Writing dramas on television news and on the Internet: Evolution of an emotional rhetoric

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This paper concerns the media coverage of human interest stories on Internet and the reactions of Internet users on social media. We are mainly interested in the image, or rather in its absence, which leads journalists to use various iconic signs allowing to give evidence of the reality of the event. So the dramatic event, and more exactly what Roland Barthes calls the “blow” entailing “a tear in the tissue of the days”, is rarely visible by the public. In that case, the drama is built around allusive forms clarified by the comments of journalists and various testimonies which allow a reading more enlightened of mundane images.

Keywords: Human Interest, Hashtags, Public

INTRODUCTION

This research is concerned with the media coverage of human interest stories on television news and on Internet. In French we call this type of media coverage “fait divers”. Even if the exact translation does not exist in other languages, we can see a common style of journalist discourses shared by different cultures, which use several expressions for a type of events (Beds, 2001). Usually, it covers crimes, murders, accidents or strange stories. It’s often sensational and emotional. Started during a thesis research on “personal dramas” told on television news, our analysis focuses now on Internet with a particular interest for images and the role of emotion. More precisely, we analyze how journalists tell the facts with images, without any neither precise nor significant images of the drama.

Indeed, there is a lack of images. For example, the moment when the husband shoots his wife, or the moment when the bus deviates from the road, are rarely filmed. Depending on the media and its technical possibilities, journalist will use different narrative processes to “make visible” the event, without being really able to show it directly. These variations linked to the medium can have an impact on the reading process, they determine the interpretive journey made by the reader. Emmanuël Souchier speaks of a “path” which would shape our memories. Firstly, I will focus on variations between Internet and television news that bring to different experiences of reading for these dramatic events.

In second time, I will present what I have called a “transmedia” drama grammar. Indeed, even if the event writing diverges on some points - according to the nature of the media - some other elements are present on television and Internet. Composed of symptomatic images, common places and various expressions of a collective emotion, that “transmedia” drama grammar allows a rapid recognition and reading of this type of events.

TEXT AND IMAGES: DIFFERENT RELATIONS TO SEE AND LIVE THE DRAMA

In this part, we are going to focus on the different relations that images and commentaries can maintain on television and Internet. We will see in particular how emotion can play a different role between these two media.

ON TELEVISION: A CONTINUOUS FLOW

To tell the drama on television, journalists proceed to a reconstruction made up of testimonies, generic images (of the police, the streets, the neighbors...) and computer graphics. The main purpose is to put the event right in front of the viewer and place him as close as possible to the drama. In front of the screen, the public does not have the time to
understand and to analyze what he is watching, since the rhythm on television news is too fast. Journalists have only one and a half minute to expose the facts. Faced with this continuous flow of information, “pathemic” content – composed of rhetorical figures with an emotional potential - can help keeping the viewer in front of the screen. Considered by some researchers as passive in front of this continuous flow (Melot, 2007), the viewer has to be interested by the broadcasted content to not change of channel. Even if we can nuance this conception of the media, we notice that television content does not require a particular action by the public, contrary to a media as Internet for instance. Therefore, television content has to be fluent and arouse the curiosity of the public.

* A relation of alienation

One of the most important points on television news is to find some images of the event. Well, as we have mentioned earlier, there is a lack of images for this type of events. So to make the drama “visible” and “alive” on television, journalists will try to find some images that illustrate at best commentaries. This injunction to illustration leadsthe professionals to operate, sometimes, a misappropriation of the first signification of the image. These misappropriations can participate in the supply of stereotypes, which although they present the advantage to be easily read by the public, give nevertheless a falsified image of the event and of the protagonists. The Figure 1, extracted from a TF1 television report called « Killed in his parent’s house: a method worthy of the mafia », shows the back of four men located near a police car. At the same time, the journalist explains the murder and says that four men, impersonating as police officers, get into the pavilion. The commentary and the image present two common points: “four men” and “police”. Even if the public can suppose that these men are not the murderers, the juxtaposition of these two statements leads to memorize this representationas the criminals. On television, the drama takes shapeby weaving these two statements. The semiotic analysis of the image must take into account the accompanying commentary. Indeed, this one plays a significant role in the process of meaning and on the memorial impact that the media coverage leaves on the public.

As we will see for Internet, the organization of article leads to another process of meaning. Videos and commentaries are separated; their reading is therefore carried out in two stages. To understand the event, the Internet user has to navigate between these different materials, the assembly between images and commentaries being not predefined as for a television report.

* A relation of amplifying

Writing dramas on television news involves telling facts with an animated content but after the tragedy, rarely any trace of the event remains. So to make the drama real, journalists can use some camera movements, which not only enable to see the facts but also to live them. For instance, with an internal standpoint, the public can adopt the point of view of the victim.

The extract (refer Figure 2) from a television report on a bus crash in Switzerland – which has led to the death of 22 Belgian children - illustrates this process.

With this internal point of view, we watch what the victims saw just before the collision. We leave our place as a spectator to become an actor of the event. By this filmic process, the proximity with the drama is strongresulting in a high emotional impact. For a semiotic analysis of TV content, it is essential to consider both the motion, as well as the focal point, since it has a strong impact on the visual experience and plays a role in the public’s involvement. Even if the image has no offensive content, the simple fact of editing can be violent because it places the viewer closer to the event.

This process is rarely used for videos posted on a newspaper website. In general, it is a fixed shot showing the scene after the drama or interviews of people involved in the event. Totally absent of the video, verbally and physically, the journalist seems to step aside to let the place to the protagonists. This deletion gives an impression of images filmed mechanically by the camera suggesting, unlike

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1 The first French television channel.
television content, a kind of objectivity from the professionals. Thus, Internet user can have the feeling of a higher freedom to make his own idea of the event.

ON INTERNET: NAVIGATION AND HYPERTEXT

On Internet, as we have said, the journalist can use different materials to tell the drama. On line, the viewer is in front of texts, images and videos. So to understand the event, the reader has to navigate between these different elements. He has the opportunity to choose, to select, to deepen some points by clicking on videos for example. An article on a newspaper website allows a combination of different materials, which play a significant role in the reconstruction of the event.

The picture is the first element on the page. Escorted by a title, this iconic material must allow a quick recognition of the type of event told. As we will see later, it is usually symptomatic images that are put at this place. Pictures of police, blood or people crying have a strong pathemic potential. This kind of images refers to a lot of different “texts” fictional content or other news, that can persuades the internet user to stay on the page and read the text (refer Figure 3).

As we can see with the article (refer Figure 4) posted on the newspaper website Le Figaro.fr, a picture of policemen has been chosen to illustrate the article. This one can allow a rapid recognition of the kind of event told. Then, when the reader chooses to go on, he can consult the text to understand the main facts. With a dramatic catch introduction, the article presents quickly the most important information. This narrative process is well known by the journalists of the printed press who call this first part a “chapeau”. So, in the article organization we do not notice obvious differences between printed and online articles except the absence of spatial limits for Internet. The specificity of Internet lies more in its capacity to include videos. Thus, articles on Internet constitute a kind of combination of various tools present in other media.

When we find some videos escorting the article, it is usually interviews of witnesses, official people and experts, or images of the scene after drama. They represent a prolongation of the main text. Like press articles contain quotations of testimonies, web articles give extracts of this external speaking with the videos. The difference with a television report, that also presents visual testimonies, is the possibility for the public to choose to watch it or not. The video titles will thus help the reader to decide to go on or not. As we can see with the next example (refer Figure 5), apathetic title can constitute an interesting narrative process to influence the video watching. Posted at the end of the article, this video for which the title contains a quotation of a witness telling that he saw bodies fall during the fire, represents a content with a high emotional potential. Bringing a non-linear reading, these different materials escorting the text come to form a “hypertext” that Paulina Koszowska-Nowakowska and Franck Renucci define as a textual, visual and interactive object really complex (2011). The authors emphasize their research on the reading process and the influence of the ocular path. We suppose that some pathetic words or images can influence the path on the website. Emotion leads in this case to action, meaning to click on links proposed in order to deepen some points of the event. As Bernard Rimé has shown it, a paradoxes psychological process appears when we are in front of unpleasant subjects like death, injustice or violence. Wanting to avoid these annoying issues makes us more sensitive and curious to them (2005).

Thus, we have seen that processes of writing and reading differ from Internet to television. A main place is according to images for both, but this one does not maintain the same relations with commentaries. On television, public is in front of a continuous flow that presents a reconstruction already made of the event. This linear reading can allow a kind of passivity from the spectator; he has only to let himself carry by the images. On the contrary, on Internet, the reconstruction of the event depends partly of the reader and his choices made according to his own interests. Emotion can then represent a determinant element in his decisions.

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1 The notion of “text” mentioned here follows the definition given by Donald Francis McKenzie for who the term “text” includes “every verbal information, visual, oral and digital in the form of maps, printed pages, scores, recorded messages, movies, video cassettes…”
Despite these differences tied to the nature of the media, we notice common elements between the both as we will see with the transmedia drama grammar.

We have mentioned earlier the absence of significant images in the media coverage of dramas. This lack leads to constantly broadcast the same things. These elements constitute a kind of “drama grammar” that gives a generic form to these different events and that, regardless of the type of medium.

**Symptoms images**

Present on television and on Internet, policemen’s uniforms and bloodstains are a part of this grammar. These symptoms images evoke more than what they are showing. They refer to different texts and call to mind an imaginary link to the drama. Quickly, the public understands which type of events this report is about; these signs inform the viewer of the dramatic aspect of the event.

**Blood**

The bloodstain has a metonymic value; this sign leads us to imagine the body of the victim, present at this location just a while ago. The images (refer Figure 6, 7) illustrate this rhetoric process. The first image was published on line after the attack in the newspaper building of Charlie Hebdo.

The second one is from a TF1 report on the murder of a young girl in her building in Paris. Images of bloodstains represent proofs of the drama, they testify to physical ravages. As Christian Vanderdope (1992) has underlined it, the reading of events presenting victims physically harmed leads to the conveying of deep reading filters. This kind of iconic material stimulates therefore an attentive and concerned reading.

**Uniform**

Pictures of policemen uniforms represent also symptomatic images. They refer to a wide variety of texts. As the image (refer Figure 8) shows it, this sign of disorder informs us that something unusual happened and that it is under police control. This picture of policemen was published on Lemonde.fr to illustrate a fire in Paris. We can see the back of three policemen moving to what we can imagine as the location of the fire. The repetition and circulation of police images may reflect a fascination for these “heroes”. This fascination was especially obvious after the Charlie Hebo attack. A research made for the Ministry in charge of the city, youth and sports on the main tendencies on social networks highlighted a large circulation of policemen images after the attack. 35 000 tweets with the hashtags #ThankstoGIGNandRAID and #CongratstoGIGNAndRAID have been recorded after the tragedy.

These messages were escorting by images looking like this image (refer Figure 9).

**Commonplaces**

Between these highly symbolic images, we find a more mundane content, like images of streets, forests, building facades... These commonplaces meet a singular event told by the journalist. The imaginary of the drama is therefore nourished by these commonplaces, marked by tragic stories. Even if the significations of these images seems really poor, it is within their banality that their power lays. It stimulates imagination and identification (refer Figure 10).

As illustrated by this extract (refer Figure 11), there is a confrontation between the image that shows a quiet and sunny area and the journalist commentaries explaining the “execution” of a child. Despite of the frontage opacity, the commentaries stimulate public imagination. This work of imagination enables a more personal appropriation of facts. In this way, the singularity of the facts is offset by the banality of the images.

**Collective emotion**

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3 The 7th of January, three men armed enter in Charlie Hebdo building in order to kill principals actors of this satirical newspaper. Targetted for its caricatures on Islam, this attack has made twelve victims.

4 GIGN (Groupe d’Intervention de la Gendarmerie Nationale) : Intervention Group of the National Police Force.

RAID (Recherche, assistance, intervention, dissuasion) : Research, Assistance, Intervention, Dissuasion.

5 Total number at the 11st of January 2015.
Demonstrations of collective emotion are another point of the transmedia drama grammar. Indeed, an emphasis is made on these demonstrations of sadness and indignation by close family members or friends, but also by strangers who want to take part in this collective movement. This emotion is expressed through the deposit of symbolic objects of mourning on the murder scene, such as candles and flowers in addition to silent marches, testimonials...

After the attack in Charlie Hebdo building, a lot of people has felt the need to express their emotions in different ways. On social networks, the idea of cohesion and unity was largely relayed through images of crowds and manifestations organized around the world on the night of the attack. The three most shared tweets show images of these gatherings. The message that has most circulated with the sepicturesis: « They wanted to put France on its knees, they have stood it #CharlieHebdo (refer Figure 12 and 13).

For Jacques Fontanille, who has worked on emotion with a semiotic approach, the effectiveness of such passionate demonstrations lies in the “sharing of the same cultural code of affectivity” (2007). The lack of drama images is then offset by these collective emotion pictures, which are meaningful and consensual.

CONCLUSION
To conclude, we notice some evolutions in the media coverage of dramas with Internet. Allowing the combination of different narrative processes, this plurality of texts on Internet can give to the reader an impression of exhaustiveness. This also suggests a form of freedom in the choice to read or view information. Moreover, as Dominique Cardon (2010) has shown it, this media enables the meeting of two spheres until now isolated: the one of information producers and the one of ordinary conversation. This contact transforms the practices of journalists. They have the possibility to consult social networks to enquire what is making the “buzz” and for what Internet users show an interest in. This can influence their choice to cover an event and the way they speak about it. Social networks represent also a source of information that they can quote in showing them as indicators of a public opinion.

Finally, by this comparative study, we wanted to highlight the different media forms for dramas that participate in the construction of a collective imagination. Granting a particular interest to the emotion, our analysis comes to question the communicational stakes of this narrative and iconic processes.

REFERENCES
Rime, B. (2005). Le partage social des émotions [the social sharing of emotions].
**IMAGES FOR REFERENCE**

"Killed in his parent’s house: a method worthy of the mafia"

*TFI – April 10, 2011*

![Figure 1](image1.png)

Journalist: “Four men, impersonating as police officers, get into the pavilion.”

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"Bus crash: victims’ families on the scene"

*TFI – March 15, 2012*

![Figure 2](image2.png)

Journalist

*If a vehicle strikes it, the collision is frontal.*

Journalist

“This is precisely what happened on Tuesday night.”

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"A young man killed in his house by a commando"

*L’figaro.fr - April 10, 2011*

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**Un jeune homme abattu chez lui par un commando**

*Figure 3*

“Men armed with balaclavas have killed a young man while he was at home with his parents at Villepinte, in Seine-Saint-Denis.”

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*Figure 4*
Figure 10

Journalist

"A cold-blooded execution."

Figure 11

Figure 12

Figure 13