

Epistemology of journalistic rituals: The case of domestic violence

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Abstract

This paper explores journalistic strategic rituals in newspaper and television reports of domestic violence, emphasises the importance of formal aspects of the media representation of violence and argues that these institutionalised forms produce the (un)importance of the issue of violence as a public problem. The purpose of such deconstruction of conventional journalistic narratives is the denaturalisation of those standard procedures of telling and framing the news that mythologise violence as an effect of individual pathologies. By overlooking its social dimensions, they establish violence as a natural, i.e. acceptable part of performing masculinity and most importantly, the social background of violence remains unexplored regardless of genre, whether it is in episodic television news stories, daily news items in quality dailies or in journalistic documentary melodramas. The most important function of these ritualised conventions is thus not so much the consolidation of the truthfulness of messages as in the act of establishing and narrowing what can be said at all.

KEYWORDS: journalistic rituals, factism, newspaper chronicle, balance, domestic violence

Introduction: Ritual in journalism studies

This paper explores some of the most important journalistic strategic rituals using representations of domestic violence in three Slovenian quality daily newspapers and on the news and current affairs programs of two television stations as an illustrative example.¹ From the 1980s onward, journalism studies have been heavily informed by anthropological concepts and perspectives. For example, in an overview of approaches in

¹ We use the journalistic coverage of domestic violence in an illustrative way because the critique of journalism's conventionality in this paper could also be applied to other areas of journalistic coverage, especially those in similar 'regions' that dictate journalistic standards (cf. Hallin 1989).

media² anthropology Rothenbuhler (2008) among three³ others identifies the following two: 1) the perspective that began borrowing concepts of ritual, myth, religion, symbolic structure, and process from anthropological theory in the 1980s to forge an alternative approach to media studies and 2) myth and symbol tradition of interpreting texts with an abstractly anthropological orientation, informed by anthropological reading but not its methods.

These anthropological concepts have become highly influential in what Zelizer (2004, 2008) labels the cultural⁴ approach to journalism which asks ‘how journalism matters differently’ (Zelizer 2008: 255). Cultural analysis insists on meaning making as a primary activity and consequently ‘explicitly challenges two aspects of journalism’s inquiry: the normative biases of much journalism research and the professional notions of journalists themselves’ (Zelizer 2004: 177).

The paper focuses on rituals of media work which are, according to Rothenbuhler (1998), one of four areas where the possibility that mediated communication may take ritual forms has been discussed:

The ritual in this case is not a ceremonial event but a formal routine of everyday work life, a symbolic method of coping with symbolic dangers. Where media event are examples of ritual by media, these are examples of media by ritual (ibid.: 79).

The notion of strategic ritual was popularised in journalism research with Gaye Tuchman’s seminal study of objectivity as strategic ritual. She defined ritual as a ‘routine procedure,’⁵ which protects professionals from mistakes and critics (Tuchman 1999: 298). Strategic ritual assumes the continual⁶ use of a particular form of reporting, which shapes the tradition and consequently the legitimacy of such action/reporting by repetitive performance. Equally important, the strategic ritual also confirms the collective

² Although most criticism in the broad area of media anthropology is pointed in the direction of the misuse of anthropological concepts by communication scholars, examples from the other side can also be found. Nightingale (2012), for instance, argues that anthropological media ethnography has “caused” the disappearance of communication theory from audience research and strives for the exploration of a general theory of communication.

³ In Slovenia’s context, a good example of yet another approach, identified by Rothenbuhler, namely the ethnography of television viewers, can be found in the works on the domestication of television (Pušnik & Starc 2008; Pušnik 2008).

⁴ The cultural approach to journalism is not only marginalised in Slovenia, it can be argued that journalism research is ‘disciplinarily nearsighted’ (Zelizer 2008: 261) because of the colonization of the research area by journalism educators and thus lacks critical insights.

⁵ Ehrlich (1996: 5) criticises Tuchman’s ‘muddled use of the concept’ as she does not explain the difference between ‘ritual’ and ‘routine’ or the different level of analysis to which these concepts may be applied.

⁶ For discussion of ritual as habitual and formalised action, see also Couldry (2003a: 3). Couldry’s ‘myth of the centre’ also resonated thoroughly within media and cultural studies. He maintains that the basis of media institutions’ capacity for ritual lies in the claim that there is a core of ‘truth’ that we should value as the center of ‘our’ values. More importantly, he identifies privileged access of the media and their natural role to frame that center as the second myth (Couldry 2012: 66–83).

experience of journalists and journalistic organisations and creates and represents a rhetorical legitimisation of the journalistic profession⁷ (cf. Zelizer 1993).

Rothenbuhler emphasises that journalistic conventions are not just routinised but also ritualised: ‘Journalistic writing to convention is a social activity, following symbolic convention, for participation in serious life, and is backed up by moral authority, in other words, it is a ritualised activity’ (1998: 86). Ehrlich’s (1996: 7) framework also suggests using ritual as a heuristic device to locate specific practices that display the ‘family characteristics’ of ritualisation. Following Grimes, he points out that something is ritualised to the extent that it is performed, formalised, repetitive, institutionalised, standardised and valued highly. Consequently, objectivity is not just a defensive mechanism but it also grants journalists a significant degree of autonomy as a ‘creative, ritualised practice paying homage to sacred professional norms’ (ibid.: 8).

The analysis below focuses on the most important conventional and ritualised features of journalistic representations of violence. In Ekström’s (2002) words, we are attempting to identify the epistemologies of the journalistic coverage of domestic or sexist violence, its validity claims, and its public acceptance of its knowledge claims. The purpose of deconstructing conventional journalistic narratives is the denaturalisation of those standard procedures of telling and framing the news that familiarise and mythologise violence as an effect of individual pathologies; however, by overlooking its social dimensions, they establish violence as a natural, i.e. acceptable part of performing masculinity. By analysing strategic rituals of reporting and naturalised codes and conventions of so-called quality journalism, this study ignores predictable negative examples of sensational⁸ journalism. Due to a generally accepted social consensus of regarding violence as unacceptable and the official journalistic ideology of objectivity, reporting on violence, with the exception of the tabloid press, is actually seen as outside ideology and as a totally transparent document and a realistic description of events based on “raw” facts.

⁷ In an influential account Zelizer emphasised that much of the professional authority of journalists ‘has come to rest not in what they know but in how they represent their knowledge’ (Zelizer 1993: 191). Drawing on Carey’s view of ritual communication she emphasises that the foundations of cultural authority of journalism are embedded within narrative which has held journalism together not only as a profession but also as an interpretive community (Zelizer 1993: 192). In Slovenia’s context, Jontes (2009) explores how journalistic authority is maintained through journalistic discussions about tabloidisation.

⁸ Another reason for ‘ignoring’ sensational journalism can be connected with Bolin’s critique of the commercialisation thesis as a mostly naturalized doxic belief in his recent article. He convincingly shows that it is not entertainment that is ‘eating its way into journalism but the other way around’ (Bolin 2014: 336). According to his main argument, in a case of Sweden (and many similarities can be drawn with Slovenia), journalism has become more autonomous as a subfield of cultural production, and has gradually come to dominate both factual and entertainment television. Journalistic practices and ideologies have consequently entered into those subdivisions of the field and we are facing the birth of the era of hyperjournalism (Bolin 2014).

Chronicle and the privatisation of violence in daily newspapers

Although journalistic discourse cannot be separated from representations of domestic violence in other forms of popular culture, which support and reinforce each other, the defining feature of journalism is its high modality, that is, its referential relationship to reality. Because of its cultural authority, it rests on the belief that it is close to reality. Some other forms, e.g. documentary, especially the *cinema verite* tradition, also claim privileged access to reality but their authority, deriving from professional ideology is lower. Its authoritative and privileged position in the context of other popular cultural genres rests on the belief that it is closer to reality. Journalism reproduces its own privileged position relative to other forms of media discourse by a set of ritualised and conventionalised discursive strategies through which its factuality is established, and “transparency fallacy” (Fiske 1987) is constantly performed. Therefore, the validity of the journalistic discourse (as compared to popular media culture) is based on its permanent rhetorical construction of neutrality and factuality. Established textual strategies, such as live reporting, the highly standardised use of accessed voices or eyewitness reports, stakeouts, or visualisation create an impression of truthful journalistic representations. As a result, journalism is understood as ‘an authorised truth-teller’ or ‘a licensed relayer of facts,’ according to McNair (1998: 65).

This study considers the individual journalist in this context as an epiphenomenon of the journalistic field, working within its structural constraints, and explains some of the naturalised protocols conventionally used by journalists for reporting on domestic violence, which are consensually accepted, naturalised, and embedded in the professional culture of journalism. Therefore, a criticism of the conventional forms of representing domestic violence is not a critique of journalistic choices by individual journalists, but an analysis of the structure of the field of journalism itself and an interpretation of the consequences of the naturalised conventions of representation of violence by men against women and children. This de-individualises the journalist/author who is to be understood as the function of discursive regimes and not as an individual source of discourse (cf. Foucault in Rabinow 1984). With the “de-individualisation” of the journalistic discourse, analytical attention moves from the question of authorial intention (or from the journalist and his/her political, or psychological motivations, for instance) to the industrialised, standardised, naturalised, and also ritualised procedures of news production in the media.

The study is based on the analysis of 361⁹ newspaper reports published between 1985 and 2010. The time span from the second half of the 1980s on was the time of the deregulation, the privatisation and the consolidation of the radical commercialisation of

⁹ In randomly selected three-month periods from March to May 1985, 1990, 1995, 2005 and 2010, 361 news articles on domestic violence were published in Slovenia’s main daily newspapers Delo, Dnevnik and Večer. All the articles on the topic of domestic violence were included in the analysis, regardless of news genre. The number of articles increases significantly after 1990 partly because of the reasons inside the media and partly because of social changes such as democratisation, the delegitimisation of violence, the thematisation of violence in political and other discourses, etc.

journalistic culture that implied the transformation of journalistic “knowledge-producing” rituals. As many as three quarters of these reports were published in sections devoted to crime and accident reporting (in Slovenian papers traditionally called “Black Chronicle”); at the same time, however, the stories were written as chronicles, a specific form of the news narrative. Bird and Dardenne (1997) distinguish between two forms of news narratives: as either story or chronicle. Both are narrative reconstructions of an event, but the chronicle as a narrative is not a story. The difference between a news story and news chronicle lies in the specifics of the narrative reconstruction of an event. Both use different conventions of the narrative reconstructions. The narrative is the representation of an event or a series of events or actions in a temporal order embedded at its border in another narrative, the so-called framing narrative, such as the narrative of a violent event in a domestic setting, embedded within the larger narrative of masculinity, femininity, family, authority, and gender relations.

News stories, in contrast, are organised in chronological order, covering the motion of time in terms of the causes and consequences of an event. ‘A “story” is different from a simple chronological account, because it seeks coherence and meaning; a story has a point and it exists within a cultural lexicon of understandable themes’ (Bird & Dardenne 2009: 156). For the narrative to become a story, explanations enabling readers to understand the issue should be woven into its narrative tissue. Thus, the story is a narrative in which events are ordered chronologically and logically/consequentially, including causation.¹⁰ The latter is a meaningful explanation and evaluation of the happening, always mediated or constructed by a narrative discourse. The chronicle, in contrast, offers no conclusions, but simply terminates, leaving things unresolved, as if ‘real events appeared to human consciousness in the form of unfinished stories’ (White 1981: 5).

In contrast to story, narrative discourse, in general, does not necessarily follow a chronological order. Chronicles in newspapers normally have the narrative form of an inverted pyramid, i.e. the formulaic system of ordering information in a descending order of importance. In their long form, chronicles feature the lead under the headline summarising the key information, followed by the details of the event. Although it is conventionally believed that the chronicle/description is a more unmediated and “objective” account of the event than the story, it is neither more real nor closer to the event than the latter. With its highly standardised inverted pyramid structure and its classification of information in descending order of importance, the chronicle is a constituent part of a ‘mythological process and routinization of the unexpected’ (Bird & Dardenne 1997: 340).

Routine crime and accident reports are conventionally published in the form of a chronicle. These unexpected yet daily events, told in this narrative form, confirm the normality and everydayness of the unusual although the latter deviates from everyday routines. Therefore, the actual topic of the journalistic narrative, in general, and the chronicle, in particular, is, according to Chaney (1993), normality rather than reality. The

¹⁰ For instance, ‘a man from Maribor attacked his ex-wife yesterday afternoon’ is a narrative. ‘A man from Maribor attacked his ex-wife out of jealousy yesterday afternoon’ is a story, which always includes moral thematisation of events or actions and, therefore, offers narrative closure.

narrative strategy of the inverted pyramid and the standard recounting of cases of domestic violence within the framework of the chronicle help daily newspapers to support the normalisation of domestic violence. As a social phenomenon, the latter is inconceivable and at the same time as self-evident as the weather or natural disasters:

They seem merely to have *occurred*, and their importance seems to be indistinguishable from the fact that they were recorded. In fact, it seems that their importance consists of nothing other than the fact that they were recorded (White 1981: 8).

Although violence is unwanted and unacceptable, the commonplace nature of domestic violence is constructed as an unavoidable aspect of heterosexual relationships. Together with the normalisation of domestic violence, the conventional narrative reconstruction of violent events in the form of the chronicle locates violence at the bottom of general or universal events, including the social importance of domestic violence. The latter is placed within the field of domestic particularity, and not understood in the context of the politics of the private. The event or an issue are not of general interest, based on their immanent characteristics. The public status of the event is constituted through the strategies of the narrative reconstruction of the event, which is given meaning and possibly assigned universal public importance only through the interpretative frame.

These institutionalised forms produce the (un)importance of the issue of violence as a public problem. Kunelius (1994) believes that two narrative dimensions are significant for evaluating how narrative reconstruction establishes general importance: the evidence of the narrative voice (i.e. the presence or absence of the narrator), and the use of footing, which establishes the narrative's dependence on, or independence from sources, i.e. from the so-called "accessed" voices (e.g. of interviewees, official sources, especially of the courts, police, social workers, or civil servants), whose role is to authenticate the narrative. Therefore, newspaper chronicle-narratives, compared to newspaper stories, do not offer the reader a subject position from which to read the narrative. The narrator is invisible, and the narrative relies on external voices. This narrative strategy conventionally constitutes the chronicle-narrative as being merely referential, that is, closer to the event and, therefore, more objective than the story. In Potter's words (1996: 150), the invisibility of the narrator, created through the externalising devices such as footing, creates the 'out-there-ness' of an event where the description of an event is constructed as independent of the narrator, who is 'just passing something on.'

Because of the absence of the narrator in the narrative structure, the chronicle as a narrative form seems to be a paradigmatic example of a transparent narrative. The objectifying discourse of the chronicle hides the narrator and obscures the teller's responsibility for the description, since the narrative seems to be a mere recording of the event and entirely referential. However, the narrative act, i.e. the conventional procedure of reconstruction and interpretation remains hidden. The event thus appears as not constructed at all and seems to speak for itself. In this analysis of daily newspapers, domestic violence is placed outside the chronicle and is storified only when it crosses the line of private and routine violence (e.g. when domestic violence ends in murder or

cruelty that marks “acceptable” violent practices), when elite personalities are involved, or when the event is perversely spectacular.

The meaning of the every narrative is shaped by the narrative situation, i.e. protocols within which the narrative is consumed. Barthes argues that in so-called archaic societies the narrative situation is highly coded, especially when it comes to mythical narratives. Modern society, however, ‘takes the greatest pains to conjure away the coding of the narrative situation: there is no counting the number of narrational devices which seek to naturalise the subsequent narrative by feigning to make it the outcome of some natural circumstances’ (Barthes 1978: 116).

This means that the chronicle as a narrative form seems to belong naturally to the sort of the events it reconstructs; it seems to be a natural narrative form for routine events of domestic violence. Neither the narrative regime of the chronicle nor the categorisation of the news itself is neutral. At that moment of turning to the media, people switch to the narrative code needed when reading, watching, or interpreting the narrative. Fiske (1987) emphasises that the semiotic and political significance of categorisation, or the pigeon-holing of social life, in economics, international politics, local politics, or the daily chronicle are problematic in themselves. They suggest that a problem can be understood and solved only within its own category: ‘localizing the definition of problems encourages local ‘solutions’ and discourages any critical interrogation of the larger social structure’ (ibid.: 287).

Journalistic “categorisation” of domestic violence as belonging to the daily chronicle section of the newspaper triggers the naturalisation, privatisation, or individualisation and consequently the psychologising of violence. As such, it contributes to the decontextualised treatment of violence as an issue outside and beyond power relations in society. As van Zoonen (1994) emphasises, defining domestic violence as a problem of the private sphere prevents recognising it as a social problem, and due to its privatisation leaves women without any means of fighting against it.

Factism and decontextualisation of violence

Factism (see Johnson-Cartee 2005) and descriptiveness as strategic rituals of reporting on violence are typical of the representations of domestic violence in the chronicle. Factism is performed by the media mainly through a decontextualised processing of facts, through the production of facts, e.g. through public opinion polls in daily newspapers that produce facts, and through the routine and ritualised use of so-called external voices. Public opinion polls and reliance on authoritative official news sources, which supposedly offer official, trustworthy facts, are two main strategic rituals of factism. Footing or the use of accessed voices as a key ritualised convention of factism is used to confirm or create the effect of reality, establish the impartiality and authenticity of journalistic discourse, and support its trustworthiness and truthfulness. The conventional structure of a news item combines a complex ritualised juxtaposition of statements (i.e. the accessed voice) and the institutionalised voice (i.e. the voice of a journalist). This juxtaposition is a conventional strategy to achieve the authority and trustworthiness of the journalistic discourse and the

status of a factual translation of reality. The use of accessed voices, including official statements, allows value judgments that are put into the mouth of the external voice, thus enabling the journalistic discourse to remain neutral and value-free, creates the reality effect and gives a report the quality of out-there-ness (see Potter 1996). It simultaneously absolves the journalist from investigating the event/problem, since the demand of factism and trustworthiness is already fulfilled by citing external sources. The juxtaposition of different and supposedly independent voices should, therefore, transform description into fact and establish the facticity of the chronicle while exposing the paradox of journalistic objectivity, which results in depending on official sources as objective knowers.

In narratives on domestic violence, factism is performed through the reliance on official sources (courts and police), which is one of the most important features of the factual discourse on domestic violence. More than 85 per cent of stories on domestic violence, analysed in the Slovenian daily newspapers relied on such official sources. They satisfy the need for securing a continued flow of information which can be produced only by institutionalised sources: both are reliable, conventionally trustworthy and articulate informants that are continuously at the disposal of journalists with their constant supply of new events. Johnson-Cartee (2005: 215) argues that journalists are dependent on the 'centralisation of information in bureaucracies and the generation of facts by bureaucrats.'

Due to their conventional use of external voices and their dependence on authoritative official sources, chronicles based on factism inevitably reproduce the legal and police discourse. The use of statements or data from official and legitimate sources as authorised knowers produces legitimate, official facts that, taken together, result in a presumably credible and objective news item. Police and courts are treated as knowledgeable, fact-producing sources beyond interpretation. However, theories of gender and notions of family and authority are always embedded in the construction of facts and statistics by courts and police. The nature of the official record is shaped by a wide range of factors embodied in their construction. The production of an official record (by police statistics, for example) always involve the interpretation of evidence. Generation and selection of facts on domestic violence sustain a particular narrative on family and gender order. Frequent instances of almost identical reports on the same event in different daily newspapers show that short news items in the chronicle section are often copied from regular public announcements of daily events by the police.

Since reports on violence are predominantly based on violent events recorded by courts and police (episodic news) and not on the problem of violence or the problematic judiciary system and legal framework for sanctioning violence (thematic news), the standardisation of sources logically produces episodic framing and thus decontextualises the problem of violence. Journalistic reports on violent events, based on court reports (representing one third of the articles in this study) are particularly significant, because they frequently uncritically transmit the discourse of the courtrooms.

However, police or court statistics are not independent of theories of gender roles, which are embedded in the construction of domestic violence statistics. Consequently, the recording of facts is part of an organisational practice of fact making, fits particular narrative reconstructions, and is never outside ideology. Furthermore, violence is conventionally

represented as excusable and relativised by citing extenuating circumstances (such as the drunkenness of the offender, reduced sanity, and jealousy), which are components of almost all court-related stories.

Factism is a mode of reporting which is not based on thematisation, but exclusively on individual events, which are entirely unconnected and decontextualised and based entirely on police and court reports. The effect of factism is that the structural causes of violence are not explored at all, and that journalistic representations do not contribute to understanding the problem of domestic violence, although the public is bombarded with information about violent events. MacDonald (2003) argues that new information does not necessarily produce new knowledge and understanding. Factism, in addition, provides information on the causes of violence (e.g. jealousy, drunkenness, or provocation), but not on the meaning of violence.

Episodic framing and melodrama on television

Despite the hybridity of the patterns of media use and despite the fact that the practices of audiences are increasingly ‘platform agnostic’ (Turner 2015: 124) and that everyday life is highly mediatized, the new media are far from replacing television. The importance of ‘heritage media’ (ibid.: 3), particularly television, and everyday consumption of news programming has not decreased.¹¹ Moreover, despite the differentiation of television consumption as the backdrop of narrowcasting and the dramatic increase of choice, for the majority of Slovene viewers local programming, particularly local news, remain the most important source of information and entertainment and discursive framework for understanding the social world.¹² Because of different news values, television news program generally reports only on those violent events that have wide-ranging dramatic effects (e.g. a family murder), or unusual and unrepresentative violence (e.g. children beat their parents, a wife beats her husband), or when the problem of domestic violence becomes a topic of discussion in institutionalised politics (e.g. a conflict of parliamentary parties over policies concerning domestic violence, a press conference of non-governmental organisations, etc.). Between 2005 and 2007, thirty-three media reports on domestic violence were broadcast on two television channels that were selected for analysis: fifteen on public service *RTV SLO* and eighteen on commercial *POP TV*.¹³ On

¹¹ The exception in Slovenia is the age group 15–24 of the television audience (cf. Jontes 2012). The common argument that television news is irrelevant because of the “new media” and changing viewing habits is thus problematic. Despite this widely shared assumption, television is still a dominant medium in Slovenia according to all indicators (viewing time, 66% share in the national advertising budget, etc.). Furthermore, a recent comparative study (Papathanassopoulos et al 2013) has also confirmed television’s dominance in news consumption: ‘Although the audience continues to fragment, based on the current numbers, it does not seem to be fragmenting away from the TV space even while it fragments within that space, at least for the near future’ (Papathanassopoulos et al. 2013: 701). New media are therefore of course important, but are only one aspect of the media landscape that requires attention.

¹² In Couldry’s words (2003b), media generates “meta-capital” or definitional or symbolic power across cultural fields and social space

¹³ Both programs were selected for the analysis on the basis of their high ratings and cultural centrality, and therefore their potential influence on public discourse and perception of domestic violence.

the whole, two kinds of news stories predominate: news on the singular violent events (comparable to the chronicles in daily newspapers analysed above) and news stories from court trials. While the commercial POP TV focuses on reporting on the violent events and frequently in serial form reports on the course of the trials of spectacular episodes of violence, public service TV SLO, in contrast, conducts more varied research into domestic violence. Certainly, the focus on the tragic events and trials on POP TV is a consequence of the news values of commercial television: the selection of the events is based on the intensity of the event or its spectacular dimensions. In short, the problem of violence is episodically rather than thematically framed.

In the following, we focus on two news stories, one broadcast on commercial POP TV and the other on public service RTV SLO. Both stories report on the same event: the parliamentary debate concerning the ombudsman's report on the state of domestic violence in Slovenia and proposals to fight it.¹⁴ There are only marginal differences in the mode of treatment of the two cases on commercial POP TV and on public service RTV SLO. Both institutions share conventional strategic rituals that constitute a journalistic professional culture and shape the story beyond the economic and organisational differences between the two institutions. Our primary analytical attention focuses on the formal aspects of the news story: the use of specific combinations of signs that in the end can shape its meaning and reading. On the denotative level, the story on both television stations is entirely balanced and neutral, for it is conventionally structured as an intertwining of institutional voices (e.g. a newsreader, a reporter) and accessed voices (stake-out, statements of experts, parliamentary representatives of political parties, selected citations from the ombudsman's report, the ombudsman's statement). Nevertheless, on the connotative level certain interpretations of the event are ritually constructed thus encouraging and supporting a specific reading of the problem of domestic violence in Slovenia and political conflict over the solution of the problem of violence.

The event is framed as a conflict between political left and right, and the question of domestic violence is consequently subordinated to the thematic framing of the political conflict over the interpretation of violence in the ombudsman's report and the suggested measures to prevent it. The problem of violence becomes interesting for both news programs only when it acquires the dramatic dimensions of a conflict between established mainstream political parties. Framing can be regarded as the process of the selection of certain perspectives on the reality at the expense of others and thereby defining the situation, suggesting what is at issue, and shaping the meaning of the event or problem reported. Reese (2003: 11) defines the media frames as 'organizing principles that are socially shared and persistent over time, that work symbolically to meaningfully structure the social world.' Framing, therefore, is a discursive process that constructs the event and thereby shapes its meaning. The frame as the metanarrative offers the context for the interpretation of the issue with the help of specific textual devices such as marginalisation and the exclusion of certain information/data by emphasising others, the use of chains of metaphors, narrativisation, and rhetoric.

¹⁴ Both news stories were broadcast on 22 February 2005 on public service TV SLO and commercial POP TV. The news item was 2 minutes and 23 seconds long on POP TV, and 2 minutes and 1 second long on TV SLO.

The concept of framing is not reduced to a stance on an issue or concerned with impartiality or neutrality of the news story but should be understood as a specific organisation of reality, principles of organisation of the communication and often an implicit, tacit theory of what actually happened. In short, it is a social ideology that finds its actualisation in a news text. According to Goffman (1986), the majority of our behaviour follows the expectations that are shaped by the frames or the interpretative schemes that constitute the context of action. Of course, the media are important framemakers of events and issues; however, they often use the frames offered by official sources (in our case the courts or the police). The framing power of official sources emanates from their role as regular routinised suppliers of news, and from their strategic alliance and mythological partnership with journalism. Journalism, in order to count as unbiased and in order to perform its objectivity, is dependent on the routine supply of news from the organised sources, such as the court and the police.

In the analysed example, two news items on the domestic violence are framed as a political confrontation. The problem of domestic violence, which offers a possibility of thematic framing (i.e. problem-oriented framing instead of episodic and event-oriented framing), uses confrontational framing. It is reshaped into a news item about a party conflict as regards the interpretation of violence (i.e. episodic framing). Thus, the attention is focused on the political conflict over the question of the credibility of the report and over the measures proposed, while the problem of violence itself is altogether pushed to the edge of the story and the issue of domestic violence is in both stories entirely marginalised. The frame here is actually meta-narration (in this case the left-right conflict), in which the first-degree narrative is embedded (i.e. the problem of domestic violence, the ombudsman's report, the political responsibility for fighting the violence). The metanarrative supplies the first-degree narrative with the meaning. Therefore, the problem of violence can be framed either as political confrontation, as a purely domestic conflict and a standard component of family relations, or, on the other hand, as the consequence of hegemonic masculinity and thus of gender power relations. However, episodic framing simultaneously causes the individualisation of the causes of the problem and so-called structural amnesia. While episodic framing suggests individual responsibility, thematic frames bring to the front larger systemic reasons for violence.

The reports on both television channels are distinctly ritually formulaic, and hence to a great extent identical. They start with the introduction by the newsreader that makes a transition from the previous news item to the new one. What follows is the introduction of the invisible reporter with scenes supplied that merely metaphorically represent the topic in the news story. In one case, entirely random scenes of children playing in the park are shown (on POP TV); in the other case dramatised (i.e. fictional) scenes of domestic violence, or more precisely, shots of the silhouette of a male that acts violently against the female silhouette, are shown (on TV SLO). Then in both cases the report moves to the parliament, to the speech of the ombudsman. The pacing is also identical in both reports. In both cases two to three sentences of the speech are excerpted, and the choice is only marginally different. This suggests that although the systems of ownership and power impose structural limitations on journalistic practice, the texts are

not a simple articulation of the political and economic structure of the media institution. In the analysis of the meaning of texts, the established standardised professional journalistic procedures, representational regimes and social mythology play an important role. In the continuation, the formal aspect of the news story and its content are practically identical. Both stories are based on the fragments of the speeches of speakers from opposition parties (two short comments) and those from the ruling coalition (also two short comments). The only difference was the order of appearance. Both news stories end with the newsreader's closing statements, which are visually complemented by a shot of the parliament in the case of TV SLO, whereas on POP TV the closing sequences are longer and more visually dynamic, with a scene of children playing in the park alternating with shots of the parliament, the ombudsman, and MPs speaking.¹⁵

The interpretative power of journalistic rituals

What are the key "knowledge-producing" practices and classification systems that guide the production of news on domestic violence and how does television news "communicate knowledge claims" (Ekström 2002)? The conventional news is normally structured through the so-called institutional voices (reporter and newsreader), visual modes of presentation, graphics, and reality reporting (with images from the location of the event or from the location that metaphorically represents the event or an issue). Both analysed news items follow the standard presentational structure in the following order: the event is introduced and thereby framed. This framing provides a discursive frame that shapes how the news item is to be understood (i.e. in the confrontational frame), the narrative is focused by a reporter in a stake-out (i.e. the problem of domestic violence and the political conflict over the interpretation of domestic violence), and finally, the authentication of the institutional journalistic discourse by the reality report (i.e. the fragments of speeches by the ombudsman and MPs). As argued by Hartley (1989: 114), the credibility of the news story depends on the 'knitting together,' that is, on the integration of the apparently transparent neutral discourse of the institutional voices and the mixture of accessed voices. At the end, comes the closing and rounding off of the narrative by the reporter and the newsreader. On the denotative level, the narrative is balanced, impartial and therefore "objective" in both news stories, yet connotatively the two news items construct a particular meaning and possibly the interpretation of the issue by the way the story is framed and at the organising level of the news narrative as a whole. The following meaning and interpretation is suggested.

Firstly, the news story is framed as a parliamentary dispute. Confrontational framing is the reference frame for an understanding of the event, and provides instructions for the interpretation: news is about the conflict between the parliamentary parties. Confrontational framing also shapes what kind of information we are searching for in the news story (the statements of the political speakers belonging to the opposition and

¹⁵ Of course, there are quite a few differences in the visual form of the news on both television stations (e.g. the graphics, the studio, the image and performance of the newsreader). The difference in the visual aspect is important for the meaning of the news, but not, however, essential for our research question.

to the ruling coalition), but it does not actually say anything about domestic violence in Slovenia, which was the topic of the report. Consequently, everything that follows is embedded in the context of the story about the conflict between political parties, and also interpreted as such, but not in the context of a discussion about strategies for dealing with domestic violence.

Secondly, since the news item is framed as political news and as a party conflict, both news stories on the ombudsman's report follow conventional performative strategic rituals for the simulation and demonstration of objectivity of news discourse. Performative strategies for the demonstration of objectivity are conventionally used by journalists when the reported issue is within the sphere of legitimate controversy, the place inhabited by the institutionalised political agents (such as political parties). They have a number of characteristics and include the textual establishment of distance and detachment and the absence of open moral evaluation. Balanced attention should be ritually paid to the statements of both sides: positional and oppositional representatives in our case. The use of the chosen accessed voices (quotes) enables implicit evaluation through their statements while simultaneously enabling the journalists to keep their objective, nonpartisan rhetoric. Thus, the key role of the accessed voices within the report is formal and ritual rather than informative: the voices confirm the authenticity of the news story and its close approximation to the real, and at the same enable the journalist to evaluate the issue at hand while simultaneously maintaining the objectivity of the journalistic discourse.

Thirdly, the informative value of both news stories is extremely small.¹⁶ Except for some statistical data in the introduction to the story on public TV SLO ('more than 5,000 criminal offences were associated with domestic violence; in one-third of the cases the offender and the victim are married or in a relationship, 11 women were murdered'), practically nothing was said on the ombudsman's report on domestic violence that triggered both reports. The problem of domestic violence and the proposed social and legal measures against it were marginalised and the whole issue was reduced to the mythical conflict between the left and right political parties in parliament on the alleged political controversy of the report and its proposed measures.

Fourthly, the unpredictability of the reality is controlled by a highly standardised and ritually used conventional form of news. In both reports, the newsreader, who represents the voice of the institution introduces the news item ('However, one thing that MPs agreed more upon is...') and rhetorically integrates it in the universe of similar events (i.e. the constant dispute between the political left and the right, i.e. between political parties represented in parliament). By doing this, the uniqueness of the event or issue is eliminated; it is linked to other similar events (left-right disputes), whereby the television flow, ritual, and continuity is validated. Simultaneously, a conceptual frame within which the event is meaningful and within which it is to be interpreted and understood is offered. The reporter at the level of the discursive structure of the news story is hierarchically

¹⁶ As argued by Hartley in his classic text on television news (1989), the meaning of the story is shaped not only by what is included in the story, but also by what is absent, excluded and discursively repressed.

subordinate to the newsreader who summarises the ombudsman's report in the opening sequence, her text being visualised with random shots of the park and children who play there (on POP TV), or of re-enactments of violence of a man against a woman (on TV SLO). These visuals give no information on the event itself and have the role of providing "authentication" of the story (see Fiske 1987). They metaphorically represent the place of domestic violence that is not accessible to television cameras. More important than the truthfulness of the story is the ritual confirmation of the credibility of the news discourse achieved.

Finally, particularly due to the ideal of objectivity, which is always used in journalism only in the case when clearly defined and institutionalised political agents confront each other, the real background of the parliamentary disagreement remains unrevealed. In the case of the ombudsman's report on domestic violence, the dispute was actually over the interpretation of the family and gender relations. Thus the context of the parliamentary conflict that would offer a chance for a thematic framing of domestic violence was ignored and the story reduced to the party rivalry. The question of the cultural struggle for the concept of the family and for the transformation of gender order remains entirely hidden from the audiences. Clearly, the context can be deduced only indirectly. The news story is a good example of the eventfulness and ritual performativity of the authenticity of the contemporary media. While news media do deliver new information, they rarely bring new knowledge that would enable us to understand social problems. As a result, social problems such as domestic violence are frequently worth reporting only when the event enables confrontational framing, which is when the social problem becomes a part of the ritualised political confrontation.

Conclusion

By analysing the characteristics of some key journalistic strategic rituals in the case of domestic violence, this paper has attempted to show how meaning is constructed and mostly narrowed in these cases. The news is not fictional, emphasised Schudson (1995), but it is conventional. Moreover, the function of conventions is 'less to increase or decrease the truth value of the messages they convey than to shape and narrow the range of what kinds of truths can be told' (Schudson 1995: 55).

Episodic framing and factism, which are typical of reporting domestic violence in daily newspapers as well as on television, are functions of objectivity as a constituent part of a professional journalistic culture, self-presentation, and ideology. The journalistic ideology of objectivity is based on empiricism, which believes that facts/data about an event represent the meaning of the event; consequently, the ideology gives priority to factism and not to discursive commentary: the facts should speak for themselves. Thus, the ideal of objectivity comes from the empiricist illusion of an absolute difference between facts and values, and between facts and interpretation. This difference is a common sense principle that shapes the practice of journalism. Therefore, it is always possible to discover the true meaning of an event through impartial empirical data: "hard" data (i.e. numbers) are taken to represent unambiguous and epistemologically transparent facts.

However, as White (1999: 70) suggests, ‘facts are a function of the meaning assigned to events, not some primitive data that determine what meanings an event can have.’ Objectivity is performed through ritualised practices, professional codes, and textual conventions of objective journalism. Thus, the truth of an event is the result of protocols that establish truthfulness; as a result, these conventions also frame the reading or the interpretation of texts. The key role of the conventions is thus not so much the consolidation of the truthfulness of messages as the act of establishing and narrowing what can be said at all.

In the quality press, journalistic treatment of domestic violence is based on the isolated event and relies on the standard choice of institutionalised bureaucratic sources as external voices that authenticate the journalistic discourse. As a result, the press constitutes domestic violence as a problem of individual psychology and social pathology and is entirely excluded from structural relations of (sexual, or class) power. The almost complete absence of a thematic framing that recognises class is also an important indicator of the decontextualised journalistic treatment of domestic violence, where nothing is said about the social status of the family. The latter is placed outside place and time, and not embedded in the context of class differences in Slovenian society. Thus, individualisation of violence and structural amnesia, built into the reporting on violence, are particularly connected to the most commonly used strategic rituals.

The key problem of treating violence on television and in the press is the episodic framing in news items, and the melodramatisation and individualisation of violence in current affairs journalism. In the first case, the standard television linear accumulation of so-called ‘serial monoglossia’ (MacDonald 2003: 69) prevents individual voices from interaction and exploration of the collective experience of domestic violence as a social phenomenon. The episodic/event-based framing of violence, which distinctly prevails over thematic framing, results in the individualisation of guilt and the marginalisation of understanding violence; it does not treat violence as a social problem connected to questions of hegemonic masculinity, power and gender relations. Moreover, in current affairs or documentary programming, unusual phenomena or events (e.g. the problem of female violence against men) and spectacular cases of violence prevail: the production of ‘usual unusual’ news items is predominant. Paradoxically, the social background of violence remains unexplored in informative and interpretative genres – in episodic informative news stories in daily news items and in journalistic documentary melodramas.

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Povzetek

Članek obravnava strateške rituale v novinarstvu na primeru časopisnega in televizijskega poročanja o nasilju v družini. Izpostavlja pomen formalnih vidikov medijskih reprezentacij nasilja in trdi, da te institucionalizirane forme proizvajajo (ne)pomembnost nasilja kot družbenega problema. Namen tovrstne dekonstrukcije konvencionalnih novinarskih naracij je denaturalizacija tistih postopkov upovedovanja in uokvirjanja novic, ki mitologizirajo nasilje kot učinek individualnih patologij. S tem, ko spregledajo družbene vidike nasilja, vzpostavljajo nasilje kot naraven, to je sprejemljiv del uprizarjanja moškosti in – kar je ključno – ne pojasnjujejo družbenega ozadja nasilja neglede na žanr, pa naj gre za epizodične televizijske novice, dnevna poročila v tisku ali novinarske dokumentarne melodrame. Najpomembnejša funkcija teh ritualiziranih konvencij tako ni toliko utrjevanje resničnostni sporočila kot pa v omejevanju tistega, kar je sploh lahko povedano.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: novinarski rituali, faktizem, časopisna kronika, uravnoveženost, nasilje v družini

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