



Reconstructing media frames in multimodal discourse: The John/Ivan Demjanjuk trial



Christian Pentzold^{a,*}, Vivien Sommer^{a,1}, Stefan Meier^b, Claudia Fraas^{a,2}

^a Technische Universität Chemnitz, Institute for Media Research, Thüringer Weg 11, D-09126 Chemnitz, Germany

^b Universität Tübingen, Institute of Media Studies, c/o Irene Gust, Wilhelmstraße 50, D-72074 Tübingen, Germany

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ABSTRACT

This article explores a way to reconstruct the verbally and visually constituted frames used in the coverage of the trial of John/Ivan Demjanjuk, a Ukraine-born U.S. citizen accused of Holocaust-related war crimes. The study looks at an exemplary case of current multimodal discourse, in which written messages and images from broadcasts and press, as well as the comments and visuals that spread through social media, can be seen to relate to each other in framing public issues. To establish a viable perspective that takes into account both the communicative organisation and the semiotic constitution of such discourses, this analysis combines approaches from frame semantics and social semiotics together with recursive sampling and coding. The article then explains the analytical procedures used to reconstruct the framing of the accused as either a responsible culprit or a victim of circumstances.

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1. Introduction

In light of the current technological, organisational, semiotic and practical entanglement of digitally networked media, any analysis of discourse must take into account that the media environment is “always on” (Baron, 2008). Only looking at either verbal or visual communication, or offline rather than online interaction, would thus introduce an artificial discrimination. In particular, analyses concerning the social, political or cultural implications of public discourse cannot ignore the palette of networked services and modal repertoires that are employed by broadcasting media, public agencies and civic actors in order to gain a voice (Dahlberg, 2013; Papacharissi, 2010).

Acknowledging the normality and norm, so to say, of current transmedia and multimodal discourse prompts us to reconsider approaches for reconstructing its semantic structures. To this end, this article examines the discursive linkage across broadcast media and social media services in framing public issues (Entman, 1993; Van Gorp, 2007). In its sampling procedures, it thus traces the intradiscursive relations between different texts, outlets and

actors. The analysis focuses on the interplay of verbal and visual modes in forming media frames. This sets it apart from other studies that have already examined the multimodal orchestration of genres like online newspapers (Cable and Knox, 2012), digital games (Ensslin, 2011) or user-generated videos (Adami, 2009). The study therefore advances interpretative discourse analysis through combining and adapting methodical approaches to the conditions of multimodal discourse (Pauwels, 2012; Sindoni, 2013).

In order to achieve this, the study focuses on semantic structures, namely media frames, since considerable attention has already gone to the language and pragmatics used in digitally networked communication to enact identities, communities or power relations (for overviews, see Androutsopoulos and Juffermans, 2014; Herring, Stein and Virtanen, 2013; Leppänen et al., 2015; Tannen and Trester, 2013; Thurlow and Mroczek, 2011). The article thus contributes to the understanding of the multimodal articulation of meaning (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006; Martinec and Salway, 2005) by examining verbal and visual frames, while the majority of framing research neglects the arrangement of different semiotic resources (Coleman, 2010).

Although some argue that it is necessary to create a holistic perspective, which connects different versions of discourse analysis (van Dijk, 2011) and is sensitive to the modalities of discourse (Fairclough, 2003; Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002), our approach side-steps this question: we neither aim for a comprehensive set of instruments accounting for all forms of digital discourse, nor do we only concentrate on the outcomes of the empirical example. Instead, the article on the one hand discusses the opportunities

* Correspondence to: Institut für Medienforschung, Thüringer Weg 11, 09126 Chemnitz, Germany. Tel.: +49 0371 531 38798; fax: +49 371 531 27429.

E-mail addresses: christian.pentzold@phil.tu-chemnitz.de (C. Pentzold),

vivien.sommer@phil.tu-chemnitz.de (V. Sommer),

stefan.meier@uni-tuebingen.de (S. Meier),

claudia.fraas@phil.tu-chemnitz.de (C. Fraas).

¹ Tel.: +49 371 531 38424; fax: +49 371 531 27429.

² Tel.: +49 371 531 32924; fax: +49 371 531 27429.

and challenges presented by current multimodal discourse for sampling material that varies in its degree of periodicity, centrality, visibility, persistence, animation and reactivity. And on the other hand, it combines methods from frame semantics, social semiotics and qualitative social enquiry in order to reconstruct the verbally and visually constituted media framing founding a discourse that varies in its communicative organisation and semiotic composition (Herring, 2010; Scollon and Scollon, 2004). Through this approach, the analysis seeks to adapt to the changes in the discursive field, rather than proceeding the other way round, where the chosen method determines what material could and should usefully be investigated.

The study explores the discourse on the third trial of the alleged Nazi collaborator, John/Ivan Demjanjuk. John “Ivan” Demjanjuk was a soldier of the Soviet Red Army, a prisoner of war during the Second World War and an auxiliary police guard, a so-called *Trawniki man*, at Nazi extermination camps. After becoming a naturalised U.S. citizen in 1958, he later stood trials for Holocaust-related war crimes, first in Israel in the 1980 s, second in the U.S. in 2001 and third in Germany between 2009 and 2011, where he was convicted as an accessory to murder, pending appeal. The multi-lingual discourse that accompanied the trial, particularly in Germany, the Netherlands, Ukraine, Russia, the U.S. and Israel, emerged from the interplay of a range of media. This included television, press and online communication, especially forums, websites and social media, which in turn mainly consisted of weblogs, the social networking site Facebook, the online encyclopaedia Wikipedia and the video platform YouTube. The discourse covered issues of war crimes, holocaust remembrance and historic guilt (for details about the case, see Douglas, 2016).

Before looking at the case, this article first discusses the analytical conditions of current multimodal discourse. Next, we combine approaches from frame semantics and social semiotics in practices of recursive sampling and coding taken from Grounded Theory. These analytical procedures are then applied to the discourse of the John/Ivan Demjanjuk trial.

2. Analytical conditions of current multimodal discourse

Specific opportunities and challenges are met by any analysis of multimodal discourses that commonly run through online and offline spheres, and that connect different broadcasting media outlets and social media platforms. First, such analyses must be sensitive to issues of *sampling*, that is, the generation, preparation and storage of material representing a discourse completely or fragmentary. Second, they must consider *interpretation*, that is, the hermeneutical understanding of discursively constituted meanings, through an analysis of the varied semiotic, semantic or grammatical aspects constituting the elements and relations in multimodal texts.

At a fundamental level, the approach to sampling rests on a definition of what should count as a unit of sampling, and thus as an individual text or discursive fragment, in a usually hyperlinked and dynamically evolving environment (Lemke, 2002). Furthermore, the discursive material challenges the methodology of sampling across six dimensions. The first of these is *periodicity*. While news outlets are typically published on a set schedule so that their chronology can be traced, current multimodal discourse encompasses texts that range from synchronised to erratic contributions. This makes it difficult to arrange a timetable for collecting items. The second dimension is *centrality*, since the diffusion of “mass-self communication” (Castells, 2009), p. 70 results in fragmentary discourse taking place in a host of venues besides broadcast publications. This cannot comprehensively be indexed and therefore no random sampling can be done. To some extent,

however, tags, mark-up or machine-readable metadata might facilitate purposive sampling, since digital texts can often be found through search engines. These services, however, also come with their politics, while concentrating instead on major platforms restricts the sampling and means complying with their settings and requirements. For the third issue to sampling, *visibility*, we must consider that instead of having either a mass or a minute audience, multimodal discourse can technically often reach a very large potential public, and yet in many cases the number of people that empirically take notice is considerably smaller (Marwick and Boyd, 2011). Besides creating practical problems for collecting discursive occurrences, such oscillating visibility also challenges ethical decisions regarding the use of material that is assumed to be public. The fourth consideration is *persistence*. Although digital discourse is frequently treated as an enduring archive (Mayer-Schönberger, 2009), the unreliable durability and availability of ephemeral texts, due to errors, conversions or de-publication, is another prevalent problem that the sampling has to cope with. As a fifth consideration is *animation*, since the different kinds of animated content can lose their modal coherence when stored as static documents and require technological solutions to record and preserve their dynamic composition. The sixth aspect, *reactivity*, relates to the fact that the digitisation and the compilation from databases allow for the customisation of content and content display, according to individual settings and technological protocols that are difficult to account for in sampling.

In turn, prospects for interpreting semantic structures from multimodal discourse are commonly associated with the availability of large corpora in digital form, which come from a range of sources and thus potentially cover a spectrum of discursive positions (Lewis, Zamith and Hermida, 2013, p. 35). A key strategy to capitalise on these options has been the turn to corpus linguistics and data mining that provides otherwise inaccessible insights into measurable discursive features (Mautner, 2005; Manovich, 2012). Yet due to the settings and limitations of their tools, these studies often fall short in fully acknowledging the complexity of the *communicative organisation* and *semiotic constitution* of such discourses that both pose challenges for interpretation.

Discourses constituted in the interplay of broadcasting media and social media are marked by unidirectional, bidirectional and multidirectional forms of exchange, which afford different degrees of interactivity. This basic condition yields an array of *communicative organisation* along modal range, speed, timing, direction of communication, roles of discursive agents and interrelatedness of messages (Quiring and Schweiger, 2008, p. 155). The analysis must therefore be sensitive to these varied settings and allow for contextualising their units of analysis in such interactive configurations (Herring, 2010). Finally, interpretation must take into account the *semiotic constitution* of current discourses as digital media services, namely the World Wide Web, have been associated with simplifying options for multimodal remix and multiplying the possible meaningful combinations of verbal passages, sounds, images, audiovisuals, colours and layouts (Lemke, 2002). Analysing these particular semiotic orchestrations requires methods to recognise their discursive significance, both separately and in combination (Kress, 2010; Pauwels, 2012).

Beyond these various considerations, any attempt to gather and understand multimodal discourse has to be aware of its generative creativity, which continually shifts the available and appropriate genres, stylistic registers and levels of formality (Baron, 2008; Crystal, 2011). In this regard, the standards of both professional and amateur communication, as well as the very criteria of what makes up amateurism and professionalism, are evolving and ask for appropriate analytical response.

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