

## **NEWS FROM THE NEWSROOM**

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### **1. News as discourse and as newsmaking process**

This volume arises from a series of discussions, workshops & panels of our research network in media linguistics<sup>1</sup>. In terms of methodology, the focus is on the link between discourse studies and ethnographic approaches to news journalism practices. In terms of analysis, the researchers of the network consider both news products and newsmaking processes. The aim is to better understand how journalists work according to evidence of the “circular circulation of information” characterizing news journalism (Bourdieu 1998: 23). Put in other words, news is what (other) news media speak and write about (or don't) (see Messner & DiStaso 2008). Our starting point for reflection is why, how, when and what is at stake with journalistic decisions and choices about news.

News products such as editorials, news bulletins, news interviews etc. tells us a lot about journalism; they reflect the languages of the media (Bell 1991; Thompson 1995; Charaudeau 2005; Montgomery 2007). Nevertheless, going backstage to the newsroom and catching a glimpse of what practitioners are doing enables us to consider a broader, better, and more realistic view of news journalism practices. Taking into account the situated activities of journalists in the newsroom is key in understanding journalism. As evidence, in both cases, the role of discourse – discursive practices – is essential. Besides the fact that news is discourse, one observes that it is through discourse in the newsroom that institutional and practical matters emerge, are negotiated and lead in the end to certain kinds of news and ways of doing news (Burger & Delaloye 2016; Fitzgerald, Jaworski & Housley 2008; Clayman & Reisner 1998). Also, discourse is the ‘agent’ or main conveyor of journalism ideologies understood as “the

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<sup>1</sup> The network is part of the International Association of Applied linguistics (AILA) (see [www.aila.info](http://www.aila.info)).

principle that determines what journalists select both within social reality and among symbolic productions as a whole. [It is] a journalistic selection in order to catch the public eye [with] the effect of censorship, which journalists practice without even being aware of it” (Bourdieu 1998: 47).

To consider such a ‘principle’ and other key elements of journalism (Kovach & Rosenstiel 2001), we take into account a wide range of practices, in terms of the praxis on site, but also in terms of news cultures and contexts. To do so, the data collection presented and analyzed in this volume is the result of ethnographic studies of different print, online and broadcast news media in a variety of contexts: from Far East countries like Australia and China to Western Europe’s Belgium, Denmark, Finland, and Switzerland. Various aspects of backstage activities are presented and analyzed in comparison to news products: editorial conferences; preparatory sessions; interactions at the workplace; writing processes recorded on the journalist’s computers; biographic interviews; stimulated recall sessions leading to self-reflexive comments by the journalists on the making of the news.

## **2. Going backstage in the newsroom**

The key aim of the volume is to point out the relevance of a perspective which combines a close look to news products and to newsmaking processes. Given that this implies linguistic and ethnographic considerations, such a perspective represents an added value for both the researchers – discourse analysts and sociologists in media studies – and the practitioners – the news journalists. The anthropologist Didier Fassin argues in a relevant manner in favor of an ethnographic perspective: « Ethnography is particularly relevant in the understudied regions of society, but can be significant also in spaces saturated by consensual meanings: in the first case, it illuminates the unknown; in the second, it interrogates the obvious » (Fassin 2013: 642-643). Practitioners’ awareness of their tacit ‘how-making-the-news’ knowledge is brought into light by ethnographic research, while at the same time the analysts benefit from the access to inaccessible situated activities to better understand news products. The advantage of ethnography for the study of news is outlined by the media scholars Mats Ekström and Asa Kroon Lundell: « Taking into account the entire process of producing and presenting news, we have argued that journalism harbors a

multitude of interviewing practices and activities that remain invisible if only the taped and transcribed broadcast talk is analyzed (

Within this global framing, the contributions of the volume focus on one type of context which the discourse analyst Daniel Perrin terms ‘critical situations’: « Critical situations denote exemplary constellations of circumstances which could lead to a failure (...). Journalists overcome critical situations with “good practices” – good according to their own, their organizations’, and/or theoretically – grounded principles » (Perrin 2013: 202). As evidence, professionals in the newsrooms under investigation produce day-by-day news items by engaging in highly routinized practices, while every day they are also faced with practical and ideological issues. These situations are more complex and require joint efforts to fix problems. They are characterized by tacit knowledge emerging, being discussed, and therefore explicated and defined within the community of practice of news professionals. Thus, critical situations help both the journalists and the researchers to establish a repertoire of good (and bad) practices and what is at stake with them.

### **3. Doing media linguistics on site**

Considering how the language of the news and of newsmaking practices functions is doing what we call ‘media linguistics’. As part of the broader domain of applied linguistics, it fosters a multimethod analysis anchored in a ‘focused’ multidisciplinary framework<sup>2</sup>. The contributions of this volume are mainly rooted either in the domain of the linguistics of newswriting (Perrin *et al.* 2009; Perrin 2013; Perrin 2014) or in the linguistics of news production (Jacobs 1999; Van Hout & Jacobs 2008; Jacobs, Van hout & Van Praet 2011). Broadly speaking, the perspective comprises all language issues of “research on the media that is informed by newsroom realities” (Cotter 2010 : 10). As such, media linguistics is an ethnographically grounded approach to news media analysis.

“Doing ethnography means trying to understand a community, by looking at how a community works” (Cotter 2010: 19). In our case, the community under

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<sup>2</sup> According to Ben Rampton, an ethnographic approach is by definition characterized by a claim to interdisciplinary relevance calling for a multi-method or multi-perspective of analysis (Rampton, Maybin & Roberts 2015 : 32-40).

investigation is that of news journalists and the site of their engagement is the newsroom. The central question that the contributors ask is: How do news journalists use language, by means of what kinds of discursive practices, to produce what kind of language of the news? Journalists engage in complex production processes leading to specific news products, and they do so according to behavioral rules, expectations and ideologies that reflect and at the same time define and shape their community of practice<sup>3</sup>. These dimensions are crucial.

To observe, however, journalists at work using language provides relevant findings only with a more precise research focus. In this volume, we look first at the chain of discourses that journalists consider to account for the narratives they produce: news agencies communiqués, press releases, shorts web news, reports and articles by media companies etc. Indeed, “Intertextuality and entextualization make it clear why a production perspective has an edge over a product-only perspective: it allows the researcher to scrutinize the complex back-and-forth between journalists and the world out there and, in doing so, to unravel the details of institutional contexts, conventions, and procedures as they impact on the news product” (NT&T 2009: 5-6). Each paper addresses these questions with a specific focus: on newswriting, story-telling, argumentation, interaction, or socialization.

#### **4. Findings and results**

This volume comprises nine contributions. Geert Jacobs’ paper focuses on a Belgian television newsroom of a national French-language public broadcasting corporation. Jacobs presents a singlecase study of the minute-by-minute unravelling of the coverage of a political news item by an experienced journalist. Jacobs shows in detail why and how the journalist eventually decides not to cover the news on a politically delicate issue. Access to the backstage of the media makes Jacobs’ analysis a unique close-up of a specific type of news making practice that would have hardly been possible without it.

‘Why and how this news item’ is at the heart of Gilles Merminod’s contribution. The author addresses story-telling as a crucial dimension of news making practices. The newsroom under investigation to explore this type of know-how is that of the French speaking public service TV in Switzerland. From the

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<sup>3</sup>Ideological as well as practical concerns which Burger & Delaloye (in this volume) call the ‘big media utopias’ and the ‘small journalistic assemblage’.

first editorial conference in the morning until the broadcast of the report for the bulletin, Merminod details the journalistic choices to turn the topic into a narrative.

As a matter of fact, media linguistics is embedded in the broader scope of applied linguistics (AL). Daniel Perrin & Mathias Furer propose a clear contribution to AL as they outline a typology of methods in real-life writing processes research. They investigate the writing strategies of journalists at their workplace (a German speaking newsroom of the public service TV in Switzerland). To do so, Perrin & Furer combine a close look at recurrent patterns in terms of stylistic formats, audience design as well as language policy making strategies in a public service broadcasting corporation.

Chang Peng Huan also uses the 'writing progression analysis' methodology to interrogate the context of the People's Republic of China news journalism practices. His research examines the distinction between the ways local or international online news is produced. The newsroom under investigation is that of a local Chinese newspaper. Interviews with journalists reveal that they use 'attribution' strategically according to the kind of news they produce and more generally as a discursive resource to exercise power in the newsroom.

Writing strategies is also the topic of the paper of Lauri Haapanen. The author focuses on a specific news genre: face to face interviews and their publication in the written press. Haapanen considers in detail how the news journalists deal with a complex chain of information and choose specific ways of quoting. Indeed, the quotation practices are far from converting oral into written sentences. On the basis of stimulated recall sessions with news journalists of a Finnish newspaper, Haapanen suggests that the quotation practices depend on what the journalist wants to achieve in an article and not on what the interviewee meant and said.

Jana Declercq focuses on specialized journalism. She investigates the construction of expertise in the very specific domain of health journalism. Often criticized for bad reporting, health journalists position themselves in an in-between: they must cope at the same time with the constraints of the news media (they have to address lay audiences) and those of the medical world (they have to inform about health in a qualified manner). Declercq analyzes this peculiar form of identity on the basis of interviews conducted with the journalists.

As a matter of fact, journalistic decisions and choices mainly depend on the agenda established during editorial meetings in the newsroom. Margherita Luciani and Andrea Rocci, address a crucial dimension of the decision-making process by journalists. Using the tools of argumentation theory, they shed light on the reasoning concerning audience uptake expectations that lead journalists (of a written press newspaper in Switzerland) to publish a certain news item instead of another or to publish news in a certain way.

Marcel Burger and Laura Delaloye also focus on newsroom editorial meetings. The site of engagement is that of the Swiss French speaking public service broadcast company. Considering a vigorous session during which a controversial topic is discussed, the authors analyze the argumentative meta-discourse that reveals the norms and behavioral rules of news journalists considered as a community of practice. Burger and Delaloye show in detail the role and place of argumentation in interaction in the decision-making process.

The rules governing newsmaking emerge from argumentative discussions with journalists. They are also made explicit from the meta discourse the practitioners tell the researchers. Gitte Gravengaard focuses on the latter. Journalists know what 'a good news story' is, but this tacit knowledge is often difficult for them to make explicit (it's about what Bourdieu terms the 'unconscious censorship' that the journalists practice or the 'interrogate-the-obvious' dimension that Didier Fassin observes). Gravengaard's analysis of interviews reveals this tacit journalistic knowledge, helping to increase the awareness of professionals and to define a repertoire of criteria of good narrative practices.

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