

Semiotic analysis of the news

Media, Television



Television news has been around for nearly as long as television itself. Millions watch it every day and it is often the first programme someone will switch to after work. News broadcast are governed by many codes and conventions. These are not always obvious to the viewer but if they are not respected, the programme might feel uncomfortable to watch. Bignell (2002), p110, explains “ The discourse of television news is composed of language and visual images, organised by codes and conventions which the news viewer has to perceive and recognise in order for the viewer to construct sense”.

News bulletin are therefore constructed in a careful manner, carrying many signs. I will look at some of these in this essay. The news bulletin also needs to remain impartial in order to be trusted and respected by the audience. Whilst analyzing the BBC News at 10 aired on Monday 5th of March, I will try and demonstrate this web of codes and convention. I will also look at the signs present in the news and their meanings. Finally, I will explore the relationship between objectivity and subjectivity. I will concentrate on the first two stories of the bulletin.

The first report is about the ongoing uprising in Syria and takes a deeper look at the families fleeing the war zone and the developing humanitarian crisis. The second package is about the government proposals to remove child benefits from anyone earning over ? 40. 000. I will start by exploring the codes of the news bulletin, highlighting the items that make a news programme instantly recognizable from any other shows. Fiske (1987), p4, defines a code as “ a rule-governed system of signs, whose rules and

conventions are shared amongst members of culture, and which is used to generate and circulate meanings in and for that culture”.

The first visual code is the news presenter Huw Edwards, smartly dressed, he gives a sense of knowledge, seriousness and authority to the news. He is the narrator, providing a link between the different items and contributes to the stability of the programme. He brings the feeling of importance to the news but also provides a friendly face that the public recognize and trust. On BBC news, they are the first person that the viewer sees. His appearance is preceded by a loud percussion noise which also reinforces his importance.

Other visual codes include the desk at which the presenter sits and the still images showed on a backdrop. This adds to the feeling of authority. The programme always starts with the headlines. This gives the programme structure, telling the viewer what to expect. This format is there to keep the viewer interested, showing selected visual and sound bites from the upcoming news reports, teasing the viewer, making them want to know more. Another code is the way the presenter addresses the viewer, looking directly at them through the camera, using personal pronouns and a formal grammar predominantly used in news programmes.

The opening title sequence is another conventional code present at the beginning of every programme. The graphics displayed are reinforcing the importance of the news and the music is loud and sounds important. The ticking clock reinforces the notion that this is a live programme, dealing with actuality. The final reinforcement of authority comes in the form of the BBC logo that has a strong connotative meaning of accuracy and professionalism.

When analysing each individual item in the news, there are further conventions found in the way they are presented.

Hartley (1987), p118-119, explains that each story “ has the following four narrative moments: Framing, focusing, realising and closing”. The first item of the news bulletin, dealing with the Syrian uprising clearly reveals these four moments. Edwards (2012), BBC News at 10, introduces the report saying “ People who have escaped from the Syrian city of Homs have told the BBC of atrocities being committed by the security forces including the slaughter of dozen of men and boys“. This frames the story and encodes its meaning as the Syrian uprising but concentrating on the current humanitarian crisis.

Focusing happens at the beginning of the news report when the correspondent on location, John Wood, reinforces what has been happening in Syria, how long the events have been going on and what the effects are. In this case, thousands of children are fleeing the war zone and have become homeless. Having a correspondent reporting from location is also another conventional code of the news. The report is realized when a woman is interviewed. You can see that she is angry and speaks loudly in Arabic. A voice over translates what she says “ We’re Homeless. Why? Because we asked for freedom“.

A man also adds “ whoever is taken at checkpoints will be killed“. Interviews from carefully selected contributors help the viewer believe the story that has been previously presented by the reporter. The last moment, the closing, enables the viewer to make sense of what they have just seen. It refocuses all the ideas presented into one point. In this case, Wood (2012), BBC News <https://assignbuster.com/semiotic-analysis-of-the-news/>

at 10, ends the report saying, “ The people of Hums are saying they are victims of a crime. The outside world will want proof. Briefly, they have defied the regime. Now, they are scattered.

There is international outrage but no agreement about how to bring this to an end”. This reinforces the framing and the fact this story is about atrocities and humanitarian issues. Iconic signs are present in this news bulletin. Hartley (1987), p16, explain what a ‘ sign’ is saying “ it is made up of two elements, just as a sheet of paper is made of two sides which you can recognize as distinct, but you cannot divide from one another. The two sides of the sign are called the signifier and the signified”. I have highlighted some signs presents in the opening title sequence but there are many others.

Looking at the introduction to the package on Syria, the newsreader sits at his desk whilst there is a picture in the background showing the shadow of two men holding a flag. In this case, this is the signifier. Added to the picture is the fact they are in a desert and there is a small graphic of a Syrian flag in the corner of the picture. The concept these elements represents, the signified, is that there is a revolution in Syria. This plays on imagery that has, for many years, been associated with these actions. For example, someone holding a flag often means protest or revolution.

The picture is also made to resemble the iconic picture taken during the Vietnam War of a group of marines holding a flag and thus adds a meaning of conflict and war. Another example is the children featured at the beginning of the filmed report. Within the bulletin, these images can have any number of meanings. However, they are filmed in the dark, walking on a road with their mothers whilst carrying bags. The signified in this case is the

fact they are fleeing their homes because of the ongoing unrest happening in the country. The denotative meaning of this is simple: A group of children are walking on a road at night.

However, because of the item of news it is part of and where this image sits in the story, the connotative meaning is that they are running away from the war zone. Finally, I will take a look at the relationship between objectivity and subjectivity. The correspondent always aims to achieve a balance between the two. The second story in the bulletin looks at a new government proposal that would remove child benefits from anyone earning over ? 40000 a year. The report starts with an interview of a father who would lose benefits under the new proposals.

This is very subjective as he gives his own views and explains how he and his family will be affected. Immediately following this, the reporter's voice over explains in details how the rules are at the moment and how the situation will be after the proposed changes. It is explained through a series of graphics and the viewer's are given an objective view of the subject. The reporter then interviews members of three political parties. These are both objective and subjective. Politicians are being objective when talking about their own party's agenda but they then go on to criticize the other party's proposal becoming subjective.

By the end of the report, the viewer has been provided with a well balanced, impartial report, as all aspect have been explained and the viewer has heard views from a member of the public and members of the three main political parties. The reporter has achieved a non bias report. Through my analysis of the BBC News, I have investigated some of the code and conventions

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present in the news bulletin. I have also explained and demonstrated the presence of signifiers that are visually present throughout the news. Finally, I have examined the need for every story to be non bias and explored the relationship between objectivity and subjectivity.

Television news has evolved over the years but some fundamental codes and conventions such as the presenter at his desk or the way he address the public have remained untouched. New technology has made it easier to capture better image, new computer have simplified the use of graphics to illustrate stories and live feed enabled television to reinforce the notion of immediacy. However, the core structure of a newsreader introducing a series of selected stories in a clearly structured formatted way has not been changed in many years.

One could argue that breaking this structure would make the viewer feel uncomfortable and lead to a break of trust on which the news relies. Because of this, I feel they are unlikely to change in the future as Golding and Elliott (2002), p 649, say:” The key elements on any ruling ideology are the understanding and the undesirability of change, and its impossibility; all is for the best and change would do more harm than good, even if it were possible. Broadcast news substantiates this theory”.