Telling Europe

Narrative analysis television news stories about Europe

by

Alexa Robertson

Department of Political Science, Stockholm University

“Tell me whom you live with, and I will tell you who you are.”

The Earl of Chesterfield

It is widely acknowledged that the globalization of television poses a threat to the national public sphere and to the figure at its heart: the “well-informed citizen”. Global television addresses an international consumer audience, rather than national ones of citizens. Global television is also live television, as both scholars and journalists have been quick to point out.1 In a competitive marketplace, the race to be first with a piece of news can outweigh the ambition of ‘getting it right’, and even when the ‘facts’ are accurate, the opportunity for reflection and analysis has been pre-empted by the intense pace of satellite and digital broadcasting. As one English journalist put it:

There’s no time for analysis. You don’t have a chance to talk with people. Things happen around you and that’s the only way you can be now, is to be live. It’s the A-all and B-all of it all. If you’re not live you may as well not be in the ballgame.2

We live in an age lacking continuity, it is said, with episodes dexterously whipped away as soon as they are presented and replaced with others, thereby depriving citizens of memory.3 A pessimistic reading of the information age is that Marshall McLuhan’s prophecy has come true: in the global village, the medium has become the message.

Or has it? There are, I suggest, two problems with such claims.

First, the audience’s realignment along global, consumer lines has yet to be accomplished. Despite the proliferation of satellite channels, news-watching remains a nationally-based activity.4 Thus, the role played by traditional media in bolstering collective identity in the past decade has aroused considerable academic interest.5 That

1 See, for example, Gurevitch (1996), Negrine (1996) and Van Ginnekin (1998).
2 Dave Green, CBS News, interviewed in the BBC documentary “The Eye of the Storm”.
3 Ascherson 1988: 86.
4 Robertson 1999.
there are lessons to be learned about the power of the media in this regard has not been lost on the architects of European integration. The post-Cold-War period has seen the development of policies designed to promote a ‘European cultural space’ and the launching of Euronews—often referred to as Europe’s answer to CNN—by an EU keen “to create an image for itself on the television screen”. While they may well play a revolutionizing, globalizing role by facilitating a shrinking of the planet, then, the media can also be thought to play a conservative role by cultivating identification with the dominant political and/or cultural community.

The second problem with claims about the dire consequences of the globalisation of news—insofar as globalised news is supposed to be live, broadcast without reflection and context—is that research supporting them has tended to focus on crisis reporting. What we know about the purported ‘CNN effect’ has largely been the result of studies of coverage of the Gulf War and other conflicts. Many conclusions have also been drawn on the basis of material limited in terms of culture, genre, and time.

But what about everyday coverage, viewed regularly over a longer period of time and across different cultures? Billig argues that established nations are reproduced as such by a collection of ‘ideological habits’ or a continual reminding of nationhood. Because these habits are usually unnamed and unnoticed, he uses the term ‘banal nationalism’ to refer to them. What, then, about ‘banal’ news reporting of ‘us’ and ‘them’?

The argument underpinning this paper and the research behind it is that European publics have not, after all, been deprived of ‘memory’. On the contrary, the news rehearse historical and cultural themes that give meaning to and make sense of a turbulent political environment. News reports are made—indeed, crafted is often the more suitable word—by journalists who have been socialised in a variety of political cultures, few of them war zones. The rehearsal of familiar themes and need of both journalists and publics to ‘understand’ means that the news clearly has a storytelling function.

Attending to the routine and the banal entails a shift in analytical focus. For years, political scientists have attempted to study the power of the media with the aid of concepts such as “agenda-setting” and “gatekeeping”, and with measurements of the space and prominence allotted to different views and factions on specific political issues. The emphasis in case studies of foreign news has usually been on media content i.e. on what has been told, and they have routinely lamented the lack of continuity and

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7 As in much mass communication research, studies of US and British media dominate. When there is comparative breadth in terms of the countries included in the analysis, as in Van Dijk’s press studies, the scope tends to be limited in terms of time, often to a single day.
context in news reporting since Cohen, in his classic 1963 study, complained that “a sense of the whole cannot be gleaned”.9

Researchers from other disciplines, however, have suggested that the role played by the news in ensuring that the ‘well-informed citizens’ conceived of in democratic theory get their daily diet of facts on which to base their political views and behaviour is second to its social, ritual function. Scholars interested in this socio-political or, as it is sometimes called, ideological role have been less concerned with the factual content — the what — of news, and more concerned with its technical and symbolic forms and structure — or with how it works. Rather than seeing the news as a source of information, these scholars consider the news as narrative, with the stories being told providing the context and continuity that foreign news studies have overlooked.10

The narrative approach was frequently applied to studies of domestic news reporting in the late 1970s and early 1980s, particularly by students of the ‘critical school’, but while interest in narratives has waxed in other branches of the social sciences and humanities, it appears to have waned in media studies. And as far as I can ascertain, narrative analysis has rarely been applied in studies of news about the world beyond the borders of the nation.11 It seems to me, however, that much more can be mined from this approach.

In what follows, a case will be made for seeing news material as fertile ground for narrative analysis and, conversely, for seeing the narrative approach as capable of yielding helpful insights into the meaning-making potential of television news texts. A review of work by media scholars on the narrative function of news will serve as the basis for a method for coding television news broadcasts in such a way that the power of television news as narrator and identity-cultivator can be explored in a valid, duplicable and reasonably reliable fashion. The method will then be applied to BBC World and Swedish television news texts to see what ‘stories’ are being told about Europe. The approach promoted here is thus a hybrid one, favouring the notion that news reporting helps ‘construct’ political reality rather than simply reflecting an extant world, while not relinquishing the ambition of attaining reliable empirical results on the basis of which generalizations can be made. What is being sought is insight into the mechanisms that allow us to “feel ourselves to belong to groups and communities which are constituted in part through the media”.12 Ultimately, narrative analysis could serve to bridge the methodological gap between the ‘Self/Other’ focus of collective identity theory and the

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10 See, for example, Barkin 1984, Tuchman 1976, Knight and Dean 1982, Smith 1979, Bennett and Edelman 1985.
11 Knight and Dean (1982), who analyse Canadian newspaper coverage of the British recapturing of the Iranian embassy in London, represent one exception, but theirs is a modest study of one event reported in a total of 18 newspaper articles.
12 Thompson 1995: 35.
‘Us/Them’ structures in news accounts of current events highlighted by semiotic analysis.

**Television news as a source of narratives**

Whether conceived of as an actor or arena (and my view is that it serves variously as both), considerable power is invested in television. As Dahlgren has so helpfully put it, television is the place where ‘public sphering’ gets done.\(^{13}\) It is also the principal storyteller in contemporary society, according to Kozloff.\(^{14}\) But how do television news stories compare with the others addressed by narrative theory?

Most definitions of narratives portray them as the recounting or recital of a series of events. There is generally thought to be an underlying structure in these. Labov and Waletzky identified six such structural elements: the abstract (which summarizes the central action and main point of the narrative, pre-empting questions about why a given story is being told), the orientation sets the scene (telling the who, when, where, and initial situation or activity of the story); the complicating action is the central part of the story proper (answering the question, what happened?). The ‘so what?’ question is addressed by the evoluation. A directionless sequence of clauses, say Labov and Waletzky, is not a narrative. Narrative has point, and it is narrators’ prime intention to justify the value of the story they are telling, to demonstrate why these events are reportable.\(^{15}\)

Bell modifies this framework to ‘cope’ with news stories. The abstract is translated as lead (with the headline considered an abstract of the abstract). The orientation is the “who, what, when and where” of classic journalism. And the coda only exists in the form of the signing off at the end of a television news bulletin.\(^{16}\)

News stories differ from other narratives in another respect. Many definitions concerned with the analysis of fiction emphasize the sequence of unfolding events, and their linear or chronological nature. In fiction, stories have a beginning and an end. This description does not really fit news narratives, the essence of which is better captured by Martin Gray when he says that creating a narrative means selecting incidents so as to suggest some relationship between them.\(^{17}\) In many media analyses, the terms

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\(^{13}\) Dahlgren 1995:12.


\(^{17}\) Gray 1992.
‘narrative’, ‘theme’ and ‘frame’ are used interchangeably. Gitlin, for example, could well be describing the essential features of the narrative as defined by Gray or Fowler (who says that narrative is the establishing of some connection between the events being recounted) when he defines ‘media frames’ as

principles of selection, emphasis, and presentation composed of little tacit theories about what exists, what happens, and what matters...\(^{18}\)

What is meant by narrative in this paper is simply the story being told in a given news report. Such a narrative may contain one or more themes. Narratives in this sense can be distinguished from media frames largely by the metaphors they evoke. The concept of frame implies something static, hung around a snapshot or a photograph, while a narrative unfolds in stages and must by definition have a narrator. In conceiving of these, I have found Jenck’s metaphor of the ‘imaginary museum’ to be particularly helpful. This refers to a museum that is becoming increasingly crowded with stockpiles of media products of which people are trying to make sense. In this museum, the journalist is a curator, who arranges the items in different ways so that visitors will be able to see and make sense of them.\(^{19}\)

It seems to me that understanding narratives means dealing with two contrasting traits: structures (which are tangible, and within reach of quantitative analysis) and meaning (which is largely intangible and more elusive). Many of the narrative analyses of news conducted in the late 1970s and 80s emphasised the former trait, and involved the quantification of largely superficial features of news reports. Smith, for example, who was interested in the ‘mythic elements’ of television, analysed twenty weekday newscasts broadcast on US networks in order to explore the possibility that television news is “structured, consciously or unconsciously, on the basis of a limited repertoire of consistent, predictable narratives”.\(^{20}\) Seeking to empirically investigate the theory that the media give prominence to events that are not spontaneous, but rather planned for the purpose of being reported, or what Boorstin called ‘pseudo-events’, Smith divided the news items in his sample into four categories: spontaneous events, comment on spontaneous events, pre-planned events, and comment on pre-planned events. He found that pre-planned events and comments on them amounted to almost 70 percent of all events reported.\(^{21}\)

But television narratives can be accessed by attending to the meanings encoded in news texts as well as the structures in which they are encased. Journalists are socialised

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19 Jenck’s concept is reproduced in Bondebjerg 1992.
20 Smith 1979: 75.
21 Ibid: 76.
in a given country, or national culture, and in a given workplace, or professional culture. They can be thought to frame the news in a way that makes sense to their compatriots, both consciously, as purveyors of ‘mediated culture’, and unconsciously, as inhabitants of the same ‘situated culture’. The stories told in evening broadcasts are of interest because television news does not simply ‘reflect’ its linguistic, social or historical determinants, but may also work on them in an active and creative way. This view of media agency does not only exist in the mind of scholars. The possibility that the news ‘constructs’ rather than reflects reality has also been expressed by journalists. As two BBC cameramen, talking about their experiences in covering the Gulf War, put it:

> Every time we film something, we film what we know. How we want to film something, what we’re prepared to see, what we think will get on air...

> I filmed it as I would any news event really [...] I produced material that was suitable for transmission rather than perhaps reflected what was actually there.

**Attending to structures and meanings in television texts**

While the ‘gatekeeping’ approach to news analysis presupposes a factual world from which news events flow, with journalists skimming off the richer parts and bottling them for public consumption, the semiotic approach assumes that no factual world can exist without “the conceptual frameworks in and through which reality is available to us”. These conceptual frameworks are based on oppositions. A given concept is not something natural that reflects intrinsic features of ‘the world out there’, but something which takes on meaning and definition negatively, in relation to other concepts. As Saussure put it, their “most precise characteristic is in being what the others are not.” In news contexts, a concept such as ‘the West’ makes sense when juxtaposed with ‘the East’, ‘the Third World’ or ‘the Warsaw Pact’, or some other contrasting concept. Concepts are thus only meaningful when they exist in a social context and are used in a way that is conventionally accepted in that context. When the context changes, signs

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23 Susan Stein and Ian Pritchard, interviewed in the BBC documentary “The Eye of the Storm”.
24 Bignell 1996.
change meaning. This points to a need for a diachronic approach as a complement to the ubiquitous case study strategy of international news analysis.

For critical media theorists, that which is politically interesting about some concepts is their multi-accentuality, which is seen as a site of struggle between different social forces to ‘fix’ the meaning of each.\(^{27}\) Hartley notes, for example, how ‘democracy’ was originally a ‘boo’ word, synonymous in the 16th century with ‘mob’, thanks to the efforts of monarchists like Hobbes to naturalize the negative definition of the concept. Preliminary studies suggest that the concept of ‘Europe’ is such a multi-accentual site of struggle, having evolved into a ‘hooray’ word in some European news discourses (eg. Euronews, German), while remaining a ‘boo’ word in others (eg. British), and intriguingly fluctuating as a ‘boo-hoo’ word in Swedish. Narrative analysis points to one way of unmasking the inevitability or naturalness of viewing Europe as destined to be a common marketplace or cultural space, for instance, or the reverse, as an artificial construct, as something that an island nation with a distinctive culture of its own can never be an organic part of, and the profoundly political quality of such practices.

Meaning in narrative news content is thought to be be made on three levels: the denotative, the connotative, and the mythological.\(^{28}\) A news picture of people applying hammers to the Berlin Wall *denotes* the razing of a concrete edifice that stood in a German city for several decades. The denotative meaning of a word or concept is generally thought to be relatively fixed. In connotation, on the other hand, the social dimension of communication is to be found.\(^{29}\) Connotation multiplies signs into a ‘second order’ of signification, according to Barthes. Thus, the same news picture of a wall being dismantled *connotes* the end of the Cold War that divided the East and West of Europe and/or the triumph of popular will over inflexible structures. Often resulting from the cumulative force of a sequence or from implied comparison with absent alternative choices, connotation exploits our expectations of what might have been chosen, in order to compare it with what is there.\(^{30}\) Put differently, connotation, particularly in television texts, works on the tendency of viewers to “fill in the blanks” with what they already know. This can be seen with particular clarity in Swedish television use of pictures of Dracula’s castle in reporting the application for EU membership by Romania and other former East Bloc states; the flying champagne corks that viewers saw on the day Sweden applied for membership were conspicuous by their absence.

Signs and their connotations are brought together in what, after Barthes, has been called ‘myth’, which refers to how texts are structured to send particular messages to the


\(^{28}\) Manning and Cullum-Swan 1994:466;.

\(^{29}\) Turner 1994: 121.

viewer that make certain ways of thinking about concepts appear natural. The distinctive quality of myth is that it appears to be exclusively true, rather than one of a number of different possible messages: it makes “contingency appear eternal” and makes political and historical intentions “innocent [...] it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but tha of a statement of facts”.31

Narrative analysis ultimately concerns such myth-making.32 Texts are thus read in such a way as to see how their structure can be thought to communicate particular messages and not others. Such analysis asks whether, and if so why, certain images, explanations and outcomes seem more ‘natural’ than others. In the present study, however, these larger questions are applied indirectly, at a relatively late stage in the analysis. At an intermediary stage, these concerns are operationalised in more direct questions to be posed to the texts, as will be seen in the next section.

However carefully it is conducted, such an analysis cannot say anything about the sense television viewers actually make of these news reports. Recent research on reception has emphasized that studies like the one reported here, insofar as they do not assume a ‘hypodermic needle’ effect (and this one certainly does not), are incomplete unless they take into account how viewers ‘read’ the news in everyday practice. Nevertheless, as Boyd-Barrett has comfortingly argued, there is value in establishing what sort of texts the media provide viewers, to be read in their various ways.33 The point of this narrative analysis is thus to explore the parameter of the ‘field of signification’, which corresponds to the walls around the imaginary museum described at the outset of this paper. It is not certain that all visitors to the museum will notice or make sense of all of the items on display—in fact it is certain they will not—but they will not be able to see what is not displayed on the shelves, and they will not be able to remember what they have not seen.

A guided tour through the imaginary museum

In order to learn more about how television news can contribute to the cultivation of collective identities, and more precisely to find out what picture European publics get of their common realm through the television news, a study has been undertaken of the narratives in news reports about Europe and European affairs, compared across time and culture. Ultimately, the study will include reports from 1995 and 1998 broadcast by two national public service broadcasters (Swedish Rapport and German Heute) and two

broadcasters aiming at international, largely European, publics (*BBC World News* broadcast at 9pm CET and the prime time Euronews bulletin in English). The ambition is to compare reporting over time, but the sample must not be too large to be dealt with by a lone researcher. A decision has thus been taken to analyse the four programmes just one day for each week of these two years. Saturdays have been chosen for two reasons. First, it is assumed that much of the role played by the media in cultivating national identities stems from the work done by journalists in explaining events unfolding in the international environment to national audiences, or what Cohen *et al.* (1996) have called “domesticating the foreign”. As there is less activity in national and European parliaments on weekends than weekdays, there is presumably more space for the ‘outside’ world in Saturday broadcasts. Second, a feature of Saturday broadcasts usually experienced by analysts as irritating is seen in this context —with a concern for the cultivation of a ‘we’ feeling in the foreground— as a positive spin-off of the Saturday selection: they include a considerable measure of sports items. As a growing body of work has shown, the media and sport have very much to do with collective identity formation.

The analysis reported here is a preliminary probe of material and methods, more limited than the study sketched above. A sample was compiled of Saturday broadcasts for the months of January and November 1998 of *BBC World’s* 9pm edition of the *World News* and Swedish television’s largest evening news programme, the 7.30 pm edition of *Rapport*. This material was analysed in two stages. In the first stage, all 18 broadcasts were reviewed and the reports contained in them were coded according to the nature of the subject (to be explained below) and whether or not they pertained to European countries or European affairs. In the second stage, those items classified as pertaining to Europe were subjected to a closer reading.

A concern for the narrative function of news requires that attention be paid to the elements of reports that generate meaning, and this must be considered the task of ‘qualitative’ analysis. But the ambition here has also been to discern patterns in a large amount of empirical material. For that reason, and because respect for that material requires that sight never be lost of its essential nature as ‘mass’ communication, a considerable amount of quantification of superficial features has also been deemed necessary.

A codesheet was thus designed to systematise the inquiry. It included a number of basic questions to be asked of each news text in the sample, many of them built on

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34 This is one component study of a larger project investigating the relationship between the media and collective identity cultivation in a comparative context. In other component studies, weekday reporting is analysed.
earlier studies of news narratives. Smith’s was one of these. While in practice his categories proved difficult to apply (how, exactly, is ‘spontaneity’ to be defined?) a number of the features he coded for in 1979 news programmes served as useful starting points for the analysis of a similar number of news programmes, broadcast twenty years later. Several of these were included in modified form.

Nature of the subject of the news item
The Smith/Boorstin test for the occurrence of ‘hard news’ as opposed to narratives was applied by asking which of the following categories each of the 219 news items in the sample conformed to:

a) an unscheduled event taking place within the last 24 hours (eg. bomb blast, terrorist attack, natural catastrophe)

b) a scheduled event taking place within the last 24 hours (eg. meeting, election, papal speech, funeral)

c) a current (i.e. within 24 hours) twist in an on-going conflict/process/ development (eg. result of today’s session of ongoing peace talks in Paris; officials now say the death toll from an epidemic that has raged the past two months has reached a certain level; balloonist reaches Europe in the course of an around-the-world-flight)

d) an ongoing process or development with no current angle (eg. Russia has developed a new missile; the Indians in Brazil are learning to read and write)

e) a comment on a recent event (eg. UK Home Minister says he won’t resign even though his son was arrested for drug abuse earlier in the week)

f) a comment on an ongoing conflict/process/development (eg. China says environmental damage must be fought; John Major says the Northern Ireland peace talks have reached a critical stage)

g) none of the above (eg. Swedes and Russians all enjoy a good crime novel).

Of these, only category (a) constitutes real, ‘hard’ news as opposed to ‘pseudo-events’, although I would be prepared to include categories (b) and (c) as well. Category (c), however, which includes the “long-running political dramas that lurch from one crisis to another” referred to by Bennett and Edelman, should provide information about the serial nature of news reporting. If there is a high frequency of such items, then claims about the disjointedness of the political spectacle—about how one event is whipped away and immediately replaced by a new event—are rendered problematic. A high frequency of items conforming to categories (d) to (f) will also lend credibility to the claim of Bennett and Edelman that “the daily life stories [purveyed in the news] embody the truths of social elites and their publics” through highly selective impressions of reality.

35 Given the constraints of this short paper, not all of the code questions—and the results they yielded—have been included in what follows. A number proved not to be useful, and will not be applied in the larger study of which this is a probe. Others not reported here will be retained in the larger study, such as questions relating to the occurrence of stock characters, defined by Berger as ‘characters who are recognizable as particular types, stereotyped figures whose natures are easily recognized’ (Berger 1997:67) such as a ruthless killer, an oppressed people, an honest working man, or an innocent bystander.


37 Ibid: 158.
Narrative analysis and television news

Context
One way of establishing this was by attending to the context in which stories about Europe were set. Is ‘Europe’ something that is to be found in the conference rooms of Brussels and Strasbourg or in the homes and workplaces of ‘ordinary’ Europeans? Is it a site of armed conflict, natural catastrophe or culture? Is it a tale of ‘domestic’ or ‘foreign’ affairs; is Europe the concern of the parliament or the market?

Point of view
A number of questions were meant to establish the perspectives or vantage points from which stories about Europe were told. Attention was paid here to the function of the reporter, the parties involved, and the viewers. Was the reporter ‘omniscient’—standing above a dispute between two or more parties, for example, or commenting on what is going through a decision-maker’s head? Or was he or she engagé, ostensibly committed to one side or the other? Is the account of a flood given by a local villager rather than, or as well as, the reporter? Is one side of a conflict invisible, unrepresented? And where is the viewer in all this? Are we situated in the middle of a crowd or do we view a given demonstration from the vantage point of a distant rooftop? Do we look at the actors through a window or fence, or are we invited to enter the room in which they live or debate the issue at hand? Are we detached observers, to which information is imparted “just to let us know”, or are we asked to respond in some way to the reported events, if not by acting then at least by feeling?

Although the analysis that is about to be presented has not yet been double-coded, it is expected that reasonably respectable figures for inter-coder reliability will be achieved, particularly as continuing work refines the techniques employed. The final three questions in the codesheet, however, are not expected to produce ‘reliable’ results. These are based on a close reading of the news texts in the European selection. They probe their pedagogical and dramaturgical features—their quintessentially narrative properties, in other words. The first of these questions is whether there is any obvious reference by the camera or in the words of the reporter to objects, events or actions that can be thought to have symbolic value, and what their function could be thought to be. The second question addresses the semiotic nature of the text, and inquires as to whether any juxtapositions are clearly apparent (such as ‘Catholic: Protestant’ or ‘aggressive leaders: peace-loving villagers’ or ‘East:West’). The third and final question concerns the theme of the news item. It asks, quite simply, “What is this news item ‘about’? What story is being told?”

There is not scope in this paper to report all the results of the preliminary study. Those that are presented below provide an indication of the contours of the analysed news texts, and in particular the similarities and differences between the British-made and Swedish programmes. First, an adaptation of Smith’s test for the presence of narratives was applied to the entire population of news items.
Table 1. Distribution of items in BBC World News and Swedish Television’s Rapport, Saturdays, January and November 1998, according to type of subject.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of subject</th>
<th>BBCWorld</th>
<th>Rapport</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>unscheduled event</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>scheduled event</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>current twist in ongoing story</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>story with no current angle</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>comment on recent event</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>comment on ongoing story</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>none of the above</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>sum</strong></td>
<td>108</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>219</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As can be seen from Table 1, only 6 percent or 37 of the 219 items in the analysed broadcasts could be labelled ‘hard’ news. Giving the figures a more liberal reading, the first three categories together amount to 141 or 61 percent of the items. That means that at least a third would be considered by Smith and Boorstin to be ‘pseudo-events’, however. This initial overview of the material suggests it should contain a good deal of narratives, as opposed to the pure information of hard news. It also suggests that live news may not be the “A-all and B-all of it all”, at least on Saturdays. The game that the journalist quoted at the beginning of this paper refers to apparently need not be hardball.

On the basis of this overview, which established topics as well as subject types, any reports pertaining to Europe or European affairs were singled out. From this group, telegrams (items 40 seconds in length or less)\(^{38}\), purely domestic items, sports and weather reports were excluded.

The overwhelming majority of excluded ‘European’ items came from BBC World programmes. The reasons for this are illustrative in themselves. First, BBC World has considerably more telegrams than Rapport, which implies that its viewers are more often given superficial accounts of affairs. Second, although aimed at an international audience, most reports about Britain are purely domestic items—many concerning the Royal Family—without any attempt to relate British affairs to a wider context.

The next question concerned the context in which reports about Europe were set. First, the physical setting of reports was coded, with scores representing the number of items in which each setting figured. (This means that “official ceremony” could only be counted once per item). Those recurring in most items were: scene of an accident or catastrophe; the scene of a protest or rally; a street or public place; and official buildings. ‘Europe’ was also to be found at military installations, on the street, in cafes, at border crossings, in the countryside and, in Rapport, in people’s homes. Table 2 shows the political, as opposed to physical, contexts of the European items.

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\(^{38}\) Telegrams were included, however, if the other programme carried a longer item on the same topic.
The somewhat lengthy cast of characters in these narratives was topped by professionals, i.e. doctors, lawyers, journalists and experts (5 in *BBC World* and 10 in *Rapport*) and the forces of law and order, including police, members of the judiciary and soldiers (7 items in *BBC World* and 6 in *Rapport*). Next came government leaders and heads of state (5 items in *BBC World* and 5 in *Rapport*). Thereafter, the casts diverged, with *BBC World* featuring more demonstrators and victims, while *Rapport* had more ‘ordinary people’, workers and cultural workers (*BBC World* had hardly any). Some of these figures undoubtedly reflect the nature of the newsday: most parliaments and workplaces are closed on Saturdays, keeping politicians out of the limelight and providing ‘ordinary people’ with the leisure time to participate in public activities, be they demonstrations or cultural events.

Table 3 shows that twice as many *BBC World* news stories were told from the perspective of an ‘omniscient reporter’ as *Rapport* stories. On the other hand, it was
more common for Rapport stories to be told from one vantage point (rather than both or all). These perspectives included ‘officialdom’, ‘the West’, ‘the underdog’, the political opposition, and that of the public (the latter in one BBC World story and eight Rapport stories).

It proved extremely difficult to code for who acted and who was acted upon in these items. Often a given character played both roles—Kurdish refugees, for example, put pressure on European governments by swarming into Italy, and thus acted on those governments; they were also acted on by officials of those governments, however, who took them into custody. Nor was it unusual for those who best matched the description of ‘acted on’ not to be among the coded characters, i.e. they did not figure in the news report at all. It proved less problematic to determine whose point of view the story represented—whether it was told by the reporter, or a character in the news report; whether it was related from an aloof and impartial vantage point, or from the perspective of one side in an issue.

Table 4. Juxtapositions noted in selected items pertaining to Europe or European affairs in BBC World News and Swedish Television’s Rapport, Saturdays, January and November 1998.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Juxtapositions</th>
<th>BBCWorld</th>
<th>Rapport</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>bureaucrats, officials, politicians: suffering people</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>government, police: demonstrators</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>underdog: political authorities; government: people</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>workers: employers</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>conflictual leaders: peace-loving populace</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>government: opposition</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>extremists: victims</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>anti-democrats: democrats</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholics: Protestants</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pro EMU: contra EMU</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>man: nature</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West: Russia</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EU: undemocratic state</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sensible British: squabbling Europeans</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>local: European</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>communist industry: vulnerable humans</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>optimists: sceptics</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wise experts: foolish laymen</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>death: life, killers: nurturers</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>order: chaos, anarchy</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>light: dark, dawn: nightfall</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>colourful marketplace: desertlike cemetery</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>plans: reality, promises: outcomes</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tradition: business interests</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>insiders: outsiders</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>then: now</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>armed: unarmed</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>good guys: bad guys</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>women writers: men writers</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hardworking: passive</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>none</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The audience tended to be kept at arm’s length by the BBC throughout all of the programmes in this sample, assigned to the role of detached observers or bystanders. In only three of the 20 BBC World items was it possible to say that viewers were situated ‘inside’ the story. The situation was the reverse in Rapport, which filmed more closely to the characters throughout. In 17 of the 22 Rapport items, the viewer stepped into a marketplace or onto a village street, attended a rally or entered into a person’s home or—most often—stood beside the reporter as he or she talked to the people involved in the story.

As discussed earlier, a semiotic approach to news analysis suggests that individuals and collectives are defined according to what they are not, and that narratives are constructed around binary oppositions such as ‘us:them’. Although there is always a danger of finding what one is looking for, I nevertheless had no difficulty in identifying a variety of basic oppositions in these texts. The programmes in and frequency with which they occurred are indicated in Table 5.

What, finally, could the themes of these news items be said to be? What stories do I think were being told? Several themes could be coded for each item (although not more than two ever were).

Table 5. Stories the coder thought were being told in selected news reports pertaining to Europe or European affairs in BBC World News and Swedish Television’s Rapport, Saturdays, January and November 1998.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>BBC World</th>
<th>Rapport</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Europe is not changing, the Cold War lives on, historical legacies</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Europe is changing</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>conflict is an inevitable feature of the outside world</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the eternal plight of the refugee, eternal suffering of repressed</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a story about law and order</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a story about unfathomable violence</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the relationship between Swedish and European culture</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wild West, maffia story, good guys vs bad guys</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>people duped by manipulative political leaders</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the revolting French</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bickering Europeans</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>common man pays price for bellicose leaders</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>things never turn out the way politicians assure you—-they will, especially when it comes to the EU</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>return to normal, getting on with life after disaster</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cultural heritage (to be proud of)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>culture is more highly valued in other countries</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>importance of upholding tradition vs business aims</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>importance of solidarity</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>forces of light versus forces of darkness</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>barbarians are ‘them’; the civilised are among ‘us’</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a story about unnecessary suffering</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a story of political repression</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norwegians superior to Swedes again</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
If these are the narratives according to which news about Europe is reported, how are the stories told? As a way of answering this question, the final part of this paper will take a closer look at a few of the texts contained in the sample analysed above.

Victims or actors? Myth and the exile

It was suggested earlier that news discourse plays an important role in affirming single, or ‘uni-accentual’ values for such concepts as ‘democracy’, ‘the West’, ‘Europe’ and ‘the market’. As signs or concepts take on meaning not just through being contrasted with other concepts, but also, as Bignell puts it, by virtue of the other signs that have been excluded and are not present in the text, a comprehensive analysis should take absences into account. Comparative studies of coverage of the same events in different national media are perhaps the only reliable way of identifying such absences. What follows are two examples of this sort of documentation, of serials with episodes recurring throughout the period: the story of exiles from the conflicts in Kurdistan and Algeria exiled in Europe.

The plight of the Kurds

BBC World topped its 3 January 1998 broadcast with a report of tightened border controls in Austria and France in response to waves of Kurdish migrants flooding into Italy. The voiceover gives official European government views on the problems of policing borders under the Schengen agreement. But the camera tells a silent and sympathetic story from the vantage point of the ‘would-be-emigrants’. Women and children adrift on the boats that were to take them to Germany via Italy meet the viewer’s gaze, as does the Italian policeman accompanying them. (The Italians, we are told, have controversially offered open arms to the refugees, to the anger of Turkey and Italy’s EU partners.) The report ends with the information that the EU is making it clear that it’s up to Turkey to find a political solution to ‘its’ Kurdish problem.

Following a telegram about the shooting down of a Turkish military helicopter by the Kurdish PKK on 28 November 1998 (also covered by BBC World), Rapport took a look at ‘ordinary’ Kurds, not adrift but at home in a village in southeastern Turkey. First, we join in a conversation with lawyers representing the Kurdish Hadep party which, we are informed in what Graddol would call an ‘institutional voice’ (which states uncontroversial facts) although a legal party, has suffered the arrests of 9 of its leaders and 107 of its members. While progress has been made in resolving other long-term conflicts such as those in Israel and Northern Ireland, greater efforts are needed to solve

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the conflict in Turkey. The image of the Turkish side in this conflict which viewers are
given is of an empty parliament building, in which the only visible activity is a man
going down a spiral staircase. We then accompany the reporter into the village, into the
busy cafe where Kurds and Turks meet over a glass of tea and a game of dominoes. The
village is called ‘little Sweden’ because it has an Olof Palme park, an Olof Palme street,
a Swedish restaurant and a Swedish travel agency. In contrast to the Turkish
government building in which nothing is happening, this village, we are told, is famous
for its hard-working inhabitants, many of whom have emigrated to Sweden. In this news
story, the Kurds are not just the concern of the Turks; they have to do with Sweden too.
It does not require a particularly careful reading to determine which side Swedish
viewers are meant to identify with. The message is also, I would suggest, a familiar one
to Swedish publics. Conflict is the result of the aggressivity or passivity of undemocratic
governments: if only they are allowed to get on with their industrious lives, ordinary
people tend to live harmoniously.

**Victims of the violence in Algeria**

Field work has indicated that television journalists have been frustrated by the conflict
in Algeria. Heavy censorship by the Algerian authorities has meant that there is a dearth
of pictures emanating from the conflict, and as television is a picture-driven medium,
this has posed an acute dilemma to European journalists.40

This dilemma is clearly reflected in BBC treatment of the killings in Algeria. News of
these is presented in telegram form (as, for example, on 10 January 1998) and depicts
abandoned rooms and bloodsplattered walls. There are few people in these telegrams,
certainly no acting or speaking subjects.

The absences in these cursory reports become noticeable when contrasted with
*Rapport*’s coverage of the developments in Algeria. The Swedish journalist whose
report was broadcast on January 10th gets into the Algerian conflict through the back
door, so to speak, through the southern European port of Marseilles from which, we are
told, it is only a short distance to that far-off North African world. In Marseilles she
finds Algerians who are not silent, but who can and want to talk and who are angry
rather than afraid. Their community of exiles—a colourful, cosmopolitan marketplace
full of life and nourishment—is sharply contrasted with the dry and dusty landscape
surrounding the cemeteries in their native country, filled with the corpses of the
innocent by the fundamentalists. The Algerians who tell us their story are working for a
return to democracy; they are political actors rather than victims, actors with whom we
can identify because they are dressed in Western clothes and speak to us in recognizable
settings in a European language. That they can be thought to represent the forces of light

in a battle against the forces of darkness is underlined by the dramaturgy of the report, which begins in the rosy dawn and ends at nightfall, with the words

There is no sign of a political solution in Algeria today, even if the EU is going to send its envoy. Meanwhile, the old man in Marseille will continue to pray and his leader Soheib will continue to hold his meetings. But last night he received a death threat and was offered police protection. He refused. Whether that was the right decision, no one yet knows.

**Insights gained and tasks for further research**

This is work in progress. The method tested here needs to be further refined, and only when it is applied to a larger empirical material will it be possible to draw conclusions with any certainty about the narratives at work in news reports produced for different sorts of public spheres. Even in this preliminary study, however, a number of patterns have become discernible. The small number of ‘unscheduled events’ and the larger number of ‘current twists in ongoing developments’ and items without any current angle at all documented in both BBC World and Rapport broadcasts suggests that, on Saturdays at least, the news their viewers watch is not comprised of a series of unrelated incidents, whipped away only to be replaced by others. Rather, these news texts would seem more to resemble episodes in a serial or feuilliton. They contain a variety of characters, settings and themes, many of which differ from one reporting country to the next, but many of which recur.

Comparative analysis of reports of Kurdish and Algerian exiles highlights a number of absences that would otherwise go unnoticed. What the BBC World report on the Algerian massacres is not about is Europe. It is only after viewing the story that appeared on Rapport, which meets the Algerians in Marseilles and casts them as Europeans, that it becomes evident that the BBC World report is not about a European concern. Similarly, it is only when the viewer has entered the ‘Swedish’ village populated by ethnic Kurds and listened to them discussing politics in the barbershop that it becomes apparent that the BBC World report about the Kurds adrift in Italian waters, while sympathetic, actually keeps these refugees at arm’s length and silent. They are Turkey’s problem, not Europe’s. What is a European concern in one programme is not in the other.

Taking a step back from the coded results, it is possible to relate them, in broad strokes, to the semiotic notions introduced earlier in the paper, and in particular to the notions of connotation and myth.
The young Kurdish woman who recurs in *BBC World* reports,\(^{41}\) adrift in a boat of mute, resigned compatriots, can be seen as a symbol for the refugees that are an abiding feature of European history and politics, and the refugee flows that continually challenge European governments. As a symbol, she can be seen as the stateless victim afloat in a sea of bureaucracy. We feel sympathy for her but cannot immediately identify with her. She is out of reach and engages our gaze but does not engage us in dialogue.

*Picture 1 here*  
from *BBC World*, 3 January 1998

The connotations surrounding the Algerian woman in the *Rapport* item about exiles in Marseilles are quite different. This exile—who, unlike the BBC Kurd, has a name and a voice—is not primarily a refugee or victim. If she is a symbol, she is not one of helplessness but of the democratic potential of the country from which she has fled. This woman is an actor rather than a subject, and one with whom we can identify. She is sitting close to us and she could as easily be talking to us as to the interviewer. Here is hope, where there was only hopelessness in the boatful of Kurds.

*Picture 2 here*  
from *Rapport*, 10 January 1998

For one of these exiles, for one of these non-Europeans in Europe, we feel sympathy. For the other, we feel respect. Using Barthe’s terminology, and reading these stories in the context of the 40 other reports in the sample, I would like to suggest (and follow this suggestion up in future research) that there are different ‘myths’ at work in the British-made and Swedish programmes in which these exiles figure. The *BBC World* myth is one of inevitability: there will always be refugees, there will always be suffering, it’s a shame but not much can be done, certainly not by people like you, who view events at a distance. The *Rapport* myth, by contrast, is that the oppressed can always fight back, and that meaningful battles can be waged with the pen against the sword, by people with whom you can identify. It is a myth in keeping with the political culture in which the Swedish programme has long worked.

The impression gained by close readings of items such as that containing the young boatwoman is corroborated by the findings reported in tables 3 and 5 in particular. *BBC World* had a larger number of inpartial/unengaged items (omniscient reporter) with the audience addressed as detached observers, being informed ‘for their information’. In *Rapport*, on the other hand, it was more common for the viewer to be placed close to the

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\(^{41}\) The same footage appears in two reports in this sample, and was being used as a trailer for a BBC World news magazine a year later.
characters in a news story and to be addressed as someone who should do more than take note. More of the themes in *BBC World* stories were about the inevitability of suffering and conflict. Acts of God and/or inhuman forces figured on several occasions as the perpetrators of the misfortune behind the news item. In the *Rapport* texts analysed here, there were no Acts of God; suffering and/or conflict were not inevitable and always had human agents.

Change and continuity in international political life are two sides of another recurrent theme in other texts. In *BBC World* reporting, the emphasis is on continuity, particularly in reports of former enemies like Germany, Russia and countries of the former East Bloc. In these stories, the context is still the military one of the Cold War and the socio-political one of the communist command economy. In *Rapport*, on the other hand, the changing nature of the international environment is stressed, and the uncertainty and misery that has followed in the wake of the crumbling of the Cold War structure is emphasised rather than continuity with that epoch: the threat posed by Russia is now one of law-and-order, with organised crime and the maffia replacing greatcoated Russian soldiers as the ‘baddies’.

There has not been scope in this paper to explore that avenue, but the occurrence and meaning of change-versus-continuity narratives needs to be examined more closely in the continuation of this study. Work also remains to make sense of the patterns documented here. What are the implications of different publics being told different stories about their political environment, in which ‘the European’ is defined differently? If viewers of *Rapport*, but not *BBC World*, share Europe with Kurdish and Algerian exiles, then who does that tell us they are?42

42 I would like to thank Annabel Herzog, Philippe Teillet, Stig Arne Norsstedt, Kjell Goldmann, Lucas Pettersson, Maria Hellman and Kristina Riegert for their comments on various versions of this paper.
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