Geographic Scale in the United States' National Nightly Network News

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When Michael Brown was shot by police officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson, MO, a small suburb of St. Louis, 'Ferguson' became a site of national and global inquiry. This increased interest, especially in the national network news, a domain of symbolic power, may have magnified the locale and created a distorted perception of Ferguson's geography and the geographic systems to which it belongs. This dissertation pairs research in media and communications and human geography to examine the scalar geographical schemas being produced in and around Ferguson by United States' national network news language. To specify 'scalar geographic language', the dissertation reviews literature from various scholars who conceptualized scale and develops a tripartite conceptualization of scalar geographic language, consolidating repeated themes in human and political geography into three classifications of scalar systems: vertical, horizontal, and binary.

After conceptualizing these geographical divisions, a content analysis of national network news media language is conducted, examining 65 texts and their deployment of these scalar geographic systems. In the analysis of the national network news texts, this dissertation finds that the national network news largely presented scalar language that created a binary between the nation and Ferguson, while also largely ignoring the regional context (the language of vertical scalar systems). Based on these findings, the dissertations argues that conceptualizations of geographic scalar systems in the national news media may have political ramifications given the United States' federalist system and the national network news' uneven distribution of visibility.

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Ferguson, Missouri was founded 160 years before teenager Michael Brown was shot and killed by Officer Darren Wilson on August 9th 2014. Ferguson came into being as a railroad community in 1855, when William B. Ferguson deeded property crucial for rail development to the North Missouri Railroad Company and received naming rights over the area. Ferguson is a part of the Greater St. Louis Metropolitan Area. It is located within St. Louis County, 12 miles away from downtown St. Louis. It is one of over 90 municipalities in the county (Newburn, 2014) and is a modern, predominantly black, suburb that is identical in many ways to the ones that surround it (Fox, 1995).

But after Darren Wilson fired the shots that killed Michael Brown, Ferguson erupted into protests and violence and became a center of massive national attention, garnering more

(1983), Dayan and Katz (1992), and Lewis (2008), which present the argument that the media produces feelings of community, nationalism, and belonging, perhaps the function of the national broadcast news media as an institution is not to prop up and reflect the existing political system, but to produce communities and social linkages out of discord? Lewis (2008; 409) argues that in Spain, '

order to rally the nation around narratives of conquest. It is 'Anticipation, and perhaps the comfort of orderliness, [that] differentiate them[2]', according to Katz and Liebes (2007; 160). As such, disruptive media events, rather than edifying establishments, like other media events, can lead to the media '

producing the content are interesting, but they have yet to be thoroughly examined in empirical work. This being the case, more empirical research examining disruptive media

to his general approach, which claims that places are defined and maintained by language

Geographical connections are also drawn by the news media. Rantanen's (2003) work illustrates how the news media produce the limits to connectivity and imagination beyond the places in which we dwell. She suggests that electronic news media (in this case the telegram) 'form the global news space available to readers in different locations (2003; 447). The world and the connections within it has gotten more complex since the telegram, but Rantanen's point remains critical, if not even more so today. As our boundaries of time and space are increasingly and simultaneously expanded and compressed (Tsatsou, 2009), the news media have a greater ability to limit and delimit perceptions of geographic scale and can create the linkages between two previously un-associated, or unknown spaces. Work conducted by Howe (2009), too, describes how the 'semantics' used by the news media (in this case newspapers in Arizona) take on a geographic life of their own, producing geographic relationships that may have not otherwise existed and tying the fortunes of disparate localities to each other.

But Howe (2009; 58) also argues that 'the spaces and places that are represented in the news media reflect both physical spatial relationships and the cognitive maps of journalists and readers'. This interest in the differences and similarities between the ''the real world' and the 'news world'' (Wu, 2000; 110) is a center of much scholarly attention. This may be a false dichotomy as, if the news media plays a role in the production of the 'real world', its communities, and its boundaries, then the distinction between the two fails to be as significant, as the real world and the news world are mutually constitutive. One of the long-term consequences of this dichotomy between reality and language in the field is that toponyms (the names of places) have been considered reality producing—scholars argue that contests for power manifest themselves in the name of a location, which then presents an ideology to those that occupy it, but 'relational' language, the language of scalar systems, had largely been considered as something that was taken from the landscape until radical

the link between phenomena and level of analysis—

and economic weight than some of its competing urban areas—and thus hierarchically privileged in the news media. This is an interesting conclusion, but one that takes the city for granted as the site of geographic inquiry and uses a comparative analysis across cities. That type of language—the language of horizontal comparison—is just one way to analyze scalar relationships. This study seeks to build on this analysis of the media's relationship with geographic hierarchies and investigate patterns in scalar language itself; hopefully gaining a greater understanding of the language of scale that is edified by the media, and thus, according to a media power approach, privileged in society.

In reviewing texts in the field, four prominent attitudes towards scalar hierarchies emerge: the binary, the horizontal, the vertical, and the deconstructionist (Marston et al. 2005; Healey, 2004). This review will describe each.

is joined up, then so too is the political practice of those who appropriate, displace, and thwart the exercise of power and its intended outcomes (Allen, 2004; 29).

Applying geographical concepts to the exercise of power, Allen finds that horizontal spatial networks of commonality may provide alternatives to the view of organizational, spatial power that the government, as a central, networked entity, can exercise. What is important here, however, is the notion that, with horizontal scalar language, previous organizations can influence contemporary ones and that society should organize not around cascading difference, but around similarity.

The language that presents horizontal scalar systems, then, is that which creates

As shown in the literature review, many geography scholars have taken a relational turn in their understanding of scale. This relational turn postulates that social actors produce scalar relationships, but empirical literature, especially that regarding the United States' national network news media is lacking. To contribute to this deficiency, this dissertation presents an inter-disciplinary approach, drawing from the disciplines of human geography, linguistics,

subjective (representations) are actually in a dialectical relationship and, thus, constitutive of each other.

This conceptual framework, brings us to the following, overarching, research question and its sub-questions--the language of which is operationalized in the methodology chapter:

> Which languages of geographic scalar systems did the United States broadcast television news media promote or hinder in their coverage of Ferguson, MO in the aftermath of the Michael Brown shooting?

In order to answer this overarching question, sub-questions regarding the specifics and timing of different geographic language will need to be answered. The sub-questions are as follows:

- **1** To what degree did the national broadcast television news media distribute the language of vertical scalar systems?

- **2**

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Given the research question and hypothesis above, the methodology used needs to take into account an additional factor: the orientation of the researcher towards the subject. As an individual who grew up in St. Louis, Missouri, the researcher has certain biases vis-à-vis the reality of the city, its portrayal, and its problems that are a manifestation of experiencing 'place'. These biases helped conceptualize the project theoretically, but provide methodological challenges, as this is a dissertation that strives to create an accurate portrayal of media behaviour in Ferguson, MO (as conceptualized in the literature review). If the researcher were to subjectively select texts that highlighted their point, this accuracy may be jeopardized; a methodology that emphasizes objectivity and systematicity is ideal. As such, this project uses content analysis to systematically discover patterns in the usage of language regarding geographic systems.

In order to discover patterns in

only those which seek to build new societal spaces out of language. For instance, a national level narrative that employs horizontal language would say 'police militarization has become a problem throughout the country lately'. This serves to

available, given these parameters. After discarding irrelevant broadcasts and duplicates this amounts to a sample of 65 media texts.

Intercoder reliability (ICR) testing is critical for the validity of content analysis research. High intercoder reliability scores ensure that the coding frame is strong and clearly defined, and thus

number of texts was hoped to be larger, but it represents the entire population of national nightly news broadcasts that aired during this period, and will yield more conclusive results than a sample of a comparative size would about a larger population. Statistical tests were conducted using SPSS and general descriptive results will be displayed before attempting to address the research question and sub-questions introduced earlier in this dissertation.

The term 'Ferguson' was used much more than any of the other terms and was the most prominent. The mean usage of Ferguson was 6 times per story, while 2 for St. Louis, 2.35 for
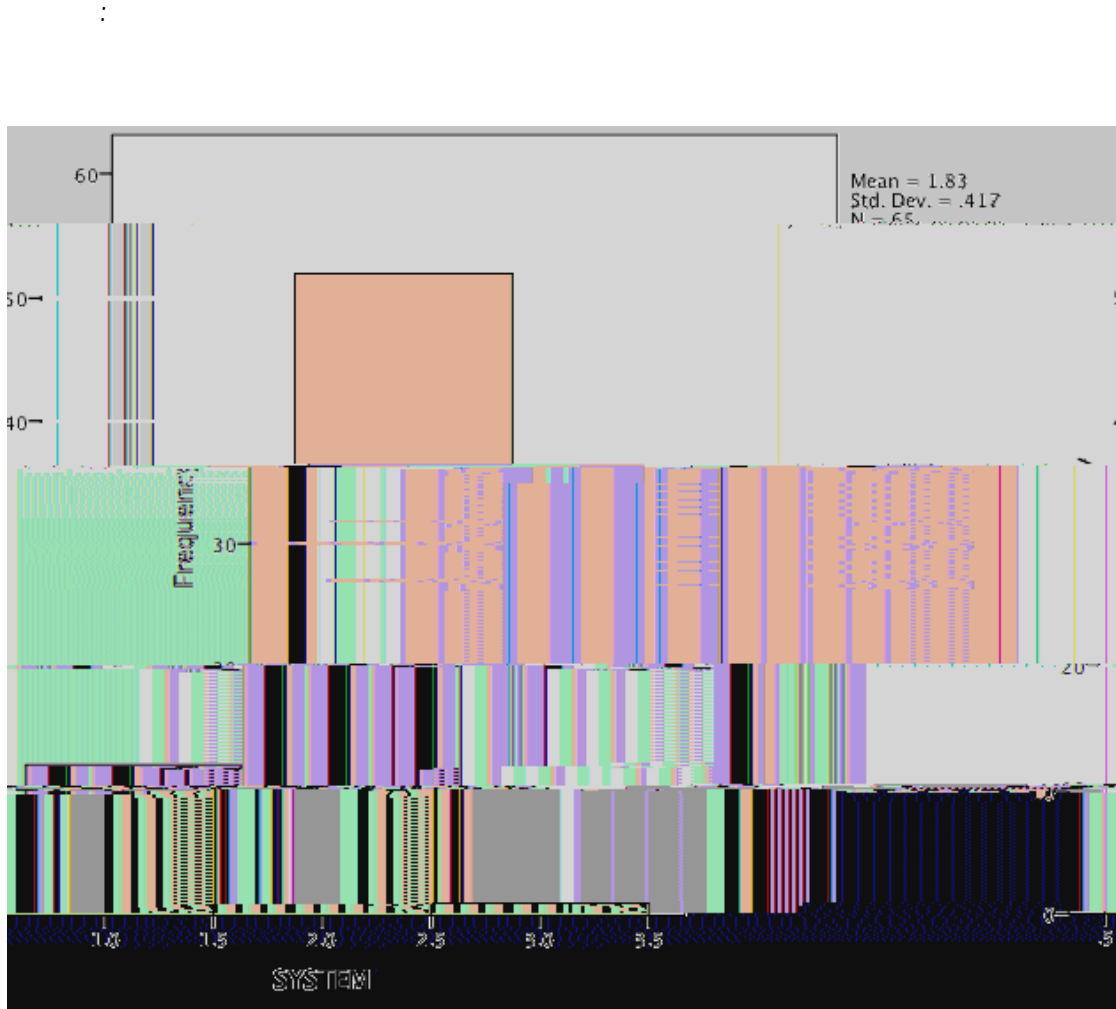
Sub-question : To what degree did the national broadcast television news media distribute the language of vertical scalar systems?

Figure 2 SYSTEM = 'Is Ferguson mainly discussed in the context of St. Louis', with 1 = Yes, 2 = No, and 3=Not-Applicable Ferguson not mentioned

Sub-question 2: To what degree did the national broadcast television news media distribute the language of binary scalar systems?

As illustrated above, the language of vertical scalar systems (responsible political entities) was subordinate overall to specific language of Ferguson in terms of prominence and overall utterance. The recurring utterances of Ferguson made it take on a larger role in the media coverage than its vertical political containers, St. Louis and Missouri. This is further illustrated by the fact that in 80% (52) of the articles Ferguson was not mainly discussed in

the context of St. Louis[6], the political container that immediately presides over it. Furthermore, a 'regional' approach was only clearly identified in 9.2% (6) of the articles.

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This cross tabulation of MACRO and INDIVID shown in Figure 3, provides strong evidence ($X2 = 43.875$; Sig = <.001) for there being a relationship between the 'uniqueness' of Ferguson, and the level of macro-narrative applied in the news sources. Further examining the table, it is clear that binary language is the most prevalent. 41.5% of the texts portrayed Ferguson as entirely unique and in 90% of those texts a Macro-level narrative was either largely or completely absent. As discussed by Cloke and Johnson (2005) in the review chapter, when language of scale is used to portray a locality as unique, without incorporating regional, macro, or horizontal narratives, it serves to create a geographic 'them' and, thus, an implied 'we' that exists in opposition to it—a binary, the local and the national, as that is the

Guard period used the term 'Ferguson' and that the median usage of the term was higher than in the time outside of the 'National Guard' period. Similarly, the use of 'St. Louis' declined during this period, with the stories omitting St. Louis in 38% of the cases as opposed to 22% in the rest of the population. Figure 5 further shows how the conceptualization changed, with the levels of usages being paired in the beginning, then separation beginning to show. After the first week of coverage, Ferguson would—with few exceptions—be the main signifier in every text.
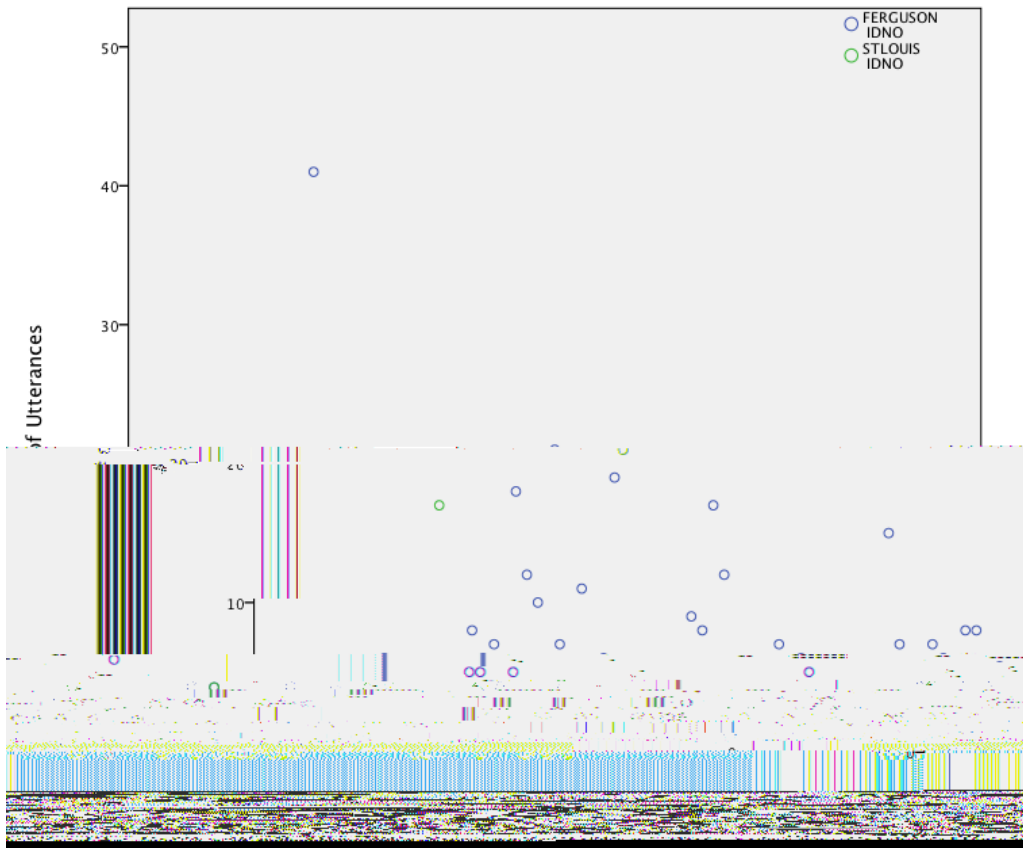

Figure 5: ID Number is organized by the time the articles were published.

Finding : The use of vertical scalar hierarchies was limited.

As displayed by Figure 2, the presentation of Ferguson as an entity within St. Louis or Missouri was limited. In addition to this, the limited definition of Ferguson within that context was constrained to the first week of coverage. Outside of the first week, only one story mainly considered Ferguson within the context of St. Louis or Missouri. This has important

implications for representations of the geography of federalist democracy in the news media. Federalist democracy, as discussed in the review section, is based upon cascading realms of political responsibility from the national to the local level. Here, the national news media do not appear to proportionally represent the geography that corresponds to it, St. Louis and Missouri, despite being politically responsible for the laws and regulations in Ferguson, are given much less airtime and consideration than Ferguson or the nation.

> Source 46 (August 24th): 'The families of Michael Brown and Trayvon Martin appeared together for the first time at a rally in St. Louis tonight. As Vladimir Duthiers reports, it is part of a larger push for peace instead of violence in the tension- filled town of Ferguson.'

The excerpt above, typical of the texts analyzed is an example of how the media routinely passed on the opportunity to present Ferguson within vertical scalar contexts. The article opens mentioning that there is a rally in St. Louis regarding what is going on in Ferguson, but, almost bizarrely, the article neither refers to St. Louis again nor uses language to contextualize Ferguson within it. The text chooses not to link St. Louis to Ferguson and focuses directly on Ferguson, detailing the composition of the city's police force, comparing the lessons of the city to national narratives of policing, and detailing the state of turmoil within its bounds.

When vertical scalar language was presented, it was generally in this format:

> Source 45 (August 22nd): 'RON ALLEN: Also today tough new demands from the young people

Source 32 (August 18th): 'Good evening. Tonight the National Guard has taken control of Ferguson, Missouri, a city so torn, so tense, it is now essentially militarized. We're gonna give you an extraordinary look tonight at what it is really like on the front lines in Ferguson.'

First it is important to acknowledge the use of Missouri in the above statement. This usage was typical. Stories would start by using Ferguson, Missouri, then their usage would slip, with the signifier of Ferguson becoming 'enough'. In this text, for instance, Ferguson would go on to be used two more times, while there were zero usages of 'Missouri'. While the locating usage of Missouri does serve to advantage vertical language to some degree, the qualities of Ferguson are not attributed to Missouri, it is defined as separate from Missouri (and the rest of America), and the place 'Missouri' is given little space to breathe in the text, averaging less than one utterance outside of the locating function per text.

Returning to the matter of the broadcast's introduction, Ferguson is presented as a specific place, whose disruptiveness makes it distinct. This seems more akin to a war piece than one on internal disturbances; the broadcaster uses the terms 'militarized', 'front lines', and 'extraordinary' to define it as a place of violent import that is distinctly different than the rest of America.

The excerpt below, despite coming from a passage that acknowledged Ferguson's status as a

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Grand Blvd. If one drove from the center of that area, roughly at the intersection of St. Louis Ave. and Newstead Ave., to Ferguson Police Department, the distance would be less than 8 miles. This could be an honest mistake by the reporter, but serves as a potent metaphor for how Ferguson was distanced from St. Louis and elevated to equal import as a separate geographic area.

> Source 62 (October 13th): 'In Ferguson, nearly half of black men Frankie's age are unemployed. The jobless rate for the city's black males overall is 27.5 percent, four times the national average.'

Finally, near the end of the sampling period in mid-October, Ferguson was referred to as a city independent of its metropolitan and regional surroundings, existing in contrast to the problems of the nation. As was seen in the section on binary language, these conceptualizations of Ferguson as statistically and qualitatively unique vis-à-vis the nation became pervasive. Coverage evolved from portraying Ferguson as an entity of St. Louis, to a

The finding that national nightly news privileged binary scalar language harms aims at the relationalization of scale. While other language was present in the text, binary language represented the majority of utterances and the issue was largely localized. As shown by Kariell and Rosenvall (1995), this imbalance can result in a locale taking precedence in the news media over other locales at the same scalar level, but the results presented in this dissertation present evidence that this focus on one locale correlates with a lesser focus on scalar systems, confining language to that of the local vs. the national. Hardt and Negri (2000) suggest that binary conceptualizations of political geography lead to an imbalance in power in which there is little ability for the lesser actor in the binary to enact political change. The news media predominantly relying on language of binary scale, according to Bourdieu's theory of symbolic power and its ability to 'constitute the given through utterances' (1991; 170), makes confining visions of scale to binaries more viable and damages the potential for radical scalar systems. Along these lines, Allen's (2004) argument that horizontal political geographies can be constructed by points distant in space and time may be impinged upon by the national news media here, because they are the principal circulators of discourse in society (Van Dijk, 2000) and they did not present horizontal language in a manner that could create new political connections.

However, the results also suggested future potential for horizontal geographic scales in the national nightly news media, as the protestors and external actors that produced horizontal language when interviewed (shown by the excerpts), received a greater level of opportunity to speak than those who presented vertical language. Based on the theory and empirical evidence that the national news media is more concerned with narratives that engage the nation (Althaus, 1991), this largely makes sense. Like binary language, horizontal language can also engage a national public, but it does so in ways that create similarity between scales, rather than differences that separate them. In contemporary events like Ferguson, which tap into national dissatisfaction, investigating similarities may make more sense in some reports than localizing the issue, as Volkmer (2008) contends that it is possible that the activation of a communal event sphere may create a common societal space that the media are driven to react to.

Vertical conceptualizations of scale, then, as evidenced by this dissertation, are those which are most damaged in national news media language. While many of the geography scholars discussed, like Brenner (2001) and Swyngedouw (1997), will be pleased that the relatively unsophisticated conceptualization vertical system of political geography is not being reinforced by the media, it is unlikely to be changed in the United States as long as federalism prevails as an internal logic. Given this, a problem that emerges from this dissertation is that scalar geographic language in the United States national network news media does not seem

national nightly news, chose the source that most Americans go to for their news/geographic information, but not all news is broadcast on national television. Cable networks like Fox News and CNN are gaining steam, individuals are getting more and more of their news online (OFCOM, 2015a), and audiences increasingly rely on social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. Thus, an investigation of the geographic language used on each platform, and the role that it plays in the conceptualization of scale, would produce research that could allow for an understanding of how geography is conceptualized in each,

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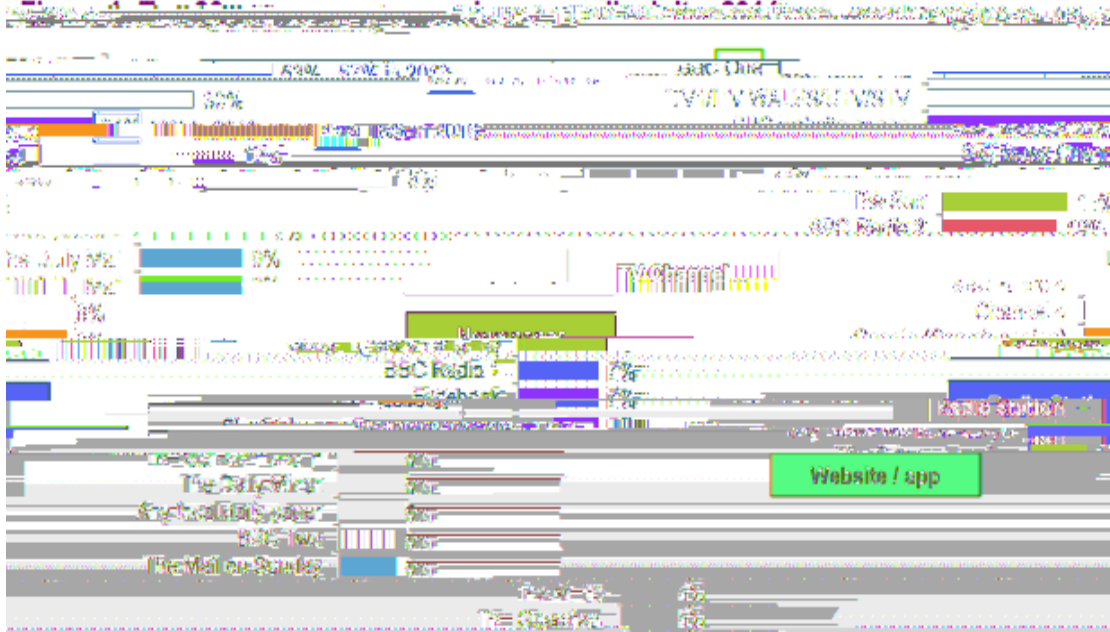Katz, E. & Liebes, T. (2007) ''No more peace!': How disaster war and terror have upstaged media events', **International Journal of Communication** 1: 157-166

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