



Verbal–visual harmony or dissonance? A news values analysis of multimodal news texts on climate change



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ABSTRACT

The focus of this paper is on the little researched interplay between verbal and visual representations of climate change news. We apply the framework of discursive news values analysis (Bednarek and Caple, 2017) to investigate how climate stories are made newsworthy through language (headlines) and image (pictures). We analyse 22 texts from the broadsheet The Guardian and 28 from the tabloid Daily Mail relating to the IPCC's 5th Assessment Report and find that, broadly speaking, the same news values are constructed in both newspapers, notably the 'traditional' values of Negativity and Impact, often in combination with Eliteness and Superlativeness. There was generally a harmonious relationship between the verbal and the visual message, with language and image reinforcing or complementing each other. However, in some instances, and notably in the Daily Mail, there was a clash between the two meaning-making modes, e.g., involving Negativity constructed through language and Positivity through image. The paper also finds that selection of visuals to accompany news stories on climate change represents a newsroom challenge, e.g., when images originally produced as visual verification of a past event are used as illustrations of what the future may bring.

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1. Introduction

This paper wishes to contribute to the still relatively sparse research literature on language–image relations in media texts. There has been a growing interest in multimodal text analysis in the last couple of decades (e.g., Kress and van Leeuwen, 2001; Machin and Mayr, 2012; Machin, 2016). Such research is being undertaken within increasing numbers of fields and methodological approaches (see Jewitt, 2016 for multimodality analyses beyond text). Technological developments have also contributed to broaden the multimodality landscape to studies involving blogs (Domingo et al., 2015) and social media such as Twitter (O'Neill et al., 2015) and Facebook (Bednarek and Caple, 2017). In the current paper, we are primarily interested in discursive practices in the newsroom. More specifically, we focus on how verbal and visual devices are employed to attract readers' interest in news items on climate change.

The seemingly simple question “What is news?” has been dealt with both by media workers, discussing news values that underpin journalistic practices, and communication researchers, identifying qualities that need to be present for a story to become news (Galtung and Ruge, 1965; Tunstall, 1971; Bell, 1991; Harcup and

O'Neill, 2001; Cotter, 2010). A different, discourse-based approach to studying news values has been developed by Bednarek and Caple (2012a,b, 2017; see also Bednarek, 2016a). Without rejecting the importance of the *why* of news reporting, their focus is on *how* news is reported in language and image. Such a perspective implies identifying the linguistic devices of the text and the visual devices of the images seen as constructing specific news values. This approach will serve as the basis for the present study.

There is no single, generally accepted, typology of news values. However, in addition to Negativity and Impact, which may be described as core news values, values posited within the approaches mentioned above are primarily related to *person* (Prominence, Personalisation), *time* (Timeliness, in the sense of recency) and *place* (Proximity, geographic/cultural). The topic we focus on in this study, climate change, is clearly a phenomenon of great current relevance (IPCC, 2014). However, the most serious climate change consequences lie ahead, in a future which is not easily understood, neither temporally, spatially or socially (van der Linden et al., 2015). Climate news therefore represents a challenge for news producers. It is diverse in nature, involving scientific knowledge, policy decisions, as well as environmental and social impacts. Such news is typically associated with the core values Negativity and Impact. However, it is also a well-recognised fact that, from a Western perspective, the majority of those most affected by climate change are, and will be, poor communities in

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faraway locations. As already indicated, it is also widely acknowledged that the most serious consequences belong in a relatively distant future. Important news values such as Proximity and Timeliness therefore seem less relevant. This situation contributes to explaining why climate change is an issue that moves in and out of media focus (Boykoff, 2007; Schäfer et al., 2014). Extensive news coverage tends to occur mainly in conjunction with so-called ‘focusing events’ of international scope (Schäfer et al., 2014), such as the climate summits (the Conferences of the Parties, or COPs) and the publication of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Assessment Reports. In addition, dramatic weather-related incidents that may be linked to global warming, such as flooding and droughts, may act as drivers for attention.

How, then, is climate news mediated to the general public through verbal and visual representations? And more importantly, how do the two meaning-making modes operate together in such texts?¹ To answer these questions, we will apply Bednarek and Caple’s framework of Discursive News Values Analysis (henceforth also DNVA; Bednarek and Caple, 2017) in a qualitative study of verbal and visual news coverage of three connected climate-related focusing events, namely the publication in 2013/2014 of the three Working Group reports (WGI-III) which – together with a final Synthesis report – make up the IPCC’s Fifth Assessment Report. These three part-reports acted as triggers for the news texts analysed here. Our material comprises news stories published in two UK newspapers with different ideologies and different approaches to climate news, the broadsheet *The Guardian* and the tabloid *Daily Mail* (see Section 4).

We start by providing a brief overview of the literature on verbal and visual news discourse on climate change, before we go on to introduce the DNVA framework. We then present our material and research questions, before we move on to reporting and discussing our findings. In a final section, we offer some concluding remarks.

2. Studies of verbal and visual elements in climate-related news texts

There is by now a rich literature involving verbal news discourse on climate change, and individual studies are too numerous to mention. Researchers such as Boykoff (e.g., 2011) and Carvalho (e.g., 2007) are among the many who deserve to be mentioned in this context (for studies with a linguistic approach, see Fløttum, 2017). As regards research on climate news with a focus on visual representations, O’Neill and Smith (2014) provide a comprehensive overview. Especially relevant contributions in the present context are Smith and Joffe (2009), identifying key climate image themes in British broadsheets and tabloids, and O’Neill (2013), undertaking both a quantitative content analysis and a qualitative frame analysis of images appearing with online articles on climate change in US, UK and Australian newspapers with different ideologies. For a recent overview of the field, see Wozniak et al. (2015). As regards the notion of news values specifically, a number of studies have dealt with this in relation to verbal discourse (see Bednarek and Caple, 2017 for an overview). However, less work has been done on news values in relation to visual elements. Exceptions are Craig (1994), Rössler et al. (2011), Caple (2013), Caple and Bednarek (2016) and Bednarek and Caple (2017).

As for work addressing the interaction between the verbal and the visual, such studies are even thinner on the ground. Notable exceptions that also deal with climate change are DiFrancesco and Young (2011) and O’Neill et al. (2015). In addition, Smith and Joffe (2009) and Wozniak et al. (2015) touch on this issue. DiFrancesco and Young (2011) analyse Canadian print media coverage of climate change in the course of a six-month period in

2008. They find what they describe as “a profound disjuncture between images and text” (p. 517), where “image and article frequently refer to completely different dimensions of the climate change issue, thus presenting multiple and sometimes even competing narratives to readers” (p. 532). A similar observation is made in Wozniak et al.’s primarily methodological paper (2015), in the presentation of an article related to COP17 in Durban: “Although suggesting a close connection to the written text through layout choices, the photograph tells the reader a separate story” (p. 471). Smith and Joffe (2009) note the occurrence of ‘positive’ pictures (e.g., children enjoying unusual weather conditions) in ‘negative’ stories (p. 654), stating that “the contradictory impact of such images may require future investigation” (p. 655).

O’Neill et al. (2015) consider the relationship between the verbal and the visual from a different angle. In the wake of the publication of the IPCC AR5, they undertook a discourse-based comparison of how the report was framed in mainstream media (broadcast and print) and on social media (Twitter) in the UK and US. The ten frames they establish are based on certain “constituent elements”, mainly narratives, themes, and stock phrases/metaphors, in addition to visual imagery typically associated with each frame. For instance, the frame denoted ‘Uncertain Science’ was found to be associated with “hackneyed, clichéd images, e.g. polar/glacial scenes, especially images of polar bears” (O’Neill et al., 2015, Supplementary information section).

Bednarek and Caple’s recent book *The discourse of news values* (2017) also addresses the verbal–visual interplay. One of three case studies included considers the interaction between verbal text (headline and opening paragraph) and visuals (first picture) in 99 online news items whose URLs were shared a number of times among users through Facebook. One of the findings emanating from this thematically diverse corpus was that overlap in identical news values between language and image was generally quite low, and lowest between headline and picture (2017, p. 219). However, few clashes of news values were observed across the two semiotic modes (2017, p. 220; see further on this in Section 5). Whether the same situation prevails in our climate change material, is at the core of the current study.

It has been questioned whether it is possible to analyse the verbal and visual mode by means of the same analytical tools (e.g., Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006). In our view, there is an obvious methodological advantage to using a unified framework when considering the interplay between language and image. The next section provides an overview of the DNVA framework, before we go on to describe our material and set out our research questions.

3. The discursive news values analysis framework

As noted in the Introduction, no generally agreed list or classification of news values exists. Drawing on previous studies, Bednarek and Caple (2017) end up with eleven news values. Presented alphabetically, they are as follows: Aesthetic Appeal (visuals only), Consonance (conforming to stereotypes), Eliteness, Impact, Negativity, Personalisation, Positivity, Proximity, Superlativeness, Timeliness and Unexpectedness. Each value is “linked systematically to verbal and visual semiotic resources” (Bednarek, 2016b, p. 229). Short stylised examples of verbal realisations of the ten values relevant for the verbal analysis are given in Table 1.² Note, however, that there is no one-to-one relationship between linguistic device and news value. The focus is on the communicative function constructed through these devices (Bednarek, 2016b). Hence, the general context as well as the specific co-text

¹ See Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) on the importance of viewing the verbal and the visual as an integrated text.

² Apart from the invented example illustrating Consonance, all are based on headlines in our material.

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