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Conflict Coverage Promotion: High Quality or High Concept?

A multimodal analysis of claims-making
in conflict coverage promotional spots of
Al Jazeera English and CNN International



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Abstract// Executive Summary

Since the 1970s, commercial pressures on news media organizations have increased and as a result, television news networks have started to adapt marketing and product differentiation strategies from the Hollywood movie industry. So today, even the war and conflict coverage of 24-hour news networks is subject to heavy promotion and part of the networks' advertising and branding campaigns. These commercial aspects of news production, however, seem to oppose concepts of journalistic quality. Conflict coverage promotion and image spots of 24-hour news networks therefore pose a great opportunity to investigate a phenomenon at the cross-roads of both commercial entertainment television and quality journalism. This study analyses claims of journalistic quality and 'high concept' in these spots and how they are linked to better understand the ideological complexes of CNN International and Al Jazeera English. The findings show an equal number of quality and 'high concept' claims with differences in the nature of the claims between the two networks. The way the claims are distributed throughout the modes of visual, voice, sound and music, as well as the way they are linked within and across modes, however, show very similar patterns. These patterns exist for quality and 'high concept' claims as well as for both 24-hour television news networks. The largest number of claims appears in the visual mode. The research also shows that analysing this kind of media text needs to be multimodal and that a social semiotic approach is appropriate for analysing claims-making and linking in conflict coverage promotional spots.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Ryszard Kapuscinski once wrote about war reporters that “Our salvation is in striving to achieve what we know we’ll never achieve.”¹ With these simple words, he described not only his personal motivation to travel the world in pursuit of death and destruction, but also outlined a myth about war reporting that seems to prevail even today. This myth depicts war reporting as something untouchable, idealistic and highly virtuous. It takes the genre out of the wider context of commercial news production, of various conflicting interests and is blind to the relevance of the markets. Like anything today, news is business and war reporting does not pose an exception. Several aspects of news operations today even suggest an increasing commercialization of the trade. One of these certainly is the phenomenon of heavy self-promotion and self-advertisement which does not stop short of trying to exploit and benefit from war, conflict and suffering across the world. War is a spectacle - in modern times mainly a television spectacle. Jaramillo claims that “contemporary television news has become a complicated genre because it attempts to balance serious journalism and entertaining television” (2009, p.33). Pressures come from various sides: media executives, advertisers, sources, and not least, the audience.

It is this conflict between war reporting as a moral mission and war reporting as an element of a highly competitive entertainment industry, which has fascinated me for some time now. Coming from an undergraduate degree in media economics and pursuing a post-graduate degree in war journalism, this issue is also of personal interest to me.

The phenomenon of image and promotional spots of 24-hour news networks, which has become increasingly widespread in the past years, provides a wonderful foundation to study this moral-economic conflict. Clips of this genre promote the war and conflict reporting of a specific channel in the fashion of an advertisement or movie trailer, making claims about the channel and its reporting, differentiating the advertised media product from the competition and treating televised war like any

¹ Ryszard Kapuscinski ‘A Warsaw Diary’, published in *Granta* no. 15 (1985)

other commercial programme or product. And yet, conflict coverage promos, as promotional spots of any journalistic programme, are very unique media texts, situated at the crossroads of news journalism and advertisement. They contain a mixture of elements from a rather wide spectrum of genres and are expected as well to contain conflicting claims that can provide an insight into the broadcasters' organisational values.

Therefore the research focus presented in this project is on the representation of journalistic quality and aspects of commercial news production referred to as "high concept" in conflict coverage image and promotional spots of the international 24-hour news networks Al Jazeera English and CNN International. The study will look into claims made in the clips and how these are connected. That will provide insights into institutional values of these news organisations, what they deem relevant aspects of good or successful war and conflict reporting. The research will furthermore provide several structural, theoretical and methodological insights into this kind of very particular media text.

To do this, this first introductory chapter is followed by short profiles of the two broadcasters, Al Jazeera English and CNN International. Chapter 3 provides a review of relevant literature, a presentation of the theoretical framework and the research questions while chapter 4 describes the methods used to answer them. The analysis of quality and high concept claims and how they are linked is done in chapter 5 and a final conclusion containing theoretical, methodological and personal reflexions summarizes the study in chapter 6.

Chapter 2: 24-hour News

While I will introduce the two relevant 24-hour news channels below, the conflicts taken into consideration for this study will not get special attention for two reasons: first, the Arab uprisings including Egypt and the intervention in Libya are rather recent events with a lot of international media attention and therefore widely known, and second, it is not the conflicts that are under scrutiny here, but the promotion of their television news coverage. A basic understanding of the two broadcasters, however, might facilitate grasping their choice of self-promotion, their set of values.

2.1 CNN International

The 24-hour Cable News Network (CNN) is available to approximately 2 billion people in more than 200 countries around the world. In the initial stages after its launch in 1980, however, the news channel could merely reach 1.7 million homes within the United States (Cushion, 2010, p.16). After expanding its domestic reach in the early 1980s, CNN's founder, Ted Turner, decided to combine the signals of the two original channels, CNN and Headline News in 1985. CNN started broadcasting on satellite to a worldwide audience and CNN International (CNNi) was born. (Cushion, 2010, p.18; Flournoy & Stewart, 1997, p.3)

According to Flournoy and Stewart "CNN built much of its reputation as a credible source for international news on the basis of its on-the-spot reporting from such locales as Tiananmen Square in Beijing in May 1989, Baghdad under siege in January 1991, and the Parliament Building in Moscow in August 1991 (1997, p.7). Here, especially the case of Iraq is interesting, as CNN managed to produce exclusive, live images of the early stages of the conflict, putting not just the station, but 24-hour news as a whole, into the global limelight. This was possible because "CNN journalists had built up diplomatic ties with the Iraqi regime" (Cushion, 2010, p.18-19). Today, Turner Broadcasting claims CNN to be one of the world's most recognized brands, a long way from being dubbed the "Chicken Noodle News" as in its early years.

At CNN, there is a great awareness that information is a commodity and news a business, with television's purpose being the delivery of news (Küng-Shankleman, 2000,

p.156). A CNN mission statement quoted by Küng-Shankleman (2000) further elaborates this: “Our mission is to cover the biggest stories in the globe, in a way that people want to watch them.” (p.155) CNN’s style is fast, immediate, entertaining and live (p.151-153). But in today’s world, with CNN standing amongst a multitude of 24-hour news channels from around the world, it has to “operate in a very crowded and highly competitive marketplace” (Cushion, 2010, p.23). As a result, CNN regionalised its programming in 1997, creating separate feeds for different regions and several local-language as well as online services².

CNN is part of the Turner Broadcasting system, which, in turn is a subsidiary of Time Warner Incorporated, a publicly traded media conglomerate and one of the world’s largest. Institutional shareholders include some of the largest financial institutions including JPMorgan Chase and asset management funds such as Wellington Management³. This suggests that the commercial network not only faces influence, possibly including editorial pressure, from advertisers, but more indirectly also from shareholders.

“CNN is not an organisation which places great emphasis on producing public statements of its strategies, goals and philosophies, preferring to leave such activities to its parent. In fact, the most succinct and accessible source of such information is its oft-repeated programme trailers.” (Küng-Shankleman, 2000, p.117) Therefore, analysing the claims in image and promo spots can lead to insights into the broadcaster’s mission and strategy, into parts of their organisational values.

2.2 Al Jazeera English

Today, one of CNN International’s strongest competitors is Al Jazeera, the name of which translates into “The Island”. While most of the programming is in Arabic, their English-language Al Jazeera English, caters to a global audience. The establishment of the Doha-based network in 1996 came as a result of the BBC’s failure to create an independent news channel on the Arabian Peninsula and a US \$150 million grant from

² http://edition.cnn.com/services/opk/cnn25/cnn_newsgroup.htm

³ <http://www.nasdaq.com/symbol/twx/institutional-holdings>