PITFALLS OF WRITING FOR THE MEDIA: APPEALS TO EMOTION VERSUS EXAGGERATED SENSATIONALISM

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Abstract

The present article looks into assignments written by students in the Modern Applied Languages Department of the Bucharest University of Economic Studies on a given topic. Students were asked to write an article for a newspaper, relying on the notes taken by a journalist. By quantitatively and qualitatively analysing the tasks submitted, the study sheds light on the difference between stories that are balanced and well-written, skilfully combining factual reporting with moderate appeals to emotion, and stories that go one step too far, crossing the line into exaggeration and a use of language that may come across as misplaced and may even affect the overall credibility of the story. By raising awareness of the difference between emotion and exaggerated sensationalism, the present research aims to contribute to the formation not only of a more informed and discerning readership, but also of highly skilled creators of media content.

Keywords: media language; emotion; sensationalism; exaggeration; factual reporting; credibility.

1. Introductory remarks

The present research was inspired by a seminar I teach to second-year students in Modern Applied Languages in the Faculty of International Business and Economics. The seminar is entitled Terminology: Specialized language (The Media), and it has generally been received with a wave of enthusiasm from students.

To begin my study, it is important to point out that, in the age of AI and especially with the unprecedented rise of apps like Chat GPT, the students' perception of writing has shifted dramatically. Almost all assignments teachers give them are likely to be written using some kind of AI tool. In some cases, it is easy to identify the fact that the task was not crafted by a human brain (although proving it is a different matter). However, in other cases, it is almost impossible to tell the difference, due to the appearance of other AI aids that convert standard AI-produced text into more human-sounding material (such as the Undetectable AI, with the option *humanize*, which aims to help outcomes bypass all detectors).

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However, since at the moment I am writing my research, there are no official software programs in place to help one detect AI-produced text, I will start from the assumption that students have actually written the assignment on their own, in good faith, and from then on, identify the pitfalls some of them have encountered when asked to write an article that will grasp the readers' attention. The least I can say is that, even if they did not write the task entirely on their own, they supposedly read or adjusted the AI-produced text before submitting it and thus, even though all students have access to the same props, some assignments stand out due to the beautiful way they were crafted, whereas in other cases, some improvements are necessary.

While I plan to do further research regarding the impact of AI tools on writing in the academic environment, both by university professors and by students, for now, to end this introductory section on a more cheerful note, I will recount a joke about Chat GPT I sometimes tell my students, when it is more than clear that they have written their assignments using the above-mentioned tool. In such situations, I tell them that Chat GPT is very much like photoshop: in vain does one look like Miss Venezuela on Instagram, if in real life one is anything but beautiful. Similarly, in vain is one's writing seemingly impeccable, if one's speaking skills and general knowledge of the language will eventually disappoint. While used wisely and in moderation, Chat GPT can turn out to be a useful tool, no one can land and much less keep a good, well-paying job relying solely on AI props. The joke may be a stretch, given the fact that my students are proficient users of the English language and resort to AI not because they couldn't do the task on their own, but for reasons pertaining to convenience or even complacency; however, I tell it to them in the hope that this possibly exaggerated comparison might raise awareness of the fact that, at the end of the day, for anything long-lasting, we have to rely primarily on our actual skills and be able to make do, if the case may be, without any extraneous support.

To end this section, I would like to thank my outstanding second-year students: Teodora Drăghiceanu, Bogdan - Camil Romașcu and Daria-Laura Văduva, whose beautiful writing has inspired me to write the current, hopefully relevant study.

2. Research methodology

To support my findings, I used a qualitative and quantitative research methodology to explore and further explain to students the differences between resorting to *sensationalism* and *emotional language* in a reasonable, impactful way on the one hand, and overdoing it to the point where the reader becomes overwhelmed on the other. The study analysed 30 assignments that recounted the theft of a prize-winning cat; after everyone had submitted their articles and after I had read all of them carefully, I came to the conclusion that, broadly speaking, they could be divided into two categories: those that maintained a balanced approach interspersed with reasonable appeals to emotion, and those that excessively sensationalized the event,

a strategy that backfires to the point where the recipient cannot bear it any longer and abandons the reading. The division into these two groups essentially meant that some students had a better grasp of what the task entailed than others. Each assignment was meticulously examined to identify key linguistic features, use and overuse of emotional language, as well as balanced versus exaggerated resorting to rhetorical devices.

The analysis involved scanning the text for instances of hyperboles, metaphors, and emotional appeals, followed by a comparative assessment to highlight the differences between restrained and exaggerated writing. This approach allowed for a nuanced understanding of how varying degrees of sensationalism impact the effectiveness and credibility of media narratives. Thus, at all times, one must bear in mind that a balanced, restrained yet impactful way of writing must include emotional language and figures of speech to a reasonable degree, and will result in creating suspense and keeping the reader hooked; by contrast, a text replete with hyperboles, metaphors, stylistic devices and an avalanche of adjectives and adverbs will likely result in the opposite effect: the reader will feel overwhelmed, they will feel that too much is too much and might even abandon the reading altogether.

3. General context of the seminar: approach and concepts discussed

The seminar upon which the present research is based covers key concepts that are relevant when studying media language. In elaborating the guidelines for this seminar, I considered the ultimate goal of enhancing the students' media literacy overall, so as to improve their "knowledge and understanding of the mass communication process and the mass media industries" (Baran, 2014:XV), with a view to them becoming not only more skilled consumers of media content but, possibly, more skilled producers thereof.

Thus, our activities in the classroom cover, among other things, the explanation and discussion of concepts such as the difference between a *broadsheet* and a *tabloid*, where the former is a serious newspaper with an educated audience that writes in a formal register and tackles serious social, economic and political subjects, whereas the latter is a publication replete with images, written in informal or even colloquial language, targeting the general public and tackling mainly celebrity gossip and sensational news. Against this general background, students are also made aware of the recent changes that publications have suffered, in that, on the one hand, both kinds of publications have had to adjust to the challenges of going digital, which has impacted their layout and overall content and, on the other hand, with the advent of popular culture and under the growing demands of the age of infotainment - combining information and entertainment (Lilleker, 2007:99), the difference between the two has become somewhat blurred, almost all types of news have become tabloid-like at least in part and, in the incessant pursuit of readers, language across the board has shifted towards a less formal style. Similarly, we discuss

concepts like *hard news* and *soft news*, where hard news is tackled mainly in broadsheets and helps readers stay informed about important, significant societal issues, while soft news (also called the *human interest story*, or sensational stories that feed on drama and gossip), is characteristic of tabloids and puts forward light, enjoyable content. Such content aims not so much to inform or educate, but to entertain people (Baran and Davis, 2013: 21).

More subtle concepts like *covering* and *framing* are also discussed in the seminar. We look at *covering* as the objective reporting of an event, providing factual details and information, as against *framing,* which goes hand in hand but is not the same as *agenda setting* (Baran and Davis, 2013: 55), the deceitful act of distorting the information and prioritizing certain topics in the news so as to influence the readers' perception of a story without appearing to be biased in their approach. In other words, framing occurs when the media tells us "how to think about" certain issues (Baran and Davis, 2013: 266). We also discuss the ways in which framing can be accomplished (via a selection of elements reported, a partial context rendered, etc). Through this approach, students are taught to look at news with an open mind and learn to sift the information using their own brain, so as to reach an outlook on reality as close as possible to the actual truth.

The seminar also tackles the concept of *newsworthiness,* "information most worthy of transformation into news stories" (Campbell, Martin and Fabos, 2016: 480) or, in other words, content including those elements that make a story worth presenting to the public. While the definition of the concept incorporates concrete aspects like *timeliness*[2]*, proximity*[3]*, conflict*[4]*, prominence*[5]*, human interest*[6]*, consequence*[7]*, usefulness*[8]*, novelty*[9] and *deviance*[10] (Campbell, Martin and Fabos, 2016: 480), in reality, things are blurrier than that and the scope of newsworthiness has shifted in recent years due to the increased tabloidization of all types of content. While it may be difficult to identify the exact factors that make a piece of news more relevant than others (for instance, in order to decide which one to put on the front page), experienced journalists will acknowledge that the *emotional impact* reigns supreme; similarly, in order to gauge emotional impact, one needs to take into account a wide array of factors, ranging from what type of newspaper this is, who the audience is

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[2] Commonly known as the relevance of how recent or current a story is.

[3] Commonly known as how close an event is to an audience, either geographically or emotionally.

[4] A story incorporating disagreement or controversy, in the hope that it will arouse interest.

[5] Involving well-known people or events, as these are in the public eye already.

[6] Stories that focus on people's experience and spawn strong emotions.

[7] Consequence gauges the potential impact of a piece of news.

[8] Information that may be helpful to the audience.

[9] A story that is unique, atypical or unusual.

[10] Describes to what extent a story deviates from accepted norms and expectations, thus becoming newsworthy.

and what is likely to impact them at a particular moment in time. For example, one common strategy found in journalism consists in launching an emotionally charged topic in the public arena in order to divert the audience's attention from other more serious, possibly more relevant topics.

On a related note, we discuss the fact that *newsworthiness* generally goes hand in hand with *sensationalism*, a feature that makes content seem extraordinary (Jones, Jaworska, and Aslan, 2021:45) since they both aim to capture the interest of audiences and make them buy a newspaper or click on a headline. However, although they are often intertwined, they are not identical, in that the former aims, at least in theory, to attract readers based on the importance of a story, whereas the latter relies primarily on the use of shocking or emotionally charged content to engage the audience, often overemphasizing the dramatic facets of a story or, should there be none, even making some up. The two are also different from an ethical point of view, since *newsworthy content* complies with the journalistic standards of *accuracy* and *relevance*, whereas sensational one may compromise them for the sake if impact – thus, to give an extreme example, fake news – or what was formerly known as *yellow journalism*, "the lengths to which publishers will go to increase their circulations to the detriment of ethical journalism practices and reporting" (Turow, 2020:235) - will not qualify as newsworthy, but it will likely be sensational. Similarly, *clickbait headlines* (Jones, Jaworska, and Aslan, 2021:45), which are by definition totally or at least partly deceptive, will clearly be sensational, as that is part of their very essence, but cannot be labelled as newsworthy, since they are at the very least misleading, if not downright false. Last but not least, newsworthy content targets a more mature, intellectually responsible public who looks for information, albeit sometimes tabloidized, while sensational content merely seeks to provoke an immediate emotional reaction, sometimes at the cost of nuance, or even of the truth itself. It would also be safe to say that the unprecedented development of sensationalistic journalism has "seriously challenged the norms and values of most readers" (Baran and Davis, 2013:32), has lowered general standards of expectations and has, in time, led to a less educated readership that may be easier to manipulate, more prone to thinking in terms of black and white, less capable of identifying nuances, more inclined to believe fake news and less demanding, which may not necessarily be a good thing. This practice of feeding less intellectually challenging content to less alert audiences has been described as the *dumbing down* of media and political communication (Lilleker, 2007:69).

Popular culture or *low culture*, as opposed to *high culture*, "is aligned with the questionable tastes of the masses, who enjoy the commercial "junk" circulated by the mass media" – such as reality TV and celebrity gossip (Campbell, Martin and Fabos, 2016:17). By contrast, *high culture* is associated with art forms like ballet, arts and literature, and their combination is referred to as *the skyscraper model*, where high culture metaphorically stands for the top floors, whereas low culture represents the bottom floors and even the basement (Campbell, Martin and Fabos,

2016:17). Today, sadly, we can observe an ever more marked tendency towards popular culture, a tendency that is evident in communication in almost every field.

In line with these last two concepts discussed, students are also introduced to the ubiquity of emotionally charged language, namely those words and phrases designed to evoke strong emotional reactions in an audience. This kind of language aims to influence feelings and attitudes by arousing either negative emotions (like anger, outrage or fear) or positive ones (like happiness, hope or empathy). It may take the form of strong adjectives like *horrific, devastating, heartwrenching, amazing* etc, of strong nouns like *betrayal, hero, catastrophe, disaster* etc, of the use of vivid imagery (descriptive language that paints a powerful picture, such as *a blood-curdling scream*), hyperboles and exaggeration (syntagms like *unbearable pain*), or even the use of personal stories, as resorting to an anecdote revolving around one particularly sad situation (derogatively called a sob story) is known to arouse more emotion than an entire statistic. This happens, paradoxically, because readers tend to perceive one specific situation as involving actual human beings, whereas a statistic is seen as merely numbers. While it is clear that "media content is often designed to touch us at the emotional level" (Baran, 2014:24), weighing just the right amount of emotion that will attract readers without deceiving them or without harming the bigger goal of the story has turned out to be a challenging task for students, perhaps not surprisingly, since it may be difficult even for seasoned journalists. It is here, at this point in our discussion, that I have done my best to highlight the fact that, while appealing to the readers' emotions is a lucrative strategy, excessively resorting to this type of language may backfire, as we will see in the following section of the present research.

4. The task: requirements, approach, outcome

4.1 Task

It is important to point out that, when I asked the students to do the task described below, I had explained to them the use of emotional language in writing for the media, how important it is to grasp the audiences' attention, and the fact that readers tend to respond emotionally when they click on a headline and / or decide to read an article up to the end. However, I had not warned them of the dangers of exaggeration because, in all honesty, I did not expect some of them to excessively sensationalise their writing. In other words, when I asked them to make their own choices regarding the language used, I fully and completely trusted their instincts. We had repeatedly discussed the fact that "journalism functions not simply as a conveyor of facts, but as a compiler and generator of emotions as well" (Anderson, 2019: 238); still, the extent to which the two are blended so as factor in the overall impact of a media text was something that students had to assess on their own.

The students were shown the notes taken by a journalist about the theft of a prize show cat, and they were asked to write a short article for a newspaper on this topic. The notes were as follows:

- *Where? Purrfect Parlour, Cambridge's famous cat-grooming centre*
- *When? About 3 am*
- *How? Broke a window*
- *Victims? Mrs Hill, owner of the prize-winning show cat, Mumu, and Mr and Mrs Banks, the owners of Purrfect Parlour. "We were so shocked that anyone would want to steal innocent cats!"*
- *What taken? Mumu, Cambridge Cat of the Year 2008 and several other pedigree cats*
- *Police: "Pets are like family members. The owners are very distressed. We are doing all we can to rescue Mumu and the other cats and return them to their homes."* (Ceramella and Lee, 2017:17)

We can see, by looking at the above notes, that despite their conciseness, they include all the elements necessary for students to write an article that is informative as well as engaging. To begin with, the topic itself is rewarding, since a discussion of pets is bound to arouse emotion and make audiences relate and read with interest. Pet-related stories easily fall under the scope of a *human interest story*, getting readers hooked and emotionally involved. Moreover, the primary victim is called by name, which brings the cat even closer to the readers' hearts, as they begin to see him as a member of their own family. The stolen pet is also a prize-winning one, therefore stands out both by his beauty, and by his importance at community level. It is at this point that the crime becomes newsworthy, as the fact that a story puts forward relatable facts and characters may not, in itself, constitute material significant enough for a piece of content to reach the public eye. It is the combination between *common and relatable* on the one hand (pet story) and *outstanding* on the other (extraordinarily beautiful, prize-winning pet) that generally puts content centre stage.

If, in terms of content, the notes provide for an appealing story, it is also the concrete elements within that contribute towards a successful realisation thereof. Thus, we are given specific details about the incident, which include the location (also called by its name), the time and the method. Not only do students understand the context and sequence of events, but here, too, we can see the emotional detail: breaking a window makes for a moderately violent crime, a detail which, in itself, exacerbates the emotional appeal of the scoop and increases its poignant potential.

The structure of the story to be written is therefore very logical and clear, the main specifics are covered (where, when, how, who, what) and, last but not least, we are also provided with quotes. Quotes from relevant people, authorities in charge, experts or other people in the know boost the legitimacy of almost any piece of writing, giving credibility to what is said and sticking in readers' minds more easily

than reported speech. In this case, we get quotes from both one of the victims – the owner of the parlour, and from the police, an authority bound to give credibility to the story and make it authentic. Moreover, the fact that the police are now involved also emphasizes the fact that the crime is significant and should be taken seriously.

Combined with the backbone of the story, that pets are like family members and the distress of the owners impacts the entire community, the details given are enough to foster empathy, create a deeper connection to the content and enable students to write a balanced and compelling story.

4.2 Analysis of findings

Out of the 30 assignments submitted, 18 put forward a balanced approach, combining factual information and appeals to emotion, whereas 12 went overboard and put forward a story replete with hyperboles and exaggerated language, thus possibly conveying the opposite effect. It is particularly important in a situation like this to strike the right balance between *fact* and *emotion*, since any exaggeration may backfire and the readers may not only feel overwhelmed, but also start questioning why, after all, a minor incident is given so much importance by the press.

I will now present some nicely balanced introductions to the story, where the basic information is introduced.

Ex. 1. The renowned Purrfect Parlour in Cambridge fell victim to a midnight break-in. The feline haven, known for its pampering services and pedigree cat clients, was targeted by an unknown burglar who shattered a window to gain entry.
Ex. 2. A burglary took place yesterday, around 3 AM in Cambridge. The owners and clients of Purrfect Parlour, Cambridge's famous cat-grooming centre, were shocked after thieves broke a window and stole several pedigree cats, including Mumu, Cambridge Cat of the Year 2008.
Ex. 3. The owners of a cat-grooming centre in Cambridge were left speechless when several pedigree cats were stolen from their establishment the night prior through a broken window. Among those cats was the winner of the 2008 edition of Cambridge's Cat of the Year award, Mumu.

All the extracts above are well-balanced, combining factual details with emotive language used in moderation. In extract (1) we can see language that is descriptive without being overly sensationalized. Thus, we get information about the location and the nature of the incident, context about the establishment and reasonably emotional nouns (haven, break-in). The tone is professional, well-suitable for reporting. Extract (2) begins with a straightforward statement of fact, providing basic details about the incident, we see clarity and relevance so the readers' attention stays on the event, rather than on shocking language. Extract (3) combines emotive language (*were left speechless*) with specific details about the stolen cats,

particularly the award-winning Mumu. While accurately conveying the emotional impact of the theft, the language stays clear and concise. Thus, all three extracts combine appeals to emotion used in moderation and factual reporting, thus ensuring that the content is as engaging as it is respectful of the seriousness of the event, which is not likely to be minimized.

Let us now look at three extracts where the introduction of the story is significantly exaggerated.

Ex. 4. The target? None other than the crown jewel of the feline community, Mumu, a prize-winning show cat, taken from the loving arms of Mrs. Hill, devoted owner, and the watchful care of the owners and the guardians of this sanctuary for the lovely cats.
Ex. 5. The Purrfect Parlour is a well-known haven for feline nobility. The holy halls were broken into in the middle of the night by a thievery act so blatant that it shocked Cambridge's well-mannered streets. Criminals disturbed the calm in the dead of night by shattering a window to gain unlawful entrance to this sanctuary of feline luxury.
Ex. 6. In a heart-wrenching turn of events, the tranquil haven of Cambridge's renowned cat-grooming centre, Purrfect Parlour, was shattered by the spine-chilling act of a daring cat burglary in the wee hours of the morning, around 3 am.

Extract (4) presents overly dramatic language and hyperbolic description, as phrases like *crown jewel of the feline community*, *taken from the loving arms*, and *sanctuary for the lovely cats* evoke strong emotions and elevate the importance of the incident beyond what might be considered proportional for a news report. In extract (5), we come across overly grandiose and sensational language, as terms like *haven for feline nobility*, *holy halls*, and *sanctuary of feline luxury* create a highly exaggerated image of Purrfect Parlour. The use of phrases such as *thievery act so blatant* and *shocked Cambridge's well-mannered streets* adds a dramatic flair that might overstate the impact of the burglary on the community, the content thus taking a serious detour from the commonsensical rules of factual reporting. Last but not least, extract (6) is exaggerated due to its overly emotive and melodramatic language. Phrases like *heart-wrenching turn of events*, *tranquil haven*, and *spine-chilling act* evoke emotions too strong and a sense of melodrama that may not be warranted in a straightforward news report; the content thus pursues the dramatic effect more than factual reporting. Thus, all these extracts can be said to be exaggerated because they use hyperbolic language, melodrama, and excessive sensationalism to describe the burglary at Purrfect Parlour. Not only do they overemphasize the importance of the incident but, in so doing, they cut corners on the credibility and objectivity of the content, potentially overshadowing the actual events with overly dramatic language.

Let us now look at three well-balanced extracts from the main body of the article, extracts putting forward the gist of the story.

Ex. 7. Mr. and Mrs. Banks, the owners of Purrfect Parlour, stated: "We were so shocked that anyone would want to steal innocent cats! It isn't very common to steal cats of all things, so we are as angry as we are confused.". The attack that took place at 3 AM the night before left both the couple and the owner of the prize cat, Mrs. Hill, baffled as to why anyone would go to such lengths to rob a centre for grooming pedigree cats.

Ex. 8. Among the victims there were Mrs. Hill, the owner of the prized show cat Mumu, as well as Mr and Mrs Banks, owners of the centre. This event left them devastated: "We were so shocked that anyone would want to steal innocent cats".

Responding swiftly to the distress call, the local law enforcement officials have launched an investigation. The police empathize deeply with the affected families. "Pets are like family members. The owners are very distressed. We are doing all we can to rescue Mumu and the other cats and return them to their homes," they reassure.

Ex. 9. The crime unfolded at about 3 a.m., shattering the peace of the otherwise serene neighbourhood. The Purrfect Parlour had been a safe space for cat lovers and their companions. But on this fateful night, the burglar struck.

The main target was none other than Mumu, Cambridge Cat of the Year 2008. This majestic feline, with its luxurious coat and regal demeanour, had graced magazine covers and enchanted cat enthusiasts worldwide. Alongside Mumu, several other pedigree cats vanished into the night, leaving their owners heartbroken. "Who would dare to steal innocent cats?" exclaimed Mrs. Banks in outrage.

All the three extracts above skilfully combine emotive language and factual details, putting forward content that is enjoyable, engaging and informative without overbearing the reader. They all include quotes, which makes the story more impactful, more credible and easier to process and remember, and their overall tone is reasonable and well-balanced. Thus, in extract (7), we have heartfelt words like *shocked* and *angry*, which add an emotional touch without being overly dramatic, while the factual details include the time of the crime, the victims involved and the specific nature of the theft. Similarly, extract (8) combines strong adjectives like *distressed* and *devastated* with concrete information including the account of the victims, the police response and the ongoing investigation, whereas extract (9), while it does go one tiny step further than the others, still has not crossed the line into overt exaggeration. Thus, the descriptions are more powerful (*shatter the place, this fateful night, majestic feline, enchanted cat enthusiasts worldwide*), yet they manage to add richness to the narrative without crossing into hyperbole. The author also tones down her descriptions by including specifics like time, location and the targeted cats (Mumu as well as others), so, overall, by playing on alternations between emotional outbursts and factual reporting, the content maintains its credibility while at the same time keeping the reader in suspense.

Conversely, let us now analyse three exaggerated extracts from the main body of the text.

Ex. 10. Mrs. Hill, her voice trembling with disbelief and fury, had the power to say: "We were so shocked that anyone would want to steal innocent cats!" Little souls taken away from their loving homes, their rightful place by the heart. But Mumu was not the only victim of this unbelievably shocking act. Alongside Mumu, several other pedigree cats, each a treasure in their own right, were simply taken away into the night, leaving behind heartbroken but full of hope owners.

"Pets are like family members," declared a spokesperson for the police. "The owners are very distressed. We are doing all we can to rescue Mumu and the other cats and return them to their homes." A beacon of hope amidst the darkness, their commitment to justice burns brightly, a guiding light in this hour of need.

Ex. 11. Perpetrators of this heinous crime spared no mercy, shattering a window to gain unlawful entry, leaving behind shattered dreams and distraught owners in their wake. Among the victims of this despicable act is Mrs. Hill, the devastated owner of the incomparable Mumu, crowned Cambridge Cat of the Year in the hallowed halls of 2008.

"I was utterly shattered," lamented Mrs. Hill, her voice trembling with raw emotion. "Mumu was not just a cat; he was family—a precious soul stolen from us."

But the tragedy didn't stop there. Alongside the illustrious Mumu, several other prized pedigree cats were callously snatched from their sanctuary, leaving a trail of anguish and despair in their absence.

Ex. 12. The lovely Mrs. Hill, who took care of the well-known Mumu, who won the 2008 Cambridge Cat of the Year award, is among the victims of this audacious murder. Mumu's majestic presence is sorely missed in Purrfect Parlour, causing a loss that affects the community at large as well as Mrs. Hill's emotions. But Mrs. Hill is not the only person who experiences sadness. Mr. and Mrs. Banks, the owners of the well-known parlour, are the pillars of strength in the midst of the storm of pain; the vicious actions of unknown attackers have destroyed their shelter. "Our cherished felines, our beloved companions, torn from us in an act of unspeakable cruelty," Mrs. Banks sobbed, her voice trembling. In response to this breach of decorum, local law enforcement has vowed to pursue justice with a passion, given the strong attachment that exists between humans and their pets.

Unlike extracts (7), (8) and (9), extracts (10), (11) and (12) are all deeply exaggerated. Their tone is excessively sensational, overwhelming the reader and negatively affecting the credibility of the article. In all these three cases, the emotional descriptors used and the excess of metaphor and hyperbole help create a narrative that feels like a dramatic, unrealistic story rather than an objective piece of news. Thus, in extract (10), phrases like *her voice trembling with disbelief and fury*, *a beacon of hope amidst the darkness* and the like add unnecessary embellishment that overshadow the actual facts. They are present, but can hardly be processed due to the way in which they are conveyed, suffocated by exaggerated sensationalism. Similarly, in extract (11), terms like *heinous crime*, *shattered dreams* and *distraught owners* and hyperboles like *crowned in the hallowed halls of 2008* create a sense of exaggerated drama, completely unsuitable for news reporting. Not only does this

diminish the reader's ability to take the story seriously, but from a certain point onwards, they may legitimately feel that they are being mocked, since a newspaper article should not be written in this manner.

We get the same impression from extract (12), replete with oddly formal phrases like *pillars of strength in the midst of storm and pain*, or *unspeakably cruel*. Here, too, the facts are present, but they might as well be missing, since they are heavily overshadowed by flowery, excessively dramatic language.

What these last three fragments have in common is that their tone is overly sentimental and dramatic, making it difficult to scoop out the actual facts. Conveying emotion is not the same as crafting ridiculously heavy melodrama, that would be out of place even for stories more serious than this. Thus, the key difference between these last three fragments and extracts (7), (8) and (9), which were balanced and well-written, resides in the degree of emotive language and hyperbole used. While exaggerated writing uses dramatic phrases and overly sentimental descriptions overshadowing the factual details, good media writing translates into a combination of reasonably conveyed, believable emotion and concise factual reporting, thus maintaining a tone that is engaging without skimping on credibility, and a style that is appropriate for a newspaper article.

To conclude the current section of our study, let us now analyse how both groups ended their article.

Ex. 13. Amid the shock and frustration of those affected, police have gotten involved and have begun an active search for the missing cats. "Pets are like family members. The owners are very distressed. We have been sifting through security camera footage from around the area and have fingerprinted the entire centre.". Police have also said: "We are doing all we can to rescue Mumu and the other cats and return them to their homes.".
Ex. 14. As the investigation unfolds, the police are doing all they can to throw the burglars behind bars. In order to avoid a similar event from happening again, the community of Cambridge is advised to be vigilant and report any suspicious activity.
Ex. 15. The local authorities swiftly swung into action and expressed their concern: "Pets are like family members. The owners are very distressed.". The police vowed to leave no stone unturned in their quest to rescue Mumu and reunite the other cats with their devastated families. The investigation is ongoing, and the community remains on edge.

Extracts (13), (14) and (15) are all written in a credible yet impactful way, as they combine factual details with reasonably crafted emotional appeals. While they do include empathetic quotes, these are not overly dramatic, nor do they overshadow the factual details given, thus the readers will find themselves hooked while accurately processing how the events unfolded.

Thus, extract (13) provides clear information about police involvement and about the specific measures that were taken (sifting through security camera footage, fingerprinting the centre), while the emotional appeals (such as the quote) help humanise the situation without crossing the line into excessive melodrama. The quote, as I have repeatedly pointed out throughout the research, enhances credibility and gives additional weight to the story. It is particularly important in a story such as this, involving animals, a story which may be perceived by some as artificially inflated, to emphasise the authorities' involvement, as this bestows legitimacy upon the concerns of the animal-loving communities and reinforces the press' views and the attention they give to the subject.

Similarly to extract (13), extract (14) informs readers about the ongoing investigation and about the police's determination to catch the burglars. Moreover, the extract goes one step forward with an awareness-raising strategy: by advising the community to be vigilant and report suspicious activity, the appeal fosters a sense of collective responsibility and prevention. Thus, one particular incident is skilfully attributed community value, making it more likely that readers will see the benefits of reporting this otherwise minor crime to the press. The language is direct and avoids exaggeration, maintaining a professional tone suitable for news reporting; therefore, in this case, the appeal to emotion atypically stems not from the use of language but from the content, from the very idea of asking for everyone's involvement.

Equally, facts are conveyed in extract (15): the swift action taken by the authorities, which reassures readers about the seriousness of the response, the ongoing investigation, which helps maintain interest in the story, and legitimizing quotes are present. Emotional depth is conveyed by the use of phrases like *leave no stone unturned* and *devastated families*, yet the line into hyperbole is fortunately not crossed. The final note about the community remaining on edge acknowledges the broader impact of the incident, making the article's reach more comprehensive.

In conclusion, all these three extracts come from articles that are both informative and engaging; the language is clear and to the point, emotional appeals remain reasonable and boost the overall impact, while quotes act as credibility enhancers. Moreover, we can see how the students instinctively touched upon some fundamental features of *newsworthiness*: aside from the *human interest, proximity* and *deviance* elements, which were inherently present in the topic, through their skilful writing, they also tapped into *usefulness* and *consequence* (by making the story about the whole community rather than an isolated incident), thus boosting both the impact of the content and the likelihood of keeping the audiences interested in follow-up stories.

By contrast, the following three extracts take emotion one step too far, excessively dramatize and cross an unwanted border into melodrama, thus not only misusing language, but also impacting the overall credibility and seriousness of the content.

Ex. 16. As the sun rises over Cambridge, a community united in grief and determination stands firm, refusing to give up in any way to fear. For Mumu and for the other stolen felines that once roamed freely within the halls of Purrfect Parlour, justice must happen. This is a story of fortitude, of unwavering love and devotion, a story that will not end until every soul returns back to their loving homes safely.

Ex. 17. As the search intensifies and the community rallies behind the distraught owners, one thing remains abundantly clear: the heartless perpetrators of this dastardly deed will not escape the long arm of justice. The stolen souls of Mumu and his fellow felines will not rest until they are safely reunited with their loving families, and the dark shadows of this nightmarish ordeal are banished from Cambridge's cherished Purrfect Parlour.

Ex. 18. Even in the face of such heartache, there lingers a glimmer of hope—a fervent belief that Mumu and his companions will find their way back home, where they belong, nestled in the warm embrace of their loved ones. As the community grapples with the anguish of their disappearance, their collective resolve only grows stronger, fuelled by love and the unwavering determination to see justice served.

The three extracts above are too much, for reasons pertaining to their overuse of dramatic imagery, emotional language and hyperbolic statements. While it is obvious that they aim to evoke strong emotional responses in audiences, make them relate and gain their support by creating a compelling narrative, in reality the language used will likely be perceived as too melodramatic and too sensationalised to be taken seriously. Thus, in extract (16), we can see a careless resort to dramatic imagery (in phrases like *as the sun rises over Cambridge* or *a community united in grief and determination),* that results in an overly dramatic picture, as well as an excessive use of emotional language (*fortitude, unwavering love and devotion, every soul returns back to their loving homes safely*) and hyperbolic statements (*justice must happen, a story that will not end*); all of these combined and used without moderation add an overinflated sense of drama that will come across as disproportionate to the actual event. Similarly, extract (17) ends the content by using inflammatory language (the thieves are described as *heartless perpetrators of this dastardly deed,* the incident is referred to as a *nightmarish ordeal* etc), a melodramatic tone (conveyed by phrases like *the stolen souls of Mumu and his fellow felines will not rest* and *the dark shadows of this nightmarish ordeal*) and overstatement (the idea that the incident casts *dark shadows* over Purrfect Parlour and the certainty that justice will be served in such absolute terms). All of these together contribute to the exaggeration to such an extent that, after reading the story, the reader will likely feel overwhelmed and deeply disinclined to take the content seriously. Finally, extract (18) also overdoes the use of emotive language (terms like *heartache*, *glimmer of hope*, *fervent belief*, and *warm embrace*) and of melodramatic phrasing (*grapples with the anguish of their disappearance*). Moreover, perhaps atypically, this final extract puts forward an overly positive spin on things, namely the idea that the community's resolve is *fuelled by love and the unwavering determination*. Unlike most exaggerated articles, which play on our negative

emotions, here, resorting to positive emotions appears to be just as misplaced, since such a way of looking at things might seem too idealistic, not to mention too emotionally charged for a credible news report.

We can see, therefore, that an overly charged, unrealistic, oddly pompous style may detract from the factual reporting and, by making an event seem more dramatic than it may actually be, it may backfire by triggering lassitude in the reader and making them lose interest altogether.

5. Conclusions

To conclude the present research, I will attempt to shed light on the conclusions that I drew, conclusions that include lessons both for myself and for my future students regarding how the *Media Language* seminar will be tackled in the following years.

To begin with, it is important to point out that, when giving students this task, after having discussed the way in which media content creators increasingly use emotional language to captivate audiences and generate interest, I did not anticipate the possibility that some of them might tend to excessively sensationalise their articles. However, in hindsight, I believe this unexpected result has enabled them to subsequently become aware of the fine line between emotion and immoderation, thus naturally assimilating the distinction between balanced reporting and exaggerated sensationalism, through their own experience. Good writing, after all, is the result of years of training and repeated trial and error. Therefore, the outcome highlights how important it is to allow students to grasp potential pitfalls on their own, which eventually turns them into more insightful consumers of media stories and, if the case may be, of better producers thereof.

It is very important for them to understand the main factors underlying the difference between a well-written article and an exaggerated one, where the former is characterised by clarity and precision, by the factual information given, intertwined with moderate emotional appeals that use empathetic language without crossing into ridiculously pompous melodrama. The tone of a well-written story must remain professional throughout, there should be quotes from credible sources, which make the article more credible, and overstatement should be avoided. By contrast, an exaggerated article often uses hyperbolic and overly dramatic language, it overemphasises sensationalism and emotion, thus detracting from objectivity and factual accuracy and is therefore significantly less credible than a well-written story. Overall, a reader may feel overwhelmed, and the inappropriate use of language may make real, potentially worrisome facts appear ridiculous, not to mention not credible. In other words, a well-written article is characterised by *moderation*, whereas an exaggerated one is characterised by *excess*.

When writing a story for the media, students should be aware of the difference between *fact* and *fiction* and they should avoid unnecessarily embellishing or overstating the significance of events. The language used should convey the necessary emotional impact without resorting to hyperbole – it is important to understand the power of words and their influence on readers, as well as the fact that language improperly used may backfire.

Resorting to and quoting from credible, well-respected sources is known to enhance the overall credibility of a story; also, contrary to popular belief, *sensationalism* and *engagement* are not the same. Readers can and should be engaged through the use of clear language and compelling storytelling, rather than through disproportionately sensationalised narratives and, to keep up the standards of journalism, one should strive to inform rather than to shock. We should look at striking the right balance between *information* and *emotion* as a way of respecting the content we are trying to put forward – any kind of excess will undoubtedly harm the credibility of the story and, as a consequence, its impact on the audience. The ultimate purpose of a story goes beyond entertaining its audience, it should also aim to convey a set of values that shape the mindset of the readers, making a difference at societal level. Storytellers, therefore, bear a responsibility before their readers and contribute towards the long-term evolution of cultures and societies worldwide.

Especially in this day and age, when newspapers have converged with the internet (Baran, 2014: 94), when the interest of audiences worldwide is gradually shifting from *hard news* to *soft news*, a process which has led to an accelerated tabloidization of information across the board, we need to ask ourselves what we expect from the content we access. Similarly, we need to ask ourselves if we fully understand the role that information plays in our lives and if this increasingly blurry landscape, where genres become ever more hybrid and readers ever more bemused, will in the long run make us or break us as a culture. By giving these questions serious consideration, by understanding and implementing the principles at stake, students can improve their ability to craft balanced, credible and impactful content, which not only helps enhance the quality of journalism, but also fosters a more informed, more aware and more discerning readership.

6. Future research prospects

Starting from the findings of the present paper, my plans for future research include deepening the analysis in several key directions. To begin with, since in this study the articles were presented in bulk, in groups of three "well written" versus three "not so well written" ones (a distinction in itself rather vague), I intend to draw clearer lines in future studies, grading the well-written articles into more or less sensational. Similarly, content which was found to be exaggerated can also be analysed in more detail, with an emphasis on mild, moderate and serious transgressions of what can be considered reasonable and well-balanced writing.

Furthermore, since I plan on giving similar tasks to future students, based on this year's experience, I intend to warn them in advance of the dangers of excessive sensationalism, of the fact that it may backfire and result in content that is too emotionally charged, in order to gauge the difficulty they may have internalizing this pitfall, as well as the adequacy of their response.

On a related note, I also intend to carry out future research in an attempt to gain insights into how the advent of AI has impacted academic activities, from assignments given to students to the response of professors as well, since technology is here to stay and, as society strives to keep up, both major and minor shifts have already become visible in almost all domains of activity.

Last but not least, since two minds are by definition better than one, I plan on tackling future research alongside an academic peer. A content analysis involving two evaluators would yield more objective results and, even if disagreement may occasionally occur, I strongly believe that differing perspectives can lead to surprising, valuable insights and hence, to a deeper understanding of the issue at hand.

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