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The editorial meeting discussion as an argumentative activity type

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ABSTRACT: A still uninvestigated argumentative reasoning hides behind news texts, in the discussions surrounding the writing process. I try to fill this gap by reconstructing how newsroom decision-making functions from a combined argumentative and discourse analytical perspective. In order to do so, I analyze the editorial meeting discussion about a potential news item and its production as an argumentative activity type, using a French- and German-language corpus collected at the Swiss public broadcast service.

KEYWORDS: argumentative activity type, decision-making, deliberation, gatekeeping, model of communication context, newsmaking, pragma-dialectics

1. INTRODUCTION

News items apparently are not argumentative texts. Nevertheless argumentative reasoning hides behind the surface, in the discussions preceding and accompanying the writing process. Studies on the news until now (see par. 2) have focussed on the news product, i.e. printed articles and television reports, with little or no attention to how these products come into being. In this respect, van Dijk's statement "we do not know exactly how this [newsmaking] process takes place" (1988, p. 111) is valid still today.

In the research I am conducting, which is part of a comprehensive approach to argumentation in newsmaking involving various correlated projects,[1] I try to fill the gap by reconstructing how decision-making leading to editorial choices functions, applying a combined argumentative and discourse analytical approach. Moreover, I trace out the inferential structure of the most significant arguments by applying the *Argumentum Model of Topics* (AMT – Rigotti & Greco Morasso, 2009).

The first step of this gap filling is presented in this paper, where I characterize editorial meeting discussions about a potential news item and its

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[1] Included in the Research Module "Argumentation in newsmaking process and product", financed by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNF PDFMP1_137181/1, 2012-2015), which involves professors and PhD students from the University of Lugano (Andrea Rocci, Margherita Luciani, Marta Zampa), the University of Lausanne (Marcel Burger, Laura Delaloye) and the Zurich University of Applied Science (Daniel Perrin).

production as an argumentative activity type. Furthermore I here reconstruct the argumentation structure of the issues occurring in an actual discussion taken from the corpus I am investigating, and highlight the *news values* that are entailed in the discussion. News values concern the news actors and events as well as the news creation process, asset the newsworthiness of an event and "provide the cognitive basis for decisions about selection, attention, understanding, representation, recall, and the uses of news information in general" (van Dijk, 1988, p. 119). At this state of the research, I call *general news values* those classified by Bell (1991) and van Djik (1988)[2] that can be considered valid in all news media, and *specific news values* those related to the interaction field under investigation (see par. 3).

2. STATE OF ARTS IN STUDIES ON THE NEWS

A large tradition of news studies is at hand, especially in sociology and discourse analysis. A core notion in the sociology of news media is that of *gatekeeper,* introduced by White (1964 [1950]). The gatekeeper in a news organization is the person in charge of news selection - this means that this role has traditionally been conceived as pertaining to a single person (see Clayman & Reisner, 1998). His decisions are oriented by a set of criteria, the news values. Anyway, focusing on these abstract guidelines means overlooking the social practices of gatekeeping (Clayman & Reisner, 1998, p. 180). This is in fact a "reasoning process" which is "worked out publicly, through concrete speaking practices embedded in course of interaction within conference meetings" (ibid. p. 180).

Discourse analysis, on the contrary, focuses mostly on the news product, in particular on the interactional aspects of broadcast news and on the representational aspects of printed news. One of the approaches that are primarily concerned with this topic is critical discourse analysis (CDA), which looks for various forms of ideological manipulation and obfuscation in the news.

Within argumentation studies, proper recent research addresses both broadcast interactions and news texts with a variety of aims. Andone (2010) looked at argumentative confrontations between politicians and journalists in interviews. Miecznikowski, Rocci, & Zlatkova (2012) worked on prediction and argumentation from expert opinion in financial news. Greco Morasso (2012) examined news framing from an argumentative perspective using the AMT. The research however remains entirely based on the analysis of news products.

In the last few years, a new line of research on news discourse has emerged, which seeks to build a bridge between the sociology and the linguistic of news production (Clayman & Reisner, 1998; Perrin, 2011; van Hout, 2010). However, argumentation has not yet been the main focus of investigation in the news field.

3. THE ACTIVITY TYPE 'EDITORIAL MEETING DISCUSSION'

The present research approaches both media organizations in their entirety and

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[2] See par. 4 for some examples of news values.

specific activity types like editorial meetings using the *model of communication context*, presented in Rigotti and Rocci 2006. According to this model, interactions take place in a context, which has both an institutionalized and an interpersonal dimension.

On the one hand, the central notion within the institutional dimension is that of *activity type*. Activity types are derived from the mapping of an interaction scheme over an interaction field. An *interaction field* is a given piece of social reality that is affected by the interaction and at the same time constraints it. Interaction fields are defined in terms of the shared goals of their participants – in the present case, the mission of the media organizations concerned. Commitment to fulfil the shared goals of the institution in a specific way generates social roles within the interaction field (e.g. the role of editor in chief in a newspaper). The shared goals of the interaction field are what guides decision-making within the field. *Interaction schemes* are "culturally shared 'recipes' for interaction congruent with more or less broad classes of joint goals and involving scheme-roles presupposing generic requirements" (Rigotti & Rocci, 2006, p. 173). On the other hand, the interpersonal dimension of context consists of the interpersonal relationship of the interaction participants and of their cultural common ground and identities.

The interaction field under investigation in this paper is manifold. In fact, the present research is based on a corpus collected at the editorial offices of German and French-language Swiss public broadcast service (SRG SSR) by a team lead by Daniel Perrin at the Winterthur Institute of Applied Media Studies (Switzerland). The corpus is made up by editorial meeting discussions, discussions between journalists and cutters or other colleagues, loggings of writing activities on the screen, retrospective verbal protocols of the writing process, interviews with journalists.

At a general frame level of the interaction field, I consider the Swiss public service institution SRG SSR, which has a federal, societal, cultural, and linguistic mission to fulfil.[3] By zooming on a specific spot, in this paper I concentrate on the redaction of the program *10vor10* [10 to 10], a daily reportage program of *Schweizer Fernseher* (SF – Swiss Television), the Swiss German-language public broadcast service.

The set of goals entailed in this interaction field could be summarized in: producing and broadcasting quality news items, reporting newsworthy events, satisfying the audience demand, making high audience rating, fulfilling the institutional mandate. The roles are: the journalists, the program's producer, and the editor in chief.

In order to define the activity type 'editorial meeting discussion' I apply onto the interaction field the interaction scheme of *deliberation*, where the participants jointly decide on a course of action over a matter of common concern. In the present case, the deliberation is shaped as a decision-making discussion involving means-end practical reasoning – i.e. "the process of deciding how to achieve […] a state of

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[3] This mandate and its actual fulfilment have been investigated by Daniel Perrin and his team during the project "Idée Suisse: Language policy, norms, and practice as exemplified by Swiss Radio and Television" (SNF NRP 56, 2005-2008) (see Perrin, 2011).

affairs" (Walton, 2007, p. 133). The state of affairs that has to be reached is the production of the next program – a program that has to respond to the characteristics pertaining to the interaction field. Whether and when such a program should be produced are not object to discussion. In fact, only production matters are subject to deliberation – mainly deciding which events will be news items, when and how they will be broadcasted, organizing a broadcasting schedule and assigning tasks concerning the production. Thus the activity type plays a crucial role in defining the issue, which generates the argumentative differences of opinion.

Pragma-dialectics offers a view of activity types that is complementary to that provided by the model of communication context. It allows seeing how different constraints (stemming from the interaction field and scheme) reshape the ideal model of the critical discussion, generating an empirical counterpart for each of the stages (see van Eemeren, 2010).

Critical discussion	Confrontation stage	Opening stage		Argumentation stage	Concluding stage
Activity type	Initial situation	Material starting points	Procedural starting points	Argumentative means	Outcome
Editorial meeting discussion	Difference of opinion on a possible news item, on its production and broadcasting.	Obligation to produce a program; length limits for the item; time limits in the production; accessibility of information and sources; general and specific news values.	Internal hierarchy in the editorial office; discussion procedure; time limit for the discussion.	Defending/ contesting the newsworthiness of an event; proposing/ objecting to production, placement in the program and broadcasting time.	Scheduling the next program; tasks division among journalists.

Table 1.

In the present case (as in Table 1) the initial situation, corresponding to the *confrontation stage*, consist in a difference of opinion between participants in an editorial meeting on a event which might become a news item, on issues concerning its production and its broadcasting time. The *opening stage* corresponds to the starting points for the discussion, divided in material and procedural. On the one hand the material starting points are the obligation to produce a program, the length limits for the item, the time limits in its production, the accessibility of information and sources, general and specific news values. On the other hand, the procedural starting points include the internal hierarchy of the editorial office, the routinized discussion procedure and the limited time available for the discussion. The *argumentation stage* consists of the various argumentative means applied in the

discussion in order to defend/contest the newsworthiness of an event and to propose/object to its production, placement in the program and broadcasting time. Finally, the *concluding stage* is the concrete outcome of the discussion, i.e. a schedule for the next program and the tasks distribution among the journalists. Note that here the activity type heavily constrains the ideal critical discussion: leaving the issue undecided is not an option. Therefore the deliberation has to reach an outcome within a given time frame dictated by the interaction field.

4. CASE STUDY

The case study presented here (070123_1400_redaktionskonferenz_discourse.txt [lines 0461-0746]) is a four-pages extract of an editorial meeting discussion at *10vor10*. This discussion took place on the 23rd of January 2007, starting at 14.00. The original language is Swiss German, whereas the present analysis is based on a Standard German transcription translated into English by the author. The participants to this discussion are the producer (P), the editor in chief (R) and 9 journalists (X1 to X9). Therefore we can consider this interaction a *polylogue* (many-to-many discussion, see Lewiński, 2010, p. 101). The issue at stake are whether to broadcast an item on a snowfall that will probably hit Northern Switzerland that night, and other subordinated issues like when the item should be broadcasted, if a weather expert should be interviewed and where the item should be shot. A subject that might sound trivial, being Switzerland a country where it usually snows a lot. However, that year the winter was extraordinarily warm and snowless and, still at the time of the discussion, it wasn't snowing yet.

4.1 *Should we broadcast an item on snow?*

The participants to the main discussion are P, R, X2 and X3. The positive standpoint is introduced by P at the beginning of the excerpt (`0461-0462 we could then make an item on snow as well/ to which I am inclined`). R expresses agreement (`0483 mhm that would be good`) – he will later modify his stance proposing a revised standpoint (see 4.1.1). X2 agrees indirectly first by moving to a subordinated decision (where to shoot the item – see 4.2.2), then by presenting arguments for the standpoint in response to criticism by X3 (`0581-0587 no but now that is not I think/ so as we say/ but snow in january is actually normal / that's true but [...] not this january/ after the warmest beginning of january ever is it`). On the other hand, X3 first doubts the positive standpoint (`0542 just because the first little snowflakes`), then expresses and defends a negative standpoint on the proposed course of action (`0567-0575 I think we are now simply because of this warm january/ we are somehow wrongly programmed/ I mean/ sorry ((shakes his head)) we are in switzerland/ it's the end of january/ and a snowflake falls/ and we turn half of switzerland [...] in such an excitement`).

The following analytic overview (Figure 1) displays a multiple argumentation structure, where the positive standpoint *we should make an item on today's possible snowfall* is supported by two lines of argumentation attributed to two speakers. R at a first stage simply agrees with P's proposal, therefore I will leave his argumentation aside.

P's arguments are based on forecasts concerning the extensiveness of the snowfall and grounded on expert's opinion. His argument 1.1 can be reconstructed as supported by an endoxical[4] unexpressed premise 1.1', which coincides with the news values of *relevance* and *proximity*. In fact, if the snowfall hits a large area of German-language Switzerland, it affects most of the audience of *10vor10*. Moreover, he supports his standpoint by quoting the expert who forecasted the snowfall (SF meteorologist). On the other hand, X2's argumentation appeals to the news value of *unexpectedness* by underlining how a normal event like a snowfall becomes extraordinary in such a warm January. This second line of argument is a reaction to X3's criticism that questions the newsworthiness of snow in January – except in case of a storm.

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[4] "In Aristotle, the adjective *endoxos* (from *en* "in" and *doxa* "opinion" or "fame") refers to propositions that are in the common opinion and, as a consequence, are generally accepted within a community (see Tardini 2005: 281). In the Topics, Aristotle gives an articulated definition of the *endoxa*: '[*endoxa* are those opinions] which commend themselves to all, or to the majority, or to the wise – that is or to all of the wise or to the majority o to the most famous and distinguished of them' (Topics I: 100b 21-23)" (Rocci, 2006, p. 425).
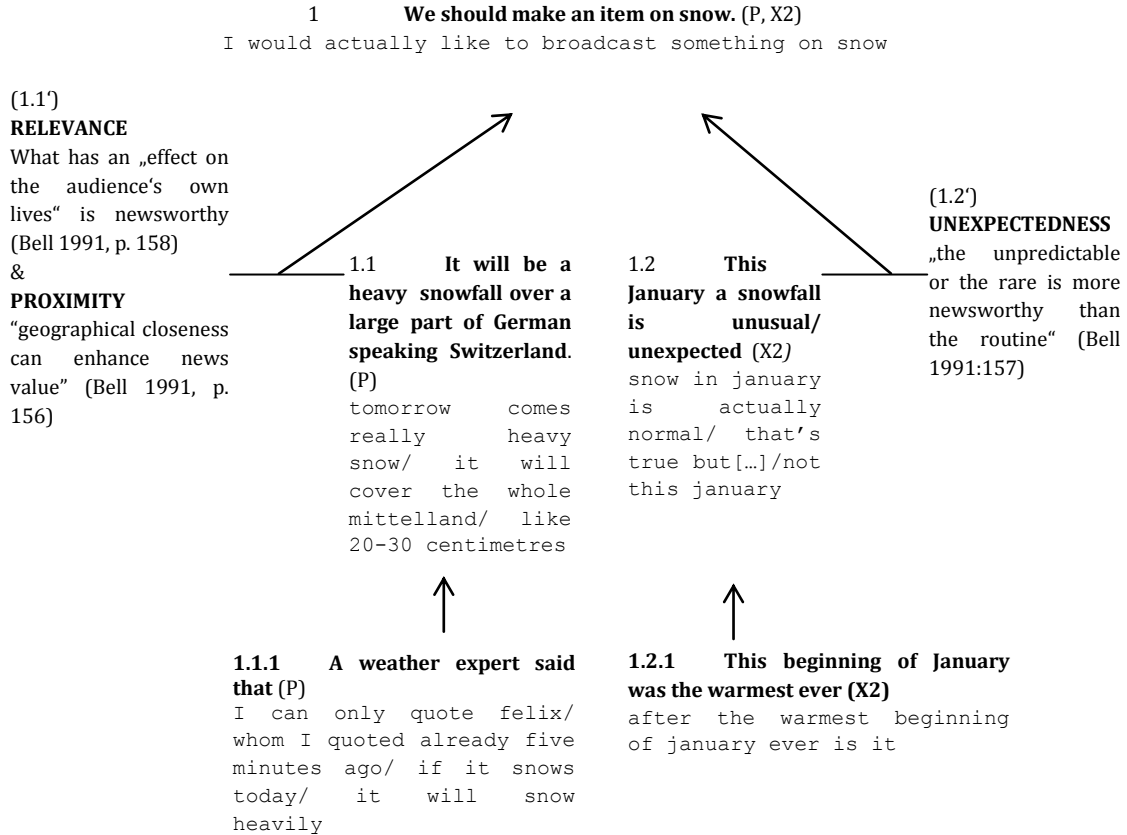
1   **We should make an item on snow.** (P, X2)
`I would actually like to broadcast something on snow`

(1.1')
RELEVANCE
What has an „effect on the audience's own lives" is newsworthy (Bell 1991, p. 158)
&
PROXIMITY
"geographical closeness can enhance news value" (Bell 1991, p. 156)

1.1   **It will be a heavy snowfall over a large part of German speaking Switzerland.** (P)
`tomorrow comes really heavy snow/ it will cover the whole mittelland/ like 20-30 centimetres`

1.2   **This January a snowfall is unusual/ unexpected** (X2*)*
`snow in january is actually normal/ that's true but[…]/not this january`

(1.2')
UNEXPECTEDNESS
„the unpredictable or the rare is more newsworthy than the routine" (Bell 1991:157)

1.1.1   A weather expert said that (P)
`I can only quote felix/ whom I quoted already five minutes ago/ if it snows today/ it will snow heavily`

1.2.1   This beginning of January was the warmest ever (X2)
`after the warmest beginning of january ever is it`

Figure 1.

4.1.1 *Reaching agreement through standpoint revision by an authority*

In order to reach an agreement about the news item production, a standpoint reformulation becomes necessary.

As the discussion develops, P confirms many times his standpoint, moving from an attenuated desiderative form (`0487 I would actually like to broadcast something on snow`) to an explicit request (`0698 I want to make something on snow`). He also keeps presenting the same expert opinion as an argument from authority grounding his thesis (`0737-0738 I can only quote felix/ whom I quoted already five minutes ago`). The other participants, in particular R, try to find a balance between P's determination and concrete constraints, like the actual snow situation (`0702 R: but snow must be really thick hm coming up down`). This rebuttal is probably connected to the mandate of the program, which imposes broadcasting only relevant events. As R is responsible for the quality of the program, he feels personally 'endangered' in case the news turn out to be trivial (`0704-0705 otherwise well (xxx) a couple of snowflakes come/ I don't want to ridicule myself`). X2's position is manifold. From the beginning he agrees on an item on snow, proposes sending a correspondent and interviewing a meteorologist, even without concern for what other programs of the same channel do (see 4.2.1). Afterwards, he

puts forward an interesting counterargument to R's standpoint that it has to snow heavily in order to justify an item on the topic (see 4.2.3). At the same time he is sceptical about the extensiveness of the upcoming snowfall (`0723 but if there is so much snow in basel [shows with the fingers about 4 cm]; 0729-0730 you say really thick/ that is not the case`).

Partial agreement is reached at the end of the discussion on the revised standpoint: *we should make an item on today's possible snowfall if and only if it actually snows and the snowfall is heavy*. This agreement is formulated by R, who first says: `if it still doesn't snow tonight/ then the problem is solved (0624-0625)`. Then, by arguing that he doesn't want to ridicule himself by broadcasting insignificant news, he imposes the second condition – the snowfall's heaviness. Furthermore, it is him who puts the ongoing discussion aside in order to move back to a topic they were dealing with before, and which is more important (`0741-0745 yes yes no that's ok/ but the other problem/ that hides behind/ is I think really a bit another/ that we now still have left open`). We thus observe how the internal hierarchy of the editorial office plays a role in the development of the discussion. In fact, it is R – the editor in chief – that has the final say, even if he takes into consideration all participants' suggestions and especially tries to comply with the producer's proposals.

The issue on snow pops up again at the meeting's conclusion, where the length of each item as well as the exclusion of some events from the schedule are at stake. P agrees on shortening the item on snow, and R ironically hints at his determination to broadcast it (`1281-1285 I don't know/ to what we can renounce today/ I already know/ that you'd very reluctantly (xxx)/ P: exactly`), which leads to mocking and laughter at P's expenses (`1288-1291 X9: tomorrow we'll be the last really behind/ but we have the best story/[...] we have today now really a great snow story [many are laughing]`). At the very end, P has reduced his pretenses on broadcasting the item, thus agreeing with the reformulation of the standpoint by R (`1783-1785 ah and snow depends a bit on/ what we have now/ if we here can get directly in with pictures`).

4.2 *Subordinated issues*

After having analyzed the main issue concerning the actual production of the item, I move to secondary issues, subordinated to a decision about the main one.

4.2.1 *Should we interview a weather expert?*

The first subordinated issue can be summarized by the question *Should we interview a weather expert?*. The participants to this sub-discussion are again P, R, X2 and X3. The topic is put forward by X2 (`0502 and should a correspondent do that`) and immediately agreed upon by P (`0508 that wouldn't be bad at all`). Thus they both support the standpoint *we should interview a weather expert*.

Then, a multiple counter-argumentation develops on side of R and X3 (Figure 2), both arguing the insignificancy of having a meteorologist interviewed for the item (`0525-0526 R: what does he say as weatherman more then/ it's snowing?`). X2 reacts to this counterargument by suggesting that, instead of interviewing the meteorologist, a reporter could simply get in touch with him before the broadcasting and then report on the snowfall in a more know-it-all way (`0549 he can also show off a bit`). X3 strongly disagrees with this solution, pointing at the fact that the weather forecast is broadcasted right after *10vor10*, therefore giving too much information on snow will cause repetitiveness in the channel's schedule (`0556-0559 yeah but shortly after there's the weather forecast/ isn't there/ and he probably says that there again/ so I am struggling with that`). He appears to be really disappointed by the prospective of doing something counterproductive for SF, thus showing commitment to the media organization. By the way, no one else seems to bother and X2 explicitly doesn't care at all for such concerns (`0560-0563 that's not that's not our problem/ […] what comes after us is it`).
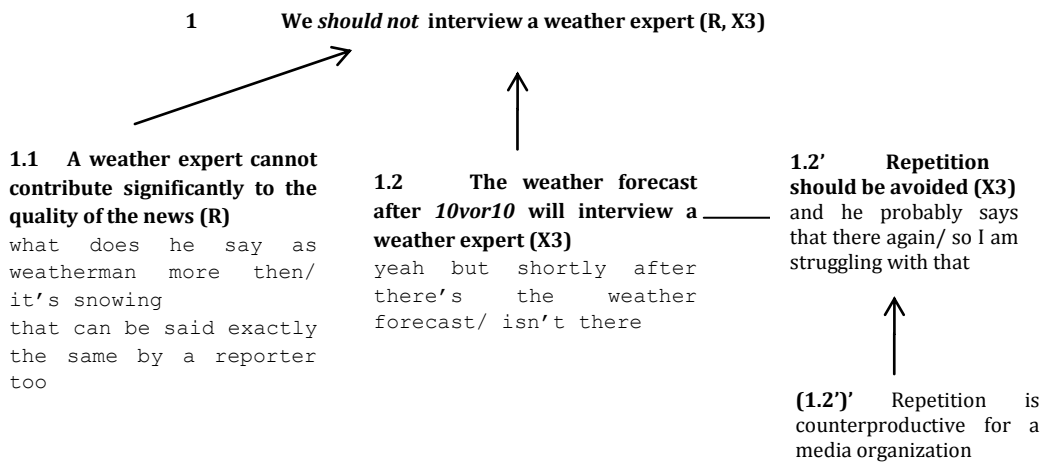

1　　**We *should not* interview a weather expert (R, X3)**

1.1　A weather expert cannot contribute significantly to the quality of the news (R)
what does he say as weatherman more then/ it's snowing
that can be said exactly the same by a reporter too

1.2　　The weather forecast after *10vor10* will interview a weather expert (X3)
yeah but shortly after there's the weather forecast/ isn't there

1.2'　　Repetition should be avoided (X3)
and he probably says that there again/ so I am struggling with that

(1.2')'　Repetition is counterproductive for a media organization

Figure 2.

4.2.2 *Where should we take pictures for the item on snow?*

Concerning the location where the item has to be shot, X2 suggests Basel on account of a local informant (`0493-0495 and ahm well basel isn't it/ there also diego says that/ they almost haven't- there are so many people there without winter tires; 0500- 0501 basel would really be the place to be/ I believe`). P agrees with this proposal (`0498 (xxx) that would be the right place`). No objection is raised to this suggestion. X2's argument from authority can be reconstructed as supported by the news value of *relevance*, because the information provided by the witness allows organizing the pictures' shooting at the place where the snowfall will mostly affect the population.
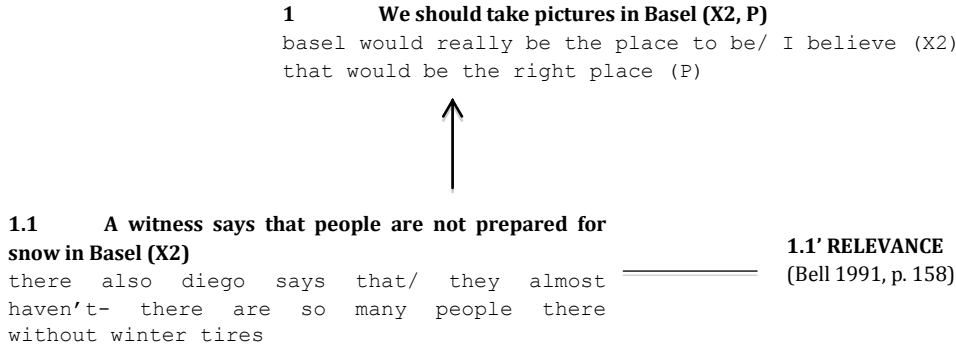
1   **We should take pictures in Basel (X2, P)**
```
basel would really be the place to be/ I believe (X2)
that would be the right place (P)
```

↑

1.1   **A witness says that people are not prepared for snow in Basel (X2)**
```
there  also  diego  says  that/  they  almost
haven't-  there  are  so  many  people  there
without winter tires
```

1.1' RELEVANCE
(Bell 1991, p. 158)

Figure 3.

4.2.3 *When should we broadcast the item on today's snowfall?*

Finally, there is a subordinated issue concerning the broadcasting time of the snowfall item (Figure 4). The participants to this sub-discussion are P, X2 and X3. P supports his main standpoint about the item production with the subordinated standpoint *we should broadcast an item on today's snowfall in tonight's program*. The arguments in favour of this implicit standpoint are that it will be snowing during *10vor10*, but not during the previous programs on SF (`0479-0480 […] if it will already snow during the broadcasting time in basel/ in the other programs that will not be the case`). Therefore, broadcasting the item on that night would offer them a scoop (related to the news value of *competition*). On the other hand, X3's general scepticism is also related to when the item would be aired. His implicit standpoint *we shouldn't broadcast an item on snowfall today* can be derived from a concessive acceptance of P's positive standpoint. In fact he says he would agree on making an item on an actually relevant event, but doesn't see any evidence that it will be the case (`0601-0609 ok, I would agree with you/ if you could already show something/ if now this afternoon it would […] and people with summer tires were blocked and so on/ if we have but one snowflake`). X2 first agrees with X3 (`0604 X2: no that's the precondition`), but later on embraces P's standpoint by enhancing the newsworthiness of notifications anticipating events (`0715-0719 I want to disagree with this/ because we must anticipate/ and tomorrow from six in the morning/ […] nothing will move on the roads`), which can be seen as an amplification of the news value of *recency*, but is also connected to *predictability*. I here choose to name this news value *anticipation*.
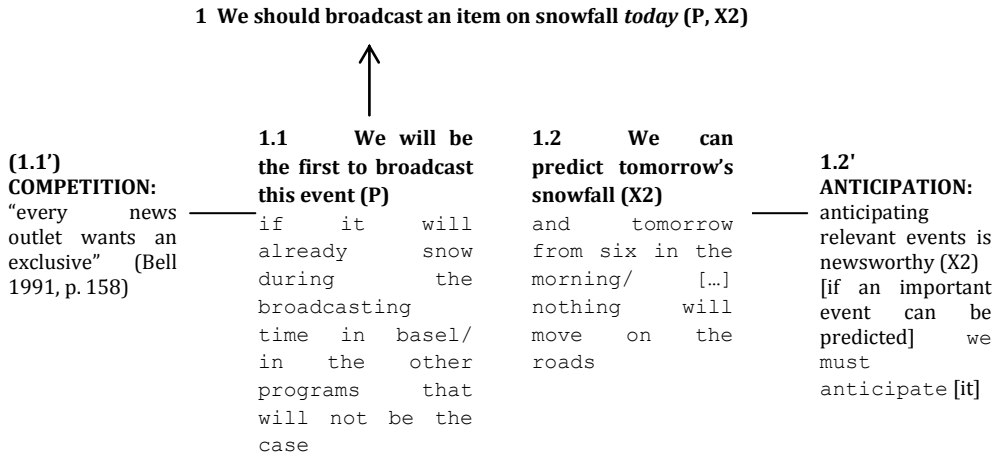
1 We should broadcast an item on snowfall *today* (P, X2)

(1.1')
COMPETITION:
"every news outlet wants an exclusive" (Bell 1991, p. 158)

1.1 We will be the first to broadcast this event (P)
```
if    it    will
already       snow
during        the
broadcasting
time   in   basel/
in    the   other
programs      that
will  not  be  the
case
```

1.2 We can predict tomorrow's snowfall (X2)
```
and    tomorrow
from six in the
morning/    […]
nothing      will
move   on   the
roads
```

1.2'
ANTICIPATION:
anticipating relevant events is newsworthy (X2) [if an important event can be predicted] we must anticipate [it]

Figure 4.

5. CONCLUSION

In this paper I have shown that during editorial meetings highly argumentative interactions take place. They correspond to an activity type built up as described by the model of communication context, and present all empirical counterparts of the stages of a critical discussion.

After having introduced the project this specific investigation belongs to and the state of arts in the sociological and discourse analytical study of the news, I have described the activity type "editorial meeting discussion" at the television program *10vor10* by *Schweizer Fernsehen* following the above mentioned theoretical framework, and have reconstructed the argumentation structure of actual polylogues. The argumentative exchanges during an editorial meeting can focus on various aspects, from the choice of an event as news to issues regarding the production and broadcasting (initial situation). These discussions are subject to various constraints (material and procedural starting points). For what the procedural starting points are concerned, all participants have a right to express their opinion and are taken into consideration by the meeting leaders (P and R), nevertheless who is higher in hierarchy has the final say (R). This is due to the fact that R is eventually responsible for the quality of the program and his reputation is at stake (`0705 I don't want to ridicule myself`). He is also in charge of keeping the discussion in the right framework and not letting it digress or become too long. In the frame of the material starting points, a discussion raises on the possibility to produce a truly relevant item with the information at disposal (actual snow situation before the evening program, extra resources like the weather expert). The participants in the critical discussion defend their standpoints by appealing to evidence, authority and expert opinion, but mostly relying on general news values (*competition*, *predictability, proximity, recency, relevance, unexpectedness,* and the here introduced news value of *anticipation*) and specific news values of the interaction field (not being repetitive with respects to other

programs of the same channel, not broadcasting trivial news). These values are hardly ever explicitly formulated (an exception: `0716 X2: we must anticipate`), but are more or less consciously present to the speakers, who act accordingly. Therefore it can be stated that news values function as *endoxa* in newsmaking. At the end of the meeting there is an actual decision-making on the item production, which is driven by the limitations of the program's length and the will to produce quality news (concluding stage).

The present research on the argumentative aspects of interactions in the newsmaking environment deepens the understanding of news production. In particular, characterizing the editorial meeting discussion as an argumentative activity type brings light on how editorial gatekeeping functions and on the role of news values in the decision-making process. The next steps in the research will include the argumentative investigation of decision-making and gatekeeping also in other contexts of newsmaking, like informal dialogues at the editorial offices and writing processes.

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