THE NEWS THAT WASN'T

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Abstract

This paper presents a single-case study of the minute-by-minute unravelling of the coverage of a political news item by a journalist in the television newsroom of a national French-language public broadcasting corporation in Europe. It is documented how the journalist's eventual decision not to cover the news is thwarted by the fact that competing media have decided otherwise. Drawing on linguistic ethnographic fieldwork, the data provide a unique close up of newsmaking practice on a politically delicate issue, with the individual journalist emerging as a responsible and sensitive professional, who is realistic and thoughtful about his own actions, in tune with what other media are covering and savvy about the workings of the news business as a whole.

Keywords: newsroom ethnography, television

1. Introduction

To begin, let's go back to 1995 and look at one of Norman Fairclough's seminal critical analyses of media discourse, viz. that of the popular BBC television program Crimewatch UK. Drawing on a fine-grained study of journalistic language and images following the newly laid out principles of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), Fairclough (1995) looks at the way in which the program frames the killing of a young woman walking home from a friend's place at night. His is a textual study, unravelling the dual nature of the program with its blurred boundaries between information and entertainment. Fairclough concludes that the producers of Crimewatch UK are essentially trying to reconstruct a relationship of trust and collaboration between the police and the general public. Interestingly, in what can be read as a kind of afterthought, he suggests that it would be fascinating to know what audiences make of this program.

A quick glance at the tables of contents of the major discourse journals will demonstrate that, even twenty years after, this kind of CDA-inspired textual analysis of the language of the news is still very popular. But let's now turn to Kim Christian Schrøder's 2007 critique of mainstream discourse analysis, one of only a handful of critical reflections on the legacy of CDA for media studies, most of which have gone largely unnoticed. Focusing on Fairclough's analysis of Crimewatch UK, Schrøder says that he is not at all satisfied with attempts to "second-guess" the program experience of the audience when a simple focus group session with a handful of viewers would have done the job. And turning to the intentions of those who made the program: Why didn't Fairclough talk to some of the people on the production team, Schrøder wonders; it would not have taken an inordinate amount of time. Echoing Jeff Verschueren's early critiques that 'linguistic work' on the media is "not sufficiently contextualized, ignorant of the structural and functional properties of the news gathering and reporting process" (Verschueren 1985: vi), "discourse ethnography" is the label that Schrøder proposes for an approach that sets out to take the wide range of discourse practices underlying what gets finally broadcast far more seriously than CDA has ever done and that combines careful attention to textual detail with systematic fieldwork that explores the worlds of both text producers and recipients.

This paper aligns with Schrøder's (2007) critique of CDA by zooming in on the production end of discourse practice. My focus is on broadcast news and the way in which the daily editorial routines determine what the general public gets to see on TV (for a more elaborate theoretical positioning see the collective position paper published by the NewsTalk&Text research network in 2011). In Goffman's terminology, the research presented here goes backstage, behind the scenes of the news, to demonstrate how a mix of sometimes trivial, but always deeply institutionalized discursive practices and professional routines impact on the final news product that, since Fairclough's early work in this area, has been the subject of so much discourse analytic work.

Crucially, in the case study that I will present I will focus on a fieldwork experience with a story that did not make it into the news, at least not initially, but that did keep the journalist whom I followed busy for most of his working day. I will call this "The news that wasn't" and I will reflect on how the backstage production-oriented research that I propose constitutes added value in pointing to what is otherwise bound to remain invisible. Put differently, I will argue that the massive literature on all sorts of media discourse (including, most prominently, the wide-ranging study of news values) has been characterized by an

overwhelming bias towards those events that actually made it into the news and that we have more or less collectively ignored the many stories which for some reason or another were not processed into news.

In turning to this news "that wasn't", this paper ties in with the larger definition of discourse analysis as the study not just of what is said and written, but also of what is *not* said and written. Linguistic pragmatics, in particular, has had a long history branding itself as that subfield of linguistics which analyses the different ways in which messages are *implicitly* anchored to speakers' attitudes, to aspects of the on-going interactive situation, to the social and cultural setting and to our ideological perceptions (see Östman 1995). Research in this area has been "primarily interested in what happens in communication over and beyond the propositional information that interlocutors and text producers want to convey in their messages" (Östman 1995: 4; my italics). While the study of implicitness incorporates household concepts of linguistic pragmatics like presuppositions and conversational implicatures, I would like to join those who have previously suggested that it could also be extended to include not speaking or writing at all. In terms of the news context that is analyzed in this paper, it could be argued that if you really want to get through to a journalist's professional vision, it makes sense to observe him or her as he's making up the news – but it makes just as much or perhaps even more sense to look at how he or she decides to remain quiet about certain events.

2. Method and data

As I indicated above, the approach presented in this paper can be labelled linguistic ethnographic. Drawing on Rampton *et al.* (2004: 4) in their UK Linguistic Ethnography Forum position paper, we believe that what distinguishes our efforts from more traditional work in media discourse analysis is that they "open up" the scope of research, "inviting reflexive sensitivity to the processes involved in the production of linguistic claims and to the potential importance of what gets left out, encouraging a willingness to accept (and run with) the fact that beyond the reach of standardised falsification procedures, "[e]xperience . . . has ways of boiling over, and making us correct our present formulas" (Willis and Trondman 2000, cited in Rampton *et al.*, 2004:4). What sets them apart from a strong and long-standing tradition of ethnographic work in news sociology and

journalism studies is that they tie the research down, "pushing ethnography towards the analysis of clearly delimitable processes, increasing the amount of reported data that is open to falsification, looking to impregnate local description with analytical frameworks drawn from outside" (*ibidem*). For the research reported in this paper our linguistic ethnographic toolbox included wide-ranging fieldwork efforts (observation, participation, semi-structured interviews, informal conversations, field notes, textual data, etc.) through which "the researcher learns to interpret and follow the rules that govern the practices of the field and to understand (and make explicit) its structures of meaning" (Oberhuber & Krzyzanowski 2008: 182) (see also Jacobs & Slembrouck 2010 for a series of reflections on ethnography as a liminal activity).

The findings presented here are based on team fieldwork which I conducted with Els Tobback in the spring of 2009 in the TV newsroom of a national Frenchlanguage public broadcasting corporation in Europe. The data include transcripts of audio-recordings of storyboard meetings, extensive field notes based on close observation of the journalists' on-line writing and rewriting processes as well as of their interactions with cutters (who are responsible for the technical editing of sound and pictures), transcripts of semi-structured retrospective interviews with the journalists and with the desk chief, hard copies of the text and video information subsidies that were available to the journalists, and video-recordings of the final TV news reports.

3. Findings

It's Tuesday 26 May 2009. It's 9.17 AM. Journalists gather in clusters with a cup of coffee to discuss what's on that day. I had arranged to 'follow' a journalist whom I will call Mathew for anonymity's sake. Mathew is one of the 'star journalists' of the newsroom's domestic politics division. It is less than two weeks before the country's regional elections and during the coffee gathering of the politics staff it is suggested that for the midday one o'clock news Mathew might want to do a story about a female candidate for the French-speaking Christian Democrats. She is a woman of Turkish origin who, it is alleged, had her campaign picture reframed to hide the veil that she is wearing.

The story is suggested by one of Mathew's colleagues who heard about this on the same station's radio news when he was in his car driving to the newsroom

earlier that morning. It turned out later that the interview had been recorded a couple of days earlier and was inspired by a message on a blog of a journalist of Turkish origin on Friday 22 May. From the very outset of the story, there are two striking elements: 1. the news does not need to be new and 2. the news is what other media write about.

In what follows I will report on the morning's events (in the form of fieldwork notes and transcripts covering Mathew's reporting efforts) as well as on interviews I conducted later that day with the day's desk chief (around two o'clock) and with Mathew himself (at the end of the afternoon).

3.1. Fieldwork notes and transcripts of Mathew's reporting efforts

(1) 9.35 AM

Early on in the 9.30 storyboard meeting the reframing story is brought up by the anchor, who had heard about it over coffee.

(A= anchor, J= journalist, M= Mathew, DC= desk chief)

A: Cette histoire du [name of the party] avec la jeune fille voilée

This story of the [name of the party] with the young girl with the veil

J1: la photo recadrée

the reframed picture

(...)

A: Mathew, sérieusement, les photos recadrées de la jeune (1.0)

Mathew, seriously, the reframed pictures of the young (1.0)

[future peut-être élue du [name of the party]

[future maybe elected candidate of the [name of the party]

M: [pourquoi pas, bien sûr c'est bien

[why not, of course it's good

J2: ça il faut le faire oui

you have to do it yes

DC: Oui c'est très intéressant

Yes it's very interesting

What is striking in this very short episode is the ease and perhaps even lightness with which it is decided that the story should be in the one o'clock news. No details are provided. Five staff, including key stakeholders like the anchor and the desk chief, voice their consent. The others, over twenty in number, remain silent. It is assumed that everyone seems to know what this is about, or that it is not relevant for the others to know. Of the five who do contribute, Mathew is

perhaps the least eager to cover the story: he waits until somebody else comes up with the topic and, even then, he needs to be pushed by the anchor ("Mathew, seriously"). His short response seems half-hearted ("why not").

(2) 10.12 AM

Shortly after the storyboard meeting, we are on our way in a car to the headquarters of the woman's political party where Mathew is hoping to be able to conduct an interview with her. He is briefing the two members of the technical crew (camera and sound). He says he wants to find out "why the picture was reframed and if it's a case of malice". In fact, as I will find out later, Mathew will be obsessed with finding the answer to that question throughout the day. In the evening, I will be able to interview Mathew and it is exactly this notion of premeditation that features prominently in his definition of what constitutes news:

S'il y a des hiatus, on veut que ce ne soient pas des hiatus uniquement dus au hasard, If there are hiatuses, you want that they are not only the result of coincidence, donc il faut qu'il y ait qu'il y ait une préméditation qui fait que surtout quand on so you want that there is there is a premeditation which makes that certainly if you tourne un sujet comme celui-là qui sont des sujets délicats parce qu'on nous attend deal with a topic like this one which are delicate topics because we are being watched beaucoup là-dessus, il faut dans un cas comme celui-là qu'il y ait, comment je dirais, closely on this, in a case like this, you need, how shall I put it que la portée soit suffisament importante. Il faut qu'il y ait quand même une volonté you want the impact to be important enough, there must be some kind of will là-derrière de faire une photo vraiment qui ne serait pas la même que celle behind it to make a picture really that wouldn't be the same as the one sur les affiches on the posters

By referring to the notion of 'hiatus', Mathew seems to suggest that news should be out of the ordinary. That is not enough, in his view, though. He wants there to be what he calls premeditation.

In the car Mathew says that "it's not an anti-veil story". He refers to the candidate as "the girl". Clearly, in what can be seen as an interesting example of talk for an overhearing audience (seemingly addressing his colleagues but clearly targeting myself as an interested third party), Mathew is trying to explain to me that he is not at all very happy "attacking the easy prey".

Around the same time, the reframing story is published in a news release issued by the national news agency. Mathew does not know about this.

As soon as we have arrived at the candidate's party headquarters, it is clear that "the girl" does not want to show up. Mathew is not amused. "I have never met a candidate for the elections who does not want to be interviewed", he says. For the first time, Mathew suggests that he is not sure if he is actually going to cover this story at all. "For the moment, there's no story. We have to double check". We are reminded of the storyboard meeting when he refers to the origin of the story: "It wasn't me who came up with the idea". At the same time, he seems to insist that he's "not at all worried about covering the story".

As we are waiting in the street to catch a glimpse of the candidate, Mathew receives a phone call from the head of the station's news department. This is very unusual and Mathew appears stressed. Apparently, the head had just received a phone call from the president of the candidate's Christian Democrat party. The president had said that she was "worried" about the unfolding of the events. Next, Mathew decides to call the party's graphic designer, who was responsible for the campaign materials, and he argues that "no one has seen any malice in it". At that point, Mathew decides to give up and return to the newsroom.

Interestingly, around the same time, the story of the reframing is published on the station's internet site. Just like with the national news agency's release issued half an hour earlier, Mathew does not know.

We are well on our way back to the TV newsroom when Mathew receives a phone call from the radio journalist who had authored the interview with the candidate that was broadcast earlier that day. Apparently, the candidate had told him that she was "very disappointed" about the reframing. She said that she was going to "demand an explanation from the party". On the basis of this single unexpected new element Mathew changes his mind. "We are not going to give up too soon", he says. "Things keep bouncing back". Matthew calls the desk chief to suggest that he could still make a report about the case. So we drive back to the center of Brussels to shoot some footage of election billboards with the reframed

picture. Mathew calls the case "extremely complicated". "It's more disturbing than I thought".

Mathew now calls the party spokesperson, who insists that there has been no malice involved and it is just a coincidence. No one has asked anyone to reframe the picture, he says. By now, Mathew has ended up in deep existential crisis. "Je doute, je doute" (*I am doubting*, *I am doubting*), he says. When we arrive at the party headquarters, he goes in and tells the receptionist that they are going to cover the story after all: "On va quand même faire un petit true, manifestement." (We are going to do a small item apparently). By using 'apparently', Mathew seems to suggest that he cannot make the decisions himself. It looks as if some higher-order forces are deciding for him. Mathew calls the desk chief again and he does not seem to be sure either. "He decides, because he is responsible", Mathew whispers. "C'est deux fois rien, mais non ce n'est pas deux fois rien" (*It's no big deal. Or is it? Yes, it is a big deal.*).

Mathew sends a text message to the head of the station's news department, who had called him earlier that morning, to tell him that he is not pursuing the story any further: "He will be happy", Mathew says. Next, he calls the radio journalist who had interviewed the girl and tells him he "gives up a little" (on "abandonne un peu"). On the way back to the newsroom, Mathew is philosophical, almost emotional: there are so many different perspectives on reality, he says. He insists that he's got no regrets. "I'm specialized in street interviews, but not with such easy prey", using exactly the same words he had used at the start of the adventure.

We arrive at the newsroom just in time to watch the one o'clock news on the overhead monitors, together with a number of other staff. There is not a single word about the alleged reframing of the candidate's campaign picture, even if Mathew and his technical crew had spent the entire morning working on the case.

While it is clear that the morning's rollercoaster of events has given us exceptional insight into what can be seen as a rather extreme case of journalistic soul-searching, with Mathew ultimately deciding that there is not enough evidence to assume that the candidate's veil was deliberately hidden, it should be noted that that was not the end of the case. Within minutes of arriving at the

newsroom, it became obvious that the story of the reframed campaign picture would have to be covered for the evening news. The reason for this sudden change is very simple: not only had the national news agency as well as the station's own website written about the story (as we have already pointed out), more importantly the station's direct commercial competitor had covered the story in their one o'clock news. This meant that, all at once, there was no further need for evidence of malice and the morning's many hesitations had instantly turned into a distant memory. As a result of the editorial decision-making process at another news medium, the alleged reframing had become national headline news and there was no way the station could afford not to cover it. Actually, two days later the candidate was world news with an article in the French daily quality newspaper *Le Monde* entitled "Polémique en Belgique autour d'une candidate musulmane voilée" (*Debate in Belgium around muslim candidate with a veil*).

3.2. Interviews with the desk chief and with Mathew

Around two o'clock I was able to interview the desk chief. It becomes clear from the very beginning of the interview that election times are special: journalists need to be extra cautious when reporting about politics as the whole country is watching them. The desk chief, who is a junior member of staff serving as a standin, seems particularly sensitive about this and it turns out that he wasn't encouraging Mathew to cover the reframing story. In his view, most journalists are simply too strong-minded and self-confident:

(7) Je trouve qu'une des caractéristiques des journalistes

I believe that one of the characteristics of journalists
c'est leur côté extrêmement péremptoire, on dit très sûrs d'eux.

Is their extreme strong-mindedness, let's say very sure about themselves.

Oui, mais enfin c'est évident. Non, c'est pas si évident que ça et il suffit qu'un autre

Yes, but it's self-evident. No, it's not that self-evident and as soon as another one

tout à coup a un point de vue différent mais il le défend avec plus de force suddenly has a different point of view but he defends it with more force et puis l'inverse sera l'évidence quoi et la difficulté est parfois là. and the opposite will be self-evident and this is what makes it difficult sometimes.

It's difficult to believe that the desk chief is saying all this at the end of the morning when he had been in constant touch with Mathew about the reframing case. Surely, Mathew had been less than strong-minded and self-assured in deciding if he should cover the story. Mathew did act extremely cautiously and at no point did he seem to be taking for granted that the story of the candidate wearing a veil should or should not be published. In the same part of the interview the desk chief calls for clear policy documents to serve as a guide for editorial decision-making and to reduce the inevitable arbitrariness surrounding all journalistic activity, but it remains to be seen if the morning's events had led to a different result if such explicit guidelines had been available.

I was in the newsroom for the rest of the day paying close attention to what was happening, but for some reason little or nothing was said about how and why Mathew and his colleagues decided to cover the reframing story after all: to everyone present the decision looked automatic and not worth talking about. My intuition was that, after the morning's events and the failure to cover the reframing story, the mood was rather negative so I did not want to make things worse by raising questions about what had obviously developed into a delicate issue. "It's not a big deal", Mathew had told me as if he wanted to finally close the debate. Interestingly, however, towards the end of a long and frustrating day, it was Mathew himself who invited me for an interview. Clearly, he felt a strong need to account for the reframing story and how he had dealt with it: while I started out with a very general opening about what in his view counted as news, he was eager to illustrate his definition by addressing "the morning's events".

Early on in the interview, Mathew insists that he should have covered the reframing story after all:

(8) Quelque part il y a quand même eu un hiatus parce que tout le monde en a parlé Somewhere there must have been a hiatus because everyone has talked about it donc on ne peut pas non plus on n'est pas une île, on doit à un moment donné so you can't you're not an island, at a certain moment you have to faire la même chose que les autres do the same thing as the others

He seems to point to what Messner & Watson DiStaso (2008) have coined "intermedia agenda-setting": news is what (other) news media speak and write about; put differently, what makes an event worth reporting is that it has been reported on before. This special brand of intertextuality has been a dominant

concern in a lot of recent work on media discourse - see, for example, Cotter (2010) on how some of the big US newspapers, including the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, share their next-day story budgets as well as John B. Thompson's early 1995 notion of "extended mediazation" (Thompson 1995); Mathew too seems to conclude that since a number of other media had decided to cover the alleged reframing of the veil, surely there must have been something newsworthy about it. Throughout the morning he had tried to be careful, especially since election times can be very sensitive, but at the end of the day, the conclusion is inevitable:

(9) On n'est pas une île déserte. Quand les gens en parlent,

You're not a deserted island. When people talk about it,

quand c'est dans les journaux, dans beaucoup de sites,

when it's in the newspapers, on many sites

on voit que les sites des journaux en parlent,

you see that the newspaper websites talk about it

on voit que Belga TV dans son journal télévisé de 15 h en parle,

you see that Belga TV talks about it in its 15.00 PM TV news broadcast

on doit en parler aussi.

You have to talk about it too.

In other words: if all these media cover the story, then it's not just that Mathew has to cover it too - it must be news as well, Mathew seems to conclude, as he refers to a break in the social order, to a hiatus.

(10) À partir du moment où je parle de de de casser l'ordre social,

From the moment I talk about about about breaking the social order

le fait que beaucoup de gens en parlent montre à quel point l'ordre social est cassé

That a lot of people talk about it shows to what extent the social order is broken
Le fait que beaucoup de gens en parlent fait que l'hiatus est clair
The fact that a lot of people talk about it makes the hiatus clear.

Towards the end of the interview, Mathew's wrap-up of what could have been a frustrating day, turns out to be surprisingly optimistic, definitely more so than the desk chief who earlier that afternoon had shown himself distrustful of the people he was working with. In contrast, looking back at his own 21-year track record in journalism, Mathew says that today's journalists are "a lot less biased, a lot less ideologized"; they are "more serious", "more inventive" and, perhaps

most surprising of all, "more free". Viewers and readers, on the other hand, are so much better educated, so much more informed, Mathew says, that you couldn't manipulate them even if you wanted to. He concludes that the complicity between media and politics is a thing of the past. On closer scrutiny, it can be argued that the day's events, which we have tried to scrupulously describe in this paper, serve as a unique illustration of exactly that: both the painstakingly slow decision-making process resulting in no news in the morning and the subsequent, almost automatic U-turn decision to cover the reframing in the evening news show serious journalism at work.

4. Conclusion

In this paper I have presented a single-case study of the minute-by-minute unravelling of the coverage of a political news item by a journalist in the television newsroom of a national French-language public broadcasting corporation in Europe. The data provide a unique close up of newsmaking practice on a politically delicate issue, with the individual journalist emerging as a responsible and sensitive professional, who is realistic and thoughtful about his own actions, and in tune with what other media are covering and savvy about the workings of the news business as a whole.

Of course the study reported here has its limitations. Questions can be raised about the impact of the researcher who is continuously interviewing, following, overhearing and taking notes, and hence about the reliability of the journalist's constant self-reflections, questioning his own actions and thinking out loud about them.

In an essay entitled "Why Ethnography Matters", Didier Fassin argues that 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. He concludes that "[t]o play its possible social role, ethnography must be simultaneously critical and public" (Fassin 2013: 642). I would like to suggest that the kind of linguistic ethnographic work on news production presented here provides exciting opportunities for reflecting on the challenges involved in realizing this double ambition of going critical and public at the same time. It could be argued that the mainstream news media that are investigated here are

both "understudied" and "saturated by consensual meaning" and that hence our work can (and should) both illuminate the unknown and interrogate the obvious. In doing so, it can hopefully contribute to the promising new field of media linguistics, which argues that no analysis of the language of the news can be complete without a thorough consideration of the contextual dynamics in which it has emerged (see Perrin 2013).

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