
DISRUPTION TO TRADITIONAL JOURNALISTIC DISCOURSE: A SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF THE RISE OF STICKER METAPHORS AND FAST-PACED FORMATS IN MOBILE REPORTING

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how news content is being transformed by the use of short form (vertical) video created with apps such as TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts. It builds upon some of the previous definitions of “framing” in the context of digital communication and media by conducting a critical textual analysis of the role of “interface elements” in mobile journalism (such as on-screen text, emojis, stickers) and posits that these elements do not only support the visual image (by providing context) but are also the primary meaning signifiers within the contemporary journalistic landscape. According to Barthes, not only do interface elements anchor meaning, but they also relay meaning. Therefore, “interface elements” subvert the traditional journalistic objective distance by providing a way for a journalist to communicate their emotional perspective on an event. Using a multimodal and digital semiotic approach, the important conclusion of this paper is that the “fragmented narrative” in mobile journalism creates a new type of “vernacular authority,” in that the new narrative forms of mobile journalism measure the degree to which an audience is likely to respond emotionally to a piece of journalistic content and the degree to which they would be able to find the content through search engines.

INTRODUCTION

The transition from the horizontal "cinematic" gaze of traditional broadcast journalism to the vertical, 9:16 "portrait" gaze of mobile journalism (MoJo) represents more than a change in aspect ratio; it represents a fundamental shift in the ontology of the news event.¹In the

traditional television news frame, the screen is treated as a "window" through which the viewer observes a distant reality. In journalism the screen is like a canvas. It is a space, with layers that you can touch.² Here the news event and the phones interface are always competing for your attention. The mobile screen is a canvas. Media outlets such as BBC, The Washington Post, and independent "creator-journalists" are using a different semiotic language when they transition from traditional journalism platforms to TikTok.³ This semiotic language is characterized by fragmented images being often covered up by dynamic captioning, "reaction" stickers, bars showing progress, and floating emoji (images).

Through an analysis of these graphical interventions, the purpose of this paper is to show how these graphical interventions are not simply there to decorate the video; they are powerful metaphorical devices that construct a new "myth" of professional journalist's objectivity.⁴ This research explores how screen-reading graphic interfaces (e.g., screen displays) provide meta-texts that establish the viewer's emotions/ideologies about an event even before they see any of the footage. We are witnessing the birth of the "fragmented narrative," where the truth-claim of a video resides not in the captured footage, but in the semiotic interplay between the image and the digital overlays.⁵

Theoretical Framework: From Barthes to the Interface

To understand how a "clown" emoji or a neon-yellow caption alters a report on a legislative session, we must return to the foundations of semiotics and multimodality.⁶ The process of "anchoring" takes place when the text gives a specific meaning to an image that has several potential meanings, as opposed to other possibilities. In cases of mobile journalism, the headline sticker acts as an extremely aggressive anchor, with the intention of removing any subtle nuances associated with the image so that it will provide a "scroll-stopping" moment.⁷ "Relay" occurs when the text and image stand in a complementary relationship, where the meaning is found in the "gap" between them. Mobile journalism relies heavily on relay, where the journalist's facial expression might say one thing while a floating "fact-check" sticker says another.

Following Kress and van Leeuwen,⁸ this paper views mobile news as a "multimodal" text. Meaning is not found in a single sign (the words or the video) but in the rhythm and spatial arrangement of all signs. On platforms like TikTok, the "sticker" is a social signifier.⁹ An emoji is not just a picture of a heart or a fire; it is a "metonym" for a specific digital subculture's reaction.¹⁰ Drawing on Interface Theory, we must recognize that the "buttons" and "overlays" provided by the app are not neutral. The software "suggests" how a story

should be told. When a journalist uses the "Green Screen" effect placing their own head over a news article—they are semiotically merging the "Self" with the "Report," collapsing the distance between the subjective observer and the objective fact.

The Typography of Truth: On-Screen Text as Vernacular Authority

In traditional news, text is used for "Lower Thirds" (the name and title of the speaker). It is static, serified or clean sans-serif, and tucked away at the bottom of the frame to avoid distracting from the "truth" of the image. In mobile journalism, text is dynamic, centered, and kinetic.¹¹ The rise of "word-by-word" synchronized captions often in bold, high-contrast colors—serves a dual purpose. Logistically, it caters to the "sound-off" environment of mobile consumption. Semiotically, however, it creates a sense of unavoidable urgency. There's a quality of "percussion" about the presentation of text in time with an audio track; it's reminiscent of the cadence of a heartbeat. The method of "fragmenting" sentences into individual word displays encourages viewers to attain a heightened level of focus so that each individual "truth," or item of information, is given to the viewer as a small, indisputable piece of data.

To understand the "rhetoric of the font," we need to evaluate the text overlays that most mobile journalists use. The selection of neon green, bright yellow, or "emergency" red as colors for their overlays is not simply an artistic choice; rather, they are metaphors for "breaking news" or "forbidden knowledge." Journalists are using the visual language of "content creators" (who utilize these colors in order to generate clicks) and engaging in Vernacular Authority.¹² They are signaling: "I am not an elite institution; I am a person speaking your language." This "fragmented" text functions as a signifier of authenticity through its very lack of formal polish.

The Sticker as Metaphor: Emojis and the Affective Turn

In the traditional journalistic paradigm, emotion is conveyed through the "human interest story", a narrative arc designed to evoke empathy. In mobile journalism, this process is bypassed through the use of "affective shortcuts": stickers and emojis.¹³ These things are not just for show they actually tell the viewer of the image how to feel before the viewer has a chance to think about it. The image is giving the viewer instructions on what emotions to have when they look at the image. These instructions are, like a guide that tells the viewer how to react to the image before they even think about what the image means. Traditional journalism relies on the "show, don't tell" rule. However, the "fragmented narrative" of

mobile video employs a "symbolize, don't show" strategy. By adding a clown or a red flag emoji over a reporter's story about a politician who has committed fraud, that reporter complete an extreme, "radical," act of semiotic condensation.

If you keep Sara Ahmed's¹⁴ definition of stickers (from her book *On the Cultural Politics of Emotions*) in mind, these stickers serve as magnets for feelings. They are what the author calls magnets. These stickers really do work like affective magnets because they draw out emotions from people. The idea of magnets is that they have a strong pull, on our feelings and that is what these stickers do. They align the viewer's body with the journalist's stance. The skull/dead emoji in a news context does not necessarily mean physical death; it signifies a "social death" or a "burn" a metaphorical judgment on a politician's statement. Through this use of hieroglyphs, journalists can take their craft from being just about reporting information to also being about creating an experience for their audience, which has value based on how much emotion is created by what the journalist produces.

People use a lot of stickers in journalism. The ones that look like they are from the government or the police are really common. You see stickers that look like police sirens or warning signs. These mobile journalism stickers are trying to look like they're, from the police or some other official group. The police siren stickers and the warning sign stickers are the kinds of stickers that people use the most in journalism. In a critical reading, these are "stolen signifiers".¹⁵ They take the visual language of emergency services and apply them to content that may or may not be an actual emergency. This creates a state of permanent urgency. If every news story from a celebrity divorce to a climate catastrophe is framed by the same flashing red siren sticker, the semiotic distinction between the trivial and the existential is erased. This "flattening" of importance is a hallmark of the fragmented narrative. The sticker becomes a metaphor for the "attention economy," where the primary "truth" being communicated is not the news itself, but the fact that the viewer must pay attention immediately.¹⁶

The Spatiality of the Screen: Layering and the Green Screen Effect

The physical layout of the 9:16 screen represents a departure from the "objective distance" of the 16:9 television frame. In mobile journalism, the most significant semiotic development is the Green Screen Effect, where the journalist's head and shoulders are superimposed over a screenshot of an article, a video, or a map. In this format, the journalist's body becomes a layer of the text. This is a "monological" delivery system. In a traditional news broadcast, the journalist sits in a studio and points to a screen; they are separate from the data. In the Green

Screen format, the journalist is the interface.¹⁷ Critically, this collapses the "space of the event" into the "space of the persona." When a journalist's face covers 30% of a document they are "leaking" or explaining, they are physically obscuring the evidence with their own image. Semiotically, this signals that the source of the truth is no longer the document, but the journalist's interpretation of it.

This is the "Subjective Turn." The "fragmented narrative" here is the fragmentation of the evidence—we only see the parts of the "truth" that the journalist's head doesn't cover. The "Stitch" and "Duet" functions on TikTok allow journalists to "react" to other videos in real-time. This creates a dialogical narrative.¹⁸ However, from a critical perspective, this often functions as a form of "Parasitic Journalism." By "stitching" a viral video of a protest, the journalist captures the "affective energy" of the original event and re-frames it through their own commentary. The screen is split—on one side is the raw, visceral reality of the protest; on the other is the journalist's calm, analytical face. This spatial arrangement creates a power hierarchy: the "event" is the raw material, and the "journalist" is the intellectual processor. The "fragmented narrative" here is the literal splitting of the screen, which mirrors the fragmentation of modern political discourse into "action" vs. "commentary."

The Algorithmic Gaze: Semiotics for the Machine

A critical analysis of mobile journalism must acknowledge that the "text" is not just written for human eyes. It is written for the Algorithmic Gaze.¹⁹ The stickers, text placements, and even the choice of words are semiotic signals designed to appease the platform's recommendation engine. Each signifier within the "fragmented narrative" includes two target audiences. The journalist may include a trending sticker on his video not as an additional meaning, but to help the algorithm favour videos that have particular stickers. This creates a "dual-address" text. The human sees a report on inflation; the machine sees a set of metadata (stickers, sounds, keywords) that tells it where to "push" the video.²⁰ This is a fundamental shift in journalistic ethics. If the "grammar" of the story is dictated by what the algorithm wants to see, then the Algorithm is the Co-Editor. The "fragmentation" here is between the intent of the journalist (to inform) and the requirement of the platform (to retain engagement). Perhaps the most striking example of the "fragmented narrative" is the rise of "Algospeak." Journalists on mobile platforms often use stickers or intentional misspellings to avoid "shadowbanning" (e.g., using "un-alived" instead of "killed," or placing a "flower" emoji over a "gun"). This is a forced semiotic evolution.²¹ The "text" of journalism is being mutilated by the "censorship" of the interface. When a journalist is forced to use an emoji of a "grape" to

discuss "rape" or sexual assault, the serious nature of the news is semiotically "trivialized" by the platform's constraints. The metaphor of the "grape" creates a cognitive dissonance in the viewer. We are looking at a "cute" icon while hearing about a trauma. This fragmentation of meaning where the visual signifier contradicts the verbal signified represents a crisis in the ability of mobile journalism to convey the gravity of human suffering.

Finalizing the layout, the "Progress Bar" (often a thin, colored line at the top or bottom of the screen) functions as a semiotic countdown. In traditional news, you don't know when the "package" will end. In mobile journalism, the viewer is constantly aware of how many seconds of "attention" they have left to give. This bar is a metaphor for the scarcity of time. It fragments the viewer's focus, as they are constantly "watching the clock" while watching the news. It reinforces the idea that news is a "commodity" to be consumed and finished, rather than a complex reality to be sat with and contemplated.

CONCLUSION

The rise of mobile journalism represents more than a mere shift in delivery; it signifies a fundamental disruption to the traditional journalistic discourse that has governed public information for over a century. Through this critical semiotic analysis, it is evident that the "fragmented narrative" of short-form vertical video has dismantled the "window" of the objective broadcast and replaced it with the "canvas" of the interactive interface. In this new landscape, the primary signifiers of truth-claims are no longer found solely in the raw footage of an event, but in the layers of kinetic text, affective stickers, and spatial overlays that define the mobile experience. Interface elements such as emojis and progress bars are not peripheral decorations. Instead, they act as negatively charged semiotic anchors and attract emotional engagement that shape the way the viewer enjoys their image prior to the view experiencing it.

By using the "Sticker Metaphor" to eliminate physical distance between reporter/reported, we are creating a form or replace the cold God-like authority of the old newsrooms with the "Vernacular Authority" that favors and values an individual's ability to connect with others on an interpersonal level rather than an impersonal or removed standpoint. However, this evolution carries profound implications for the future of democratic discourse. The "Subjective Turn" afforded by the Green Screen effect where the journalist's body becomes the literal interface signals a move toward a personalized reality where information is inseparable from the persona that delivers it.

Furthermore, the "Algorithmic Gaze" has introduced a chilling dual-address system. As journalists mutilate their own texts through "Algospeak" and "stolen signifiers" to satisfy the machine, the gravity of human suffering risks being trivialized. When a grape emoji has to represent violence to prevent a shadow ban it hurts the credibility of journalism. The goal is to stay on the platform. Ultimately, the fragmented narrative creates a paradox. While mobile journalism offers a more accessible and visceral "truth" to a generation skeptical of institutions, it simultaneously flattens the distinction between the trivial and the existential. The "permanent urgency" created by flashing sirens and countdown bars treats the news as a fleeting commodity rather than a complex historical record. As we move further into an era dominated by the 9:16 frame, the challenge for both journalists and audiences will be to reconcile the democratizing power of the mobile "canvas" with the need for a semiotic language that can still convey the unvarnished, unfragmented weight of the world. The disruption is complete; the task now is to determine whether this new grammar of journalism can move beyond "affective shortcuts" toward a meaningful and sustainable reconstruction of the truth.

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