

Participatory Newspapers: A Thematic Analysis of Online News Articles and Readers' Comments



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ABSTRACT: E-newspapers have become inescapable sources of information thanks to their accessibility and interactivity. In their commentary sections, these digital platforms have given voice to their audience to have their say in what is reported. Yet, despite the popularity of such digital platforms, little is known about their interactive communication process, production and consumption. Accordingly, this study tries to investigate the interactive aspect of the most popular Moroccan e-newspaper, Hespress, in the way its journalists and readers represent the issue of irregular migration in Morocco. A thematic analysis was conducted to identify the dominant thematic patterns representing the issue of irregular migration in Hespress news articles and readers' comments.

KEYWORDS: participatory newspapers, public sphere, interactivity, online news producers, readers' comments, Thematic Analysis.

INTRODUCTION

With the rising rate of Internet penetration in Morocco, e-newspapers, which have become a popular tool in the spread of news, have given voice to their audience to have their say in what is reported. E-newspapers without readers' comments are becoming rare and starting to look awkward, even suspicious. For some users and some items, readers' comments may be no less interesting and informative than the main journalistic texts to which they relate or respond. Therefore, this article investigates whether the online producers and readers represent the issue of irregular migration in the same way or not. Therefore, this study tries to identify the dominant thematic patterns representing the issue of irregular migration in Hespress news articles and readers' comments. The general finding of this study leads to the identification of two key themes within which irregular migration is represented. The theme of Human Rights reflects a noticeable pro-migration discourse which dominates the news articles. In the readers' comments, however, negative discourse about irregular migration is dominating and the theme of Blaming the Government is pervasive.

This dissertation is guided by a research question that focuses on the specific content of online reader comments to the news articles, and how this content reflects the effectiveness of the platform as an online public sphere. Therefore the question this article tries to answer is:

Which themes are dominant in Hespress news articles and readers' comments when representing the issue of irregular migration?

Theoretical framework

The theoretical perspective will consider the prior research on the subjects of: news producers and the audience participation, specifically considering the communication and interactivity between both of them. Also, the concept of public sphere will be reviewed to give theoretical ground to this study and pulling on some previous studies will provide a foundation for the discussion of results that follows later in this study.

Social media theory

With the rise of the digital era, traditional news faced many challenges in transmitting the messages to their audiences. This change in delivering news to certain target groups brought the transformation of the top-down model of journalism, with writers as gatekeepers of information, to a decentralized system where the audience have a more active role in the formation of news. That is to say, the rigid gatekeepers and old-hierarchies pervaded the mass-mediated age are shifting as now there is more participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006). For Jenkins (2006), new trends are developing in the media industry. While gatekeepers and hierarchies still exist, there is now less room to differentiate between those producing media and those consuming them and that 'read only' media culture is being opened up for more 'read/write' participation among media audiences. According to Habermas (1991), digital platforms provide a global, low cost and instantaneous system of two-to-many communications. A communication system that promises greater participation and freedom of information access that can promote democracy as it enhances citizens engagement in the public sphere which, according to Habermas (1991) is: By 'public sphere' we mean first of all a domain of our social life in

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which such a thing as public opinion can be formed. Access to the public sphere is open to all citizens. A portion of the public sphere is constituted in every conversation in which private persons come together to form a public. When the public is large, this kind of communication requires certain means of dissemination and influence; today newspapers and periodicals, radio and television are the media of the public sphere. We speak of a political public sphere when the public discussions concern objects connected with the practice of the state (p. 398).

Habermas theory derives inspirational strength from a historical juncture during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Western Europe particularly in England, France and Germany when coffee houses, salons, societies, the town hall, the village church, the tavern, the public square, convenient barns, union halls, parks, factory lunchrooms, and even street corners became the arenas of debate, political discussion, and action. Habermas (1991) extends this to a normative model of popular involvement in the public sphere for contemporary times. He explains that in these venues, everyone had an equal right to speak as if they were equals.

One of the main features of the online publications is that interactivity represents the attribute that made e-newspapers so popular among readers (Chung, 2008). Furthermore, for Chung (2008) readers also find the new relationship between them and journalism a valuable one, with the on-going interaction being appreciated. The communicative power assumed to reside in traditional media hinges on the fact that there is a predominantly one-way flow of content from a few elite producers to masses of ordinary recipients. This assumes that, first, the flow of texts is linear and unidirectional from media elites to society, and second that there is a clear-cut separation between the processes of production and consumption of media texts. The control of elite groups over texts is assumed both in the industrial, political and economic sense, as well as in local communicative practices as recipients have little space to talk back. Even before the advent of new interactive and participatory affordances, approaches in media and communication studies had turned against audience passivity to audience power. In light of recent technological changes, a number of scholars and media commentators have announced sweeping social changes in media communication.

Digital platforms and social media are by their nature interactive, as opposed to the unidirectional nature of message flows in traditional media. One consequence of this shift is the separating lines between official and unofficial texts; hence, the traditional dichotomy of powerful versus powerless voices is eroding as more content is produced and consumed socially. While the institutional power behind discourse; that is to say, mass media power, may appear to have been compromised, the power in discourse, or bottom-up language-in-use, seems today to be the focus of interested domains of politics and the corporate world (KhosraviNik, 2009). Interactive media have now helped to decentralize the mass-mediated processes of pushing content onto audiences and offer some kind of participatory role to the individual communicator. By making access to the processes of production and distribution of texts possible, the locations of communicative power concentration are unfixed and shift according to the contextual environments, and such spaces for resistant discourses are not only afforded but taken up and used effectively.

Interactivity

In the past, there were few possibilities for readers to comment or respond directly to a news story. One of the few such ways was the readers' letters to the editor. Today, however, many online newspapers provide their users with a wide range of interactive features allowing users to talk back to an original text. In this paradigm, users become also prosumers, a term coined by Alvin Toffler in 1980 and refers to a combination of production and consumption, because they are not only viewers of content but also the co-creators of the very content themselves (KhosraviNik & Unger, 2016).

Ziegele and Quiring (2013) define readers' comments as a media stimulated interpersonal communication that is published directly below news items on news websites or on news media presences within other online communication services. Comments are normally published via an online form with minimal censorship and usually do not require the commenters to use their real name. In this way, readers are allowed to add their voice to journalistic discourse in commentary sections and debate spaces creating a new channel for the visible and public discursive processing of news issues. Readers' comments sections on e-newspapers are an extension of the traditional letters to the editor page in a newspaper, where readers could share their views. They are a form of participatory journalism that gives the public a medium for expressing their perspectives on current issues. As a result of the implementation of the social medium for participation and dialogue on the news sites, readers are now provided with the opportunity to directly comment on online articles. For Loke (2012), this change has changed the dynamics of newspaper websites. While previously the readers' participation was limited and restricted to separate discussion forums, the comment sections are, nowadays, an active and important part of online newspapers.

Most of the studies which have focused on readers' comments suggest that no real boundary shift occurs between journalists and their audiences (Karlsson, 2010). E-newspapers' commenters still maintain the roles they already had in traditional media settings, namely the role of active recipient but not of the news producer or of information source for a specific story but kept separate from professional journalism and clearly distanced from the newsroom (Hermida, et al. 2011). Some studies have shown that the two most closed stages of news production are the agenda-setting stage and gate-keeping (Singer et al., 2011). Other studies have investigated whether users' comments challenge mass media in their core journalistic functions or not. For instance, Karlsson (2010), for instance, has focused on how readers' comments challenged the dominant media frame, and took a critical stance towards mass media coverage. Similarly, Robinson (2009) compared how professional and amateur journalists covered the anniversary of

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Hurricane Katrina in 2006, reporting that in several occasions users challenged the newspapers' version of the story and expressed anti-media feelings. McCluskey and Hmielowski (2012) found that online reader comments provided a wider range of viewpoints, compared to letters to the editor. In this case, online posts also tended to challenge traditional institutions more often than did the letters to the editors. These findings suggest that readers' comments broaden the public sphere, while they also challenge mass media's role as gatekeepers.

METHODOLOGY

The research question will be addressed through a content analysis conducted on a constructed six months sample of news articles and reader comments from September 9, 2013 to December 11, 2018. A Thematic Analysis was conducted with the aim of identifying the dominant thematic patterns used to represent the issue of irregular migration in *Hespress* news articles and readers' comments. To overcome the criticism placed upon thematic analysis as being too vague in its method, I used the six stages of Thematic Analysis proposed by Braun and Clark (2006).

The method of thematic analysis is applied in this study in order to locate the dominant themes that exist in *Hespress* news articles and readers' comments. Thematic analysis is "a method for systematically identifying, organizing, and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a data set" (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 57). Therefore, it allows the research questions to be explored in more depth. It is based on the premise that "broader assumptions, structures and/or meanings" are selectively articulated and represented in the knowledge (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 85). Accordingly, it is compatible with the current critical discourse analysis, which assumes that discourse shapes the construction of knowledge. It is a flexible research method that can be used in an either inductive or deductive manner, or even a combination of both approaches. Braun and Clarke (2006) describe thematic analysis as a flexible research tool which aims to identify how the attendance of themes or patterns within raw unstructured qualitative data is associated with a particular line of thought. It is based on the premise that "broader assumptions, structures and meanings" are selectively articulated and represented in the knowledge (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 85).

Basically, thematic analysis is a qualitative method for recognising, analysing and reporting thought patterns within sampled sets of data. However, its flexibility makes it practically compatible with essentialist and constructivist frameworks, applicable in inductive and deductive analyses, and, thus, fits in quantitative and qualitative approaches. So, with the advent of themes by previous research, the methodological orientation towards thematic analysis is actually deductive. In other words, a deductive thematic analysis is conducted for this study which means that the themes are driven by previous research and theories. This approach might reduce the richness of the data, but it will instead give an opportunity to provide "detailed analysis of some aspect of the data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 84). This research analytical preconception is inspired from acknowledged academic scholarship on migration discourse.

According to Braun and Clarke (2006), a theme is a "patterned response or meaning" derived from the data that informs the research question (p.82). Themes can be classified as either semantic or manifest, which address more explicit or surface meanings of data items, or latent, which reflect deeper, more underlying meanings, assumptions, or ideologies. The researcher has great flexibility about which themes to identify, but he or she should strive to identify themes that provide important insights that address the research question. Researchers can employ an inductive or deductive approach to theme identification. An inductive approach derives themes from the researcher's data. Conversely, deductive approaches use a pre-existing theory, framework, or other researcher driven focus to identify themes of interest.

Thematic analysis is used to identify and classify content in a text and it involves coding the texts into categories. Accordingly, this study follows the method as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) as it has become the widely adopted method of thematic analysis within the qualitative literature. Their method of analysis consists of six steps:

- During the first stage, the researcher immersed oneself in the data to familiarise with it. The researcher reads and re-reads the data to become intimately familiar with its content; analysis begins with noticing things of interest that might be relevant to the research questions. These were noted in an electronic file for record keeping.

- During the second stage, coding the data starts by identifying aspects of the data that relate to the research questions. This involved selective coding, where only material of interest was manually coded through using sticky notes and highlighting with different colours the identified categories.

For reliability and rigour, the initial descriptive coding was shared with the recruited coders in order to check on possible biases. The complete coding started with the first data item and progressed systematically until the last data item was coded in a thorough way.

- During the third stage, the researcher searched for and identified themes that capture something important about the data in relation to the research questions. At this third stage, all data relevant to the research question was coded at a semantic level. Semantic codes were data driven and provided summary of the explicit data content, whilst latent codes were researcher-driven and identified implicit meanings within the data. According to Braun and Clarke (2013), the separation between semantic and latent level of coding was not pure and occasionally codes had both elements. Codes were evident in more than one data item and captured

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patterns and diversity within the data set. The elements of each code were considered for consistency or overlap with other codes, which in turn provided the opportunity to start refining codes and linking these together.

- During the fourth stage, the researcher has to review the identified themes by making sure that the themes are appropriate and sufficient for the research objectives. This gives the opportunity to ensure that the thematic analysis is going the right direction, and the researcher can make final changes in the themes as needed. Therefore, after the process of refinement, two overarching themes and six main themes were identified and presented in a table. Overview of all themes could be seen in Appendix 2. Braun and Clarke (2006, p.91) advise that "Data within themes should cohere together meaningfully, while there should be clear and identifiable distinctions between themes."

- During the fifth stage, the researcher defined and gave names to themes. Defining themes by stating what is unique and specific about each one; useful because it forces researchers to define the focus and boundaries of the themes by distilling to a few short sentences what each theme is about.

- During the sixth stage, which is the final description of the findings, the researcher selects compelling examples of data extracts that illustrated the themes and related them back to the research questions and literature. Nikander (2008) has argued that extracts should be offered in order to increase transparency and demonstrate analytic rigour.

Given the flexibility that thematic analysis grants to researchers regarding how to conduct qualitative data analysis, it is particularly important to identify choices such as using inductive or deductive analyses in coding and identifying themes that underlie the analysis throughout the manuscript. Accordingly, for this study, two overarching themes were identified based upon the thematic analysis and the consultation of previous migration research which are pro-migration (victimization) and anti-migration (problematization) themes. This study is partially inspired from the research conducted by Berry, Garcia-Blanco and Moore (2015) which analyzed the most frequently occurring themes in news coverage about refugees and migrants in the European Union. The themes coded for that study are: Threat to national security, Crime, Cultural threat, Human rights, Health risks, Humanitarian, Integration to community, Political and policy response, Education, Economic and Success stories.

Strengths of thematic analysis

The benefits of thematic analysis are its foundational and apt tool for a first approach to qualitative research; and its flexibility (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which perfectly fits the aim of "identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (p.79). Particularly, the thematic analytical approach used will be a latent one; i.e. an approach which involves highlighting the meanings behind themes in a broader discursive context, and discussing each topic beyond its surface realist value. Also, as compared to many other qualitative methods, thematic analysis is relatively simple to learn and apply. Because it can be inductive and thus does not require the use of theory to inform analysis, thematic analysis is quite accessible to less experienced researchers. At the same time, it is a powerful method for analyzing data that allows researchers to summarize, highlight key features of, and interpret a wide range of data sets. Furthermore, its methods are foundational to numerous other forms of qualitative analysis; in fact, Braun and Clarke (2006) argued that it should be the first method of qualitative analysis that researchers learn. Finally, thematic analysis offers researchers great flexibility with respect to the volume of data analyzed and the ability to analyze data with an inductive, data-driven approach or a deductive, theory-driven approach (Clarke & Braun, 2013).

Weaknesses of thematic analysis

The flexibility that thematic analysis offers can also be seen as a drawback of being not a rigorous method (Clarke & Braun, 2013). If manuscripts do not clearly state the paradigmatic orientation of the work and the role of theory in the analysis, thematic analysis risks being seen as a method that is applied broadly and never consistently. Additionally, given the flexible nature of this analysis method, it can be challenging for some researchers to determine which aspects of data to focus on and which theoretical or epistemological frameworks to use for their analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As with any analytic method, thematic analysis can be conducted poorly. However, a particular disadvantage with thematic analysis is that it has been more prone to inconsistent or improper use of terminology as compared to other methods with more well-defined and less flexible frameworks. These vagueries complicate appraisals of manuscripts that use, or claim to use, thematic analysis.

The flexibility that thematic analysis offers is also seen as a drawback in that it contributes to a perception among some that it is not a rigorous method. If manuscripts don't clearly state the paradigmatic orientation of the work and the role of theory in the analysis, thematic analysis risks being seen as a method that is applied broadly and never consistently. Additionally, given the flexible nature of this analysis method, it can be challenging for some researchers to determine which aspects of data to focus on or which theoretical or epistemological frameworks to use for their analysis.

RESULTS

After the investigation of the pro- and anti-migration emerging themes that are used to represent the migrants, it was found that Hesperess news articles depict the migrants as fundamentally victims who deserve humanitarian help. The readers' comments, however, hold a different view about the migrants. They resorted to anti-migration themes to show them as an unwanted 'others' who threaten ones' own security and stability. The main findings that have been reached within these representations are:

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-The finding of the thematic analysis has led to the identification of two overarching themes pro-migration themes and anti-migration themes. Each overarching theme has its corresponding three themes which are used in the construction of irregular migrants' identity in *Hespress* news articles and readers' comments. The theme of Human Rights is recurrent in *Hespress* news articles. The theme of Blaming the Government is recurrent in the readers' comments.

Two main themes surface in our data and the following table demonstrates the overarching themes, the themes, and their description:

| | Overarching Themes | Themes | Description |
|--------------------------|---------------------------|------------------------|---|
| News articles | Pro-migration | Human Rights | Principles from the International Human Rights law or the universal right of asylum are referred to as they emphasize emotions like solidarity, empathy and compassion. |
| Readers' comments | Anti-migration | Blaming the Government | This criticises the authorities for all the mess caused by the irregular migrants by adopting the new migration policy and its reforms. |

DISCUSSION

Following the thematic analysis suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006), there was the identification of the attendance of a dominant theme within *Hespress* news articles and another dominant theme in its readers' comments. In *Hespress'* news articles, a positive attitude towards the new migration policy has been expressed through the predominance of pro-migration themes. The themes that dominated the news articles narratives are: the Human Rights Theme. As already mentioned, within this discourse, the recurrent lexis is: humanity, solidarity, integration, victim, benefit, and deserving. The readers' comments, however, voiced a negative attitude about the new migration reforms by emphasising anti-migration themes. The theme that dominated the readers' comments is Blaming the Government Theme. The narratives of the readers' comments are dominated by lexicon like: threat, burden, problem, crisis, different 'other', unwanted invaders, and crime.

In general, both *Hespress* journalists and readers have chosen different and opposing lexical repertoires when voicing their perspectives about irregular migration during the studied time frame. It was found that by using different themes and wording, *Hespress* news articles and readers' comments communicate very differently about irregular migration. The victimization discourse in the news articles has remained the same and the same is true with the problematization discourse in the readers' comments which have not shown any change during the same period.

Another finding about *Hespress'* interactivity which is about whether its readers assume or not any of the core journalistic functions regarding news production like: setting the news agenda, intervening in the gatekeeping function by providing original, unreported information. What was found is that *Hespress'* readers often challenge the journalistic viewpoints and, consequently, they air oppositional views. In this context, however, *Hespress'* editorial team is still the one to steer and guide audience's participation because they effectively tell them what to discuss about. As Reich (2011, p. 98) notes, "comments leave the journalist in the traditional position of the lead singer, while audience members generally play the minor, faceless and reactive role of the chorus".

Similarly, very few readers use comments as channels to provide original information about reported news. Rather, readers tend to limit themselves to expressing their opinions on public issues, without interfering with the core journalistic functions. This finding confirms previous studies which show that most readers have not yet assumed new roles, apart from the ones they had before the emergence of digital media (Neuberger & Nuernbergk, 2010). It is evident, then, that this type of audience participation is not rendering audiences co-producers of news content in significant ways. The potential implications of this question is that *Hespress'* commentary sections have allowed its readers to react to the representations and categorizations provided by *Hespress'* journalists which means that professional news no longer have a monopoly over the production of meaning for public issues but they blend with readers' perspectives in new hybrid texts.

Implications of the study

This study has a pedagogical implication, as there should be the incorporation of media literacy classes in the Moroccan educational system to equip students with the necessary critical thinking skills to be able to cope with the digital age. Media literacy will help news users to evaluate the credibility of news as it has become possible for anyone to write articles and post them on the Internet.

Another important implication of this study is that online news publishers should take into consideration their readers' comments and views for a better quality reporting because as long as the readers' comments are not taken into consideration, this won't make the interactive way of communication genuine.

CONCLUSION

The article has revealed that there are two contradicting discourses that dominated the news producers and news consumers of Hespress. The findings of the data illustrate the disagreement between the news article and readers' comments representations; the positive thematic paradigm around irregular migration is voiced by the journalists and it is accompanied by negative comments as a typical reaction. This explains that the interactive aspect of the e-newspaper is not genuine because their communication is not that successful since they hold totally different representation of the issue of irregular migration in Morocco.

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