

From fact to narrative: the production of news and the effects on the sense of reality

Do fato à narrativa: a produção da notícia e os efeitos sobre o sentido de realidade

Del hecho a la narrativa: la producción de la noticia y los efectos sobre el sentido de la realidad

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Abstract

In this article I discuss the relationship between journalism, occurrence, and reality from the analysis of news production operations that the portal of the Argentine daily *La Nación* made of the Cocaine Case of *Puerta 8*, on February 2, 2022, in Buenos Aires. I seek to answer how journalism operates the production of news about the event and what effects of meaning it produces on the sense of reality. Assuming that reality is a social construction (Berger & Luckmann, 1985) and that the event is simultaneously fact and narrative (Quéré, 2006; 2011), I adopt four analytical categories: subjects and objects – implicated in the fact in its indicial character; and concept and strategy – which concern the narrative as a production of meaning. It is in the articulation of these categories in recognition and production operations that journalism participates in a peculiar way in the reiteration and stabilization of a common sense about reality.

Keywords: Journalism. *La Nación*. Event. Cocaine. Production-recognition.

Introduction

In a text from 2010, Meditsch points out the misunderstanding of the well-established notion in communication studies that journalism constructs reality. He states that “the relationship between journalism and the event takes place within a larger process of the social construction of reality and is conditioned by this larger process, which must be understood beforehand” (Meditsch, 2010, p. 20, our translation¹). In other words, reality is constructed discursively in different places and journalism participates, along with other actors, in its symbolic production and the socialization of knowledge about what happens. From this perspective, journalism, the event, and reality are linked in the production of news, but it is the event itself that promotes this link.

An event is something that breaks into everyday life and affects someone, producing a difference. It is a fact that can be understood within a framework of references and, at the same time, a narrative in search of meaning (Quéré, 2006). This double life of the event is what connects reality with journalism, in other words, it makes the production of news the result of a reading of reality that combines fact and meaning. This practice consists of selecting events from the most singular one (Genro Filho, 1987) that present themselves as a difference in the complex reality of the world and on which journalism acts discursively in order to reduce uncertainty, producing as its effect the sense that what is said there is reality itself apprehended and reproduced.

It is based on this hypothesis that I seek to examine, in this article², the coverage given by the website of the Argentine daily *La Nación* to the *Puerta 8 Cocaine Case*, which took place in Buenos Aires on February 2, 2022, and involved the deaths of 24 people and more than 80 hospitalizations due to cocaine consumption. The analysis covers a set of 14 news items published by *La Nación* that day, seeking to answer the following questions: how does

1 All the references not originally written in English have been freely translated.

2 This article presents part of the results of the research project “Journalism, institutions and actors: from social practices to the weaving of meanings in the mediatized circulation of discourses” carried out as a post-doctoral internship at the Facultad de Ciencias Sociales of the Universidad de Buenos Aires (UBA) in the year 2022.

journalism operate the discursive production of news about the event and what effects of meaning does it produce on the sense of reality?

I have adopted four analytical categories³ from which I seek to demonstrate the operations of recognition and production carried out by journalism around the event in its double life: 1. object (about what is being talked); 2. subject (who, whose and for whom it is being talked about); 3. concept (what is being talked about) and 4. strategy (how it is being talked about and by what means). The first two relate to the fact as an action that takes place in the reality of ordinary life and have an indicative character. The last two point to the operations aimed at making sense of the news event. I would point out that these categories are implicated in each other as operations that shape the journalistic narrative of the Case and that the distinction I make here aims to highlight this articulation to recognize the logics that condition the journalistic activity of news production.

I maintain that the news is organized internally on a referential level based on the indicial character of the events (the facts), in other words, taking the actions and their protagonists (subjects and objects) in their singularity, transforming them into information about reality (what happened to whom, when and where); and on a level of meaning, in which the concepts and strategies for interpreting the facts according to the newspaper's production conditions are articulated. It is in the articulation of these two levels that journalism participates as a peculiar instance in the reiteration of reality, carrying out operations of recognition and production. So, although news stories don't cover the totality of the reality of an event, the effect of meaning that derives from them is that everything that can be known about it is contained therein.

Reality and event

Berger & Luckmann (1985) consider that reality is the result of a social construction that begins in early childhood, when the child internalizes the world through the acquisition of the mother language. For them, this primary socialization is followed by other forms of secondary socialization that offer other parameters of reality. These socialization processes can be defined in terms of the formation of frames of reference with which we apprehend the world and give it meaning, or, as the authors put it, as reality constructed in interaction with others. In Bourdieu's sociology, this framework is constituted as a habitus, schemes of structured and structuring structures that condition actions and modes of distinction.

In view of this, Meditsch (2010, p. 26) points out that journalism cannot be credited with constructing reality, but rather with preserving it, as a form of tertiary socialization:

journalism could only be seen as an even more tenuous form of socialization in terms of constructing reality, perhaps appropriately called "tertiary" if compared to the previous levels. It would have the role of 'conserving' and 'updating' the realities internalized in primary and secondary socialization.

This role of journalism in updating and preserving internalized realities does not develop from the simple reiteration of the ordinary regularity of life, but from the events that break this routine, in other words, from the event as a difference that provokes differences. An event is a phenomenon that, to a greater or lesser degree, shakes up our construct of reality. It is constituted as an experience that creates a rupture in ordinary life, which affects us either as a provocation, affliction, or suffering, or as satisfaction, joy or enchantment (Quéré, 2006). It can be unexpected or planned, but it always has an inaugural character, "which means that when it occurs, it is not only the culmination of a process, but also marks the end of one era and the beginning of another" (Quéré, 2006, p. 189). As the end of a process, it leads us to understanding by perceiving it as the result of a sequence that culminates what preceded it. As a beginning, it is inscribed in the order of meaning, implying that we take action in response to what has happened to us.

The event, then, is always a discontinuity that relates to a past and a becoming, a before and an after. However, this past only manifests itself because of the event itself, because "it must have happened in order to have a past. This past is completely relative to the event and the way it is perceived, identified, and described" (Quéré, 2006, p. 191). The same goes for the future. But both the past and the future are relative to the event in two different ways, according to Quéré (2006). From one perspective, the event is explained as the result of a sequence, of a

3 These categories are adapted from Foucault's (2008) proposal in *Archaeology of Knowledge*.

process that constitutes it and, at the same time, already inaugurates a new beginning. On the other hand, the event explains the past, in other words, what was previously an ordinary reality is now illuminated by the event. And in relation to the future, it configures a set of responses that perform the actions that must be carried out on the basis of what has happened. Quéré (2006, p. 192) summarizes as follows:

The event is not just a target to be understood by contextualizing and reconstructing the causal sequence that led to it; it is also a source of understanding. Understanding then takes place according to the event. In one case, the search for continuity tames novelty and discontinuity; in the other, the hermeneutical power of discontinuity is exploited.

It is on the basis of these two possible statuses of the event (target and source) that Quéré (2006; 2011) postulates the double life of the event based on two modes of experience. On the one hand, it is apprehended as a fact that occurred in a context and for which we attribute a past and insert it into causal sequences. It influences our lives, we are affected by it, for better or for worse. This experience is thus inscribed in a frame of reference from which the event is apprehended. In the other mode of experience, according to the author, the event creates its own context of meaning:

Instead of it being the context in which the event took place that illuminates it, it is now the event that illuminates its context and its past, modifies the intelligence of previous events or experiences, reveals a situation with its structure and its horizons, uncovers “an unexpected landscape of actions and passions” (Arendt), reveals unsuspected possibilities and eventualities, and sheds its light on what may have preceded it as well as on what may follow. In short, it gives a new meaning to a story and an environment, a meaning of which it is the source, due to its discontinuity (Quéré, 2006, p. 198).

As a result, the first life of the event is the fact that affects us and that we apprehend from our references in order to frame it in a context as a difference that produces a difference. The second life is constituted as a narrative. In other words, we talk about what happened in order to perform its meaning, to reduce the uncertainties it generates. As França (2012, p. 14) summarizes, the first life is of the existential order, because it affects our sensations, it touches us, while “the second life is the event turned into a narrative, turned into a symbolic object”. It is in this context that journalism is inscribed as a body that apprehends the facts that erupt in everyday reality and as a producer of one of the narratives that give meaning to events.

Event and journalism

França (2012) points out that events do not have a specific place, just as the production of the narrative that realises the second life of the event takes place in any sphere of life. However, considering that “the media is the central institution through which society speaks of itself, to itself, it must be noted that it is mainly in this domain that events are revived and gain their symbolic existence” (França, 2012, p. 16). In fact, the media is a reference point for the production of meaning, but the generalization involved in the term media overlooks the specificities of each media institution in symbolic production. Here we are interested in demarcating what characterizes journalism.

For Genro Filho (1987), the specificity of journalism lies in capturing an event from the angle of singularity, whose content emulates the particularity and universality that are proposed in it. The singular, for the author, “is the form of journalism, the internal structure through which the meaning brought by the particular and the universal that have been overcome is crystallized. The particular and the universal are denied their preponderance or autonomy and maintained as the horizon of the content” (Genro Filho, 1987, p. 164).

Whether expected or not, the event is always of the order of the *extra-ordinary*. It is a fact that we identify as such because it shakes up the particular reality that constitutes us and that we constitute through socialization, and it is a narrative that inscribes it in a framework of meaning. When journalism is faced with an event, it apprehends it in its singularity, carrying out two simultaneous operations. The first is to insert the event into a frame of reference that identifies it as unique (it explains what happened, to whom, when and where). Therefore, it tries to apprehend it as a clue (secondness in Peirce), meeting society’s need for information. The second is the elaboration of the narrative, inscribing it in the order of meaning (assigning it a concept and devising strategies for its circulation). Journalism thus apprehends the singularity of the event, corroborating the frame of reference with which the facts are apprehended and inserting it into media circulation as meaning that is offered up for interpretation by audiences.

This perspective raises the issue of journalism's relationship with reality. As Meditsch (2010) rightly points out, this is not a construction of reality, per se, but the work of reiterating and stabilizing a factual reality within a framework of references and meanings put into circulation. As Verón (1993; 2004) argues, the social construction of reality is established discursively from a tangle of discourses that are infinitely appropriated through a historical and collaborative production of meaning. This is a collective work of interpretation that is constituted in the social circulation of discourses based on operations of production and recognition that engender negotiations of meanings. Journalism participates in these operations by taking events in their singularity, and audiences relate these events to their historical processes of socialization. These operations are manifested through different grammars that are each contingent on certain conditions, which are of production on the one hand and recognition on the other. In this context, reality is conditioned by the schemes that constitute us and by the negotiated interaction of meanings that we make with others based on our perceptions.

Journalism and reality: the Puerta 8 Cocaine Case

In the early hours of the morning on February 2, 2022, hospitals in the north-west of the Buenos Aires conurbation, in the municipalities of Hurlingham and Tres de Febrero, began receiving the first patients who had consumed allegedly altered cocaine. Without delay, the health workers informed the police authorities, who began investigating the matter. By the end of the morning, the event was on Argentinian television news, starting with TV Canal 5 Noticias (C5N) at 11:28am, La Nación Más (LN+) at 12:05pm and Todo Noticias (TN) at 1.08pm, followed by other national and international media throughout the day and the following days.

Despite belonging to the same group as the daily La Nación and TV LN+, the news portal La Nación only published its first report on The Puerta 8 Cocaine Case at 2:35pm, two and a half hours later than the group's own broadcaster. At this point, the event was already in full swing, and information about the deaths and hospitalizations, with constant updates, was already circulating in almost all the Argentinian press and on social networks.

In this context, what was unique about the event no longer constituted news, so in order to insert itself into the expanding information flow, La Nación broke the news by seizing on a singularity derived from the main event, namely the warning by the courts about the high toxicity of the drug, as we read in the headline: "Adulterated cocaine: the Justice warned about the circulation of a substance of 'very high toxicity' in the face of the death of eight people" (COCAÍNA adulterada: la Justicia..., Feb. 2, 2022). Here, the event is taken as the reason for an action, and the fact becomes the cause and context of this action. This is evident in the lead:

Faced with the death of eight people in the municipality of Buenos Aires after consuming cocaine, which is being investigated as to whether it was adulterated or poisoned [context], the San Martín Attorney General's Office issued a statement to warn the population [Action] about the circulation of this substance, which they described as having "extremely high toxicity" (COCAINE adulterated: la Justicia..., Feb. 2, 2022, my highlights).

Next, the portal gives details of the preventive measures sought with the security statement, and then circumscribes the event within the frame of reference that, throughout the day, was mobilized by different sources. Initially, it warns that it is not yet possible to determine causes and consequences because "the investigation into this cause is preliminary" (COCAÍNA adulterada: la Justicia..., Feb. 2, 2022). However, based on the portal's reading of what the sources say – doctors who have spoken to patients, a judicial detective linked to the case and the press release itself – it draws up the news that reports on what can be known so far:

It all began this morning [when], with the first four deaths [what], which occurred at the San Bernardino Municipal Hospital in Hurlingham [where] (. . .) the doctors consulted the patients [who] (. . .) and they told (. . .) that they had taken cocaine [what].

LA NACION has learnt that four other people are in intensive care in Hurlingham's Emergency Care Unit (UPA) 9, with conditions that appear to be due to the same cause. There are also others hospitalized in Tres de Febrero and San Martín.

"We've never seen anything like it," a judicial detective linked to the case told LA NACION" (COCAÍNA adulterada: la Justicia..., 2 Feb. 2022).

Each of the news sources reports the event from their own frames of reference, trying to explain what happened and to whom, but also revealing how the event affects them, either to mobilize them to take action - to consult, to speak out - or to perplex them - “we’ve never seen anything like it”. La Nación’s journalism reads this discursive production of the sources and organizes it to frame the information in the logic of the unexpected and still apparent meaningfulness of the event. And in the end, the portal inscribes its significant production within the framework of the indeterminacy that characterizes the event in the process of happening. And at the end, the portal inscribes its significant production in the realm of indeterminacy that characterizes the event in the process of happening. It says that, despite the coordinated work of the police, the cause of the high toxicity of the drug consumed is still unknown: “(...) he could have ‘cut’ the cocaine with poison or some other toxic substance. (...) It has not yet been possible to establish the context in which this adulteration occurred” (COCAÍNA adulterada: la Justicia..., Feb. 2, 2022).

Considering the categories I adopted to distinguish the operations that reveal the two lives of the event in the news story (the apprehension of the fact in its pragmatism - subject/object in an action - and the production of the narrative that gives it meaning - concept/strategy), this news story is constituted, on the one hand, as a text that covers the first life of the event. But, on the other hand, by submitting the news story to the “security” hat, in other words, by treating the event as a police matter, the portal is already strategically directing the event towards its second life, when it is inscribed as a narrative that gives it meaning. It still lacks the elements to do so, but the concept that is imbued in the terms adopted by La Nación points to the meaning effect that the reality of drugs is a police matter, even if the singular brought up in the news story points to a public health report.

In the chart⁴ below, I reproduce the sequence of news items published on the portal in chronological order, indicating the time of publication, the heading, and their titles. I won’t go into a detailed analysis of each of the news items in the corpus here, but I will point out that the productive logic I observed in the news item above is operative in the others, as well as the meaning effect mentioned seems to predominate, since of the 14 news items analysed, nine are identified as “Security”, three as “Politics” and two as “Society”.

Chart 1: *The Puerta 8 Cocaine Case in La Nación on February 2, 2022.*

Time	Heading	Title
2 :35 pm	Safety	Adulterated cocaine: the Justice Department warned about the circulation of a substance with “extremely high toxicity” after the death of eight people
3:39 pm	Safety	The mother of one of the victims poisoned with adulterated cocaine: “I found him lying in the kitchen”
6:20 pm	Politics	In the government, they say it’s too hasty to talk about a war between drug traffickers
6 :30 pm	Society	“It’s not fair that innocent people are being arrested,” he said at Gate 8, the village where the drugs were sold
7 :06 pm	Safety	“You have to discard it”: Sergio Berni’s recommendation to those who have “bought drugs in the last 24 hours”
7 :08 pm	Safety	Poisoned drugs: this is how one of the inmates arrived at Hurlingham hospital
7 :11 pm	Society	Adulterated cocaine: an epidemiological alert has been issued for seven municipalities in the conurbation
8 :18 pm	Safety	Narcos networks 2.0 and denial of the danger and real power of retail drug trafficking
9 :55 pm	Politics	Adulterated cocaine: María Eugenia Vidal and Patricia Bullrich blame the government: “It’s the absent State”
11 :30 pm	Safety	Adulterated cocaine: the number of deaths rose to 20 and the number of internments to 74
11 :30 pm	Politics	Adulterated cocaine: Axel Kicillof leads emergency meeting and doesn’t rule out Russia’s return
11 :39 pm	Safety	They believe that in the upcoming hours they could find more victims who haven’t reached the hospitals

⁴ Note: The chart shows, in chronological order, the sections and headlines corresponding to the news about the Puerta 8 Cocaine Case published by the La Nación news portal on February 2, 2022.

11 :40 pm	Safety	The prosecutor said that the cocaine was “intentionally” adulterated and gave details of how the raided bunker was discovered
11 :49 pm	Safety	Adulterated cocaine: what is fentanyl, the scandal drug causing havoc in the United States?

Source: author.

As the event develops and new actions unfold throughout the day, the portal adds information, seeking to understand the event from a framework of references that have the sources’ reports as the turning point in this reading of reality. This is why, in the next story, published just over an hour after the first, the victims’ families appear as sources, whose particular reality is affected by the event and singularised in the news: “the mother of one of the inpatients (...) said she found her son ‘lying in the kitchen’” (ES..., Feb. 2, 2022). This description is set in the context of tension between residents and police: “In the vicinity of the San Bernardino Municipal Hospital in Hurlingham, where there are fences and police presence to control *the neighbours’ tension* (...)” (ES..., Feb. 2, 2022, my highlights).

This news item also contains information about the arrest of people, the cause of the poisoning and what is still expected and, like the previous one, it is also under the “safety” heading, reinforcing the “police case” effect that drives the event in this direction:

Ten people were arrested this afternoon in searches carried out in the Puerta 8 settlement. Maria, Leonardo Guevara’s sister-in-law, said that “the official side confirms that it was rat poison”.He also guaranteed that the investigation is ‘ongoing’. (...) suggested that there could be more victims who have not yet been recognised (ES..., Feb. 2, 2022).

Most of the news stories are published from 6:20 pm onwards, as shown in Chart 1. In all of them there is a reference to the inaugural event, whether as an update, context, or pretext for other productions. The regularity that characterizes the event’s reading operations, its framing as a singular fact in a particular reality and its presentation as a narrative, however, do not hide some shifts that I observed in this process of its insertion into media circulation.

Observing the two news items under the “society” heading, published at 6:30pm and 7:11 pm, the first highlights the feeling of injustice that has affected the residents as a result of the police action (reported at 3:39pm): “It’s not fair that innocent, hard-working people are being taken into custody” (NO..., Feb. 2, 2022). From there, the portal goes on to profile the neighborhood and its people: “The neighborhood, which occupies just one block, is full of low-rise houses (...). ‘Here we are all humble, hard-working people. We’re very united (...) The police know who the sellers are and they’re not from here...’” (NO..., Feb. 2, 2022). In other words, the thread that connects the news item is the tension that has arisen between the police and the residents over the arrest of people from the community. By highlighting the ordinary life of the neighborhood, the portal doesn’t frame the event as a case of public security, but as an impact on a unique community of honest, hard-working and supportive people, thus establishing a difference between the drug problem as a police case and the “good” people who suffer the consequences of this “evil”.

The other story deals with an epidemiological alert issued by the Ministry of Health of the Province of Buenos Aires, asking health establishments to pay attention to certain symptoms that may be related to the consumption of adulterated cocaine: “Adulterated cocaine: an epidemiological alert has been issued for seven municipalities in the conurbation” (COCAÍNA adulterada: emitieron..., Feb. 2, 2022). Even though the heading is the same, “society” has a different meaning here, as it now refers to a concept that is more geographical than communal, more generic than particular, more political than affective. In this sense, this news item seems to be closer to the health or politics sections, in that it refers to government actions in this area.

For the portal, however, no news item is classified as health, and politics has a very restricted meaning, as I can see in the three news items related to the Puerta 8 cocaine case, published at 6:20 pm, 9:55 pm and 11:30 pm, under the “politics” heading. In the first, it reports that the Federal Government’s Ministry of Security is at the disposal of the Bonaerense police and comments on one of the investigative hypotheses about the case: “In the government they say it’s hasty to talk about a war between drug traffickers” (EN..., Feb. 2, 2022). The second brings the case to the very heart of power disputes, highlighting the positions of the opposition: “The former governor and current deputy María Eugenia Vidal, and the president of PRO, Patricia Bullrich, have criticized the administrations of Aníbal Fernández and Sergio Berni for their drug trafficking policies” (COTO..., Feb. 2, 2022). And the third reveals what would be the main concern of Axel Kicillof’s provincial administration in relation to the case: “What we have to achieve is to make everyone aware that poisoned cocaine is circulating so it should not be consumed” (Adulterated

cocaine: since..., Feb. 2, 2022). And it reports on government measures and the situation of the governor, who is visiting Russia.

All three stories are referred to the event and it is the event that mobilizes solidarity, criticism, or action. In these news items, the portal moves the event from the “police” section to the “politics” section, even though the issues dealt with there are related to public safety. It seems to me that this editorial choice is related to the sources or protagonists of the actions reported; the political agents working in their respective institutions: Aníbal Fernández and Axel Kicillof (government) and Eugenia Vidal and Patricia Bullrich (opposition). In the news story about the epidemiological alert above, the protagonist is an institution, so it would not fall under the heading of “politics”.

Considerations on the relationship between journalism, reality, and the event

In analyzing the news from the La Nación portal on the Puerta 8 Cocaine Case, I tried to demonstrate the operations that journalism undertook around the event. On the one hand, I observed the operations of recognition, based on a reading that distinguishes the singularity of an occurrence that involves subjects, objects and actions; a reading that frames the fact within a set of references that are information. In this sense, the news reported that, at a certain time and in a defined place, people died of intoxication after consuming a certain type of drug.

Yet news does not just provide information about the world. It is also the production of a narrative that directs the event towards a meaning. This meaning is coherent with the conditions of production, in other words, it is conditioned by a given reality that the La Nación portal constructs for itself based on certain schemes - a habitus - that constitutes it and places it in dispute with other realities. Thus, by framing the event in the “security” section, for example, La Nación corroborates and reinforces an internalized reality that drug use is a police issue. The result of journalistic production, however, is subject to different readings, so that the news that is put into circulation is part of a process of dispute, in which the meaning of the event and the reality it exposes is only consolidated in the historical and collaborative flow of entangled discourses.

In short, journalism describes the facts and gives them meaning. Conditioned by its grammars of recognition, it apprehends them in their singularity by carrying out a singular reading of the discursive production of the protagonists or patients of the event. And in doing so, journalism already dialectically directs the event towards a meaning, mobilizing its grammars of production, articulating a logic in which the event is sometimes fact, sometimes meaning, sometimes center, sometimes context, sometimes pretext... In this process, journalism corroborates a sense of reality, acting to stabilize it (Meditsch, 2010). It produces, from fragments of an event, the effect of a full reality, which puts the ordinary daily life (Heller, 2002) back on course until another event breaks out to continue linking journalism and reality.

To conclude, I would like to point out two points that stem from this study. The first is the recognition that news cannot do without a set of indicative elements that refer to the event as a “real-life fact”. This relates to the effect of truth and objectivity in journalism. At the same time, and this is the second point, this effect conceals the strategies that journalism puts into operation to offer the narrative that frames the event in a bundle of meanings coherent with a common-sense reality internalized in society.

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