

# “The left is hurting terribly”: Neutrality in Broadcast News

POWNEWS

NOS Journaal

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## Neutrality

Introduction Method Results Discussion

- Neutrality is an important concept in the normative framework of journalism. It is a concept with core dimensions that are generally accepted and laid down in ‘codes of conduct’ of journalists:
  - Truth. Journalists are accurate and factual in their presentation of reality
  - Impartiality. Journalists are independent when carrying out their tasks
  - Fairness. Journalists present both sides and search for a balance in perspectives
- Despite the consensus about its core dimensions, the concept is problematic in at least two ways:
  - In journalistic practice: journalists are caught in a dichotomy between ‘seeking the truth’, which is often simple fact finding, and fairness, if they dig deeper into the simple facts and try to interpret them
  - In research: neutrality is a multi-dimensional concept that plays a role on different levels of broadcast news
- Next, I will explain the *dimensions* and *levels* of neutrality

## Dimensions of neutrality

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- One of the ways in which discourse studies conceive of neutrality is as facticity and 'lack of evaluation' (Thompson & Hunston 2000; Montgomery 2007)
- Conversation analysis reflects on neutrality in the context of news interviews and argues that interviewers cannot be neutral in an absolute sense (Clayman & Heritage 2002). 'Neutrality' – i.e., orientedness to neutrality - is possible. Interviewers are neutralistic when they
  - try to stick to their questioning role
  - avoid making statements reflecting their opinions
  - refrain from direct or indirect support for the statements of IE
- Central in Media studies' conception of neutrality is 'lack of statement bias' (D'Alessio & Allen 2000). Statement bias occurs when journalists interject their own opinions into the text of the coverage of an issue

## Levels of a neutralistic orientation

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Research has shown that journalists are oriented to neutrality on different levels of broadcast news:

- On the local level of interview questions, journalists solve the tension between 'neutral stance' and 'critical, penetrating and investigative journalism' by the use of question formats that confront without taking position (e.g., the third-party statement (Clayman 1992) and the formulation (Heritage 1985))
- On the intermediate level of question-answer sequences, journalists exploit voice: they present opinions by making use of the voice of interviewees
- On the global level of items and programmes, journalists exploit structure: the norm of neutrality gets more relaxed as they move into an item and programme

## Our study

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The study starts from the insight that neutrality is a *multi-dimensional* concept that plays a role on different *levels* of broadcast news. Acknowledging that it is impossible to study neutrality empirically in all conceivable ways, we made a blend of relevant dimensions of the concept and levels of analysis that is particularly targeted at the comparative study of NOS-journaal and PowNews

The aim of the study is:

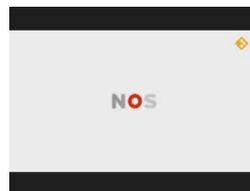
- To describe the way in which the Dutch 'standard' news programme NOS-journaal and the alternative PowNews – being examples from news programmes in a *multiform* public broadcasting system – practise neutrality

## Data collection

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- Double Case Study
- One issue of NOS-journaal
  - Time: 20.00 -20.25 pm
  - On air since 5 January 1956
  - Characteristic visuals and sounds
  - Presentation: person, posture and voice
  - Setting: three-dimensional effect; split; photo- and video wall; live feed
  - According to its mission statement, NOS-journaal is oriented to
    - Factuality
    - Presenting both sides
- See Table 1 for global structure and content of the issue, use of interview types and coverage time of items

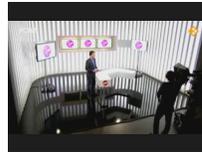


## Data collection

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- One issue of PowNews
  - Time: 22.05 – 22.25 pm
  - On air since 6 September 2010
  - Characteristic visuals and sounds
  - Presentation: person, posture and voice
  - Setting: trapezoid with two video screens standing in the left and right corner and three photo screens behind the desk; no live feed
  - According to its mission statement, PowNews is
    - reliable
    - independent
    - in favour of balance
- See Table 2 for global structure and content of the issue, use of interview types and coverage time of items



## Analysis: Question design

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- A broad notion of 'question' is used
- The questions were analysed with the aid of QAS, a measurement instrument for adversarial question design (Clayman & Heritage 2002; Clayman et al. 2006; Clayman et al. 2007)
- Three dimensions of adversarialness are particularly relevant in the context of the current study:
  - Initiative
  - Assertiveness
  - Opposition
- Examples of adversarial, i.e. non-neutral, question design are given in the handout

## Analysis: Support

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- If interviewers stick to questioning, their conduct will be treated as appropriate at least within the “on air” confines of the interview (Clayman & Heritage 2002)
- We focus on deviations of this questioning role in the form of response tokens, i.e. short, propositionally rather empty utterances of the recipient of an answer – i.e. the interviewer - during or immediately after the answer. They provide feedback to the interviewee and do not have ‘the floor’. We distinguish two types of response tokens:
  - Back-channel cues during the utterance of the interviewee such as *hmhm*, *no* and *yes*
  - Acknowledgment tokens, occurring in third position, such as *OK* and *right*
- There are various interactional dimensions to response tokens, one of which is that they indicate support (Heritage & Clayman 2010)

## Analysis: Evaluation

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- Evaluation covers expressions of the speaker’s attitude towards, viewpoint on, or feelings about a referent or topic (Thompson & Hunston 2000: 5)
- It concerns affect, certainty and doubt, desirability
- The indicators of evaluation that we used were derived from:
  - Biber & Finegan (1989)
  - Thompson & Hunston (2000)
  - Renkema (1997; 2002)
  - Pomerantz (1986)
  - Foolen (1993)
  - Montgomery (2007)
- Example 7 in your handout shows a news interview with characteristics of evaluation

## Levels in the analysis

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- The turns of the news interviewers were judged with respect to the presence or absence of the specific indicators of the three dimensions of adversarial question design that were included in this study, namely initiative, assertiveness and opposition
- The turns of the news interviewers were judged with respect to support
- The questions and answers in the news interviews were judged with respect to evaluation
- Evaluation, if found, is studied in relation to structure and voice: where does evaluation pop up and who is voicing it?

## Results: Question Design

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- PowNews publishes the questions; NOS-journaal does not do that
- Adversarial question design per news programme

	NOS-journaal	PowNews
<b>Initiative</b>		
• Introduction of the question with utterances	3	12
• Asking more than one question in a turn	2	4
<b>Assertiveness</b>		
• Prefacing the question with utterances in favour of one of the answering alternatives	1	5
• Using the suggestive sentence mode	2	15
• 'Tilted' utterances that are damaging to the interests of IE	0	5
<b>Opposition</b>		
• Opposing introduction	0	2
• Opposition in the entire question	0	2

## Results: Question Design

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- NOS-journaal applies adversarial questioning, but not all types are represented in its repertoire: both forms of opposition are lacking, as is the assertive question that damages the interests of IE. PowNews has some instances of opposition, while it also makes use of assertive questions that are damaging to the interests of IE. It introduces the questions frequently with utterances, and a substantial number of these prefaced questions is tilted. The number of information seeking utterances that are suggestive and conducive is also relatively high.
- Example 1 shows initiative in NOS-journaal; example 3 assertiveness. Examples 2 and 4 show assertiveness in PowNews; examples 5 and 6 concern PowNews's opposition.

## Results: Support

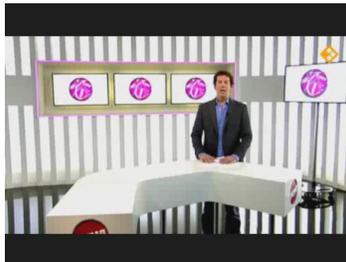
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- Back-channel cues: do not occur in NOS-journaal; two instances were found in PowNews
- Response tokens in third position
  - In NOS-journaal, the tokens in third position are relatively neutral
  - In PowNews, the third position is used for displaying utterances that can be regarded as support for the answer of IE (*Great erm very great these Netherlands again; OK, thank you very much; we also found a question-answer sequence that is concluded with: Ohhohoh, he even takes it with him too! Very good.*)

- Evaluations are apparent in the interviews of both programmes, and in particular in the answers of the interviewees
- Table 3 in the handout shows a selection of the frequently occurring aspects of evaluation and examples

- While NOS-journaal embeds all interviews – i.e. the discourse elements that contain most evaluations - within news items, following upon the headline and the kernel, PowNews positions them on a high level in the global structure of the news, as a trailer immediately after the headline (see Table 1 and 2)
- See example 8 in the handout



## Results: Evaluation, structure and voice

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- There is also a difference between NOS-journaal and PowNews with respect to positioning of evaluations *within* news items. PowNews's journalists position them at the beginning, take initiative in their formulation and embroider them. NOS-journaal's journalists let them appear half-way or at the end of news items, do not repeat or elaborate them, and interviewees rarely put their views to interviewees
- Compare the clips from the interviews with reporter Dominique van der Heyde (NOS) vs. lawyer Bram Moszkowicz (PowNews)



example 9



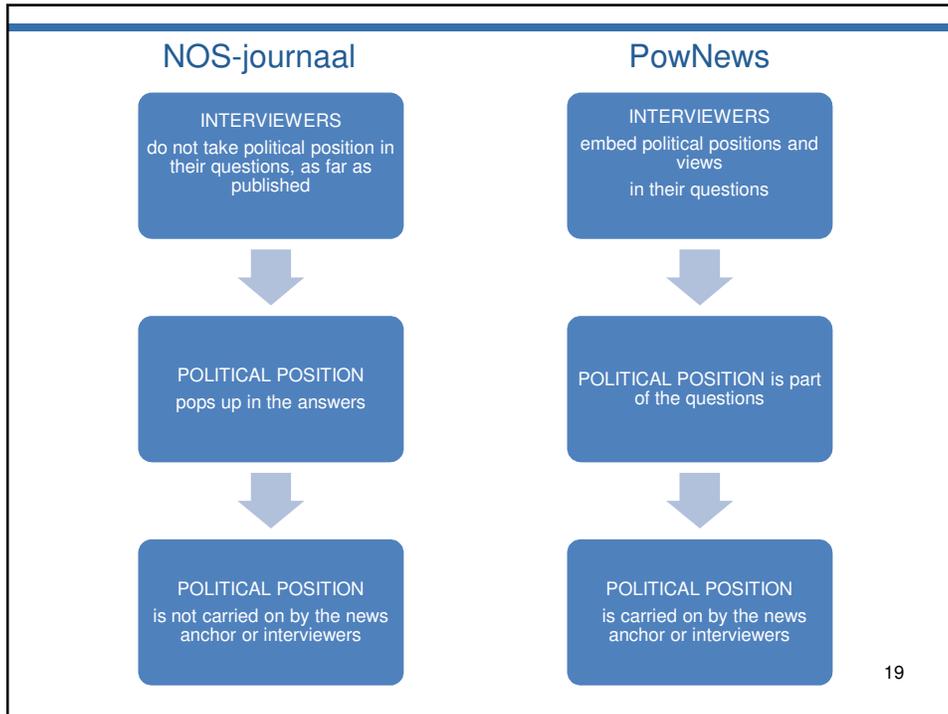
example 10

## Results: Evaluation and political position

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- Not all evaluations concern political positions, but a subset does
- Both programmes contain evaluations concerning political positions
- If an evaluation concerns a political position, the programmes differ in the way in which they show it
- The diagram on the next slide shows how NOS-journaal versus PowNews present political positions



## Results: Evaluation and political position

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- The difference between the programmes is especially striking with respect to a subset of evaluations, namely the evaluations that concern political positions
- Two clips taken from interviews with witnesses illustrate the point



example 11



example 12

## Conclusions

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- **Question design:** NOS-journaal applies adversarial questioning. PowNews does this more frequently and shows more variation in its use of adversarial question forms
- **Support:** the interviewers from NOS-journaal avoid response tokens and if they use utterances that share the form of response tokens, these utterances are ambiguous with respect to their interactional dimension; nor do the PowNews interviewers make extensive use of response tokens, but they do not avoid them totally, thereby displaying support
- **Evaluation:** PowNews does not fit into the existing normative framework of news programmes in which the expectation that information precedes evaluation is apparent. PowNews's viewers hear and see evaluations before they are informed about the facts. Pownews also flouts the principle that is emerging on the global level of items and programmes, namely that journalists can exploit structure and get more relaxed with respect to neutrality as they move into an item and programme. PowNews presents positions right from the start and carries them on through news items from the beginning to the end

## Discussion

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- The study, being a case study, is not representative with respect to large categories such as programmes
- Our PowNews specimen does not fit into current expectations with respect to news programmes and flouts emerging principles of dealing with non-neutrality
- Our NOS-journaal specimen underpins the allegations that NOS-journaal is a politically partial programme empirically
- Presenting balanced news by means of hearing various sides is an infrequently used practice in both issues of news programmes that were studied
- How worrying is the discrepancy between NOS-journaal's mission statement and practice concerning neutrality?
- How feasible and practical is the aim – put forward by policy makers – of the Dutch public broadcasting system of *multiformity*?

End

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