The Newsworthiness of an Armed Conflict: A Corpus-Assisted Multimodal Discourse Analysis

of Selected Newspaper Reports

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Abstract

News reports are multimodal texts that play a key role in the public understanding of events of sociopolitical significance. Not only do reporters disseminate pieces of information about these events, but they also contribute to public perception in relation to key issues underlining them. The role of language becomes evident in this respect, since news reports are reconstructions of events and are thus not objective. Specifically, language enables journalists to configure reports by discursively foregrounding certain aspects of events and backgrounding others, enabling the creation of different versions of the same event. Given the public influence of the news media, it was crucial to scrutinize the discursive construction of historic, politically contentious events.

To fulfill the need for scrutiny, this thesis investigated the discursive construction of the newsworthiness of the 2017 Marawi City siege. This historic event was selected not only due to its significant impact in the region itself, but also its public portrayal as an example of terrorism. The original contribution to knowledge of this research is it embraces a *multi*modal perspective to analyze the rhetorical configuration of newsworthiness and news values unlike earlier studies. In other words, this analysis dealt with both texts *and* images. Moreover, it scrutinizes relations of both meaning-making modes. By extension, this newsworthiness analysis also sheds light on reporting practices used to paint this conflict as an act of terrorism.

This research is supported by analyses of the news from (critical) discourse studies and social semiotics. These studies explored various discursive practices such as recontextualization, framing, and discursive representations of news actors. A common theme binding these studies is the argumentative nature of the news arising from the dialectic relations between discourse and ideology, signifying how journalists can communicate a worldview through the news. More importantly, these analyses highlighted the potential ramifications of how semiotic resources are deployed to reconstruct events such as social polarization and division, the further muddying of "terrorism" as a concept, and unfairness in the portrayal of agency and identity. However, these studies do not tackle the discursive construction of newsworthiness.

There has been a recent scholarly uptake in analyses of the discourse of newsworthiness, a framework this thesis adheres to. This framework was instrumental in scrutinizing the influence of culture and ideology on how events are construed as newsworthy. It has also been utilized to evaluate reporting practices such as sensationalism in science reporting and the unfair portrayal of political actors in news photography. However, it differs from earlier paradigms in journalism studies and linguistics, whereby newsworthiness was conceptualized outside discourse. Rather, it understands newsworthiness as a discursive, rhetorical, or semiotic construction of the news. It is configured by news values via meaning-making resources such as language and photography.

Based on this framework, various semiotic resources can be used to construct a feature of an event. These aspects are conveyed in 11 news values: *Aesthetic Appeal* (beauty in news photographs only); *Consonance* ([stereo]types around news actors); *Eliteness* (high prestige or distinction); *Impact* (significant outcomes or widespread effects); *Personalization* (ordinariness); *Positivity* and *Negativity* (the [un]favorability of events); *Proximity* (geographical and/or cultural

closeness); *Superlativeness* (the high intensity of news events); *Timeliness* (recency, newness, or seasonality); and *Unexpectedness* (surprising, rare, or shocking aspects).

Corpus-assisted multimodal discourse analysis (CAMDA) served as the research design to analyze 60 broadsheet reports on the Marawi crisis – that is, a corpus or dataset of 49,535 words and 60 images. On the one hand, this multimodal perspective shifts from a monomodal, typically logocentric analysis of discourse and towards a more inclusive means of analyzing the expression of meanings. Meanwhile, corpus linguistics complement the multimodal component of this work by minimizing bias and cross-validate manually obtained linguistic findings. Moreover, dominant, changing, and unpredicted knowledge can be unearthed based on repeated discursive patterns generated by the corpus linguistic software.

The corpus was primarily subjected to separate intrasemiotic analyses of texts and images. These manual monomodal analyses were conducted in two tiers. Firstly, individual linguistic and visual devices were annotated and classified based on device type (e.g., role labels, intensifiers, image cropping) and news value present. This scrutiny was contextual and considers how target audiences may interpret specific devices (e.g., words pointing to the death of jihadists construct Positivity). Since there were many news values, this analysis was conducted with a news value in turn to maintain systematicity. Because this tier focuses on individual resources, each text and image were coded more than once per news value.

As for the second tier, each text and its accompanying news image were evaluated to ascertain if each news value was clearly, possibly, or not established discursively. As for Positivity and Negativity, four annotation options were available (positive, negative, mixed, or absent

valence). This level relies on first tier findings, where the presence (whether clear or doubtful) or absence of news value devices serves as basis for annotation. In this regard, texts and images are coded as *clear* cases if there is at least one apparent news value device.

Alongside the manual linguistic analysis, a two-level collocation analysis was conducted to identify non-random and statistically significant lexical associations with the word MARAWI. A list of first-order collocates was generated with specific filters through LancsBox. Every content word collocate was analyzed their concordances to identify their usage vis-à-vis MARAWI and the news value(s) they construct. Meanwhile, a similar approach was employed in identifying second-order collocates through three first-order collocates, namely, *city*, *said*, and *Maute*. This phase enabled an exploration of networks of meanings through shared and exclusive collocates.

The manually obtained findings at the second tier were eventually combined to scrutinize intersemiotic or multimodal news value relationships. Specifically, these second-tier annotations were converted into a spreadsheet and was loaded online to create an interactive Kaleidographic view of the entire corpus. Further, a static table of frequencies complemented this online visual. These tools were utilized to identify the extent to which news values were clearly constructed in either texts or images, or both. To this end, the Kaleidographic was played on varying speeds to assess and appreciate text-image relations and overall news value trends. Meanwhile, the table was used to cross-check observations from the visualization.

The separate intrasemiotic look at texts and images revealed differing trends in how this crisis was constructed as a newsworthy happening. On the one hand, the texts possess a core set of concretely constructed news values (i.e., Proximity, Timeliness, Eliteness, Superlativeness, and

Impact). These news values were clearly construed through various linguistic resources and were supported by the results of the collocation analysis. On the other hand, photographs do not have a core group of news values, since no news value was clearly constructed in more than 50 % of the total number of images.

Further, the intersemiotic analysis reveals a harmonious news value relationship between the two modes. Specifically, texts predominantly complemented photographs by supplying news values not clearly construed in the latter. Meanwhile, when the news articles are considered as a multimodal ensemble, seven news values appear central in the broadsheets' representation of the Marawi crisis as a newsworthy event. These foregrounded news values convey how close the crisis was to readers (Proximity), how this siege was still ongoing or recent (Timeliness), that its effects are intense and widescale (Impact and Superlativeness), and how the political elite was deeply involved (Eliteness). To an extent, these reports also emphasized common knowledge and stereotypes of news actors (Consonance), experiences of hostages and victims (Personalization), and various unfortunate circumstances (Negativity).

My thesis finally contends that national broadsheets may likely have shaped the public's understanding of this crisis through its multimodal construction of newsworthiness. As the press reproduces these discourses for public consumption, they facilitate how their respective readers understand its relevance as a historic terrorist crisis. In this light, journalists possess a significant responsibility of being judicious in reconstructing realities using different semiotic machineries. Thus, they are invited to strategize and reflect on textual and visual meanings they communicate to their audiences in covering critical events.