
We recommend you cite the published version.
The publisher’s URL is:
http://linguistics.sllf.qmul.ac.uk/LangMedia2013

Refereed: Yes

(no note)

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Abstract
Heroes or Villains? Stakeholder Representations in Crisis Reporting

The crisis story is a recurring news genre form where public perception of an organisation and its crisis response is largely dependent on the media coverage and framing of the event. The organisations involved frequently find themselves cast in the role of ‘villain’ as crisis events unfold, thus facing public censure and reputational damage. Likewise other stakeholders involved in the crisis, whether consumers, employees, suppliers or competitors are perceived and labelled by the outside world as heroes, victims, protectors, allies, or enemies (Pearson and Mitroff 1993). The media clearly has a role to play in apportioning blame or engendering sympathy for the organisation and other actors, actively shaping public perceptions of the crisis event. Indeed Cottle (2006) suggests that the media goes beyond reporting or representing to ‘performatively enact’ a mediatized ritual in disaster cases.

This research explores the performative role of the media in the creation and development of crisis roles for stakeholders in the reporting of the BP Gulf of Mexico Oil Spill in April 2010. This was a crisis on a major scale, causing loss of life, creating significant environmental and economic impact, and threatening to escalate into a trans-national ‘war of words’ between the UK and the US. Indeed the spill was soon referred to as the worst in US history, with President Barak Obama claiming that the event would dominate environmental policy for years to come.

The research adopts a discourse analytical approach (Van Dijk 1998, 2011) to explore the referential strategies used in media reporting of this event. It focuses in particular on the representation of stakeholders as social actors, exploring how stakeholders and groups are categorised. Such linguistic strategies serve to “project meaning and social values onto the referent” (Richardson 2007, 50) as well as expressing the relationships between the referent and others. The BP crisis serves as a case study of a media phenomena that ‘mobilises collective sentiments’ yet remains, according to Cottle (2006) relatively under-researched.

References

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