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Live blog as genre in pursuit of credibility

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

“Are you covering the council meeting tonight with a live blog?”, asked a councilman expectantly, just before I climbed the stairs towards the press stand, one floor above the council hall in Leiden, The Netherlands. I was covering the council meetings live almost weekly, and while writing down and immediately publishing what was said, I often received messages with advice from politicians, background information, and suggestions concerning language and grammar errors via WhatsApp—all an indication of the seriousness with which the politicians downstairs followed my report of their meeting. My live blog was published on the website of *Leidsch Dagblad*, a regional paper, leading to even more suggestions and advice from people reading my live blog at home. Due to the constant and often immediate—but very valid—political and public suggestions for improvements during production time, live blogging was often an exhausting undertaking as well. After coming home at night, it took a while to fall asleep after frantically typing, understanding, and summarizing what was said and meant throughout the evening.

“What are you doing when you live blog?” asked Jaap de Jong, the professor of *Journalism and New Media* at Leiden University, where I taught students how to become journalists. “How do you know if people accept your version of the council meeting as credible? And how can you make sure that these live blogs are credible and immediate at the same time?” Relevant, and topical questions.

Live blogs are a relatively new and very popular format for journalists and the public alike (Bahr, 2021; Flower & Ahlefeldt, 2021; Knight, 2017; Lee, 2022; López, 2022; Matheson & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2020; Pantic, 2020b, 2020a; Pantic et al., 2017; Thorsen & Jackson, 2018; Vaahtoranta, 2017; Weaver, 2020; Wilczek & Blangetti, 2018). Often free content, live blogs proliferated from sports beats to other beats, now covering a wide array of subjects and themes, like natural disasters, terrorist attacks, political debates, the global pandemic of COVID-19, or the crisis in Ukraine on a daily, sometimes hourly, or even minutely pace. Live blogs are an established choice for journalists to cover events, and for the public to follow them.

The technological possibilities sped up the coverage of news from retrospective to immediate, covering events while they developed. Live blogs differ in form and function from regular online formats or live news on the radio or television. Live blogs are built up by posts, with the most recent post—either text, a photo, data visualization, embedded social, or other elements—placed on top, and the oldest posts at the bottom. A live blog is published on a stable URL (and therefore an online format) that refreshes automatically. Posts are standalones without a necessary narrative relation with posts before or after. Live blogs cover events as long as they take, which can vary from the duration of a match, game, or race, up to a political debate or breaking news event, which may take several days. Based on qualitative research of two live blogs (covering Brexit in the UK and the 7.8 magnitude Kaikōura earthquake in New Zealand, both in 2016), Matheson & Wahl-Jorgensen (2020) conclude that live blogs are characterized by a fragmented and open narrative structure; temporality and overlapping moments in time; curated, multi-layered texts; networked journalism (using texts in live blog that comes from correspondents, Twitter, radio and television coverage, parent broadcaster or politicians or sport commenters); and a dynamic and temporary status of texts.

Consequently, the popularity of live blogs has some serious challenges for both producers and the public (Harper, 2013; Lee, 2022; Livingston & Bennett, 2003; Morpork, 2011). Previous research showed and theorized that when journalists evaluate events, they persuade the public to accept their account of reality by performing discourse (Potter, 1996; Broersma, 2010), using textual and productive conventions and routines to credibly achieve—as genre theory explains—communicative goals (Frow, 2015; Swales, 1990). Consequently, discourse communities of professional journalists are formed, indicating the crystallization of conventions to cover recurring events, and binding texts, writers, and the public in a web of reciprocal expectations and fulfillment (Swales, 1990, Beaufort, 1996). If we would look at live blogs as a journalistic genre it evaluate events (Bednarek, 2006; Wagner-Pacifici, 2017), but in contrast to other genres in journalism, live blogs do all the above immediately

(Matheson & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2020; Thorsen & Jackson, 2018; Thurman & Walters, 2013; Usher, 2014). Therefore, the main question in this thesis is how is journalistic credibility established in live blogs?

Media, remarks Schudson in *The Sociology of News* (2003: 33) “are obligated (...) to maintain their credibility in the eyes of the readers.” Media must not only obtain credibility with the public, but also with experts, politicians, or persons in sub-groups. Luckily for journalists, they do not have to reinvent the credibility of news again and again. The production of news is prescribed by routines and conventions (Broersma, 2010; Gans 1979 [2004]; Tuchman, 1978). News, according to Tuchman (1978: 1), is the combination of how the organizations of news work and news workers are put together. So, journalists produce news items or documentaries (video), make portraits (photos), have interviews, reconstruct, write columns, comment, and analyze. Or live blog. In short: journalists produce news in what Tuchman called a web of facticity, explained as “the mutual determination of fact and source” (1978: 84). Journalists, explains Tuchman, must question facts by going to sources, which lead to credible news that might be accepted by the public. However, Tuchman’s web of facticity does not include the public—her “web of facticity” stops with the production of news (her seminal analysis of news production is titled *Making News*). Still, news is made for the public.

The concept of the *pursuit of credibility* encapsulates both the notion that credibility is produced by journalists, and once produced, evaluated by the public. I argue in this thesis that making news means that journalists perform discourse (Broersma, 2010), and by performing discourse, they strive for the pursuit of credibility (Frow, 2015), which are consequently evaluated (understood and accepted, or not) by news users (Braet, 2007). The pursuit of credibility closes the circle of makers, content, and the public, and to understand how credibility is established in live blogs, I study the three stages of the pursuit of credibility: the *realization of credibility* (by makers), the *content of credibility* (the live blogs), and finally, the *evaluation of credibility* (by the public). To do so, I first describe the emergence of live blogs as a format in journalism (see paragraph 1.1) and the adoption of this innovation (see paragraph 1.2). Then, I will introduce the theoretical concept of genre (see paragraph 1.3) that underpins my conceptual model for the pursuit of credibility.

1.1 EMERGENCE OF LIVE BLOGS

The history of live blogs is hardly academically researched, perhaps due to the poor state of archiving online news (Thurman & Shapals, 2017). Archiving web-only content—which live blogs are—is “spotty or non-existent” (Hansen & Paul, 2015). Consequently, its invention is mostly attributed in previous research to the *BBC*, *The Guardian*, and *The New York Times* (Matheson, 2004; Matheson & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2020; Thorsen & Jackson, 2018; Thurman & Walters, 2013), making the live blog a predominantly Anglo-Saxon invention.

Live blogs started as a feature for sports journalists and proliferated towards other beats from there (McEnnis, 2016). For instance, in the ‘90s, *The Guardian* used this innovative format in the sports section of the website, under the name minute-by-

minute, although colleague journalists found evidence for the existence of live blogs in *The Guardian* all the way back to 1923. Then, the newspaper published an hour-by-hour account of the 1923 general elections updating an article every now and then and publishing its final report the next day in the printed newspaper (Owen, 2012). The *BBC* experimented during the '90s with live text input, done by one or several people during the weekend, mostly covering sports (football) (Scott, 2014). In 2005, the *BBC* started to call their *live text inputs* a live blog.

The format is distinct from live radio and television, because of the centrality of reporters and television stations as a source of authority (Lewis & Cushion, 2009), and an emphasis on written text. Due to its speed of production, texts are hardly reworked (Thorsen & Jackson, 2018). Several studies show that this format is popular among the public; one study even showed that respondents preferred this format to regular online news because reporters, in the eyes of users of live blogs, hardly have time to interpret, and therefore manipulate information, due to the sheer speed of production (Thurman & Walters, 2013). Live blogs also appeal to journalists because they feel there are fewer obligations to their knowledge claims—journalists covering an event in a live blog feel they can report more uncertainties concerning developments than in regular (online) news (Matheson & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2020; Pleijter, 2011; Rammeloo, 2011; Rom & Reich, 2017).

1.1.1 Short history of Dutch live blogs

In the Netherlands, the live blog as a journalistic format gained attention in 2011 (Pleijter, 2011)—at least, in that year, professional pioneers of live bloggers in the Netherlands debated on the format for the first time; David Haakman (national newspaper *NRC*), Robert Engel (internet platform *EnDanDit.nl*), Paul Vereijken and Erika Massuger (regional newspaper *Eindhovens Dagblad*), and Jens Kraan (public broadcaster *NOS*) publicly discussed features of live blogs from their professional points of view in a pub in Utrecht. This dedicated discussion concerning live blogs was an early indication of the acceptance of the format as a journalistic genre, and even possibly the start of a new discourse community, as will be further explained in the second chapter of this dissertation. The meeting back in 2011 between the first “live bloggers” led to some agreement on a set of common goals, language, and procedures describing live blogging.

For instance, during the debate back then, journalists discussed the order of posts: the most recent information at the top of the page (as is a present convention) or the most recent post at the end (which did not survive as a convention). Both ways of ordering news information were—according to the journalists present at that time—closely related to the communication goal (Swales, 1990) of live blogs. Haakman (*NRC*) mentioned the public's wishes to follow the news in real time, hence placing the latest news on top; Engels mentioned the wish of the public to read the live blog at the end of the day as an oversight of what happened, starting with the first post, and ending with the most recent. Both journalists had the purpose of communicating as effectively as possible to the public.

Journalists also debated on the criteria for the status of news to be published in live blogs. Kraan (NOS) mentioned that the fall of Benghazi (during the civil war in Libya, 2011) was only confirmed by an informal source in the Netherlands who had contact with insurgents. The source's information was not confirmed by other sources, like international press agencies or governments. However, "we did put that information from [the informal source, SL] in the live blog, but we did not make a separate news item about it. We only did so when the international press agencies also reported this news two hours later" (Pleijter, 2011).

While 2011 was the first year the live blog was discussed as a serious journalistic format, the first form of live blog in the Netherlands dates to 2009. Then, Wouter Bax, journalist of the Dutch national newspaper Trouw, uncorked a bottle of champagne because the newspaper was, according to his own enthusiasm, "back in the frontline of news" (Bax, 2009). During a press conference covering the takeover of Fortis by the Dutch ABN bank, Bax witnessed live-blogging in action, done by a Belgian journalist, sitting in front of him. At that moment, Bax wrote, he realized that newspaper now had a format to cover breaking news, for long only done by radio and television. His newspaper, Trouw, used, later that same year, the format covering the crash of Turkish Airways Flight 1951 at the Amsterdam Schiphol Airport, February 25th, 2009:

"Throughout the day, internet users could take note of the latest news, photos and even the live blog of one of our editors who, until the evening, described what he saw and heard and exchanged thoughts with guests of his blog. It attracted crowds of people who came into direct contact with [journalists of] Trouw and the newspaper also benefited the next day. [Reporters] neatly reported the facts, but also testified to the fact that the journalists had been forced by their own live news service to do even more thorough and in-depth work for the next day" (Bax, 2009).

And even further back, in 2005, the Dutch national newspaper NRC mentioned the BBC's live blogs covering the horrendous terrorist attacks in London on their website. Three years later, in 2008, two students at the School voor Journalistiek in Utrecht, The Netherlands (School for Journalism), Loek Essers and Peter van der Ploeg, covered the terrorist attacks in Mumbai, only following social media such as Twitter and Flickr. They made the news by covering it in an innovative way. Then lector Piet Bakker told NRC (Dutch national newspaper) that he thought both students were present in Mumbai, so convincing was the liveness of their reportage (Klaver, 2008: 20).

1.1.2 Adoption of an innovation

So, early adopters of the live blogs in The Netherlands had to determine the basic order of their posts due to differing communication goals of live blogs (real-time news or reading news) and used live blogs as a place of not yet confirmed, but relevant information. In terms of linguist and genre-theorist John Swales (1990),

there was not yet a community's nomenclature; conventions and routines had yet to mature in these early days of experimentation. Most Dutch media started with the adoption of live blogs to cover the Arab Spring; the terrorist attack of Anders Breivik in Norway; Dutch state elections; the shooting in Ridderhof, a mall in Alphen aan den Rijn; the financial troubles in Europa; and the tsunami in Japan; all in 2011 (Rammeloo, 2011). At the same time, the use of mobile phones and social media was well-established by that time. Members of the public became "accidental journalists" (Allan, 2013:1), posting their eyewitness reports on social media for journalists to use as content for their reports. And they did so with success, in terms of visits to these live blogs. In 2011, eight out of ten most-read online articles in *NRC* (Dutch quality national newspaper) were live blogs (Rammeloo, 2011).

The adoption of live blogs in the Netherlands went relatively fast due to this perfect storm of news events combined with the establishment of social media use by the public. Explorative research confirmed that the immediacy with which these stories could be reported also for newspapers; the affinity of (parts of the) the public to be a part of that story by reading a live blog; and the technological developments that made it easier to start live blogs helped people to accept the innovation on Dutch political beats (Lil, 2023). The interaction of these three aspects sped up the innovation of live blogs.

Because live blogs and the events they cover are so closely related, a more recent development of the format is slow blogs. Slow blogs cover events that last long periods, varying in duration from two or more days to weeks, months, or even more than one-and-a-half years (Daams, 2023; Nab, 2021, Van Exter, 2020). So, when the COVID-19 pandemic broke out, news platforms started to cover COVID-19 in live blogs that lasted for months. For example, NU.nl (Dutch online news platform) started their live blog covering the pandemic in February 2020 and stopped it in August 2021. "The news flow around the coronavirus comes from fewer different sides," and became "smaller than before," according to a statement explaining the end of the lasting slow blog. After COVID-19, the war in Ukraine was also followed by live blogs with long durations—some started the first day Russia invaded eastern Ukraine, February 22, 2022, and are still covering the war at the time of writing in October 2023.

In conclusion, live blogs are a journalistic format in motion; they develop as a reaction to the immediate reality they cover. Starting as an online tool to cover sports, live blogs developed into an innovative, immediate, and sometimes highly uncertain journalistic genre. Despite these challenges, live blogs seem to be popular among journalists and the public alike to present and follow news, despite the challenges previous research mentioned. Live blogs, uncertain and fragmented, also seem to be the opposite of regular journalistic discourse that is characterized by its factuality and structuredness. To understand how and if they are credible, I argue that we must analyze live blogs as a genre. Genre is often seen as a classification of texts (or photos, or paintings), based on similarities between its members. Seen as such, things can be classified as a member of a genre based on characteristics they share with

other members of that same collection, like a taxonomist classifies plants, insects, or animals. However, genre is more than similarities between the classification of things. Genre does work.

1.2 WHAT GENRE DOES

A mind experiment might be useful to explain that genre not only classifies, but also “does work.” Imagine that someone would like to see a movie—a Western, to be precise. Mentioning the word “Western” stimulates expectations about the content of the movie, and flying saucers are not part of that expectation (to name a genre confusion after the film *Cowboys & Aliens* (Favreau, 2011). In Westerns, bad guys wear dark hats, people ride horses, and some are fast shooters. The “world” of Westerns is clearly cut into good and bad (and, sometimes, the ugly). A “good” Western might let spectators forget they are watching a film and get sucked right into the story. In rhetorical terms, the moment spectators (or listeners or readers) forget the story is mediated, is called presence. The user is submerged within the narrative, and effects of credibility can emerge (Frow, 2015): what is being told is real in the eyes of the public. This, in a nutshell, is an important effect of genre.

The rise of the internet has fueled academic interest in genres and genre analysis (Bawarshi, 2000; Bonyadi, 2012; Mast, Coesemans & Temmerman, 2017; Miller & Kelly, 2017; Steensen, 2011), also within journalism studies (Broersma, 2008; Buoziis & Creech, 2018; Smeenk et al., 2018). Genre analyses are in themselves as old as Aristotle’s classifications into his Poetics (Tragedy, Comedy and Epic) (Huys, 2011) or Rhetoric (speech before the people’s assembly, occasional speech and speeches before the court) (Huys, 2011), and as modern as shreds, in which videos of rock concerts are used to poke fun at the musicians, the audience, just one song, or the entire concert, with self-created music dubbed over the original soundtrack (Skageby, 2013).

In *Analysing Genre* (1993), Bhatia sees genre analysis as discourse analysis. It has evolved, “moving from a surface-level description to a more functional and grounded description of language use, often bringing in useful explanation of why a particular type of conventional codification of meaning is considered appropriate to a particular institutionalized socio-cultural setting” (Bhatia, 1993: 5). Thus, to provide more in-depth attention to the social situation of language use, genre analysis was created. According to Bhatia (1993: 40), genre analyses have an eye for socio-cultural and organizational constraints and expectations that determine choices in language use. Genre analyses detect conventions and expose the (often) predictable ways in which communicative events are shaped, combining the work of producers of discourse (in this thesis: journalists) with the content they produce and the public’s reception.

It does so, however, without a crystallized method for analyzing and classifying language use into genres. Harrell & Linkugel (1978) even see a danger in this: “In short, ‘generic’ seems to be loosely taken to mean ‘classification’ and little has yet emerged to organize and systematize the development of generic criticism” (Harrell & Linkugel, 1978: 262). This lack of a uniform method is a major methodological weakness in genre analyses. Nevertheless, studies have been carried out that always

serve as a starting point for genre analyses, especially concerning pedagogical approaches to writing various texts. One such concrete approach to the classification of text into genres is *Genre Analysis* by John M. Swales (1990). Swales (1990:58) defines genre based on approaches of genre in folklore, literature studies, linguistics, and rhetoric, and describes “genre” as

“a class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes. These purposes are recognized by the expert members of the (...) discourse community, and thereby constitute the rationale for the genre. This rationale shapes the schematic structure of the discoursed and influences and constraints choice of content and style.”

Seen as such, live blogs are a class of communicative events, where journalists—as expert members of a discourse community—share the willingness to present news as immediately as possible (fulfilling the communicative purpose). Following Schudson (2003), Tuchman (1978), and Gans (1979), their rationale for “genre” is the pursuit of credibility, and translated to live blogs, genre influences and constrains the choice of content and style for makers. So, far from being merely “stylistic” devices, genres create effects of credibility “which are central to the different ways the world is understood in the writing of history or philosophy or science, or in painting or film or prayer or in everyday talk” (Frow, 2015: 20). Consequently, genre channels strategic responses when such responses are necessary, based on a recurrent situation. Terrorist attacks, natural disasters, political debates or political campaigns, a football match, a Formula 1 race, or a judo tournament are examples of recurrent events—and seen as such, live blogs are strategic responses from journalists. To understand how journalistic credibility is established in live blogs, I propose a conceptual model of the pursuit of credibility, grounded on the literature of genre and genre analysis.

1.3 A CONCEPTUAL MODEL FOR THE PURSUIT OF CREDIBILITY

As mentioned, the pursuit of credibility encapsulates both the production and public evaluation of credibility. Consequently, the pursuit of credibility exists of the realization of credibility by journalists; the resulting live blog or the content of credibility; and the public evaluation of credibility. These are three building blocks for a conceptual model to analyze the pursuit of credibility in live blogs (see *Fig. 1 Stages in the pursuit of credibility in live blogs*). The conceptual model explains the pursuit of credibility as a model, starting with an event (left), and ending with the acceptance (or not) of the public of the version of reality presented in the live blog by journalists (right). At the same time, these three building blocks correspond with the chapters in my thesis. The elements of the conceptual model are hereafter theoretically underpinned with concepts from genre studies.

Genre prescribes, determines, and limits possibilities of language use that are available as soon as something needs to be said in a social situation or concerning an event. These situations are defined by and are consequences of interpretations

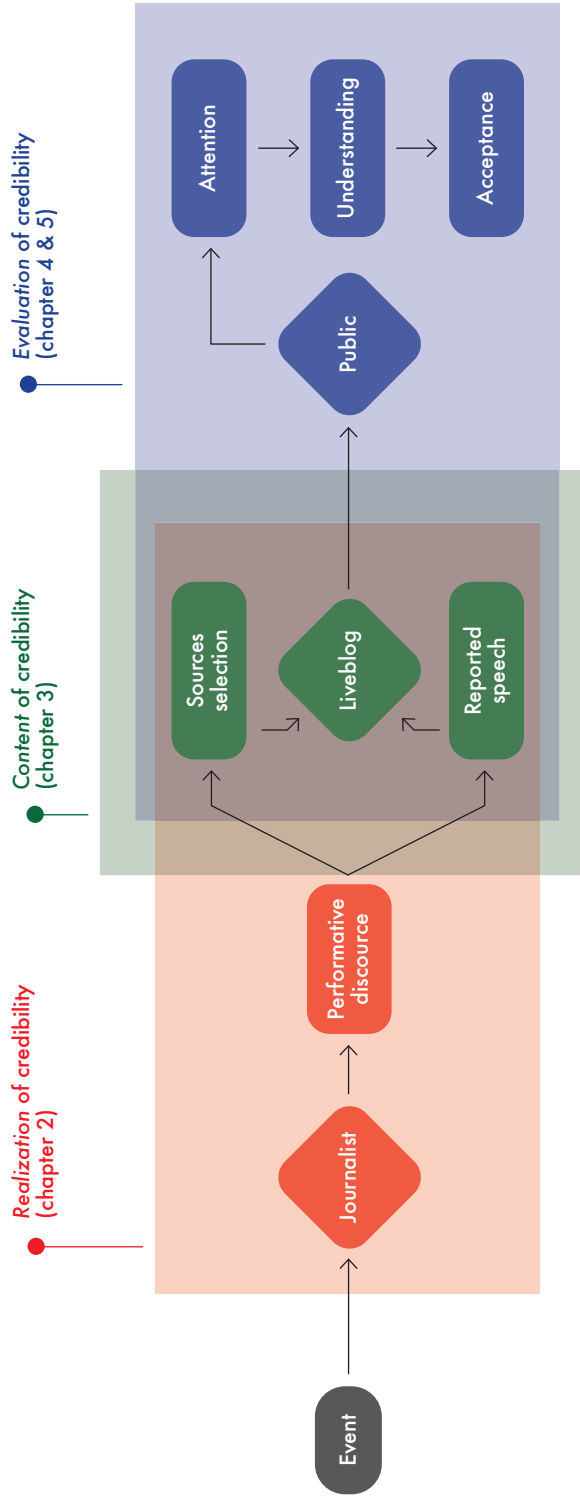


FIG. 1 Stages in the pursuit of credibility in live blogs

(Miller, 1984). Genre establishes a relationship between a (recurring) situation and discourse (written and spoken word, but also image and art). “Genre,” explains Frow (2013: 15), “shapes strategies for occasions; it gets a certain kind of work done.” So, the first step in our conceptual model concerning the pursuit of credibility is the question of whether an event must be covered by a live blog in the first place (starting left in the conceptual model with ‘Event’, on the previous page). Genre does not only prescribe the use of language concerning an event, but it also constitutes this situation. With the choice to cover an event with a live blog, a specific situation is defined by journalists as urgent, immediate, and newsworthy.

But why should journalists choose live blogs (or any other genre)? One answer to the question of why a specific genre is chosen given a specific event or situation is provided by Miller (1984) and Giltrow (2017), among others. They proposed genre as a social action. This approach is based on the recurrence of situations or events. “Recurrence is implied by our understanding of situations as somehow ‘comparable’, ‘similar’, or ‘analogues’ to other situations” (Miller, 1984: 156). Events, such as a football match, a tournament, a debate, a terrorist attack, or natural disaster are newsworthy and “ask” for discourse. These situations or events require social action because they share a sensation that something needs to be said or written, called exigence (Bitzer, 1968).

Exigence is regulated by conventions, and according to Giltrow (2017: 2017), these conventions arise in and prescribe activity at the same time (see also: Devitt, 1993). Genre is not the form of substance of discourse, but, according to Miller (1984: 151), the action used to accomplish it. Bawarshi (2000) states that genres reproduce activities in such a way that the public recognizes them. Swales (2004) claims that genre is not a social action but a frame for social action. The frame is just a starting position, an orientation with no guarantee that what needs to be done will happen, except that speakers and writers can shape their plans and ideas, and the audience can have certain expectations (Fowler, 2007). This, of course, is all done by people, and in my case: journalists.

1.3.1 Discourse Community

Swales (1990) and Askehave & Swales (2001) argue that genres differ in discourse community and communicative purpose. A discourse community (see Chapter 2) has six characteristics (Swales, 1990: 24-27). First, a discourse community shares the same communicative purposes. This purpose, for instance, was not yet clear in 2011 (see paragraph 1.1.2 Short history of Dutch live blogs), when pioneers of the format disagreed about the order of live blogs based on the goal of the format (bring news immediately or present news orderly).

Second, the members of a discourse community communicate with each other. Translated to my study of live blogs: journalists follow each other’s live blogs or write articles in professional literature about the format and the experiences with it. In doing so, members give feedback on each other’s work. Third, members use their participatory mechanisms primarily to provide information and receive feedback. Swales then

mentions, fourth, that more than one genre can be used by a discourse community. Again, translated to this thesis, journalists covering an event in a live blog might use interviews and reportage, or embed socials and photos to report events. Fifth, Swales mentions jargon among members of a discourse community as a necessary condition for a discourse community. In the community of live bloggers, terms such as “post,” “embeds,” or “slow blog” are examples. Finally, one should take into consideration the adoption of new members and thus, the renewing of the community (Swales, 1990).

With this concept of discourse community, Swales deepens the concept of genre by considering not only texts, but also the social conditions, routines, and conventions under or with which an achievement must be accomplished. Other examples of discourse communities held together by (strict) communicative purposes, routines, and conventions to establish effects of credibility are law and academics. The last category is educated in routines and conventions to do and present research at conferences, in journal articles, or theses like this one, and in doing so, are expected to convince others of their credibility as an academic. The discourse community of live bloggers is empirically underpinned in my second chapter, where I will present routines and conventions used by journalists covering evolving events in live blogs.

1.3.2 Routines and Conventions

These routines and conventions explain and show what journalists do to translate a recurrent event (first stage of my conceptual model) into a live blog (the second stage of my model) to convince the public (third stage of my model) of a credible presentation of their version of reality. Journalism, in essence, is a trait of persuasion; confronted with a (evolving) reality, journalists perform discourse (Broersma, 2010) by following routines and conventions to persuade the public of a credible representation of facts. That is the one thing the public has: a representation of facts—they can only believe what is provided by journalists because (most of the time) they themselves are not present. “Events and facts do not have ‘intrinsic importance’ but become important because they are selected by journalists who adhere to a culturally and ideologically determined set of selection criteria” (Broersma, 2010: 16). So, news is hard work: selecting, filtering, choosing words or frames, and then molding it into media formats suitable for an audience busy doing other things. Form and stylistic devices are central to “legitimize valid representations of the social world” (Broersma, 2010: 16).

Seen as such, journalism is rhetorical in nature, and journalists try to persuade the public of their specially crafted version of reality. Journalists do so by hiding shortcomings or inadequacies by presenting facts as natural (content), and they use specific forms to prove the truthfulness of their productions. This is the news the public can act on, and this is, according to Broersma (2010: 18), a linguistic representation that has “the power to describe and produce phenomena at the same time.” Between an event and the discourse performed by journalists to persuade the public of a credible representation is a reciprocal link.

The reciprocal link between situation and discourse can be analyzed with what Frow (2015: 79) calls “expressive capacities of genre.” These expressive capacities

offer “frame works for constructing meaning and value in one or another medium” (Frow, 2015: 79). These frameworks are alternatives to each other and are chosen one above another because specific expressive qualities are—given a specific situation—valued above others by journalists. Hence, one can report (or learn from) an event with a documentary, an item, a data analysis, or a photograph—all these genres have specific expressive capacities with their “own” effects of credibility. How can we understand these effects to choose the right genre for the desirable effects with the public?

1.3.3 Effects of Credibility

Frow (2015: 79-80) distinguishes three analytical sets of features for effects of credibility: a formal feature, a thematic structure, and a structure of address. A formal feature of genre includes the use of a voice-over, interviews with informants, hand-held cameras, or certain rhythms in editing (examples are from Frow, 2015: 80). Following these examples, a formal feature of effects of credibility in live blogs is, for instance, the order of posts, with the most recent at the top and the oldest post at the bottom. A second formal feature is the timestamp that all live blog posts have, exacting the time the post was published by the author, and therewith signaling urgency and immediacy.

Thematic structure, the second feature of effects of credibility, concerns the topics or topoi of genre. Thematic structures of stories (Frow, 2015: 83) are, for instance, the kind of actions of actors who perform them, and both the significance of these actions and their actors for an unfolding story. “Together, actions and actors form a world with a particular organization of space and time and a particular mode and degree of plausibility: it will be symbolic, or exemplary, or empirically factual, and it will be presented as historically true, or as possible, or as probable” (Idem: 83). Translated to live blogs, the topics of (most) live blogs are evolving events (planned or what-a-story news) like natural disasters, terrorist attacks, war, revolution, political campaigns and debates, sports games, matches, or races. Actions and actors (in live blogs: sources) are then organized in space and time, making the coverage of an event presented in a live blog possible, probable, and credible. The selection of sources in live blogs covering breaking news, politics, and sports is central to my third study concerning the content of live blogs (see Chapter 3).

Finally, the effects of credibility are also organized by structures of address. These structures of address concern who (what kind of person) is speaking—and with what authority and credibility—to whom. “This speaking position brings with it a certain kind of authority and moral force (...)” (Frow, 2015: 10). Examples of authority and force are suggested by Austin (1962 [1975]) as performatives. A performative does not describe, but it does something. “When I say, before the registrar or altar, ‘I do’, I am not reporting on a marriage: I am indulging in it” (Austin, 1962 [1975]: 6). This structure of address is also a central theme in my content analysis of live blogs (see Chapter 3), where I analyze not only the source selection (thematic structure, see above), but also the reported speech, or the way they are represented in live blogs.

How can you evaluate the work done in the live blogs that are published? The last step in the pursuit of credibility is the evaluation by the public. Braet (2007, following McGuire 1989; O’Keefe, 2002) distinguishes three stages when the public is confronted with a speech or text: first, attention, then understanding, and finally, acceptance. These are stages to understand the success of persuasion: without attention, there is no understanding, and without understanding, there cannot be acceptance. And, finally, without acceptance, there is no persuasion. Consequently, these three stages can be seen as criteria for successful persuasion and are therefore used in this dissertation: first, to understand the pursuit of credibility of live blogs, and second, to assess if they succeed in persuading the public to accept the reading of reality by its makers.

So, the public must first find a live blog (attention), the first necessary condition for acceptance (as will be explained in Chapter 5). News organizations therefore often promote their live blogs in contrasting colors on their websites (often in red), and for free (contrary to other news on their sites) hoping it will pull the public in for the next necessary condition for acceptance: understanding the presented version of reality. They do so when the live blogs answer their need for information. Previous research showed different motivations for using news and for using news in times of crisis specifically. I analyzed in Chapter 4 motivations and needs during the first four months of the pandemic while it raged around the world, impacting the lives of millions of people. We explored these motivations, habits, and needs further in Chapter 5. In this chapter, we conclude that fulfilling attention, understanding, and acceptance (Braet, 2007) leads to a possible effect of credibility. However, along the way, the public can also miss the live blog (no attention), not understand what is covered (or how it is covered), and thus, not fulfill the pursuit of credibility. Therefore, this dissertation will empirically study all three stages of live blogs in the pursuit of credibility.

1.4 THIS THESIS

The chapters of this thesis (excluding the Introduction and Conclusion & Discussion) are submitted or published as an article in an academic peer-reviewed journal. Because the articles are written with co-authors, I use “we” in these chapters. The authorship of these studies are shared, all studies, however, are conducted by me. The co-authors were consulted and gave feedback on my work. The introduction and conclusion of this thesis are mine, and therefore, I use “I” in both. Chapter 2 concerns the discourse community of live bloggers: journalists covering breaking news, politics, and sports immediately. Chapter 3 concerns the content of live blogs of breaking news, politics and sports and the performing discourse of source selection and reported speech. Chapter 4 concerns live blog use during times of crisis (COVID-19). The fifth chapter concerns avid live blog users evaluating the credibility of the format.

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