Sociocognitive Discourse Structures Presenting Suffering during the Corona Crisis: Can We Trust the News?

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Abstract

Based on van Dijk’s theory of Sociocognitive Discourse Studies and Chouliaraki’s theory on the Mediation of Suffering, this research is aimed at identifying sociocognitive discourse structures which have been employed with the specific intention to attract readers’ attention and sell the story no matter what. Even when the news are to orientate a Western spectator towards the suffering of ‘Others’ who belong to the same category of the economically and politically strong world, the news resort to sociocognitive discourse structures with the aim to attract readers rather than boost confidence and trust. The obvious outcome is that the suffering thus presented in the news causes even more uncertainty among the readers. The corpus “Globe&Mail-Corp” compiled for this research consists of news representations of the Corona crisis in 2019/2020 in the Canadian daily paper *The Globe and Mail*. By identifying sociocognitive discourse structures that clearly reflect a mediated representation of distant suffering, this research demonstrates that news agencies will try to overcome the “out-of-sight-out-of-mind” phenomenon even in cases when economic and political power relations are equal. The findings suggest that sociocognitive discourse structures have been employed in headlines referring to the Corona crisis with the intention to attract readers. A mediated representation of distant suffering could be confirmed as well as the violation of at least two core principles of journalism.

Keywords: suffering, sociocognitive discourse structures, uncertainty, trust, Corona crisis

1. Introduction

A prominent fact related to the news media today is that media trust is decreasing (Strömbäck et al. 2020). Numbers from various researches indicate that trust and confidence in the mass media have been declining continuously during the last few decades (Guess et al. 2018, Jones 2004). More importantly, traditional news media are being challenged by several factors (bad economy, redundancies, lack of audiences, etc.) which seem to force the media into producing inaccurate, provocative and unethical news, a trade nowadays commonly seen in television production (de Benedictis & Allen 2017) but also reflecting on online media outlets (Đorđević 2020a).

Most news agencies have to face the results of the global trend reflected in the collapse of the traditional financial model in the media as a direct result of digitization so that revenues generated from advertising are now flowing into online platforms (Fisher 2018). Consequently, lower returns have imposed redundancies and restructuring (Picard 2014) which are leading to an existential crisis (McNair 2006) for traditionally trained journalists. Easy access to the internet nowadays enables almost everybody to be a publisher, which “has resulted in a blurring of professional boundaries between reporters and bloggers, citizen journalists and other communication roles” (Fisher 2018: 21).

The fact that news media face competition from other sources of information (Strömbäck et al. 2020), such as digital and social media, has given political and social actors the freedom to be less dependent on news media given that they can reach their audiences via Instagram, Facebook and Twitter (Groshek & Koc-Michalska 2017). According to Groshek and Koc-Michalska (2017), the new media do not only make it easier for prominent individuals to by-pass the news media, but they can also attack them. For instance, prominent politicians seem to be less afraid of providing misinformation and even being caught when doing so (PolitiFact 2019). In addition, there is also the tendency of social and political actors to feel certain news media are being hostile towards them while favouring the other side, especially when it comes to political conflict (Hansen & Kim 2011). As a result, this hostility is foregrounded as often as possible and used as an excuse for even more misinformation.

Different crises and disasters, and ultimately the current Covid-19 pandemic, have affected the entire world so much that normal life is almost impossible. The way news outlets handle these crises is reflecting a seismic shift in journalistic reporting mainly recognizable in the gradual decline of the standards of ethical journalism. What is more, a new relationship between the news outlets and the audiences is building up because of the violation of ethical journalism. In the past, audiences would show more sympathy and empathy for victims of suffering, which is why factual reporting was enough. News agencies would provide the facts about a disaster or crisis, audiences would read about it and respond to it by showing sympathy for the people suffering under the crisis presented. However, now that the competition in the news business is fierce and audiences are literally drowned in news (Friesem 2016), it seems that audiences no longer know how to respond to suffering presented in the news.

Ong (2015) identifies class as an explanatory factor in the variation in interpreting mediated suffering. This means that audiences not belonging to the same class as the victims whose suffering is presented in the news show a different judgment, sometimes even opposite to common perceptions of media ethics. Thus, a common outcome nowadays is that audiences from countries with a higher economic and social standard show less empathy for victims in countries of a lower economic and social standard. It might even be argued that audiences all over the world have lost their capacity to feel sympathy or empathy for people suffering anywhere in the world (Friesem 2016) because the “overexposure to human suffering has unaestheticizing, numbing effects” (Chouliaraki 2008: 18).

News outlets resort to different solutions to attract readers. However, as is presented in this research, even when the news are to orientate a Western spectator towards the suffering of ‘Others’ who belong to the same category of the economically and politically strong world, the news agencies still choose to violate the core principles of journalism in the attempt to attract readers. They choose to employ this strategy rather than boost confidence and trust in the presented news, let alone motivate the spectator for civic action, which used to be the primary goal of confronting Western spectators with suffering of less fortunate people (Chouliaraki 2008). This research shows that news agencies will resort to whatever resource possible, even violate the core principles of journalism just to sell their story. By identifying sociocognitive discourse structures that clearly reflect a mediated representation of distant suffering, this research demonstrates that news agencies will try to overcome the “out-of-sight-out-of-mind” phenomenon even in cases when economic and political power relations are equal.

Therefore, we first elaborate on two theoretical frameworks, the theory on the Mediation of Suffering (TMS) (Chouliaraki 2008) and Sociocognitive Discourse Studies (SCDS) (van Dijk 2018). In the second part of this article, we present the findings gathered from a corpus of 199 headlines of news representations of the Corona crisis in 2019/2020 in the Canadian daily paper *The Globe and Mail* (Section *World*) which show that sociocognitive structures are being employed with the pragmatic function of presenting suffering in such a way that it attracts readers.

1. Theoretical Background

Mediation of Suffering in the News Today

The mediation of suffering “problematizes the nature of public action under conditions of mediation” (Chouliaraki 2008: 2) which implies that it involves audiences both emotionally and culturally with distant ‘Others’. The news media have the advantage to locate suffering anywhere in the world and present it to audiences everywhere in the world. On the one hand, mediation overcomes both geographical and moral distances between people living far away from one another. On the other hand, modern technology is bound to contribute to the presentation of suffering in a particular way by adding effects, sound, image and other semiotic modes which may raise doubts among audiences about the trustworthiness of the suffering presented to them as they can never be sure how much is real and how much has been fabricated (Tomlinson 1999).

The theory of the mediation of suffering is not a new theory. News outlets have always pursued different strategies in their attempt to create a kind of “politics of pity” (Boltanski 1999: 7). These strategies may not always have been ideologically motivated but have been meant to provoke the audience to relate to the sufferer in a certain way and position media texts into a broader context of social practice and public conduct (Corner 1995). However, with the overflow of information about various issues and problems, suffering included, it is nowadays questionable whether the ethical values embedded in news discourse really provoke the audience to take action and relieve the suffering of the misfortunate people presented to them in the news. As it seems, the “spectacle of suffering becomes domesticated” and “suffering is met with indifference or discomfort, with viewers switching off or zapping to another channel” (Chouliaraki 2008: 18). What is undisputable is that the news outlets are pursuing the same strategies to attract audiences, not with the same intentions, though. Nowadays, what matters is to have the broadest possible audience and whether they are going to be affected by the news seems less important.

The primary premise that the mediation of suffering relies on is the notion of pity (Boltanski 1999) and it is employed by journalists not as a human sentiment but as a sociological category embedded in media discourse. Raising pity among audiences is meant to draw “attention to the meaning-making operations by means of which sufferers are strategically, though not necessarily consciously, constituted so as to engage spectators in multiple forms of emotion and dispositions to action” (Chouliaraki 2008: 19). Two dimensions may be defined in the spectator–sufferer relationship based on pity: that of proximity–distance and that of watching–acting (Chouliaraki 2008). The former overcomes the geographical and moral distance (Tomlinson 1999) whereas the second motivates spectators to civic action (Corner 1995). Nowadays, the second dimension seems less frequent.

In a climate that makes it extremely difficult for newsagents to compete with the changing market, it seems even more difficult to adhere to the core principles of journalism which include: a) truth and accuracy, b) independence, c) fairness and impartiality, d) humanity, and e) accountability (Ethical Journalism Network 2020). Journalists are expected to rely on these principles because without them, they would not be able to present real world events. In other words, their news would be clouded by subjectivism and personal interpretation. Unfortunately, the list of arguments in favour of the prevailing lack of trust in the media is long (Đorđević 2020a) and does not exclude the presentation of suffering in the news. In fact, when presenting suffering, it seems that news outlets tend to violate two of the principles more than the other three. The first one is fairness and impartiality, which leads to the violation of the trust and confidence among readers, but more importantly, the trust and confidence among the victims. The second one is humanity, which erases all boundaries of common decency and respect. When it comes to attracting readers, neither objectivity nor empathy seem to be important. In the context of the Corona crisis, as this research presents, such unethical behaviour among journalists is as prominent as ever.

Sociocognitive Discourse Structures

Sociocognitive Discourse Studies (SCDS) “relates discourse structures to social structures via a complex sociocognitive interface” (van Dijk 2018). The main subjects of SCDS are the ongoing communicative Common Ground, the shared knowledge and the attitudes and ideologies of language users who are participants of a particular communicative situation and members of social groups and communities (van Dijk 2018). SCDS makes “explicit the fundamental role of mental representations” and it “shows that many structures of discourse itself can only (completely) be described in terms of various cognitive notions” (van Dijk 2018: 28). Therefore, SCDS relies on “explicit psychological theories of mental representations of journalists or other language users” as well as on “the ways these models mediate between shared social cognition (knowledge, attitudes, ideologies), social structures and actual text and talk” (van Dijk 2018: 28).

In addition, SCDS includes the cognitive interface between discourse and society. The sociocognitive approach does not accept that there is a direct link between the structures of discourse and society but supports the notion that there is a cognitive interface where the two meet and interact. The result of the interaction between discourse and society via the cognitive interface constitutes the sociocognitive dimension of the sociocognitive approach to discourse analysis. This means that the sociocognitive approach assumes that structures of society can only “affect text and talk through the minds of language users” because “social members represent both social structures as well as discourse structures in their minds, and thus are able to relate these mentally before expressing them in actual text and talk” (van Dijk 2018: 28).

The way discourse is produced and comprehended is related to the way linguistic and discursive knowledge systems are applied by language users so that the processing of lexical items, syntactic structures and various meanings of discourse is closely related to grammar, the lexicon, semantics and different forms of interaction. Since local and global meanings attributed to discourse are based on underlying mental models as subjective representations of events or situations, a crucial aspect of the sociocognitive dimension is how the production and comprehension of discourse will involve the particular expression of a mental model regarding an event, person, opinion, belief, etc. (Đorđević 2020b).

The discourse structures proposed by van Dijk (2018) include: stress, intonation, word order; meanings of words, sentences or sequences of sentences; coherence; opinion and emotion words; global topics or themes; deictic or indexical expressions; speech acts; evidentials; conventional, schematic, canonical structures; metaphors and ideological polarizations. If identified, described and analysed within a particular corpus, in the case of the present research within the context of the global Corona pandemic, it may be proven that certain sociocognitive discourse structures have been employed to exploit suffering for the purpose of attracting readers.

The identification of sociocognitive discourse structures is in fact the identification of lexical items that are perceived as individual instances of words and phrases with specific sociocognitive references to a certain discourse structure within a broader context (Đorđević 2020b). For instance, lexical items may refer to social actors (e.g. politicians, victims, attackers, police, government officials) or their representation in a context (e.g. individual, collective or impersonal). The mentioning or description of a social event may refer to a global topic or event (e.g. demonstrations, riots, elections), while lexical items indicating evaluative and emotional representations may refer to ideological polarizations (e.g. verbs such as *urge*, *warn*, *state*, or adjectives such as *important*, *imperative*, *dangerous*). In the context of the present research, the identified sociocognitive discourse structures serve the purpose of both a quantitative and a qualitative analysis enabling the determination of the extent to which the theme of suffering is used in a particular discourse with the intention to attract readers.

1. The Research

Objectives and Hypothesis

The main stipulation that this research is based on is that news agencies will resort to whatever resource possible, even violate the core principles of journalism just to sell their story. In order to achieve that, journalists use certain sociocognitive discourse structures in the very headlines to draw the attention of their readers to the news presented to them. Headlines are a good choice because they enable the author to present a certain message in a concise and focused manner. Because of that, headlines are deemed conclusive in the sense that they can exert influence even if the effect of the lead seems weaker than the effect of the headline (Đorđević, 2018). Therefore, a corpus of headlines compiled from the Canadian daily paper *The Globe and Mail* (Section *World*) during a single week has been analysed to pursue two research objectives. The first was to identify the sociocognitive discourse structures used in the headlines while the second was to establish which of the identified sociocognitive discourse structures reflected the mediated representation of distant suffering employed with the intention to attract readers. The anticipated outcome of the quantitative and the qualitative analyses was to confirm our hypothesis that sociocognitive discourse structures have been employed in headlines referring to the Corona crisis with the intention to attract readers, thus confirming a mediated representation of distant suffering as well as the violation of at least two core principles of journalism.

Methodology and Corpus

The corpus (Globe&Mail-Corp) compiled for the purpose of this research includes 199 headlines (2129 words) of news representations published in the Section *World* in the Canadian daily paper *The Globe and Mail* in the period from 15–22 April 2020 (eight days). This daily paper was chosen due to the fact that Canada a) belongs to the Western countries in terms of economic and social standard, and b) is geographically located in such a way that it is physically distant from most of the countries presented in the news published in *The Globe and Mail* in the indicated period. Both criteria contribute to the assumption that the news agencies will try to overcome the “out-of-sight-out-of-mind” phenomenon even in cases when economic and political power relations are equal.

In the first step, the headlines were selected, read and coded. As it was easier to divide the whole corpus into 8 subcorpora based on the day of publication, the following coding principle was applied to the headlines:

* The uppercase letters SC were used to identify the subcorpus.
* The publication date was added to the letters SC: 15APR, 16APR, 17APR, 18APR, 19APR, 20APR, 21APR and 22APR.
* The number of the headline in the Globe&Mail-Corp was added at the end of the code: 001, 002, 003, 004, … 199

This means that, for instance, the headline No 56 was coded as follows:

1. British government extends lockdown restrictions for at least three more weeks [SC16APR056]

As stated in Section 2.2., van Dijk (2018) proposed the following discourse structures: stress, intonation, word order; meanings of words, sentences or sequences of sentences; coherence; opinion and emotion words; global topics or themes; deictic or indexical expressions; speech acts; evidentials; conventional, schematic, canonical structures; metaphors and ideological polarizations. However, for the purpose of this research, we decided to include only those of van Dijk’s discourse structures which reflect the mediated suffering employed with the intention to attract readers, which are: opinion and emotion words, global topics or themes, deictic or indexical expressions, speech acts, evidentials as well as metaphors and ideological polarizations.

In order to fulfil the first objective of our research, i.e. to identify the sociocognitive discourse structures employed in the headlines, we had to be able to differentiate the sociocognitive discourse structures in the single headlines. That is why we decided to apply a colour-coding principle which we developed for the purpose of this research and which is as follows:

* Global topics or themes – green for all toponyms showing where the Corona pandemic was raging.
* Opinion and emotion words – yellow for all words and phrases referring to the opinions or emotions expressed by the authors in the analysed headlines.
* Deictic or indexical expressions – purple for words and phrases referring to a specific place, point in time, etc., such as time adverbials (*now*, *then*), place adverbials (*here*), demonstratives (*this*, *that*, *these*, *those*), etc.
* Speech acts – olive green for utterances expressing a certain intention that the author might have had (greeting, request, complaint, invitation, compliment, refusal, etc.).
* Evidentials – blue for quotative and sensory evidentials whereby we added numerical expressions to this group of discourse structures as they were perceived to have been used for the purpose of adding evidence to an utterance.
* Metaphors and ideological polarizations – red for words and phrases referring to social actors, representations of a social actor in the headline context, social events, evaluative and emotional representations.

Since the second objective of our research was to identify sociocognitive discourse structures that reflect the mediated representation of distant suffering employed with the intention to attract readers, we identified words and phrases which indicated that the mediation existed. On the one hand, we identified words and phrases in the corpus that referred to the cause of suffering. On the other hand, we identified words and phrases in the corpus referring to attempts made with the intention to relieve the suffering. Therefore, we added the colour grey for words and phrases representing the cause of suffering, i.e. the Corona crisis. Regarding the attempts made to relieve the suffering, we decided to underline the words and phrases already coded red as the discourse structure metaphors and ideological polarizations indicated the attempts we were looking for in the corpus.

In the context of this research, two of the sociocognitive discourse structures, i.e. opinion and emotion words as well as metaphors and ideological polarizations, were expected to prove the hypothesis that news agencies resort to whatever resource possible, even violate the core principles of journalism just to sell their story. As presented in the next section, this expectation was confirmed and it could also be confirmed that the two core principles that were obviously violated were c) fairness and impartiality and d) humanity (Ethical Journalism Network 2020).

1. Analysis and Discussion

Quantitative Analysis

The first step of the analysis of the compiled research was expected to serve our first objective, i.e. identify the sociocognitive discourse structures (Table 1).

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Discourse structure** | **Van Dijk’s sociocognitive discourse structures** | **Sociocognitive discourse structures added for the purpose of analysis:** |
| global topics or themes  | opinion and emotion words | deictic or indexical expressions | speech acts | evidentials | metaphors and ideological polarizations | cause of suffering | attempts to relieve the suffering | violation of core principles of journalism |
| **Colour** | green | yellow | purple | olive green | light blue | red | grey | red & underlined | red & yellow |
| **No of occurrences** | **155** | **117** | **13** | **25** | **106** | **76** | **101** | **12** | **193** |
| **492** | **306** |
| **798** |

Table 1: The frequency of sociocognitive discourse structures in the entire Globe&Mail-Corp

As expected, the most frequent discourse structure was the one referring to global topics or themes. A total of 155 toponyms could be identified in the Globe&Mail-Corp. Very frequent occurrences could be identified regarding opinion and emotion words (117), evidentials (106) and metaphors and ideological polarizations (76). The remaining two sociocognitive discourse structures, deictic or indexical expressions and speech acts, though not of lesser importance, could be identified in 13 and 25 instances respectively.

As for the discourse structures that we added for the purpose of this research, we could identify a total of 101 instances of words and phrases referring to the cause of suffering and a total of 12 instances referring to the attempts to relieve the suffering. Finally, we were able to identify a total of 193 instances of sociocognitive discourse structures indicating the violation of the core principles of journalism.

Qualitative Analysis

The detailed qualitative analysis of the sociocognitive discourse structures enabled us to draw conclusions which could confirm our hypothesis that sociocognitive discourse structures have been employed in the headlines of the Globe&Mail-Corp referring to the Corona crisis with the intention to attract readers, thus confirming a mediated representation of distant suffering as well as the violation of at least two core principles of journalism. All examples that are provided here present the relevant sociocognitive discourse structure in bold letters and not the colour that we applied based on our colour-coding principles because of the volume’s formal conventions.

As stated in Section 1., we assumed that even when the news are to orientate a Western spectator towards the suffering of ‘Others’ who belong to the same category of the economically and politically strong world, the news agencies still chose to violate at least two of the core principles of journalism in the attempt to attract readers rather than boost confidence and trust. Furthermore, as stated in Section 1., the violation of the first, fairness and impartiality, leads to the violation of the trust and confidence among readers, but more importantly, the trust and confidence among the victims while the violation of the second, humanity, erases all boundaries of common decency and respect.

The corpus shows that most toponyms presented in the headlines are related to places far away from Canada (China, India, Pakistan, Australia, Russia, South Korea, UK, Japan, Africa, Yemen, Italy, Spain, Germany, France) many of which belong to Western countries (101 out of 155 instances) with a high economic and social standard of living as is the case in the following example:

1. **Australia** retains restrictions on public movement for at least four more weeks [SC16APR49]

Therefore, the Canadian audience can see that the Corona crisis is literally everywhere, affecting everybody, rich and poor. However, the United States of America, the southern neighbour of Canada, although identified in 29 instances, is often mentioned in the context of Trump’s inability to handle the crisis, such as in the following examples:

1. Canada needs to be a good influence on **U.S.**: Fareed Zakaria [SC16APR064]
2. Tension mounts in **U.S.** over plans to reopen the economy as Trump appears to encourage protests [SC17APR89]

Example 2 implies that the US should look up to Canada and implement the same measures as Canada has because otherwise the US will not be able to win the battle against the pandemic. Example 3 is referring to Trump’s tendency to generally make inadequate decisions.

As expected, the occurrence of opinion and emotion words in the corpus is mainly meant to draw attention to the prevailing suffering induced by the Corona pandemic all over the world. A total of 93 instances of opinion and emotion words out of 117 have been identified as direct references to the Corona crisis. These references may be illustrated as follows:

1. G20 countries agree to debt freeze for **world’s poorest countries** [SC15APR029]
2. The **notorious** nine: These world leaders responded to the coronavirus with **denial, duplicity and ineptitude** [SC21APR163]

Although Example 4 refers to a context including Canada, the purpose of the headline is to draw the audience’s attention to countries of a lower economic and social standard than Canada by putting the emphasis on the *poorest countries* in the world. The next example uses opinion and emotion words twice in the same headline. A closer look at the article reveals that the first adjective, *notorious*, refers to the political leaders of Brazil, Belarus, Mexico, Tanzania, Turkmenistan, North Korea, Cambodia, California’s 22nd congressional district and Zimbabwe who denied the Corona virus, did nothing to prevent it or simply encouraged their citizens to ignore the pandemic suggesting it was a global scam. The second instance is meant to explain why the nine leaders are *notorious* by referring to their negative reactions – *denial, duplicity and ineptitude*.

Nevertheless, opinion and emotion words are also used to show that the Corona crisis results in additional problems which countries, even not so remote from Canada, have to battle as well. The following headline (6) indicates that the Corona crisis is not that far away, causing a series of problems and not affecting only poor countries.

1. Protests erupt along Mexican border after suspected COVID-19 **deaths** at U.S.-owned Honeywell, Lear plants [SC16APR068]

As far as deictic and indexical expressions are concerned, the most frequent one occurring in 11 out of 13 instances in the entire corpus is the preposition *amid* as if journalists wanted to stress the fact that we are all literally surrounded by Corona, as evident in example 7.

1. Sri Lankans mark anniversary of Easter bombings at home **amid** coronavirus pandemic [SC21APR154]

The use of speech acts is not very frequent in the corpus, but it still points to obvious pragmatic functions. Examples 8 and 9 are particularly illustrative, where example 8 indicates an invitation and example 9 indicates support. Examples 10 and 11 are quite indicative of evidentials. In example 10 the use of a numerical reference could be identified and in example 11 the use of evidentials includes reported speech.

1. More U.S. protests **call for** lifting coronavirus restrictions as governors push back [SC19APR109]
2. Elizabeth Warren **endorses** Joe Biden for president [SC15APR23]
3. World Food Programme warns at least **30 million** people could die of starvation during pandemic [SC15APR032]
4. WHO chief urges U.S. to reconsider funding freeze, says novel coronavirus **‘will be with us for a long time’** [SC22APR190]

As far as metaphors and ideological polarizations are concerned, they occur mostly with direct references to the Corona crisis. In example 12, the metaphor “lockdown” (occurring in 24 out of 76 of instances of metaphors) refers to the quarantine measures introduced in many countries in the world. In example 13, the metaphor indicates the author’s deep concern about the outcome of the crisis and the headline suggests that the situation is not improving but rather causing deeper problems which will be evident in the economy of the country.

1. Spain’s PM Pedro Sanchez to seek longer but more flexible **lockdown** as cases still rise [SC18APR096]
2. ‘My life is hard now’: As China prepares for worst quarter in decades, **shadows deepen** for consumers [SC15APR052]

As stated in Section 3.2., two sociocognitive discourse structures were added to the analysis as they were meant to establish the mediation of suffering by clearly identifying the cause of suffering as well as the attempts to relieve the suffering. The former could be identified quite frequently and it expresses the cause of suffering successfully, such as in the following examples:

1. **Coronavirus pandemic** is causing pandemonium in global illicit drug trade [SC19APR105]
2. Prince Philip thanks those fighting **COVID-19** in rare statement [SC20APR121]

In both examples, the reference to the Coronavirus pandemic is straightforward and recognizable. To be more precise, no sociocognitive discourse structure from among the ones van Dijk (2018) suggested could be related to these, which is exactly the reason why we introduced this as a new sociocognitive discourse structure and colour-coded it grey.

The latter, i.e. the attempts to relieve the suffering, could be recognized in the metaphors and ideological polarizations already identified in the headlines, but it could be identified in only 12 instances, which indicates that journalists do want to motivate their readership, the primary purpose of the mediated suffering, but they do not have specific suggestions as to what the audiences should do. It might even be concluded that journalists use this specific type of sociocognitive discourse structures in headlines exactly because headlines are concise and limited in focus. In that way, journalists can avoid making suggestions and just indicate the suffering without going into further elaborations. For instance, the following examples show the good intention to motivate their readership while lacking the competence to provide concrete advice:

1. Trump gives governors three-phase plan **to reopen economy** [SC16APR035]
2. **Stars unite** for One World coronavirus special [SC20APR133]

In Example 16, the headline refers to a solution suggested by Trump whereas in the next headline (Example 17), it is suggested that various relief measures can be applied, one of which is that musicians and artists unite in the online space and contribute their art to the relief of the suffering.

The final step of the analysis was meant to find evidence of the violation of at least two core principles of journalism, which could be confirmed in a total of 193 instances and could be recognized in both opinion and emotion words as well as in metaphors and ideological polarizations. The former may be illustrated by the following example:

1. China secretly determined likely pandemic in January, **didn’t warn** public for six key days [SC15APR001]

The headline violates the principle of fairness and impartiality by stating that China *didn’t warn* the public, meaning they were withholding information about the pandemic. This fact has not been proven; therefore, it is unfair to claim it. Similarly, in the following example:

1. Coronavirus lockdowns are choking Africa’s **already-vulnerable** food supply [SC15APR005]

The headline uses the adjective *already-vulnerable* as a euphemism indicating that people in Africa are more or less starving. Given the fact that the headline is accompanied by an image of people literally fighting for food, this headline is a violation of the principle of humanity as it is presenting people in a very humiliating situation although the intention might have been to provoke pity among the audience for the suffering of the people in Africa.

1. Conclusion

Though this was only a small-scale research, we managed to accomplish the objective of identifying sociocognitive discourse structures in the compiled corpus of headlines as well as establish which of the identified sociocognitive discourse structures reflected the mediated representation of distant suffering employed with the intention to attract readers. Based on the quantitative and the qualitative analyses, we were able to confirm the hypothesis that sociocognitive discourse structures have been employed in headlines referring to the Corona crisis with the intention to attract readers, thus confirming a mediated representation of distant suffering as well as the violation of at least two core principles of journalism.

To conclude, the role of the media in the mediation of suffering is to present suffering to their audiences with the primary goal to influence the public ethics and motivate audiences to civic action (Chouliaraki 2008). The scope of this action may range from simple empathy which vanishes the moment the spectator changes the channel or clicks on another news item to broad actions of raising money, offering relief, providing solutions, etc. However, with the negative climate spreading through the media all over the world induced by the bad economy and with the fierce competition (Fisher 2018), the intentions of the media regarding the mediation of suffering seem to be moving into the wrong direction. The result is that it is more and more common that the media employ the concept of pity with the intention to sell their news rather than motivate civic action in any way whatsoever. The final outcome is that the trustworthiness of the news is now more questionable than ever (Strömbäck et al. 2020).

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