

**Live blogs a genre? Strategies for Source Presentation and Language Use in Dutch Live Blogs
Covering Disaster, Politics and Sport**

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ABSTRACT

Keywords

Wordcount

Introduction // Live blogs are a popular choice for journalists to cover events under immediate circumstances, whether it is the outbreak of the Covid-19 virus, a terrorist attack, a political debate or a sporting game (Bennett, 2016; Thorsen & Jackson, 2018; Thurman & Walters, 2013; Thurman & Newman, 2014; Weaver, 2020; Wells, 2011). While it started as a format to cover sports events (Thurman & Walters, 2013), live blogs are increasingly used to cover breaking news events. Online visitors of live blogs do like the immediacy and convenience of presented information (Pantic, 2018), avid live blog consumers in the UK and US are interested “breaking news associated with crisis events, unfolding political stories and sports events, in that order (Thorsen & Jackson, 2018: 851)”. With the format, journalists can present news in real time through the curation of secondary sources (Thurman & Walters, 2013). This way consumers can follow the news as it unfolds. The live blog is, as Beckett (2010) suggested, “the new online frontpage (2010: 3)”.

However, despite this popularity and proliferation of live blogs, this format has also been subject to scholarly debate regarding the conflict between immediacy versus reliability [verwijzing]. The central claim of critics is that the speed of production trades rigorous verification with immediate publication. Not truth but a *temporary version* of truth takes a central position in processes covering breaking news in live blogs. Journalists are caught up in a “hamster wheel (Starkman, 2010)”, *never wrong for long* (Cohen, 2012) seems to be the credo, resulting in fragmented news deprived from context (Barnhurst, 2011; Boyer, 2010; Craig, 2011; Fletcher, 2010; Karlsson & Strömbäck, 2010; Lewis & Cushion, 2009; Lordan, 2007; Phillips, 2011). According to Wells (2011) it might be difficult for readers who come across a live blog in the middle of an event or story. Matheson & Wahl-Jorgensen (2020: 301) add that texts in live blogs are “fragmented in structure, relaying information as it becomes available, rather than presenting a neatly organised news story”.

These (serious) shortcomings do not correlate with the widespread proliferation of the format amongst the public and journalists alike. One way to tackle this paradox is by an

alternative reading of its characteristics: live blogs are not accepted *despite*, but *because* its format, their 'potential confusion', 'fragmented structure' and 'relaying of information'. In this alternative reading, their 'shortcomings' are expected, and this expectation makes the format credible. Live blogs might be a genre and genre a device for an efficient and consistent production of discourse that relates to the expectations of its customers (McQuail, 1987). "Genres makes (...) a set of knowledges [available] on which the users of texts draw; they construct a 'world' which is specific to the genre, and effects of truth, authority, and plausibility that help realise that world (Frow, 2015: 31)." Discourse follows genre-conventions or the *construction* of these 'worlds' (Broersma 2010a; Miller, 1984; Swales, 1990). To understand live blogs-as-genre, we need to analyse its conventions for production. In short: what are the rules for live blogs? This 'rule-based approach' might resolve the paradox between immediacy, urgency and credibility and between the popularity of the format for journalists and public and its critics.

To understand the rules of live blogs, we need to classify discourses by its *communicative purpose*, more so than by its format or its formative characteristics (like fragmented narrative, timestamped posts or embedded social media) (Askehave & Swales, 2001; Miller, 1984; Swales, 1990) To understand why format is not an important variable for classifying discourses, Frow (2015) makes a parallel with tennis played in a park and tennis played at Wimbledon: both follow the same rules as a game, "but the ceremonials governing the two games - the level of formality, the sense of occasion - are very different, and give the game a different value and import (18)". Still, both games played are tennis. So, to categorize live blogs in genre, we need to establish its *communicative purpose*, not just its formative characteristics. Communicative purpose has two different qualities: *content* (what is communicated) and *goal* (why is it communicated). This paper focuses on *content* – the *what* is communicated in live blogs. To understand the genre conventions of live blogs, we want to know *what strategies journalists use in the coverage of events in live blogs*. These strategies fall into two categories: strategies for

source presentation and strategies for language-use. Both can be analysed with one, comprehensive parametric framework, proposed by Bednarek (2006). We will first elaborate on the theoretical underpinning of this model before present an operationalisation (Method) and results (Results).

Strategies for source presentation in live blogs // Sources and journalists are, according to Lecheler & Kruikemeier (2016: 158), the single most defining aspect of news reporting. “News sources define the reality of news coverage and give structure to the news production process (Idem).” Their extensive literature study of the use of *online* sources evaluates *which* sources are selected and, second, *how* their information is verified. Their conclusion: “(...) online sources have not led to a change in the actual news agenda (idem: 167).” Elite sources dominate the narrative, as in regular news. In short: journalists are still gatekeeper(s). Differences compared to regular news are found in verification of online sources, which “requires skills that go beyond those most journalists possess (Idem: 168)”. What Lecheler & Kruikemeier found for online journalism in general is confirmed by source-studies in live blogs by Bennett (2016) and Thorsen & Jackson (2020): a journalistic *bias* towards elite sources in live blogs covering politics and terrorist attacks.

However, these studies also show an important *omission* in journalism studies, formulated by Lecheler & Kruikemeier (2016) as a point for further research: once sources are selected and verified, *how* are they integrated in news texts - as quotes, paraphrases or indirect? Confronted with uncertainty and due to a lack of time and under mounting pressure of urgency, epistemic responsible journalists (Rom & Reich, 2020) have to trade rigorous verification for a different strategy: lingual strategies to cope with mounting (un)certainly towards selected sources. In short: journalism is not only *who* is allowed to say *what* and *when*, but also *how* this is presented. “Presentation of knowledge in situations of uncertainty is alluded (...) as ‘ultra-cautious language’, ‘hedging’ of assertions, and ‘avoidance of categorical

statements' (Berkowitz & Zhengjia, 2016; Mariott, 2007, in: Rom & Reich, 2020: 58)." Hermida (2015: pp) writes about 'semiotic disclaimers' in the form of quotations and/or attribution. Potter (2005) elaborated on three more "ways in which the identity of the agents who produces descriptions can be worked on to effect their credibility (122)": *footing*, *category entitlement* and *interest formulation*.

According to Potter "descriptions can be given authority by emphasizing or building up category membership which imply particular knowledge entitlements and the way these (...) may be undermined (idem)". So, factuality (and credibility) of claims and utterances can be enhanced by working up *category entitlement*, "the idea that certain categories of people, in certain contexts, are treated as knowledgeable (133)". Utterances and claims can also be weakened pointing towards someone's *stake or interest* of the author's account. More directly, journalists can manage the relation "between the identity of the speaker/writer and the facticity of the version they produce (122)", which Potter calls (following Goffman (1981)) *footing*. By managing the 'distance' between author and claim, authors manage personal accountability.

While Potter (2005) illustrates footing with examples from conversational analysis, Bednarek (2006) proposes a comprehensive parametric framework for evaluations of knowledge in journalistic discourses. Within her parametric framework she distinguishes three categories for managing distance and therewith responsibility for claims and utterances: *attribution*, *sourced averral* and *non-sourced averral*. "The notion of *averral* (...) refers to statements originating in the writer, whereas *attribution* 'refers to the use of a manifest intertextual marker to acknowledge the presence of an antecedente authorial voice (Groom, 2000: 15, in: Bednarek, 2006: 60, italic original)". Bednarek's parametric framework (further explained in the method section) gives us tools for empirical research in ways journalists covering events in live blogs present their sources and knowledge and which strategies they follow to manage distance between claims, utterances and their (personal) responsibility.

These linguistic strategies gives insight in their epistemic behaviour and shows not what they *ought* to do, but what they actually *do*. Therefore, we want to know

RQ₁: Which linguistic strategies to manage distance (attribution, sourced averral and non-sourced averral) are used in live blogs?

Strategies for language-use in live blogs // Following this question is the question about language-use in live blogs, as an important indicator for genre-conventions. News has gone through political, economic, technical as well as cultural standardization (Hardt & Brennen, 1995, in: Buozis & Creech, 2018) and language is regulated *linguistically, situationally* and *functionally* (Biber & Conrad, 2019). Journalists are not free to write what they want while covering events, but are limited by professional norms, like objectivity (Broersma, 2010a), news values (Galtung & Rouge 1965) and frames (Entman, 1993) which “allows journalists to navigate various social forces through acts of representation as they receive feedback from audiences about the kinds of frames they prefer (Buozis & Creech, 2018: 1432)”.

Journalists do not just mirror reality but produce stories according to conventions and formats which readers recognize and trust: journalism is a *performative discourse* (Broersma, 2010a). So are genres. Frow (2015) states that discourses are *performative structures* “that shape the world in the very process of putting it into speech (19)”. Genre and genre-conventions both help journalists to write ‘towards’ an audience, trying to relate to what their public might know and try to solve possible processing problems even before they put a letter on paper or screen (Broersma, 2010a; Swales, 1990; White, 2020). “There is, as it were, a reciprocity of semantic effort to be engaged in by both sides; a contract binding writer and reader together in reaction and counter-reaction (Swales, 1990: 63).” Swales (1990) points to news as an example where these semantic efforts are an integral part of broadcasts “to ensure

that they are comprehensible both by repetition (...) and by providing background information (...) (Idem)".

These semantic efforts are indicators for conventions of language-use and "reveal the relationship between truth and power, tied to specific historical and cultural contexts (Buozis & Creech, 2020: 1434)". Broersma (2010a) points towards textual conventions "to ensure the effect of authenticity and truthfulness (17)" which, according to Buozis & Creech (2018) takes shape in texts. Those texts can be analysed in terms of genre to "offer an organizational model which allows room for the complexity and ambiguity of (...) *various epistemological stances* while grounding these news narratives in their social contexts by *turning to the textual conventions* that constitute journalism's authority over the truth (Idem, 1436; *italic added*)."

These *epistemological stances* and *textual conventions* in live blogs have an immediate quality: due to urgency of live blogs, knowledge is highly uncertain. Still, journalists want to prevent compromises of their editorial standards and *evaluate* what is attributed to a Sayer or Senser. They express these evaluations of Sayer and Senser in different ways. Bednarek distinguished STYLE and MENTAL STATE as categories answering the question *how* utterances or claims can be *presented* in discourses. STYLE is the category to evaluate attributions by a Sayer, MENTAL STATE is the category used for evaluations by Senses. An author can *present* utterances and claims by a Sayer as *neutral, illocutionary, declarative, discourse signaling or paralinguistic*. An author can *present* utterances and claims by a Senser as *belief, disbelief, emotion, expectation, process and volition* (Idem) (see Tabel 1: ...).

Table 1: ...

Attribution	Sayer	STYLE	<i>neutral, illocutionary, declarative, discourse signaling or paralinguistic</i>
	Senser	MENTAL STATE	<i>belief, disbelief, emotion, expectation, process and volition</i>

RQ₂: Which linguistic strategies are used by journalists to present attributions in live blogs?

Volgen nog: METHOD: A parameter-based framework of evaluations, results, discussion and conclusion en literature.