

# Digital Linguistic Ethnography in the Newsroom: An NT&T case study

## From 'click bait' to 'quality clicks' - How online newswriters sell news 'the right way'

International research group NT&T is committed to investigating the pivotal role played by the news in society by foregrounding its inherent wide-ranging discursive processes.

### In doing so, we

- strive towards a redefinition of the news, one that embraces the complexity of **today's constantly developing, heavily digitized and globalized newscape** through a broad, inclusive understanding of the news as a mixed and endless array of topics that raise public interest;
- do not just zoom in on the news but **expand our analytical lens to include other institutional domains like health, business, education, politics, science and the arts** and how they interact with those involved in making as well as consuming the news;
- recognize how **existing news production processes are subject to continuous change** and aim to chart the constant flux of newsmaking practices both inside and outside of the traditional newsroom, as well as the roles and responsibilities of those involved in them;



- call for increased recognition of the contingencies of **an age of post-journalism**, leading scholarship beyond an exclusive focus on selected professionals in the newsroom towards integrating other stakeholders and how they partake in the discursive processes underlying the news;
- believe in an inclusive approach to the study of news, which does not simply incorporate the views and experiences of those 'on the shop floor', but actually sees the **news practitioners as necessary, valuable and credited research partners**;
- encourage an **activist approach**, one that is intent on rendering visible and **examining critically what has so far been hidden or, worse, taken for granted** and draws on a strong belief that opening up the workings of the news – in a time in which 'fake news' and 'alternative facts' dominate public perception – to general scrutiny is instrumental in promoting knowledge transfer as part of the global democratic project.

- set out to promote the analytic power of a linguistic (digital) ethnographic perspective;



### Background

#### Ubiquity of online news

##### Differences in:

- News Consumption
- News Content
- **News Production**

News is presented as

"online packages that access databases, archival documents, photos, audio and video and that increasingly provide users the opportunity to interact with and contribute to the presentation"

(Royal 2012:5)

#### Growing use of web analytics

##### Web analytics & journalism

(Tandoc 2014; Schlesinger & Doyle 2015; Usher 2018)

- **What:** monitoring audience behaviour/engagement with news content
- **Why:** increasing clicks and reads; attracting visitors, since most news websites (including those with "pay walls") rely on **online advertising as an important source of revenue**

### Current NT&T research foci at UGent:

#### 1. Algorithmic tools

"Algorithms make decision-making more informed and objective – a promise hotly contested by critics of these technologies. Yet, to date, most of the debate has focused on the instruments themselves, rather than on **how they are used**" (Christin 2017)

#### 2. Craft of online newspaper sub-editors

"Underappreciated and underresearched" (Vandendaele 2017)

- Recent yet **crucial role in the online news production process**
- More than spelling checkers
- Fact checkers, **guardians of the news brand**
- Make articles readable, accurate and widely read
- **Craft headlines** to 'seduce the reader' and 'sell the article'



### Preliminary conclusions

#### Research goals:

- ➔ Evolution of sub-editing craft in a digital world
- ➔ What makes a 'good'/'clickable'/'viral'/'shareable' online headline?

#### Fieldwork setting:

- Belgian Brussels-based Dutch-language broadsheet
- **Fieldwork opportunity as online sub-editor: 5/3/18 – 19/8/18**

#### Method:

- **Going 'digitally' native:** Into the Newsroom
- Ethnographic fieldwork, interviews, think-aloud protocol
- **Headline testing with Chartbeat**

#### Data:

- Access to Chartbeat/Slack/DioContent/DNR/Trello
- The different headline options
- The articles & position on website (and in newsletter)
- Case-based interviews with online sub-editors + site managers
- 9 additional semi-structured interviews with main 'digital players' in the newsroom (e.g. the 'digital disruptor')

### What is a headline test? (Chartbeat)

Headlines	Trials	Quality click %/Click through rate
"Een surrealistisch landje": waarom buitenlanders niet voorbij de Belgische clichés geraken	1,129	68% 6.16%
Waarom frieten, chocolade en bier België begrijpelijk maken voor buitenlanders	198	82% 3.63%
Friet, bier, chocolade en wafels: buitenlandse media begrijpen 'de Belg' beter door clichés	160	58% 4.53%
De Belg als beschiden, bierdrinkende onderdog: clichés maken onze samenleving behaagbaar voor buitenlanders	366	81% 4.46%

Gathering 'quality clicks' = constant struggle between

- news values (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Harcup & O'Neill, 2001; 2016; Bednarek & Caple, 2017)
- production values (Vandendaele, 2017)
- algorithms that register which stories are clicked, liked or shared most

Towards **ONLINE journalism values**

Sub-editor does not just copy-paste, cf. headline tests

#### Online news

- on one hand: increased automated production ('churning out news')
- on other hand: increased nuance, creating well-thought out original work

Mass production ≠ Loss of traditional journalistic practices (news values, creativity)

Technological innovation ➔ 'Robojournalism'?

Technology introduces (an) additional layer(s) in the news production process and enhanced reflection on journalists' own professional practices

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