that has sufficient conceptual amplification in itself. Consider *webactors*, which contain hints of a self-portrayal in its delivery and explanation, as Pisani describes himself as a "social animal" before the advent of the Web. "Digitally interpreting" Giovanni Sartori's *bubble-up* model for the construction of public opinion (a flow, which is originated by the mass and arrives to the elite), Web democratization in Pisani's mind-set would not be linked to the vast number of "common-people" with access to the Internet, but rather to the greater number of them who freely (absenting power hierarchical barriers) elaborate, download and specially upload written and audio-visual information, opinion, and entertainment content to and from the Web.

His latest book, *La Alquimia de las Multitudes*, (Paidós Comunicación, 2009), originally published in French, then translated into Spanish with co-author Dominique Piotet, sets its *pisanistic* sights on the habits and trends of the most diverse (all ages and origins) range of Web users. At the same time, Pisani's work retains some vestiges of Clifford Geertz, perhaps a result of his being driven by "the intense and incessant logic of the Web," as he puts it.

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The following conversation was conducted with Dr. Francis Pisani by Dr. Samuel Martín-Barbero on February 23, 2009, at the IE School of Communication-IE University, on the Segovia, Spain campus.

SMB: *Francis or Dr. Pisani? What are you — a guru, a trend-setter or an early adopter?*

FP: "Francis," please. I'm an old journalist who has a lot of fun following things that are changing, from one of the places where those things are being renovated at an intense, relentless pace.

SMB: *What do you get more excited about, writing a "print newspaper column" in Le Monde or a "digital site column" at Soitu.es?*

FP: They are two very different things. I live in both worlds. I publish almost nothing in-paper in France. I only have a blog at the *Le Monde* Web site. In Spain, until just a short while ago, I only had a column in *El País*, and I had no presence online. The two systems don't reach the same people, and to a certain extent, the beautiful and fun thing is that neither of the two worlds work, but they aren't dead. I don't think that the role of print paper is condemned, although it will probably be a minor role in the future. However, I am convinced that the fundamental focus has to increasingly be on Internet multimedia production, not only as something that is done in addition to the original text news and editorial production, but as the main or central point, with radio, television, and print newspapers being kept to the side.

SMB: *How is it possible to be deep into thought and at the same time be at the cutting edge, as a trailblazer in the way you stay ahead when putting into practice what is offered by the Internet?*

FP: First, you're attributing virtues to me that I'm not so sure I have. But let's say that the key in both cases is curiosity, which is the primary virtue that a journalist needs. It led me to roam the world for awhile. Then I got interested in these new spaces that are being opened up by information and communication technologies. I think that taking five minutes a day to see what you don't know or what you haven't done is important to be able to gain control of tools. But the "Web animal" is something very different from what we know. Therefore, it's not only necessary to have tools and to be able to handle them, but also to understand the underlying logic, such as the logic of networks or the logic of Moore's Law, which few people even know about.

SMB: *Then, do you work and live more as a journalist, a writer, a blogger, or as a combination of the three?*

FP: It was curiosity that led me to be a journalist. I liked to travel, and I discovered that travelling was more interesting when I asked people questions, when I searched for something. I spent a large part of my life out of the country where I was born. Based on that, I like to say that I'm philosophically a journalist, because I think it is essential to have access to intellectual diversity and because, in addition to this, I try to keep a certain skeptical and critical distance. Therefore, this curiosity that leads to seeing the diversity of realities and of points of view, together with distance, is one definition, like any other, of what journalism could be.

SMB: *You just mentioned "curiosity," but is it sufficient for reasoning like you do? Is this the best recipe for a "digital native"?*

FP: When someone points out a link to me that I think is interesting, that link sometimes takes me to something, which seems sufficient, but other times, and in order to get interested, I first have to systematically carry out one, two, or three more steps. Thus, I delve deeper to find out where the information is coming from, which involves looking for Wikipedia data on something that I don't know about. What I mean by this is the notion of curiosity and the desire for systematization when delving into a search.

SMB: *The great contribution that you have made in your latest book has been to explain the concept of "webactors." The center of power is shifting to the community. And the doubt now is in knowing how much and what type of power is in hands of the public and society. Who has really lost it, in agenda-setting function terms, gatekeeper-journalists, maybe?*

FP: I think that serious research work and reflection is currently leading to a shift of power, from those who used to have the monopoly of the microphone and the print press to the fact that everyone can participate. Today, the Web is a participatory Web. Everyone is there. Therefore, journalists in general (editors and reporters) are losing a monopoly and a share of power, which doesn't mean that they can't participate in information discussion and production, as long as they can adapt to what is in play. Having

said this, it could be seen as somewhat worrisome. The word that we could use to explain this evolution is the notion of democratization. There is a democratization of news production, and there is democratization in the life of companies, which have to consider their users more than they used to.

SMB: Could we say then that it is now more unclear how to determine where power and democracy are precisely located, given that it's not just a question of knowing where technology is accessed, but rather where the user or reader's content is produced?

FP: I think that there is a big problem, which is access to broadband. For example, the country in the world with the greatest access to broadband is South Korea, and precisely there, the use of broadband for "everyone's information" through very well-known news and information sites such as OhmyNews contributed to significantly changing a political system and scheme.

SMB: Focusing on media economics and media business management, if you were to have dinner with Rupert Murdoch and he asked your opinion about the Internet strategy of News Corporation, what would you tell him?

FP: I'd ask him, I'd more likely ask him for advice (laughing). I'm a journalist, and therefore I'd ask him questions. Even still, he understood that MySpace was the future of something. He purchased it for \$500 million when nobody understood the importance that it was going to have, including me. Someone told him about it, and he understood it and put up the cash. Afterwards, when he acquired *The Wall Street Journal*, it's really interesting, because it seemed that the logic of the Web involved an opening up of content, and then he backtracked, keeping a hybrid policy. This man knows a lot.

SMB: As the reader and observer that you are of high-quality Anglo-American press, what is the future that awaits the Sulzberger family at The New York Times as "corporate independent"?

FP: I'm very concerned, and I'm going to give you an anecdote. I live in California, and I read *The New York Times* on the Web every day, receiving RSS, newsletters, and things like that. They haven't understood the logic of the cell phone. I used to read *The New York Times* online much more than *Le Monde*. When I connect with my iPhone to read the news of *The New York Times*, after activating their device, you have to wait up to five minutes to have access to the content, because they try to put the entire content of the newspaper in the iPhone. Since there's no major difference in how both newspapers treat the news, *Le Monde*, in turn, did something much more simple, with wait times of fractions of a second. Therefore, the user's experience is better, and *Le Monde* facilitates this experience for me, because it is more immediate and flexible. Mobility is one of the focal points of tomorrow. As of today, *The New York Times*, which is highly involved in the seriousness and importance of its institution, hasn't understood this.

SMB: Considering that we are experiencing a global economic downturn and a crisis of professional identity, with bad wage policies and job placement difficulties for journalists at traditional publications, what advice, with all your experience as a writer, columnist, freelancer, and technologist, would you give to young journalism and communication students so that they can go out into the labor market with more

optimism and a greater certainty that what they have formally studied and informally learned has been worth it?

FP: A bit of advice, seriously — that they try to imagine how the world of the media will be in their profession within 30 years time. Within 30 years, a person of 20 today will be 50 and will still be extremely active. So then, if they prepare only for a world of today that is dominated by people who don't understand the logic of the Web, they are going to be preparing for yesterday's world. Therefore, if they think about what will happen in 2040 or in 2050, then they will understand what is going to be useful to them.

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Following this interview, Dr. Francis Pisani was invited to lecture and to formally become a Visiting Faculty member of IE School of Communication-IE University, Spain. He graciously accepted.