

**Peter A. Cramer: Controversy as News Discourse**  
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Peter Cramer's<sup>1</sup> book on controversy *as* news discourse sets to explain how journalism shapes public controversy in the modern industrial society and how it influences the experience of it by the mass mediated public.

## 1 Background, Goals and Methods

The book is presented as a contribution to the *discourse arts*, a term by which Cramer refers to “the panoply of modern fields that in various ways trades on the traditions of rhetoric and dialectic” (p. 8, fn. 1). Importantly, this implicitly means that argumentation theory is but one component of the field that Cramer envisages. Cramer recognizes that the discourse arts have approached controversy from a resolution-oriented angle, either in general terms or in a more context specific fashion, proposing “particular therapeutic intervention designed for particular cases” (p. 1). These resolution-oriented approaches presuppose that a definition of the event of controversy, of its spatial and temporal collocation, of its participants and their roles is achieved. His monograph is designed to contribute to this preliminary problem of event definition and contextualization.

*Controversy* is seen as a “metadiscursive label” (p. 3), used not only by scholars but also by other writing professionals (such as journalists) to denote and point at some discursive contexts. We would say, using a phrase that is not among Cramer's

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technical terms, that controversy is a label for *framing* certain discursive events (cf. Rocci 2009).

The method adopted is *discourse analysis*. In fact, a particular kind of discourse analysis that Cramer characterizes as “empirical, ethnographic and grounded” (p. 17). These terms have to be understood as referring respectively to the extensive use of authentic corpus data, to the adoption of the participants’ perspective and to the gradual emergence of generalizations from “rich and repeated experience with the particulars of data” (p. 17). In this respect, he is quite explicit in distancing his work from traditional approaches to the discourse arts that are driven by normative models and from flavors of discourse analysis, such as Critical Discourse Analysis, that rely on an overarching critical theory. By adopting this perspective, Cramer seeks to resolve a tension that he sees between the prescriptive and normative aims of the discourse arts on the one side, and their descriptive and critical practices on the other. More precisely he sees the risk that description and critique be limited to those discourses that appear closer to models inherited from an authoritative tradition, which harkens back to the ancient rhetorical pedagogy of the *controversiae* as well as to the genre of the philosophical dialogue. Cramer contends that prescriptively oriented works in the discourse arts treat controversy as a given, leaving it in the background, in order to concentrate on how to argue in an effective, sound and/or ethical fashion. For different reasons, studies of particular controversies in philosophy and science also tend—in Cramer’s view—to leave the definition of controversy in the background, in order to concentrate on the subject matter. Despite this aim of relieving the tension between normative and descriptive concerns, Cramer says that the conclusions of his study remain descriptive and interpretive in nature, and do not directly venture into a critique of journalistic practices (p. 16).

Cramer’s discourse analysis relies on data from the Reuters Corpus (RCV1), made up by news articles published between the 20th of August 1996 and the 19th of August 1997. The analysis concentrates on patterns found at the lexis and grammar level, and at the text and genre level, with a special focus on set phrases (“formulas” p. 4) used to report controversy and on how they influence the reader’s view of controversies.

## 2 Structure and Contents

The book consists of an introduction that outlines the purpose of the work and the theoretical and methodological choices summarized above, and of five other chapters that constitute the body of the scientific contribution. There is no chapter specifically devoted to the conclusions of the research.

Chapter 2 starts from acknowledging that controversy has usually been treated as a simple prerequisite for a “critical discussion” (p. 25), and therefore the focus has laid on how to solve it and not on how it came into being. In order to consider it as an object of study, he presents three different attitudes to controversy research, which differ according to the role they assign to texts in shaping a controversy. The *supportive* attitude considers texts as a truthful account of a controversy. The

*distortive* attitude focuses on the critique of texts that are considered obstacles to understanding the controversy. Finally, the *constitutive* attitude analyzes the texts about controversy as data that shape the controversy itself and contribute to our experience of it. Cramer analyzes his corpus with a constitutive attitude (p. 4). On the other hand, the journalists whose work he analyses adopt a supportive attitude towards their source texts.

The third chapter connects the genre of the news article to that of the classical philosophical dialogue. Cramer starts by examining the role of dialogue in the discourse arts “as a framework for designing, shaping, and locating controversy” (p. 44), and highlights how the perspective of formal deductive logic (which sees argument as a particular arrangement of propositions) should be integrated with the dialogue setting. Cramer recognizes that this integration is among the aims of classical dialectics and rhetoric, and of modern theories of argumentation such as Pragma-Dialectics. He then describes the prototypical *dialogue setting*, whose participants are physically co-present and directly interact with each other, being responsible for their standpoints. This prototypical *dialogue setting* is complicated by the intervention of additional participants, such as mediators, moderators or, in the case in point, journalists. All these participants share the aim of “designing discourse under institutional constraints so that it reaches institutional goals” (p. 50). Cramer, however, sees a fundamental difference between journalists and additional participants of the kind of mediators: while mediators are institutionally resolution-oriented, journalists’ institutional goal is different. They do not want to solve public controversies, but “to help create them by naming them” (p. 50) and enacting them in their texts.<sup>2</sup> After this discussion of the role of dialogue in the discourse arts, he moves to examining the staging of the dialogue in written texts. Staged dialogue combines two “pre-genres” (p. 57) at the basis of human communication: conversation and narrative. Despite its conventionality, written dialogue allows to maintain vividness by narrating an interaction event as unfolding conversation. As far as the philosophical dialogue is concerned, it is not a productive literary form anymore, but Cramer claims that it still functions as a prototype for human interaction in its official and written form. According to Cramer, this genre has a continuator in the *philosophic essay* as it is found in modern academic pedagogy. Philosophic essays have a kind of dialogical structure as well, because students are asked to report various standpoints interacting with each other. Moving to the news article, Cramer argues that this genre has not been studied a lot in the “discourse arts” (p. 60) and that it rarely contains argumentation. This is due to the fact that journalists are supposed to report events and others’ opinions in a neutral way. The article represents a peculiar kind of narrative, because it does not follow the chronological order of events, and is related to the dialogue, because it “depicts a drama [...] through constructed dialogue” (p. 61). The next subchapter is dedicated to a short story of the news article in the US, a genre whose characteristics and relevance have changed a lot during its history. An important step in this evolution is the introduction of the *objectivity norm*, which, according to Cramer, passes from scientific writing into journalism in the nineteenth

<sup>2</sup> On journalists as participants see also p. 29.

century. Journalism shares with scientific writing also the informational register and a tendency to use abstract formulations. As these features are at stake also for genres associated with expressing own points of view (like editorials), the journalist never presents himself as a conversational interlocutor. After a synthetic overview of the news values guiding news production, Cramer brings in the notion of “balance” (p. 71), which can be signaled through a peculiar use of language. One of these features is indirect constructed dialogue, which allows representing opponent standpoints as equal. According to Cramer, this is the way in which journalism reuses the classical dialogue structure in order to report controversy.

The fourth chapter is dedicated to the corpus analysis, with a particular focus on two case studies, and to the formulas used to portray controversy. The term *controversy* appoints both an event category (related to a “discursive conflict between speakers” p. 76) and a “feature of language in use” (p. 75). Event categories (abstract nouns that synthesize and categorize complex actions) not only respond to the need for classification of the news article, but also contribute to textual cohesion. Moreover, the fact that people talk about events using categories created by news media, constitutes a sort of “speech chain” (p. 78) transcending the text’s borders. Controversy is set in the news as an event category through the use of formulas, the most important of them being those depicting it either as a *natural phenomenon*, an *historical event* or a *pragmatic event*. In the first case controversy is seen as an “autopoietic force” developing beyond human agency, in the second as a discrete discursive phenomenon occurring in time, while in the fourth it is depicted by staging an unfolding dialogue.

In the fifth chapter, the author focuses on the fact that journalists transform collected information (and preexisting texts) into a new text item, according to precise professional norms. This accurately elaborated product is supposed to be taken as a faithful account of the event. The journalist presents himself as a narrator in the text, which allows him to emphasize his objectivity and to clearly attribute the burden of proof of the reported statements to their actual utterer, also at the expenses of vividness. Cramer moves then to the features which contribute to topicalizing controversy in news articles, for example the use of nominal phrases (NP) containing the word *controversy* in the headlines and leads. This allows to categorize complex news events as controversies. The author argues that the prototypical situation for controversy in news articles is inside decision-making dialogues, which allows to stage a critical discussion between participants. These participants are the explicit sources of the information, and their utterances are reproduced using reported speech. Attributing a statement to a source fulfills the objectivity requirement, guarantees for the origin of the information and enables the writer to distance himself from the reported contents. The sources have thus to be as reliable as possible, but also relevant and accessible: that’s why it is elite people who often are chosen to speak about a happening. Therefore, the participants’ selection results from a series of practical choices more than from the wish to deliver a comprehensive account of the situation. Journalists introduce speakers in their narrative also by constructing *profiles*, “pattern[s] of reported speech attributed to a specific speaker or a collectivity” (p. 155). The author describes then some

modes of citation (eyewitness, interlocutor, address and irrealis citations), followed by examples of profiles inside reported dialogues found in the corpus data.

The sixth and final chapter deals with the issue of the location of the controversy. According to Cramer, the location of the controversy together with the identification of its participants has been largely overlooked by accounts exclusively preoccupied with the resolution and the evaluation of the arguments put forth. This is due, in part, to the enduring influence of the face-to-face speech situation as the prototypical rhetorical situation. Cramer argues that, along with the narrated event (which the journalists contribute to delimit and to shape with their texts) also the reading situation represents a location of controversy: the readers themselves are participants in the public controversy, as they learn about it through the newspapers and perhaps discuss it further—which means they interact with the text. Journalism functions in a society where face-to-face persuasion has lost its centrality and where the reconstruction of a modern *agorà* is problematic. With their narratives and their constructed dialogue, journalists help delimiting a “situation of controversy” that—unlike that of classical rhetoric and philosophical dialogue—“is complex; it is distributed across temporal, geographical, and pragmatic locations” (p. 182). At the same time, “news coverage helps to constitute public controversy when readers make the presupposition that its narrated events refer to some social, public, and discursive reality beyond the reading situation” (p. 190). A reading situation that is, as Cramer says in the last sentence of the book, “the situation in which many have their only experience of many public controversies” (p. 190).

### 3 Insights from the Discourse Analysis of News Texts

The core of Cramer’s scientific contribution lies in the painstaking discourse analytical work on the Reuters corpus in Chaps. 4 and 5. With respect to these analyses, the very broad historical landscape painted in Chap. 3 takes inevitably a background role and the remarks in Chap. 6 seem to be aimed to provide the book with a sense of closure, in lieu of an explicit conclusion. To be more explicit, we believe that the descriptive results presented in Chaps. 4 and 5 represent an indisputable achievement of this book, which makes it worth reading by anyone interested in investigating empirically argumentation in the news media. At the same time, the nature of these results is the clearest indication of the intended (and perhaps also of the unintended) limitations of this work. We summarize in the present section some of the achievements of Cramer’s discourse analysis, while the limitations will be briefly discussed in the final section of the review.

Cramer’s work demonstrates how corpus-based techniques can be fruitfully applied to the empirical investigation of the kind of problems that concern the argumentation discipline. The corpus techniques used in discourse analysis allow an empirical grounding of argumentation research that is quite unlike what can be achieved with the quantitative methods of the social sciences. The research design is simple. It is based on the assumption that the word *controversy* offers a convenient and relevant lexical entry point to study the way in which journalists shape ‘controversies’ in their texts (more later on the *controversy* vs. ‘controversy’ issue).

The assumption of relevance derives from the hypothesis that the word is used not only as an event category to organize, at a high level, the narrated world, but also “meta-pragmatically” to index a pragmatic event of which journalists and readers are themselves part. A lexical entry point is convenient, as word forms are easily searchable in large corpora. From the occurrences of *controversy* the research moves to the examination of patterns of co-occurrence, from which different recurrent “formulas” are singled out and characterized for their distinctive role in the discursive functioning of the texts and in the intertextual functioning of the journalistic coverage. It should be noted, at this point, that this cannot be achieved just by looking very hard at corpus data, but requires a modicum of underlying theory, which, in Chap. 4, is offered by the functional linguistic notions of an *individuation* hierarchy and of *transitivity* parameters adopted by Cramer. For instance, Cramer finds a series of formulas that journalists use to depict controversy as a quasi-natural phenomenon: something *sparks* or *stirs controversy*, *controversy looms*, then *erupts*, then *rages* for some time. In these patterns *controversy* is scarcely individuated, unbounded, uncountable. It hardly interacts with other participants (low transitivity) and, in particular, does not feature human participants. It remains in the background: something happens *amid controversy* or is *clouded by controversy*. Interestingly, when a certain frame such as *\_\_rage* or *amid\_\_* has been proven relevant for controversy, one can start looking for its occurrence with other words, such as *war*, *debate*, *outrage ... rages*, or respectively *amid ... worries*, *speculation*, *concern* (cf. Table 4.8 on p. 89). Other formulas, in contrast, are meant to identify and individualize controversies as bounded, historically situated events. The *named controversy* formula (e.g. *the Whitewater financial controversy*) aims to direct readers towards something that is or is supposed to be known from previous coverage, while the *emergent controversy* formula refers, so to say, to history still in the making (e.g. *the controversy over\_\_*). Finally, we find *the controversy* and similar phrases as a resumptive, anaphoric NP encapsulating a whole antecedent discourse segment including previously narrated dialogue between participants as a single *pragmatic event*, which is labeled as a controversy. At this point the study can move from single formulas to patterns of formulas within a text or intertextually within the developing coverage of an issue (cf. the case studies at the end of Chap. 4). The study of the controversy as a pragmatic event is further expanded in Chap. 5, which is devoted to the study of journalistic constructed dialogue patterns in a few exemplary texts extracted from the corpus. Here the main analytical tool is represented by *profiles*, which Cramer adapts from the computational linguistic work of Sabine Bergler (2006). These represent cohesive chains of reported utterances attributed to the same participant, or to the same group of participants, or camp, or position. Interestingly, through anaphoric links journalistic texts put together the reported speech of different individuals associated in the same camp (e.g. a political party). Through the analysis of profiles in texts, Cramer singles out several different regimes of reported speech in the news, which range from the simple eyewitness report to the irrealis quotation, which tells us what the participants did *not* say—but were expected to say—so that journalists can even “report” controversies that did *not* in fact happen (but could have).

Especially in Chap. 5, Cramer matches the discourse-linguistic analysis with remarks on journalistic values (e.g. news values), professional norms (e.g. preference for official named sources) and production routines (e.g. complete editability of the text), offering important insights on how and with what consequences these values, norms and routines may impact on the (re-)construction of controversies in the public sphere by news texts. It is impossible to do justice of this wealth of observations in the space of this review.

Thanks to the discourse analytical work in Chaps. 4 and 5, Cramer succeeds in his main descriptive aim: providing an account of how news texts shape public controversies. He provides convincing, or at least suggestive, evidence of the journalists' practice of creating dialogue profiles featuring sources that "have neither shared physical proximity nor being involved in any direct written or spoken interaction, nor demonstrably engaged a common issue" (p. 5). He also shows that this choice of dialogue participants depends on practical choices based on professional rules. Thus, his constitutive attitude towards controversy is, to some extent, vindicated: it is clear that (at least some) of the controversies in the public sphere start to exist when they are staged in news texts.

#### 4 Critical Remarks

In this last section we would like to move certain critical remarks to Cramer's work. More precisely, we would like to point out some limitations of this study, which emerge once it is placed in the broader context of argumentation studies.

The first remark concerns what is not a limitation per se, but rather a design feature of the study, which runs the risk to escape completely to the reader—at least initially. Cramer's study is not about 'controversy' but about *controversy*. In the introduction Cramer mentions the fact that among many scholars *controversy* is not "a substantive object of study" but a "colloquial term" (p. 7), and later insists on the fact that *controversy* does not seem to be a clearly defined "term of art". It is important to stress that—deliberately, we believe—he does nothing to provide from the outset a stipulative definition of the concept. The study is then about the English word *controversy*, as one of the many words used to denote "a problematic event or situation that sound reasoning should be used to resolve" (p. 3), or the discursive expression of a disagreement or difference of opinion, or an argumentative confrontation. This is legitimate, but has delicate consequences. First, drawing comparisons between this study and studies such as those of Dascal, where *controversy* is stipulated in a much narrower sense becomes problematic.

Dascal, in fact, devotes his attention to learned controversies narrowly characterized as lengthy written exchanges where each move consists of an elaborated text, which manifest a deep disagreement on several interrelated issues, and which have a public dimension (cf. Dascal 2003). Cramer looks at how newspapers use the English noun *controversy*. When Cramer relates and contrasts his work with Dascal's or with other studies concerning scholarly controversies, it is legitimate to ask whether the objects have anything in common besides involving argumentative confrontations. The same could be said for the connection with the

ancient practice of *controversiae*. Words are polyfunctional and it is perhaps healthy to remind that their range of uses is an exquisitely language-dependent fact. For instance, Italian *controversia* covers a large spectrum of kinds of disagreement, including Dascal's learned controversy, but would be unnatural/bizarre in Cramer's *natural phenomenon* formulas. Not because these journalistic formulas do not have equivalents in Italian, but because they use different disagreement related words, such as *polemica* 'polemic'. For instance, *controversy rages = infuria la polemica, amid controversy = tra le polemiche*.<sup>3</sup>

This last remark brings us to an empirical limitation of Cramer's study. Certainly, it can be expected from a (semasiological) study about the word *controversy* that the concept 'controversy' is not defined stipulatively upstream. What could be slightly more worrying, however, is that downstream the empirical analysis does not give us a delimitation of the semantic space of the word *controversy* against that of other event categories in the semantic fields of disagreement and conflict. We do not know whether and how *controversy* differs from other disagreement words used in the news.

A different issue emerges when we look at how Cramer positions his work with respect to argumentation theory. He contends that "argumentation does not have a theory of participant that goes much beyond a reiteration of the dialogue model, positing only that there will be two participants, proponent and respondent, and that they will perform speech acts and argumentative moves that are appropriate to the procedural constraints and norms relevant to their sort of dialogue" (p. 143). This allegation may be correct of certain works at a certain stage of development of argumentation theory (Cramer here refers to Walton 2004). The remark, however, is emphatically untrue of the robust strand of research on 'argumentation in context' that has developed over the last decade and which is well represented in the monographs and collections of the *Argumentation in Context* book series, and by the recently founded *Journal of Argumentation in Context*. For instance, van Eemeren's (2010) extended model of Pragma-Dialectics clearly distinguishes between the ideal model of the *critical discussion*—which has indeed only two abstract participants (protagonist and antagonist)—and the socially relevant *argumentative activity types* where the relevant social roles of the participants, with their attached argumentatively relevant discourse prerogatives, are defined by more or less institutionalized commitments and by the *raison d'être* of the specific sphere of activity. A similar attention to modeling realistically participant roles in complex argumentative activities is found in the works inspired by Rigotti and Rocci's (2006) view of communication context, such as Greco Morasso's (2011) detailed account of argumentation in mediation interactions. This growing body of research is all about non arbitrary, motivated accounts of participant roles. And, importantly for Cramer,

<sup>3</sup> Consider for instance the following Italian headlines, extracted via Google: *Il Festival di Bayreuth apre tra le polemiche* 'Bayreuth festival opens amid controversy', *Caos post-incidente, infuria la polemica* 'Post-accident chaos, controversy rages'. In both cases the Italian noun *controversia* would have been infelicitous, suggesting a somewhat learned context and a high level of argumentative quality, which are clearly off-color in the examples.



it is not limited to the dyadic, face to face situations that he associates with the inherited “dialogue model”.<sup>4</sup>

It is true that the public sphere of discussion to which journalists invite their readers appears somewhat more rarified and amorphous than the tightly defined decision making contexts that have been largely favored by argumentation scholars lately. Nevertheless, this public sphere that journalists shape with their staged confrontations does inherit much of its structure from underlying tighter contexts of decision making. For instance, recent work on argumentation in economic-financial journalism (cf. Zlatkova 2012) has shown that readers are addressed as *investors* (whether they really are is another matter), while the elite participants that act as sources on the issue under dispute are clearly presented either as corporate *insiders*, as *experts* (e.g. financial analysts), as *regulators* (e.g. central banks) clearly mirroring the participant structure of the underlying “interaction field” of financial activities. Similar considerations could be probably made when journalists mediate the judicial or the political system.

Cramer’s predominant preoccupation with participant selection turns out to be an empirical limitation of the study. Controversies and argumentative confrontations are defined not only by their participants, but also, and crucially, by the definition of the *issue* and of the *standpoints* with respect to it. While some hints are found here and there in the book, Cramer does not consider in depth to what extent journalists contribute to making issues and standpoints explicit. Contributing to this clarification of issues and standpoints would mean for the journalists to be de facto resolution oriented, even if not in the same way that arguers are.<sup>5</sup>

Cramer does not tell us much either on how journalists report the *arguments* proper, that is the reasons that are adduced by participants in support of their standpoints. Recent work by Smirnova (2009) and Zlatkova (2012) suggests that by reporting sources and partially presenting their argumentative moves, journalists do manage to argue themselves, while ostensibly remaining within the boundaries of their professional rules. It seems that they achieve this fine balance by using a complex combination of arguments from authority (by emphasizing the “weight” of sources) and reported substantial arguments, while effacing their agency as arguers. Unfortunately, Cramer’s work on dialogue profiles does not have much to say for or against this hypothesis.

A final critical remark should be addressed to Cramer’s attitude towards normative and critical approaches to argumentation. In the introduction he polemically contrasts his ethnographic perspective with an approach that sets “to critique news discourse by measuring it against norms that may be irrelevant or unknown to the participants themselves” (p. 20). In the passage the criticism is primarily addressed to critical discourse analysis, but it invests de facto all normative approaches relying on ideal models. We do share Cramer’s frustration with analyses that seem primarily aiming “to confirm suspicions about pernicious

<sup>4</sup> Cf. for instance Lewiński’s (2011) account of argumentative asynchronous “polylogue” in Internet based forums.

<sup>5</sup> This holds, at least, in the Pragma-Dialectical view of resolution whose first ideal step is the confrontation stage where standpoints over the issue are made clear (cf. van Eemeren 2010: 8–11).

motives of journalists and news organizations” (p. 20), but this does not mean that professional practices should be judged *only* with respect to the standards and rules that the involved participants already recognize. This does not seem worthy of an open society and would not be conducive of an improvement of the standards themselves. One could consider, for instance, how the corporations have gradually developed standards of *sustainability* and *corporate social responsibility* precisely as a response to criticism that held corporations accountable with respect to standards that, initially, were “irrelevant or unknown” to the corporate world.

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