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Live blog as genre in pursuit of credibility

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SUMMARY

Live blogs are highly popular among both the public and journalists. However, issues lie in the credibility of the format, especially given the uncertainty with which events are reported and the immediacy of their production. This paradox between popularity and uncertainty leads to the central question in this dissertation. To answer this question of how journalistic credibility is achieved in live blogs, I introduce the concept of “pursuit of credibility,” which is empirically supported through four separate studies, operationalized with literature on genre.

The first study (Chapter 2) focuses on the producers of live blogs. Little is known about how journalists routinely report on unexpected events in live blogs as these events are unfolding. This chapter delves into the creators of live blogs, referred to as “live-bloggers,” and the routines and conventions they follow when reporting on an event in a live blog. To better understand the relationship between those who “liveblog” and how “live-blogging” is conducted, I interviewed a selection of nine experienced live bloggers who cover breaking news, sports, and politics for the three most visited news platforms in the Netherlands.

Based on our results, I conclude that journalists working on different platforms follow similar routines and conventions to claim, acquire, and justify knowledge. Despite working with different platforms and covering different events at different moments, respondents in my research shared a common understanding of elements such as the conceptual approach to a communicative goal, communication channels regarding routines and conventions, and assumptions about the subject and the use of the genre. These findings reflect the concept of a “discourse community” (Swales, 1990), wherein discourse operates within the conventions that are defined by the community. Data showed that live blogging is primarily a social event, making it a different activity than individual contributions to news platforms. Live blogging involves building credibility with one another and incorporating debates about choices in the production of live blogs.

For political events, journalists covering debates with live blogs have knowledge anchored within networks of colleagues. My research indicates that an important convention for acquiring knowledge is social, involving on-site contact with expert colleagues. Acquiring knowledge for planned events, such as sports and politics, requires both subject-matter expertise (knowledge of the game or politics) and technical, management, and organizational skills (asking questions, critically evaluating and integrating information from third parties and colleagues), conducted by individuals with a high degree of editorial autonomy.

In contrast to blogs focusing on politics or sports, it is an important convention to cover breaking news with at least two people. Both play a gatekeeping role in the production of live blogs, maintaining constant and continuous contact with other journalists within their organization. Unlike debates and sports events, breaking news is handled by a team with distinct roles actively acquiring knowledge. This

not only implies reduced editorial autonomy for live blogging journalists but also for their direct colleagues, who must share their knowledge and provide access to (exclusive) contacts and sources needed to obtain more reliable information.

This discourse community of live bloggers is constantly balancing (ir)relevance with (un)certainty due to the immediate nature of live blogs. Unlike regular online journalists who produce articles, live bloggers face the immediate challenge of striking a balance. Journalists do not have a coherent narrative after the fact, as with online news, but report on news (or politics or sports) the moment it is happening. This led to an evaluation of information.

One convention was quite clear: if information was deemed irrelevant and uncertain, journalists did not publish it. When information was evaluated as certain and relevant, the convention was equally clear - the information was published immediately. In between were cases where information was relevant but uncertain, or certain but irrelevant. Both evaluations led to the convention of justifying their choices to publish. Journalists explained they did this by either emphasizing the relevance for the public or by explicitly attributing uncertainty in their wording, using hedges, thereby managing accountability regarding the published information.

Two more conventions regarding the use of sources were identified in our data. First, when there was uncertainty about information, respondents based their claim to knowledge on the authority of the (formal) source. To balance the importance of the information with its questionable factual accuracy, the ethos of the police spokesperson legitimized the claim. When dealing with eyewitnesses, respondents indicated that they checked the consistency of the eyewitness accounts. This meant they wanted to hear more witnesses telling the same story before using the information in their live blog, or they wanted to know the development of the situation to enable the verification of the eyewitness accounts, using them towards the end of the event.

Live blogging, in contrast to regular online reporting, can best be summarized as a social process rather than autonomous production. These findings are important for three reasons. First, to understand how journalists deal with uncertainty when reporting on events under immediate circumstances with live blogs. Second, to understand the functioning of this popular format. Third, to contribute to the literature on journalistic genres, discourse communities, and, more specifically, the generic requirements of live blogs for establishing credibility.

In Chapter 3, I explain how journalists address the challenges that live blogs pose: journalists perform discourse. They present valid representations of the social world. One way to do this is through the use and representation of sources. In this paper, we analyze this performative discourse of live blogs by revealing possible patterns of source citation and discursive strategies in a series of live blogs. We examine how journalists deal with the mix of speed and uncertainty. Based on a quantitative content analysis of nine Dutch live blogs at the sentence level, we conclude that journalists follow the same conventions and routines as regular (online) articles.

Data showed that sourcing strategy of journalists in live blogs is the same as with other journalistic genres – mainly formal, confirming previous research done by Gans

(1979), Lecheler & Kruikemeier (2016), and Thorsen & Jackson (2018). This shows that even though new technologies provide journalists with new ways and formats to persuade the public, this does not mean journalists adapt new routines and conventions. Existing journalistic routines and conventions, like source selection, can be used to cover new events, or, as with live blogs, these same, old routines and conventions can be used to cover existing events in new ways. The latter seems to be the case concerning live blogs: existing routines and conventions are used to cover breaking news, politics, and sports in new ways: immediate, with high degrees of uncertainty, multimodal.

Journalists can then choose between different ways for the reporting of speech, each with their own rhetorical effects to persuade. Two are direct, and indirect speech, both with different rhetorical functions (Smirnova, 2009). Direct speech signals neutrality and objectivity as desired effect; indirect speech put the autonomous journalist as specialist and 'knower' more to the foreground (Harry, 2013). Our data shows that live blogs are predominantly source centered because when sources are reported, journalists use (far) more direct speech than indirect speech.

However, journalists use narration almost twice as much than both direct speech and indirect speech combined. More than quoting or interpreting what sources said, journalists predominantly report their own speech in their own words, using no sources at all. So, within the subset of sources, journalists mostly use direct speech, leading to a source centered discourse, signaling objectivity and factuality by reporting speech *ad verbatim*. Within all live blogs combined, however, journalists use narration and no sources at all, interpreting developments they cover, presenting themselves as 'knowers' concerning developments they 'see'. So, despite the potential for polyvocality (multiple and different voices in live blogs) due to accessibility through social media, journalists predominantly choose formal sources and report their statements mainly in a direct manner. As a result, they often reiterate the official interpretation of an event they are reporting in the live blog due to the use of formal sources. At the same time, they suggest objectivity in their reporting by using quotations but still select what to quote.

Chapter 4 provides an overview of the results of a survey conducted among users of live blogs during the initial months of the COVID-19 pandemic. During crises, people tend to consume more news to alleviate or reduce uncertainty. The survey conducted during the early months of the pandemic in the Netherlands revealed that respondents consumed more news compared to the period before the COVID-19 crisis. They often preferred fast and immediate news sources such as online platforms, radio, television, and social media over traditional newspapers.

Individuals who choose to read liveblogs do not limit themselves to consuming news exclusively from live blogs. There appears to be a clear positive correlation between the use of live blogs and the use of online news websites, apps from traditional standalone online news sources, news aggregators, podcasts, and government websites. People who read national newspapers and those who watch commercial news programs are less inclined to consume live blogs. In other words,

users of live blogs exhibit a strong correlation with informed news consumers who also have an interest in various other media. Nevertheless, the number of liveblog users diminishes rapidly over time during the pandemic. People who read live blogs tend to have a desire to stay updated on news and not miss out. Users of live blogs feel strongly connected, even addicted, to news. There exists a strong mutual relationship between the need for news and the liveblog format.

Our data also suggests that the theory of reducing uncertainty applies, but with a slight twist: while reducing uncertainty, respondents are confronted with new uncertainties due to the chosen format (live blogs). This results in further reduction of uncertainty in the news, leading to new uncertainties that need to be minimized—ad infinitum. This potentially forms the news consumption habit referred to as ‘news junkies’ by Swart & Broersma (2022).

Contrary to expectations, these individuals embrace uncertainty by following news about the crisis through live blogs in various ways. Other research indicates that news consumers who chose to avoid certain news during the pandemic experienced an improvement in their well-being (Bruin et al., 2021). This study suggests that liveblog users feel the need to consume more news despite the potential consequences.

In Chapter 5, I focus on the users of live blogs. Despite the paradoxical challenges of uncertainty and immediacy, live blogs are popular among the public. The lack of alternatives to follow events immediately may explain the popularity of live blogs. However, in a media landscape with many choices, opting for a live blog is not an obvious decision. While substantial research has examined the perceived credibility of online sources, online posts, and online media, there are no specific studies that explore how liveblog users assess the credibility of and within this format.

This chapter presents results from six focus groups discussing these credibility aspects and technical features (multimodality, interactivity, and hypertextuality) in six Dutch live blogs. The findings lead to the conclusion that using a liveblog is an active way of engaging with an unfolding world, where uncertainties and fragmentation are not obstacles but motivations to explore further, read, and listen, much like in a detective or adventure game. In this way, respondents seem sufficiently self-assured to evaluate the credibility of live blogs by rectifying what goes wrong, contextualizing what they perceive as a narrow interpretation of events and embracing the complexities of an evolving reality.

In the conclusion, I address the primary question of this research, namely, how journalistic credibility is established in live blogs. To answer this question, we must first accept that credibility is not an inherent characteristic, quality, or attribution but the result of journalistic assessment. Credibility is a process that begins even before journalists have written a single word, with the cursor blinking in the upper left corner of the screen. At that point, journalists choose a genre that compels them to consider the socio-cultural context of the chosen discourse to describe reality from a social perspective.

Based on expectations, trust can be built through discourse between creators and the audience. In this context, I defined genre as a social act, based on recurring

situations or events that demand discourse (exigence). Political debates, terrorist attacks, natural disasters, competitions, races, and games recur regularly, and when covering these recurring situations, conventions and routines emerge. Journalists refer to these conventions when there is an exigence. Each time the audience follows these events in the news, they evaluate the journalistic effort based on their expectations.

In summary, genre organizes professional discourse to meet public expectations, even before an event or situation is conveyed to the news. When genre is in action, public expectations are fulfilled, and credibility effects emerge. The same applies to live blogs. Live blogs covering political and current news result from a social production process with a specific communicative goal: immediacy above relevance, above uncertainty.

How credibility is established in live blogs is determined by an implicit and unspoken contract of expectations between producers and the audience regarding the content of the liveblog, resulting in credibility effects. Credibility is the *raison d'être* of journalism; it is a continuous task for journalists to persuade the audience to accept their version of reality. Journalism is essentially a profession of knowledge transfer from the journalist (establishing credibility) through content (content of credibility) to the audience (evaluation of credibility). Consequently, to understand this implicit contract of expectations organized by genre, the efforts of journalists to achieve credibility and the evaluation of credibility by the audience must be analyzed together. This is what I aimed to do and demonstrate with this dissertation.

