



ТРИБУНА МОЛОДОГО УЧЕНОГО YOUNG SCHOLAR'S ENDEAVOURS

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STRATEGIES AND TACTICS EMPLOYED IN REPRESENTING PROTEST MOVEMENTS IN CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH-LANGUAGE PRINT MEDIA

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Protest movements have become one of the most common and efficient forms of social activism in the last decades. Information about protests mainly becomes available through the Mass Media, which view protests from diverse perspectives and have the power to shape the public perception of this activity. The aim of this research is to explore and compare the language that the contemporary English-language media use to represent protest movements as well as to identify some key manipulative strategies and tactics employed in protest representation. Specifically, the study focuses on the examination of the news coverage of the Yellow Vests movement in France, which was largely presented as 'chaotic' and 'faceless', which compromised and discredited the protesters' agenda. The research is carried out within the theoretical framework of Critical Discourse Analysis, including the approaches proposed by Christopher Hart and Norman Fairclough, and is mainly aimed at revealing the ideological bias behind news texts.

Keywords: protest movements, the Yellow Vest movement, protest representation, critical discourse analysis, media, online news

СТРАТЕГИИ И ТАКТИКИ РЕПРЕЗЕНТАЦИИ ПРОТЕСТНЫХ ДВИЖЕНИЙ В СОВРЕМЕННОЙ АНГЛОЯЗЫЧНОЙ ПРЕССЕ

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Протестные движения являются одной из самых эффективных форм социальной активности, а также источником перемен в сферах политики, экономики, общественной жизни, культуры и экологии. Будучи важной частью действительности, протестные движения часто являются предметом освещения СМИ, имеющих разную идеологическую направленность и стремящихся повлиять на мнение читателей с помощью определенных манипулятивных стратегий и тактик. Объектом настоящего исследования является репрезентация в средствах массовой информации Движения желтых жилетов во Франции, одного из самых известных и значимых протестных движений современности. Предметом исследования выступают техники и приемы, используемые англоязычными СМИ при описании Движения желтых жилетов и его участников. Цель исследования заключается в выявлении стратегий и тактик, используемых для формирования у аудитории определенных представлений о Движении желтых жилетов, а также в выявлении различий в применении этих стратегий и тактик в источниках разной политической направленности. В качестве методологической базы исследования выступают принципы критического дискурс-анализа,



изложенные Н. Фэйрклафом и К. Хартом. Материалом для анализа послужили 50 статей, взятых из онлайн-версий известных англоязычных газет.

Ключевые слова: *протестные движения, движение «желтых жилетов», репрезентация протестов, критический дискурсивный анализ, СМИ, онлайн-новости*

1. Introduction

Protest movements have become a common phenomenon all over the world in the last decades. Today protest movements can be considered a major driver of changes in political, cultural and economic spheres as well as one of the most efficient forms of social activism due to the use of new technologies. Information about protests is mainly transmitted by means of news sources, which have the power to show events from diverse perspectives and shape public perceptions of protest activity. Therefore, it is of great significance to gain deeper insights into manipulative strategies and tactics in protest representation.

A considerable number of researchers express interest in techniques which tend to be used in representing protest movements in the media [Fairclough, 1995; Hart, 2014; Lee, 2014; McLeod, 2007]. For instance, much attention is paid to the role of grammatical and lexical choices in revealing the ideological properties in news texts focusing on protests [Fairclough, 1995; Hart, 2014; van Dijk, 1995; Smith, McCarthy, McPhail & Augustyn, 2001]. In addition, some scholars highlight the importance of visual images in forming readers' opinions on protest activity [Fairclough, 1995; Hart, 2014].

I extend this stream of research by exploring strategies and tactics employed in the representation of the Yellow Vest movement in France, one of the most vivid protest movements existing nowadays, in contemporary English-language media. The Yellow Vest movement was formed in 2018 entirely by means of social networks. Its name originated from the drivers' fluorescent vests which have become the protesters' symbol. The main impetus for the creation of the Yellow Vest movement was the government's decision to increase fuel taxes in 2019. The plans dealt a blow to all the car owners of France, who largely belong to the middle or working classes. Later on, the movement became more politicized and started to address not only the issue relating to fuel, but also a range of socio-economic problems, such as pensions, social disparity and inequities in the French taxation system. The protests lasted for more than a year and came to a halt only in March, 2020 due to the spread of COVID-19. The purpose of this study is to identify and examine the key manipulative techniques the contemporary media applied to influence the way the Yellow Vest movement is perceived by the audience as well as to establish the differences in their use depending on the political views of the selected news sources.

2. Data and methodology

To identify the specific techniques used in the representation of the Yellow Vest movement, 50 articles from the online news editions of English-language newspapers have been analyzed. The selected newspapers differ in their political stances: some of them are considered to be more liberal (the Guardian, the Irish Times, etc.), while others are more neutral (the New York Times, The Globe and Mail, etc.) or conservative (the Irish Independent, Daily Mail, The Mercury News, The National Post, The Straits Times, etc.). The research sample consists of 18 articles from liberal newspapers, 16 articles from neutral editions and 16 articles published in conservative news sources.

The Yellow Vest movement and its representation in news sources is a matter of great interest for the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which views language as a form of social practice and is aimed at revealing the ideological bias behind texts. The methodology described in the works of Norman Fairclough [Fairclough, 1995] and Christopher Hart [Hart, 2014] serves as the basis for the analysis of news articles presented in this work.

Fairclough proposes a universal model for the critical discourse analysis of communicative events. This model connects three dimensions: text, discourse practice and sociocultural practice. Text analysis takes into account both meanings and their forms and encompasses linguistic analysis, which includes grammatical analysis, lexical analysis and the analysis of semantics, as well as the analysis of text organization and cohesion. The discourse practice dimension covers such processes as text production and text consumption. The sociocultural practice dimension incorporates the analysis of non-linguistic factors (situational context, cultural and political aspects of the society, institutional practices, etc.) which influence text creation and text perception [Fairclough, 1995: 57–62].

Hart focuses on the link between grammar and ideology in discourse practice. By “grammar” the author implies “the system or systems that make up part of the human language capacity, as well as the theoretical models that aim to capture this system”. “Ideology” is understood as a particular perspective or attitude [Hart, 2014: 2].

Hart lays emphasis on the ideologically loaded linguistic means of event representation. One of the means revealed through transitivity analysis is the description of certain process types and their participants, who can be perceived as agents or patients. Another strategy is mystification, or the concealment of information. It includes the use of the Passive Voice and nominalization. As far as social actors are concerned, they can be represented as a group or as particular persons. Generalization and collectivization tend to be used to impersonalize “ordinary” actors, while personalization is used to describe powerful people. Moreover, social actors can be determined or undetermined. In case of determined actors, nomination (the use of proper nouns or affiliation) or categorization can be applied. Categorization is connected with functions and characteristics social actors share with others and

incorporates functionalization and identification. Functionalization takes into account types of activities social actors perform (what they do), while identification encompasses appearance (physical identification), personal or kinship relations (relational identification), and such characteristics as age, gender, ethnicity and social status (classification). Additionally, hidden evaluation of certain actions can be considered a valuable representation strategy. Besides, Hart acknowledges the role of visual images in CDA and their features (camera angles, distance, etc.) in conveying the desired point of view on events.

3. Results

3.1 Social actor analysis

One of the strategies used in the majority of the newspapers regardless of their political alignment, particularly in 39 out of 50 sampled articles, is the impersonalization of the participants of the movement. They tend to be referred to as “protesters”, “demonstrators” or “groups”. As far as neutral or conservative newspapers are concerned, the word “rioters” is frequently used to describe the “yellow vests”. This emphasizes the fact that the Yellow Vest movement has no defined structure and reinforces the impression of it being completely faceless, leaderless and ambiguous in its goals.

- “Riot police fired tear gas to try and disperse the protesters around the Place de la Republique, but demonstrators responded by starting fires and throwing flares and paving stones.” [“Paris yellow vest protest descends into violence.” *The Irish Independent*, 20 April 2019]
- “It was the third weekend of protests and confrontations with the police by the group, and by far the most damaging.” [“France’s Yellow Vest Protests: The Movement That Has Put Paris on Edge.” *The New York Times*, 3 December 2018]
- ““Everything leads us to believe that rioters will try to mobilise again.”” [“Police fire tear gas and arrest hundreds in Paris protests.” *The Straits Times*, 8 December 2018]

However, some articles in liberal newspapers give a more detailed description of the protesters, which evokes sympathy, allows readers to establish an emotional connection with the “yellow vests” and creates a positive impression of them. For instance, some protesters are portrayed as “well spoken”, “neatly dressed” people who do not look like “vandals and looters” that had no criminal record in the past or, in case of the injured activists, as mutilated victims of “the ultraviolence of repression”. Sometimes the activists are categorized according to their family roles or professions to show that the main reason for their participation in protests is to attain better living conditions. This technique has been employed in 11 analysed articles.

- “Well-spoken, tidy, clipped beards and short hair, these gilets jaunes (yellow vests) seemed hardly the stone-throwing, shop-smashing rabble those packed into the public benches had

come to watch.” [“Gilets jaunes in court over violent protests.” *The Guardian*, 8 December 2018]

- “Several had lost an eye or limb in clashes with riot police.” [“Injured gilets jaunes protest in Paris against police violence.” *The Guardian*, 2 June 2019]
- “He had two children with his girlfriend, but they did not live together, his mother was being operated on for lung cancer this week and his arrest meant he would almost certainly lose his job.” [“Gilets jaunes in court over violent protests.” *The Guardian*, 8 December 2018]
- “He worked as a forklift truck operator earning €1,200 a month out of which he paid €300 a month for his council flat.” [“Gilets jaunes in court over violent protests.” *The Guardian*, 8 December 2018]

3.2 Mystification analysis

The analysis has shown a very thought-provoking detail: neutral or conservative newspapers tend to select passive constructions (including agentless passives) when referring to police forces and their actions, for instance, to causing injuries to activists. It may signify that neutral or conservative sources avoid assigning responsibility for certain acts to the police officers:

- “A French yellow vest protester’s hand has been ripped apart during violent clashes in Paris as demonstrators tried to storm the French National Assembly during a 13th consecutive week of unrest.” [“French yellow vest anti-government protests turn violent in Paris.” *The Irish Independent*, 9 February 2019]
- “...after dozens of Yellow Vest protesters were injured by “dispersal grenades” and rubber pellets.” [“Violence Surges in Paris as ‘Yellow Vest’ Protest Dwindles in Week 18.” *The New York Times*, 16 March 2019]

In contrast, liberal newspapers mainly use the Passive Voice when describing the actions of the protesters to show them in a better light:

- “Some bins and bicycles were also torched.” [“Millions for Notre Dame – but nothing for us, say gilets jaunes.” *The Guardian*, 20 April 2019]
- “Did he know about the off-licence that had been looted near where he was arrested? No.” [“Gilets jaunes in court over violent protests.” *The Guardian*, 8 December 2018]

Apart from that, nominalization is frequently employed in the analysed articles regardless of the political stances of newspapers. The most common examples are the words “scuffles”, “skirmishes” and “clashes”:

- “As scuffles broke out in front of the National Assembly and French police responded with tear gas, paramedics huddled around the injured protester at the National Assembly gates.” [“French yellow vest anti-government protests turn violent in Paris.” *The Irish Independent*, 9 February 2019]
- “Skirmishes also broke out between the police and protesters in major cities in western France, including Nantes, Bordeaux and Caen.” [“Violence Surges as Yellow Vests Attack French Government Ministry.” *The New York Times*, 5 January 2019]
- “Clashes also broke out between demonstrators and police near the Porte de Champerret, close to the Arc de Triomphe, as protesters prepared to march across town towards Gare d’Austerlitz.” [“Paris police fire tear gas at yellow vest anniversary protesters.” *The Irish Times*, 16 November 2019]

3.3 Transitivity analysis

It has been observed that in neutral and conservative newspapers the “yellow vests” usually appear to be the agents of material processes connected with destruction, looting and arsons. This technique discredits the protesters’ agenda by “criminalizing” the activists and shifting all the responsibility for the unrest onto them. Remarkably, it is reflected in 14 articles from neutral sources despite the fact that they are expected to maintain neutrality and remain unbiased.

- “Protesters dragged two officers to the ground and kicked them repeatedly, the video showed.” [“Violence Surges as Yellow Vests Attack French Government Ministry.” *The New York Times*, 5 January 2019]
- “Rampaging groups last weekend threw cobblestones through Paris storefronts and looted valuables in some of the city’s richest neighborhoods.” [“France closes museums, Eiffel Tower amid ‘yellow vest’ protests.” *The Mercury News*, 6 December 2018]

At the same time, liberal newspapers tend to portray the police officers as the main agents of material processes implying violence. In 13 articles of such newspapers the officers are described as “aggressors” who conduct disproportionately brutal actions against the demonstrators. As for the “yellow vests”, only their participation in peaceful actions is highlighted.

- “The gendarmes fired tear gas and stinger grenades.” [“Gilets jaunes protests cause extensive damage on Champs-Élysées.” *The Irish Times*, 17 March 2019]
- “A group that observes police conduct at gilets jaunes (yellow vest) protests said officers had attacked five of their number during the demonstration, injuring one of them.” [“Yellow vest protests: Toulouse police use teargas on 1,000 marchers.” *The Guardian*, 29 September 2019]

- “In driving rain, protesters marched under umbrellas, waving placards reading “Macron, clear off.” [“France’s ‘yellow vests’ come out for 26th week but numbers on the wane.” *The Irish Times*, 11 May 2019]

As far as verbal processes are concerned, neutral and conservative newspapers predominantly present the information acquired from official sources, so in most cases famous politicians and representatives of police forces play the roles of agents/speakers. Due to that, their point of view on the protest activity becomes paramount. Meanwhile, the “yellow vests” are rarely assigned the role of speakers, which demonstrates the non-acceptance of their position and downplays the significance of their opinions, aims and requests.

- ““We need to stop being a country that listens to those who cry the loudest,” Education Minister Jean-Michel Blanquer told LCI news channel.” [“Macron reeling as tough stance against ‘yellow vest’ protests backfires in France.” *The Globe and Mail*, 6 January 2019]
- “Two police union officials told The Associated Press they are worried that radical troublemakers from both the far right and far left will hijack Saturday’s protests.” [“France closes museums, Eiffel Tower amid ‘yellow vest’ protests.” *The Mercury News*, 6 December 2018]

On the contrary, the majority of liberal newspapers give the “yellow vests” opportunities to express their position and explain their goals to the audience by making them agents of verbal processes.

- ““We’re suffocating with this government who wants to put us on our knees,” said Annie Moukam, a 58-year-old teacher among the protesters.” [“Police fire teargas as gilets jaunes protests return to Paris.” *The Guardian*, 18 January 2020]
- “Laetitia Dewalle, a protester from the Val-d’Oise, said: “We’re continuing – always in a peaceful spirit.”...she added: “This movement itself is not violent. That’s not our way of doing things.”” [“Paris braces for fifth weekend of protests by gilets jaunes.” *The Guardian*, 14 December 2018]

3.4 Evaluation

According to the collected data, neutral and conservative newspapers negatively evaluate the protest activity of the “yellow vests”. The protesters are described as “thugs and bullies” and their actions are considered to be immoral, violent and life-threatening. At the same time, the police are portrayed as “the guardians”, which shows approval. This contrast enables the author to implement the strategy of Self-legitimation and Other-delegitimation:

- “French Interior Minister Christophe Castaner blamed “thugs” and “bullies” on Sunday for the violence that hit demonstrations the previous day marking marked the first anniversary of the anti-government “yellow vest” protests.” [“French interior minister blames protest violence on 'thugs'.” *The National Post*, 17 November 2019]
- “Philippe announced new security measures ... aimed at avoiding a repeat of Saturday’s violence, in which rioters set life-threatening fires, ransacked luxury stores and attacked police around the Champs-Élysées.” [“The Latest: France bans some yellow vest protests in Paris.” *The National Post*, 18 March 2019]
- ““Once again, the republic was attacked with extreme violence — its guardians, its representatives, its symbols,” Mr. Macron wrote.” [“Violence Surges as Yellow Vests Attack French Government Ministry.” *The New York Times*, 5 January 2019]

The negative evaluation in liberal newspapers is primarily connected with the use of weapons against the “yellow vests” by the police. The public condemnation is drawn by the depiction of injuries and the comparison of clashes with war against civilians:

- “Lawyers estimate that as many as 17 people have lost an eye because of the police’s use of such weapons since the start of the street demonstrations, while at least three have lost their hands and others have been left with their face or limbs mutilated.” [“French 'yellow vests' march in Paris to denounce police violence.” *The Guardian*, 2 February 2019]
- ““...It was like a war. It was our first demonstration. I had no idea the police had weapons that could do that damage.”” [“French police weapons under scrutiny after gilets jaunes injuries.” *The Guardian*, 30 January 2019]
- “She said using the sting-ball grenades was akin to using military weapons against a civilian population.” [“French police weapons under scrutiny after gilets jaunes injuries.” *The Guardian*, 30 January 2019]

3.5 Visual Images

It has been noticed that almost all the images included in the articles of neutral and conservative news sources de-individualize the protesters. The “yellow vests” are portrayed either in large crowds from far distance, or from the back so readers cannot see their faces (see Figures 1, 2). It once again reinforces the impression that the movement is a faceless group of random people.



Fig. 1. More than 3,000 came out in Paris, the government said [*The New York Times*, 5 January 2019]



Fig. 2. A burning bicycle near the Champs-Élysées [*The New York Times*, 5 January 2019]

However, some images in liberal press tend to draw attention to separate representatives of the Yellow Vest movement. To begin with, observers can clearly see faces even in group pictures. It is worth mentioning that either defenseless people or activists with serious injuries are usually in the foreground of such photos (see Figures 3). In this case, it convinces the audience of the fact that the “yellow vests” are fighters for their rights unfairly repressed by the police. In addition, articles in liberal newspapers often contain many close-ups of the most prominent figures of the movement (see Figures 4, 5). This demonstrates that the movement has a certain hierarchy and enables the audience to establish an emotional connection with some “yellow vests”. What is more, close-ups are usually associated with rightness.



Fig. 3. Jérôme Rodrigues, one of the leaders of the gilets jaunes movement, is helped after being injured in the eye during clashes between protesters and police [*The Guardian*, 30 January 2019]



Fig. 4. Eric Drouet had the idea of calling national protests and the movement exploded into action [*The Guardian*, 9 February 2019]



Fig. 5. Priscillia Ludosky started the movement with her online petition against the rising cost of fuel [*The Guardian*, 9 February 2019]

Another distinctive feature is that, while conservative and neutral newspapers include photos depicting some protesters carrying out destructive actions (see Figure 6), the majority of the analyzed articles in liberal newspapers contain images which focus only on the consequences of protest actions and eliminate the protesters from the scene (see Figure 7). Such visuals weaken the link between the “yellow vests” and the caused damage, similarly to mystification in media texts.



Fig. 6. A protester attacking a shop window near the Champs-Élysées in Paris on Saturday [*The New York Times*, 16 March 2019]



Fig. 7. A statue of Marianne, a symbol of France, inside the Arc de Triomphe was damaged by rioters on 1 December [*The Guardian*, 9 February 2019]

Anchorage points also play a crucial role in the interpretation of images representing the Yellow Vest movement. First of all, in neutral and conservative newspapers the police officers in some photos stand closer to the camera than the “yellow vests” (see Figure 8). This way the viewer sees the events from the police’s perspective and is invited to share the police’s attitude towards the protest activity, as being positioned on the same side in space is associated with support and affiliation. Moreover, social actors who are portrayed far from the camera seem less trustworthy and more dangerous [Hart, 2014: 90]. In case of images in liberal newspapers, the viewer predictably appears to be on the side of protesters in space, which evokes sympathy for the “yellow vests” and legitimizes them (see Figure 9).



Fig. 8. About 89,000 security forces were deployed across the country on Saturday, including 8,000 in Paris, compared with 4,600 a week earlier [*The New York Times*, 8 December 2018]



Fig. 9. A woman remonstrates with riot police during an anti-government yellow-vest demonstration on Saturday in Paris. The yellow-vest (gilets jaunes) protests first erupted last November [*The Irish Times*, 16 November 2019]

One more feature occurring in liberal newspapers is the positioning of the demonstrators to the left of the observer while the police are positioned to the right (see Figure 10). According to Hart, everything that is on the left is associated with the past or the present, something safe and familiar, and what is right is associated with the future, something undetermined and potentially dangerous [Hart, 2014: 87]. Due to this fact, the audience subconsciously starts to support the “yellow vests” and express lack of trust towards the police officers. Unlike in liberal news sources, in conservative and neutral newspapers protesters appear on the right while the police appear on the left (see Figure 11).



Fig. 10. Protesters clash with riot police forces near the Opera Garnier in Paris [*The Guardian*, 30 January 2019]



Fig. 11. Protesters clashing with French riot police officers on the Champs-Élysées on Saturday [*The New York Times*, 3 December 2018]

4. Conclusion

Protest movements have become an integral part of our life and are widely covered by mass media. Having different ideologies, news sources tend to describe protest events in the desired light, influence people's minds and convince their audiences of certain points of view through numerous techniques. The Critical Discourse Analysis of the articles concerning the Yellow Vest movement in France has been instrumental in revealing the key manipulative strategies and tactics employed by contemporary English-language newspapers to form certain perceptions of the demonstrations as well as uncovering diverse attitudes towards protest activity. The present work can be considered a contribution to the field of media studies and serve as a basis for future research into the topic of protest representation.

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