The discursive representation of the US same-sex ruling:
A corpus-based investigation of news values
in the US, UK and Italian press

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On June 26, 2015, the US Supreme Court ruled on the *Obergefell v. Hodges* case that led to the recognition of same-sex marriage in all fifty States, declaring it a constitutional right under the Fourteenth Amendment. The event received massive media coverage and soon became a major topic of animated discussions on digital media platforms.

The media coverage and its worldwide resonance resulted in a(n involuntary) deviance amplification effect (Cohen 2002), framing the event in such a way that moral panic was an inevitable consequence (Hall *et al.* 1978; McEnery 2006).

Drawing on these observations, our investigation focuses on the cross-cultural discursive representation of key actors and events concerning the US Supreme Court ruling in leading US, UK and Italian newspapers. In particular, our contribution is based on the analysis of all the articles published in the timespan that goes from June 26, 2015 to July 3, 2015 by the following newspapers:

- US corpus (US_NewsMar, 182,243 tokens [186 articles]): *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and the *Los Angeles Times*;
- UK corpus (UK_NewsMar, 33,717 tokens [42 articles]): *The Guardian*, *The Daily Telegraph*, and *The Times*;
- Italian corpus (ITA_NewsMar, 22,633 tokens [43 articles]): *la Repubblica*, *Corriere della Sera*, *Il Messaggero*, *il Giornale*, *il Fatto Quotidiano*, and *Libero*.

The selection was made both on the basis of the printed and online circulation of each newspaper in the respective countries, and their widespread use of digital media (see the next paragraph on this aspect of our research).

The data were collected by using the online database LexisNexis. However, due to the unavailability on LexisNexis of the sources previously mentioned for the Italian component of the NewsMar, Google News was used in order to collect these data. BootCat (Baroni and Bernardini 2004) was then used so as to collect automatically the news stories displayed thanks to Google News.

The corpora thus collected were then uploaded to the online corpus analysis platform Sketch Engine (Kilgarriff *et al.* 2004; Kilgarriff *et al.* 2014) in order to analyse the discursive construction of the event in relation to news framing.

Our investigation is part of a wider independent research project based on the cross-cultural analysis of news values in the press. News values have been traditionally described as "the factors that take an event into the news" (Bednarek and Caple 2012a: 39), that is, in terms of the factors that make a news story newsworthy. Thus, they have been considered as linked to news selection, since as Bell (1991) argues, they are "values by which one 'fact' is judged more newsworthy than another" (Bell 1991: 155). In the Journalism and Communication literature, this approach to news values is confirmed, since they are "typically defined as properties of events or stories or as criteria/principles that are applied by news workers in order to select events or stories as news or to choose the structure and order of reporting" (Bednarek and Caple 2014: 2).

While news values have generally been approached from the point of view of their material (i.e., as properties of the event in itself; see Galtung and Ruge 1965) or their cognitive construction (van Dijk 1988), Bednarek and Caple's (2012a) view is mainly linked to their Discursive News Values Analysis (DNVA) approach (Bednarek and Caple 2017), which investigates "how newsworthiness is construed and established through discourse" (Bednarek and Caple 2012b: 104). This is due to the fact that, as Vasterman (1995) argues:

> […] news is not out there, journalists do not report news, they produce news. They construct it, they construct facts, they construct statements and they construct a context in which these facts make sense. They reconstruct 'a' reality.

Thus, a discursive perspective on news values can allow us to "systematically investigate how these values are constructed in the different types of textual material involved in the news process" (Bednarek and Caple 2012b: 104). This approach allows the authors to highlight given textual traces that can let us see how news values are realised in the news discourse.

From this observation, we must also underline that, as Bell (1991) highlights, these are values and, as such, "[t]hey are not *neutral*, but reflect ideologies and priorities held in society" (Bell 1991: 156, italics in the original). Indeed, Cotter (2010) refers to them as "ideological factors" (Cotter 2010: 8, 67), since they can be used to both reinforce "an 'ideology' about what counts as news" (Cotter 2010: 67) and to strengthen "*other* ideologies (rather than just an ideology of what is newsworthy)" (Bednarek and Caple 2014: 3, italics in the original). However, while scholars working within Critical Discourse Analysis have repeatedly hinted at their ideological nature (van Dijk 1988; Fowler 1991; Richardson 2007; Machin and Mayr 2012), as Bednarek and Caple (2014) highlight, news values have not been comprehensively researched in this field of investigation.

Thus, the aim of our research project is to demonstrate how given news values (Bell 1991; Bednarek and Caple 2012a, 2012b, 2014, 2017) are disseminated and/or 'picked up' by media institutions in their professional experience of what counts as news. Indeed, analysing if and how journalists reinforce and reinterpret these ideologies may help researchers "find out what values are emphasised (foregrounded), rare or absent (backgrounded)" (Bednarek and Caple 2014: 6).

In order to achieve this, corpus linguistic methodologies can help us when approaching a large amount of data, as Bednarek and Caple (2014) and Potts, Bednarek and Caple (2015) point out. Indeed, through the use of corpus linguistic methodologies, we can gain "first insights into a conventionalised repertoire of rhetoric of newsworthiness" (Bednarek and Caple 2014: 14) in the case of corpora representative of specific media events. Thus, if "every journalist and every editor will have a different interpretation of what is newsworthy" (Rau 2010: 15), corpus linguistic techniques can help researchers identify "what kind of discursive devices are repeatedly used […] to construct different news values" (Bednarek and Caple 2014: 16) and, consequently, they can take us to the backstage of the news production process. In this way, the combination of Discursive News Values Analysis (DNVA; Bednarek 2016a, 2016b; Bednarek and Caple 2017) and corpus linguistic methodologies can be used to better define how news stories are reported since, by underlining what is newsworthy for a particular news organisation, they can help researchers 'sneak a peek' into the professional practices at the very heart of the news production process.

In order to carry out our analysis of the news values that are routinely enhanced in our corpora, we have resorted to the Word list tool available on the Sketch Engine online

platform. A cut-off point of minimum frequency of five occurrences has been imposed, since as previously argued our investigation wants to highlight discursive patterns that are routinely used by the media organisations under investigation.

In order to further ensure this, that is, that the selection of given items displayed in the Word list was not only due to their frequency but also to their dispersion in the corpora under investigation, we have decided to make use of the Average Reduced Frequency (ARF; Savický and Hlaváčová 2002). This is something different from the methodology adopted by Bednarek and Caple (2014) and Potts, Bednarek and Caple (2015), since they only take under consideration as a parameter in the analysis of news values the raw frequency of given words in the corpora they set out to investigate, without considering the dispersion of the phenomena highlighted.

The word lists thus computed were not, however, contrasted with a reference corpus (i.e., no keyword analysis was performed), since the scope of our analysis was not to contrastively highlight differences among genres in news discourse but, rather, see how given items in our corpora were explicitly and routinely used in order to construe the newsworthiness surrounding the US Supreme Court ruling. Indeed, a comparison with other corpora might have altered the results, due to the nature of the genres contrasted *per se* and not to the way newsworthiness is construed in the US_NewsMar, UK_NewsMar, and ITA_NewsMar.

In order to assign a news value to given items in the word lists computed according to the methodology previously described, a collocation analysis was also performed for each of these elements, so as to explore the semantic prosodies/preferences (Louw 1993; Stubbs 2002; Partington 2004) of given phenomena and attribute a specific news value.

In a preliminary study, focusing on a qualitative analysis of the first news stories on the US Supreme Court ruling published by the newspapers under investigation on June 26, 2015, our findings have identified how different cultures tend to highlight different sets of news values in the three countries and different newspapers under investigation. More specifically, this preliminary study has highlighted that, while the Italian newspapers tend to represent the event in terms of the news values of Eliteness (in particular, by presenting the event as a success for the Obama administration), Impact, and Timeliness, the UK press strongly underlines the news values of Negativity (in particular, in *The Telegraph*), Impact, Timeliness/Superlativeness; finally, the US press strongly enhances the news values of Impact (specifically, focusing on future consequences), Eliteness (in this case, the judges involved in the US Supreme Court ruling were particularly foregrounded), and Negativity (explicitly linked to the opposing sides in the judges' decision).

Thus, by extending our analysis to the entire week after the ruling and by combining a quantitative and a qualitative analysis of our data, our aim is to highlight if these particular news values are further enhanced by the newspapers under investigation and if the signification spiral portrayed and entailed by playing on these particular (or further) notes of newsworthiness are consistently used by the news media agencies in reporting the event.

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