Socio-Semiotic "Reading of the Truth" in the Context of Virtual Communication

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Abstract

The paper deals with specific qualities of communication forms on selected websites (24 *sata. hr*, *Index. hr*, *The Guardian* and *The New York Times*) in accordance with the theoretical instruments of social semiotics. We find that fundamental principles of this discipline are of paramount importance in trying to explain the significance and influence of media messages on shaping awareness of the world. We have followed poststructuralist semiotic tendencies, and we have tried to emphasize the need for signs to be observed primarily as dynamic formations, as *semiotic resources* which are used in the process of creating meaning and which represent the cornerstone of multimodal content as the third level of virtual communication on which we basically founded this paper. Furthermore, given the context, the way, the character and the occurrence frequency of the term *terrorism* on the aforementioned websites in a two-month period, we tried to show how certain topics cross narrower, in this case political issues and become a global interest that simultaneously communicates in several segments and creates a specific sign system that spreads to very different areas of interest by corresponding and managing different areas of knowledge while simultaneously influencing the design of our political, ideological, social and cultural attitudes.

Keywords

Media Studies, Social Semiotics, Semiotic Resource, Terrorism, Websites

1. Introduction

Human intellectual and social life is based on the production, use and exchange of signs because we find ourselves in situations where we gesture, talk, write, read, watch television, listen to music, observe an image caught in a pattern of signs which explicitly affect our behavior, both cognitively and emotionally.

Therefore, the concept of production and consumption of media content as well as their interconnection is one of more popular topics of media studies that gains its importance thanks to the attitudes and discussions of Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer as well as the other members of Frankfurt School from the 1930s of the 20th century [1]. Production and consumption are two fundamental relationships to be addressed in this paper, more precisely we will deal with the process of creating signs (semiosis) and the consumption of these signs, *i.e.* the question of how recipients "write" meanings into the media text taking into account the consequences that the production-consumption relationship necessarily produces. We will therefore be interested in the moment of production as extremely important in the process of creating media product/text and its value on the market.

We will not rely on Marx in theory, but we shall rather focus on the media semiotics [2] more precisely on social semiotics, and in accordance with the underlying principles of this discipline, we will try to explain the importance and influence of media messages on shaping awareness of the world. In accordance with Van Leeuwen, social semiotic is not *pure theory, not a self-contained field. It only comes into its own, it is applied to specific instances and specific problems, and it always requires immersing oneself not just in semiotic concepts and methods as such but also in some other fields. Social semiotics is a form of enquiry; it does not offer ready-made answer. It offers ideas for formulating questions and ways of searching answers* [3]. We shall leave aside the market value of (media) product and, along Jean Baudrillard's lines, we shall give significance to the symbolic dimension which becomes extremely important in the world of media supply and demand. *The sphere of the symbolic, which is usually related to ethnology, the history of religion, psychology or psychoanalysis becomes thus a subject of semiotic*s (Kleut, 2014, p. 111). Despite the fact that numerous theoreticians (see, for example, Bolin, 2005), consider the concept of the value of a sign to be problematic, we think that this concept has an extremely important role in the contemporary media environment. In fact, we consider that the sign is not just sheer imagination and some elusive fiction, but it is also very realistic, it has its historical destiny and a significant place in the creation of (hyper) reality. In accordance with the poststructuralist semiotic tendencies, we emphasize the importance of observing signs first and foremost as dynamic formations which, relying on the theoretical instruments of social semiotics will be called semiotic resources used to create meaning.

Furthermore, aware of the fact that, given the current trends in information and communication technologies, the Republic of Croatia (especially with their internet service prices and the use of broadband internet) is lagging behind most EU member states, we were interested in how and to what extent do domestic media, more precise websites, participate in informing the public, which is their role in the process of creating meaning according to which the recipients organize individual opinions and attitudes about current political, cultural, social,

economic and other issues. In this regard, we were especially interested in the issue of terrorism due to, as we will see, many specific qualities and complexities that this term implies. Also, in order to gain a better insight into basic questions which we were trying to answer, we have also included foreign websites in the research and we tried to establish a comparative analysis related to the appearing frequency of the term terrorism in the period from September 11 to November 11, 2017. In doing so, we tried to determine in which way particular topics go beyond the narrower, in this case political issues and become a global interest that simultaneously communicates in several segments and creates a specific sign system that spreads to very different areas of interest by corresponding and managing different areas of knowledge while simultaneously it influences the design of our political, ideological, social and cultural attitudes, leaving explicitly an impact not only on the cognitive part of personality but also on the affective one.

Further on, we conducted a web survey mainly among the teaching staff and the students of University North in order to get a clearer picture of the importance and popularity of getting informed through a website among the student population on the one hand and the academic population on the other. The survey was filled by ninety-nine respondents and was divided into four sections: Part 1—General Information (gender, age, degree of education); Part 2—Using Computer and Internet, sources of information; Part 3—Media and Terrorism; Part 4—Influence of Media on Emotions. For the purposes of this paper, we have used the answers from the first three groups of questions, which we use in the following text in order to confirm and explain certain theses. We are aware of the disadvantages of a web survey (the so-called cloze questionnaire), hence we do not consider the obtained answers to be the purpose of the research, but they are primarily a confirmation only of certain theses, that is, they help us better and more effectively situate our topic in a broader theoretical and analytical context. As far as the websites are concerned, we have included two domestic sites and two foreign websites in line with the popularity and affection shown by our survey respondents. These are websites 24 *sata. hr* which is visited by 20.4% of respondents, and *Index. hr* [4] which is visited by 19.8% of respondents. It is interesting to note that 72.4% of the respondents answered that they regularly read the domestic information websites (88.8% of the respondents use the internet as the source of information), while 78.6% do not read any foreign information websites at all. The rest of the respondents point out digital editions: *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, sporadically *Daily Mail Online*, *BBC News*, *Spiegel Online*, etc. We have to admit that the results concerning the visits to foreign information websites are quite devastating, so we have chosen the digital edition of *The Guardian*, and the digital edition of *The New York Times* for the comparative analysis. Out of a large number of websites only the four mentioned have been selected, and this basically disables the generalization of the results, but the aim of this research is not generalization but rather the examination of

analytical value of the theoretical framework, and if it is established that the analytical procedure is adequate to the applied theoretical viewpoints, we shall consider it applicable in some future, more extensive researches.

2. Social Semiotics—A Key for "Reading" Information Websites

According to Nöth (2004) [5], the annulment of reality in the artificial world of hyper reality, or the reflection and living in that reality that we can only perceive by simulation or illusion, is one of the most attractive topics of contemporary media studies based on semiotics. In fact, semiotics contemplates the theory of meaning as marking, *i.e.* it is based on the view that the connection between the bearer of the sign and the referent is mediated, arbitrary and imputed [6]. Here we will not present the historical cross section of semiotics development, but we will largely focus on contemporary research in this area, and in accordance with that, it should be emphasized that a sign is a cultural unit which strives to point to the principles of the meanings emergence in cultural and social practices in which markings get linked to the marked in order to present a reality with no signs. Sign systems are dynamic in the context of these reflections, and in accordance with van Leuwen, we shall perceive them as *semiotic resources* used in the process of creating meaning. In this regard, we will also emphasize the importance of Peirce's principle of semiosis, according to which *signs constantly point to other signs until the meanings stabilize in social life. The analysis of conditions under which this stabilization takes place has become a legitimate and desirable subject of semiotic researches that are united under the name of social* semiotics [7]. The concept of sign in social semiotics is replaced by the concept of *resource* because it is thus trying to, according van Leeuwen, avoid thinking that *what is represented by a sign* is something predetermined *and not originated as a result of its use* (Kleut, 2014, p. 55). Therefore, we can conclude that the reflection and the study of semiotic potentials of certain resources implies exploring how resources can be used in the process of communication, *by creating inventories of past and present resources and mapping of their use* (van Leeuwen, 2005, p. 57). Such uses occupy a relevant place in a social context that has its own rules or at least the best practice that governs the ways in which specific semiotic resources can be used.

It should also be remembered that modern media are not just ordinary channels that send messages from sender to recipient, but they are rather technical and technological structures that induce specific messages and communication practices. As we have already pointed out, we will focus first and foremost on specific forms of web communication, so we will draw attention to the importance of computer semiotics [8], but this time we shall set aside a deeper discussion on the mentioned discipline. According to Kleut, software represents the first level of articulation in virtual communication. However, here we will only consider a fact suggested by Nake & Grabowski (2001), that computer signs are

dual—they possess the logic of functioning at the computer level and another logic on the social and cultural plan. Further, we should also mention the interface [9] which represents the second level of articulation in virtual communication, which appears as a transitional segment between computer semiotics and social semiotics. Our research will primarily be focused on sociological aspects where web communication is an unavoidable cause and consequence and we will therefore stop at the perception of website as a media in which different expressive possibilities are merged, together with systems of expressing meaning whose interpretation particularly relies on semiotic principles of modality. Multimodal contents therefore represent the third level of articulation in virtual communication, which will be our primary focus in this paper.

The theoretical environment of social semiotics in the context of analytical approaches is based on three premises: a) semiotic modes are always involved in different textual products, which means that all discourses are multimodal; b) social semioticians assume that interests of the sign-maker are motivated by reciprocal relations between the signifier and the signified and therefore they motivate the signs; c) discourse production focuses on cultural, social and contextual factors [10]. In accordance with the above mentioned, it is concluded that discourse is a socially constructed knowledge of a certain aspect. The way that media, more precisely, websites show events in the world and society represents a semiotic process, but the semiotic process is at the same time the way in which recipients enter into a relationship with, for example, a text they are reading. In this regard, socially semiotic approach to multimodal analysis must inevitably include wider insights, it has to focus on questions about the way media texts reveal and influence the formation of problems of identity, nation, culture, society, etc. For this reason, exactly, we have focused on the problem of terrorism, or on the importance of its presence in the media, primarily to show how the media generates the richness of meaning of what we can perceive as a discourse, as a term that functions as a text and which, as we will see, gets caught in a network of communication dissemination and culture, including also the broader economic, political and even psychological context [11]. We are talking about a term that, with its appearance in the media, as well as the effects that its phenomenon inevitably causes and affects the change of the world, and the change of the awareness of the questions of nation, religion, identity, etc. This term shows the extent to which technology affects the transformation of the world. For example, let us recall Heidegger and his analysis of early 20th century media where he established to what extent does visual technology (photography, film) directly enter the transformation of the world according to which all things can be seen as a world of images [12]. The presence of terrorism in the media, as well as the effects that its phenomenon necessarily evokes, proves that the media establish a new communication culture, a culture of new standards, codes and expressive markings, and this way they directly affect the awareness and creation of social knowledge of the whole world.

2.1. Organization of Multimodal Content on Selected Websites

According to Kress & Van Leeuwen, in social semiotics a mode is defined as a system of marking (symbol system) shaped by a social practice [13]. Relying on Manovich's view, we consider websites to be a digital image that functions as a representative (signifier), it belongs to human culture and enters into a dialogue with other images and other signs of culture. Therefore, we think the websites we are trying to present are space-determined media in which *the logic of spatial distribution leads to the present semantic elements, while the elements and relations among them represent the resources for marking* (Kleut, 2014, p. 51). In other words, certain resources take a significant place only thanks to the importance (editorial politics, social context) they possess in a certain socially important moment.

Websites observed in this paper, 24 *sata. hr*, *Index. hr*, *The Guardian* and *The New York Times* demonstrate that visual presentation combines two types of multimodal content that correspond to two interface functions: presentation and action. While presentation is understandable on its own, it should be noted that the action includes navigation as well as hyperlinks since linking elements through hyperlinks show how the screen space gains depth in addition to the width and length, and due to this depth websites can be regarded as partially time-determined media. All observed websites are organized in a very similar way: 24 *sata. hr* follows the organizational logic of the printed edition (24 *sata*) where photos are dominant while the text is in the background. In the top left corner of the web page there is a logo, then main menus in a horizontal sequence (*Home, News, Show, Sport, Life & Style, Sci/Tech, Viral, Video*), the top slider is static (at the moment of this analysis in this spot there is a retail chain ad that advertises Christmas atmosphere, food, candles, decorations, etc.). The page is organized horizontally and in the first part, which contains the most important information, there is a large picture of a pretty young woman and we only from the title below know that this is actually about a recently killed girl. The first part of the front page is divided into three columns, but as we scroll down the page (which is broken by ads), the number of columns increases to four. In the bottom right corner there is a logo of the media platform that launches the portal. In the foreground, there is always a photo, and most often the photo is closely related to the event that it accompanies, while the news headline is below the photo. The website is directly linked to social networks such as *Facebook, Twitter* and the *Viber* communications platform. White and orange are dominant colours. *Index. hr* largely follows the logic of traditional print media, whereas this website does not have its own printed equivalent. The top part of the page is occupied by a dynamic slider that advertises a new vehicle at the time of access, and the page logo is below the advertising part in the top left corner. Similar to the previous website, the menus come next (*Home, News, Sports, Black, Rouge, GC, Lajk, Auto, Plus, Info*). In the upper part of the front page on the left, there is a selection of the latest and most popular news divided into two columns, and

in the third column there are ever-changing headlines and links to the latest news. As we scroll down the page, which is also broken by ads, we come to the news from sport, and a special section called *Index Plus* which includes columns *Car*, *Mums*, *Pets*, *Fit.* Unlike 24 *sata. hr* which is dominated by photos, *Index. hr* gives priority to the text rather than photos which appear only as a side-segment to the news. Index news can also be read on Facebook, while dominant colours are red and black. Both portals, in addition to photos, use video footage as accompanying content to news. We may notice that a digital edition of The Guardian is very similar to the visual organization of 24 *sata. hr*, even when it comes to number of columns on the main page, photo dominance and horizontal spatial organization. The Guardian is specific because it has the UK edition, the US edition, and the international edition, while dominant colours are white and blue. The logo, which is a stylized website's name, is located in the top right corner. Of all the aforementioned websites, *The New York Times* is the only one fundamentally different, primarily because it visually gives the impression of a large format, which is in line with printed edition and it represents one of the few daily newspapers that did not transfer to the smaller, tabloid format type. Unlike previous websites, we notice the absence of slider on the front page and a significantly smaller number of advertisements in general, which strives to leave the impression of serious and professional journalism with, naturally, white and black colour as recognizable elements of elegance and sophistication. The logo is a stylized website's name, and immediately below there is a horizontal main menu: *World*, *U.S.*, *Politics*, *N.Y.*, *Business*, *Opinion*, *Tech*, *Science*, *Health*, *Sports*, *Food*, *Magazine*, *T Magazine*, *Real Estate*. The first part of the front page includes the latest news, the central part is divided into two columns, while the third part is reserved for the most popular news through its entire vertical line. The bottom part of the home page includes several rubrics: Editors' Picks, Smarter Living, Features, Discovery. The top part of the home page is dominated by the text section, while the lower part is dominated by photos.

All websites have the so-called widget "search", a search engine that enables a more simple access to a selected content, thus achieving hypermodality, that is *a way to name new words*, *images and auditory meanings in hypermedia*, *or semiotic artifacts in which they are labeled*, *in various syntagmatic organizations*, *connected into complex networks* (Kleut, 2014, p. 55). Our study focuses on the emergence of the term terrorism in texts on selected websites, and the result of this process is the transition from one screen composition to another.

2.2. Placing a Semiotic Resource *Terrorism* into a Digital Environment

In our study, the term *terrorism* is determined by semiotic resource in accordance with the social semiotics, *i.e.* a signifier, an object that is involved in the domain of social communication and possesses a *theoretical semiotic potential* constructed by all its past uses, that is, it possesses the *current semiotic potential*

constituted by these past uses which appear as relevant users of that same resource. The term terrorism is therefore included in both domains, it possesses historical significance and historical meaning and is today one of the most important news of global scale not only of political importance but also of the general, cultural one.

Horgan (2005) [14] sees terrorism as a global phenomenon in various shapes and forms that was considered to be a largely marginal topic until 1960, when the global information network came to the scene. Thanks to technological innovations it becomes one of the most popular topics of almost all media [15]. Terrorism today is brutal, often irrational and presents a very big problem to many governments. It is an inherently immoral problem that exists outside the framework of rational activities, and as such enters the wider area of research in the 1960s and is presented mainly through one-sided opinions that define it as an abnormal form of violence. At the time of so-called new terrorism, this opinion is more than ever expressed, primarily because terrorism is characterized as nihilistic and irrational, as something that is impossible to explain precisely thanks to its redundant logic [16]. This so-called *new terrorism*, underlined by completely new semantic and semiotic paradigms, was presented on 11th September 2001 with the attack on the World Trade Centre in New York. It is an event that has completely changed the traditional concept of thinking about this term and has fundamentally transformed the role of media in society, initially through and thanks to television, and afterwards through and thanks to other media [17].

Television, especially television news, has specific features (e.g. immediacy, uninterrupted presence, fast change of scenes, creating an impression of intimacy, etc.) and because of that it influences the emotionality of the viewer stronger and more direct than any other medium, and this, of course, directly influences the understanding of the course of social life. Television news are based on a narrative that has great resemblance to the narration of film art, so there are opinions that perhaps for this very reason the terrorist attack on the USA was conceived as a film disaster. *Namely, the attackers knew that the American nation (and not only them) is a society of spectacles that thinks in images and that this is one of the most impressive and most effective ways to achieve their main goal—to strike them with terror and a sense of complete insecurity. They assumed that the media would help them—and they were not wrong* [18]. The television undoubtedly has the power to challenge emotions, which is proven by the results of a conducted survey, so even 61.6% of the respondents chose television as the medium that in this sense possesses the greatest power. Anyway, the media turned events related to 9/11 into *a series of dramatic and emotional stories that set certain frameworks for understanding of this event and were permanently engraved in collective memory* (Kovačević & Perišin, 2014, p. 123). This event simultaneously influenced the question and reflection of a series of complex concepts and problems—nation, identity, emotions, awareness, politics,

religion, media, etc.

Although websites do not have some of the basic features of television and television news (or at least these do not stand out in the same way), we would be wrong if we did not think they played a significant role in mediating and constructing knowledge about wider social life. Respondents who completed our survey pointed out that as many as 36.4% of them spend more than five hours on computers (19.2% of respondents spend less than two hours, 21.2% spend between three and five hours, and only 1% of respondents use the computer only occasionally), and even 88.9% of them use the internet as the basic source of daily information, while as many as 73.7% of them learn about a new terrorist attack (as well as generally about that topic) most commonly through websites. The availability of information at any time, a break from everyday business obligations, constant updating of content, etc.—all these are advantages of gaining information through websites. In addition, let us recall Horgan's thought which he recorded in the *International Herald Tribune* in 2005—every week, sometimes even several times a day, we come across a number of articles dedicated to terrorism, the consequences of terrorism, and the risks and dangers associated with it. The question arises as to why issues such as economics or major disasters do not have the same power as terrorism issues? The answer should be looked for in the fact that no other event (or it has rather had no competition yet) has such a force in causing fear among readers (and viewers) as terrorism. The aforementioned is also confirmed by the conducted survey since 52.5% of respondents chose exactly the fear to be the underlying emotion that they feel when they see the news of a terrorist attack.

By choosing the term terrorism in search engines of these websites, we have found that all of them function in the same way in their organizational structure. The search result in all four cases gives the list of articles where the searched term appears on the date of publication of the texts (24 *sata. hr*, *Index. hr*), considering the position it has in the title (*The Guardian*), while *The New York Times* perhaps has the best solution because it is possible to summarize the search results with the help of the calendar and the relevance setting. Along with the title of the text, there is often a genre-specific definition, *i.e.* the section in which the article is located (news, sport, show, columns, etc.). In addition, along with the text title that also functions as a hyperlink, there is usually a photo that corresponds to the given topic. On the website 24 *sata. hr*, the term *terrorism* appears in 20 articles, on *Index. hr* in 42 articles (not all of which are explicitly associated with Islamic extremism), *The Guardian* (*International Edition*) in 17 articles, while *The New York Times* counts 20 articles. As we have already warned, selecting the search term also leads to the reorganization of the screen composition, and the choice of a specific article opens the required content. The organization of this content is again organized with regard to the stylistic and compositional peculiarities of the website as a media and is almost identical in all four examples: the article takes up the middle part of the screen, above the

title of the article there is most often the highlighted image, followed by the title (in bold, larger font), and then there is a text which includes photos accompanying the content. All articles can be shared via e-mail or social networks: Facebook, Tweeter, Linkedin, Google+, Reddit, Pin, and most articles can be commented on by the logged-in users. There are links to current news below the articles, the main menu is on the left and right side or the top of the page, and then there are the most popular news or advertisements. According to the aforesaid, we can conclude that the architecture of the mentioned websites is more or less identical in both the title pages and the individual articles, which confirms the existence of some fixed basic principles for site design such as sharing, hierarchical scheduling, mode combination, abstraction, visual routing.

We started our research with the date 11th September 2017 and we chose it on purpose in order to explore its symbolic value, and we have shown to what extent and in which ways this term exists in collective memory today. On the 11th September 2017 the website 24 *sata. hr* published an article with a headline *Day of Horror. Croats Too Died in Hell Towers of WTC*, the authors of which are website editors. It is possible to conclude from the title itself in which way the fundamental thoughts will be directed and that the memory of this tragedy will have an expressed national component. The highlighted photo displays a tower in flames, while a very short introductory part repeats the facts connected to the tragic event (memory of the event itself, the number of victims as well as the USA actions in the following month—operation in Afghanistan, then in Iraq, the execution of Saddam Hussein five years later, and Osama bin Laden ten years later), while the rest of the text primarily focuses on recalling of those Croatians that managed to save themselves from the death towers (Mario Stanišić, Ivan Teodorović, Sandra Larson, Zlatko Kapović, Denis Antolov, Darija Grbić, Ivan Žgaljić, Anthony Matešić, Vesna Begonja), and of those Croatians that died that day (Anthony Jović, Alfred Vukoša, Ronald Tartaro, Dominik Mirković). Special place is dedicated to Dominik Mirković who lost his life while saving others, so this part of the text is further reinforced by his photograph. Further, *Index. hr* publishes an article that day by the title *Trump on the Anniversary of 9/11 Attack*: "*That day, our eyes opened*", and they state the Croatian News Agency (HINA) as their source. The article primarily reflects on the USA president's speech, which is more or less the combination of emotional memory of the event on the one hand, and the tendency to invoke the public to a firm, fearless defensive stance on the other. The article is accompanied by photographs—a big photo of Donald Trump above the title as well as a video clip (1 hour and 21 minutes) from YouTube, which broadcasts the speech of the American president. Both articles have the possibility of comments that are mostly contradictory and non-objective, which is an often case in the Croatian communication space of this kind, and they are considered to be inappropriate statements, so we do not think that there is a need to emphasize them in this place, regardless of them being another unavoidable segment in discussions about contemporary virtual

communication flows.

In the context of 11th September 2017, we come across an interesting situation in *The Guardian* which publishes an article by the author Joanne Walters titled *Will Accused* 9/11 *Architect Khalid Sheikh Mohammed Ever Come to Trial?*, which reflects a completely different way of remembering the tragic event. There is no remembrance of the tragedy in this article which would primarily invoke emotions, but exactly the opposite—the text is abundant in sarcasm and irony. The author states that the main suspect for the attacks that have forever changed the world, spent the sixteenth anniversary of the event in Guantánamo and that there is a great chance, according to his lawyers, that Sheikh Mohammed could die before the start of the main trial set no earlier than in January 2019, and that is even an optimistic prediction. The author enriches the text with Terry McDermott's thoughts, a co-author of the book *The Hunt for KSM: Inside the Pursuit and Takedown of the Real* 9/11 *Mastermind, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed*, and also with Ellen Judd's thoughts, who is an anthropology professor at Manitoba University. However, one thing additionally underscores the dominant sarcastic tone and gives a very special charm to this article, and that is a photo/cartoon by an artist Janet Hamlin depicting Khalid Sheikh Mohammed during a hearing in Guantánamo in 2012. Thus, in the centre of the photo there is Mohammed dressed in typical men's clothing—white dress (kandoora), white scarf on the head (keffiyeh), black rim holding the scarf (aghal). He is depicted sitting in front of a monitor and a bundle of papers/documents, with expressed black hair, sharp black eyebrows and grey beard. With his right-hand index finger, he is holding his chin, and we can notice a scorn on his face that is exactly the opposite of the situation in which he is actually found, and that in fact emphasizes the irony of his entire court process.

Digital edition of *The New York Times* on September 11 publishes Ariel Dorfman's article entitled *Remembering the Disappeared*, which points to the fact that out of 2,753 victims of the terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre, we do not know anything about 1,112 of them, which means there is no trace whatsoever of up to 40%. The author then goes into the analysis of the word disappeared and he connects it semantically and semiotically with the terrorism and political injustices whose equivalents are found in adjectives such as fear, loss, darkness, etc. On the other hand, the *disappeared* carries a spark of hope, as until the dead body is found or any other evidence on which the disappeared becomes dead—there is always the possibility that they will one day, somewhere appear alive. Of course, the chances are very small. The whole intonation of the article is emotional, commemorative, entirely directed towards the victims, and the context in which survivors continue to exist. Unlike the previous ones, this article is not marked by a highlighted photo, but immediately below the title on the left side of the text there is a photo taken by Katherine Lam. It is an interesting, somewhat artistic black and white work of art that resembles scenery similar to contemporary theatrical performances characterized by the so-called *naked*

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podium and in whose centre there are only the actors completely left to their skill. So, there are three people in the photo, one male and two females, with no expressive facial lines, caught in a conversation. Between the man and a woman there is a silhouette (probably male) that actually suggests the presence of the disappeared and this tries to send a message that the disappeared (regardless of the meaning of the word) are always with us. Therefore, this photo in principle fully follows the content of the text.

Terrorism is an omnipresent term and an omnipresent real possibility, so while exploring articles on the above-mentioned websites, we have come to the conclusion that it exists in a communication phenomenon that cannot exist without internet and other communication channels through which it is mediated. For this reason, every two to three days on average, depending on whether there are any attacks and depending on their intensity, there is a published article with a central topic of terrorism. On a general plan, there are no big differences either in the presentation methods or in the contents of articles on all four observed websites. All of them focus on topics dealing with possible ways to solve the problem; about hiring and special training of soldiers; about dangers of hacker attacks; all of these media covered the London Underground explosion on 15th September; they also covered the automatic weapon attack on visitors of the country music festival in Las Vegas on October 2; then they wrote about the Bosnian-Herzegovinian extradition of Mirsad Kandić to the USA, who was a jihadist uncovered by the *WhatsApp* application; about the terrorist attack on Manhattan on October 31, etc. It is interesting to note that in situations such as the one in the French town of Toulouse on November 10, when a man intentionally hit a group of students with his car, and there were two seriously injured, they first try to determine whether it was a terrorist attack. In other words, every extreme act today is immediately associated with a terrorist attack, which once again proves popularity, of course, in a negative context, of this term and act. But, to prove that it is a day-to-day growing problem, there is a data issued by the British government, according to which, as reported by the British military service MI5 head Andrew Parker, in the past 12 months, 379 people have been arrested for terrorism-related activities, which is a growth of 68% and presents a one-year record.

The fundamental difference we notice in the comparison of the websites relates primarily to the specifics of the political atmosphere in the Republic of Croatia on the one hand, and in the USA and Great Britain on the other hand, and for that reason there are more often examples of verbal outwitting between Donald Trump and Teresa May among the articles published in the digital editions of *The Guardian* and *The New York Times*, which is a communication characteristic significant for their milieu. Likewise, these countries have experienced and still are experiencing the real catastrophe of terrorist attacks, so they approach the problem in a different, sometimes more studious and politically indirect way. The Republic of Croatia has not yet experienced a terrorist attack

of this type, but a large number of inhabitants remember the Homeland War and the horrors people experienced and went through, so authors of the articles as well as readers are likely to have a higher degree of empathy towards these topics compared to the nations that have not experienced such tragedies in their recent history.

The previous presentation induces us to Lewis's thoughts stating that terrorism holds a cultural form that has a semiotic trajectory in the culture of modern media, and one of the basic goals met through the media is, as we have already mentioned, the spread of fear. According to Lewis, the spread of fear is a strategy controlled and managed by subnational and transnational militant groups, and violence in general as well as political violence stand out as the main drives of the media industry. Therefore, we shall accept Lewis's opinion and point out that terrorism is a category of political violence which uses directly selected victims and material targets for semiotic and symbolic reasons. Terrorism is something real, tangible, but also totally abstract. Its meaning entangles into the complexity of cultural relations and tensions and is reflected as the war of languages and cultures. The current wave of terrorism and political violence is built on ethnic, religious, discursive and political differences that are based on the historic division of the world into the West and the East. This division can be characterized as an abstract manifestation of cultural disputes which uses violence to collapse the global hierarchical order. Today, as Huntington warns, wars are waged for the *culture*, rather than for ideology or economics. Basically, the entire so-called *war against terrorism* depicts the level of abstraction that is the highest level of politically created, legitimate militant authority that governs the world.

3. Conclusions

In our previous presentation, we tried to confirm that today's epoch is indeed marked by mass media that creates a new universe, a universe based on *interconnections, feedbacks and touches* [19]. These are the processes Baudrillard describes *as narcissistic and burdened with constant surface changes*, therefore there is no *scene* or *mirror* today, but everything is turned into a *screen* and a *net*. We live in *the ecstasy of communication*, the media practice *has transformed our sense of space and time* (ibid), which creates the order defined by the pattern of a model, *i.e.* the highly formalized and technically structured signs and meanings. *This is the order in which, beyond the formally visible models, metaphysics of code or the logic of binary oppositions dominate* [20], and social semiotics in the research of new reality (virtuality, hyperrealism) is a powerful ground for understanding a series of processes in which we appear as active or interactive readers. As we have tried to show, social semiotics assumes a wide range of research and therefore does not concentrate on observing the sign solely in its traditional dyadic (Saussure) or triadic (Peirce) structure, but it singles out the fact that all that we do can be articulated in different social and cultural meanings. The semiotic resource is the bearer of the potentiality of meaning, and

the contemplation of semiotic potential in the context of a certain semiotic resource implies exploring how this resource was, is or will be used for communication purposes.

Therefore, the reader's place in such an atmosphere, perhaps even paradoxically, becomes irreplaceable primarily because every media content can be seen exclusively as *a structured, culturally located, symbolic product that can only be understood in relation to readers and which, together with readers, brings meanings* (Kleut, 2014, p. 25). However, due to space constraints, we have left many issues aside, and the reception model is certainly another issue that opens up a completely new topic. Furthermore, the issue of media terrorism, to which we have paid special attention, opens a whole series of questions, and in the context of media studies, one should focus, inter alia, on the psychological effects of the media on the recipient with regard to a specific topic, which is the primary field of research of media psychology.

However, our research tried to show the importance of semiotic research in the context of the media, but of contemporary research in which it is almost illusory to talk about the relationship of meaning, or insist on expressing meaning. We are more inclined to think, which we have been trying to demonstrate, that the current fundamental relationships are relations of symbolization which establish a motivated link between the homogeneous entities according to which mechanisms that are active in a society are discovered.

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