

News as Narrative: reporting and translating the 2004 Beslan hostage disaster

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ABSTRACT

On 1 September 2004, School No. 1 in Beslan, North Ossetia-Alania (Southern Russia) was seized by an armed group that held over a thousand children, parents, and teachers hostage. With over three hundred people killed by the time the siege came to an end, Beslan was Russia's worst hostage-crisis and, to date, there has not been another like it. This thesis uses socio-narrative theory as a conceptual framework to investigate, using a case study approach, a sample of online reporting generated in response to the crisis, thus exploring ways in which different narratives are constructed from, and in response to, events emerging from situations of violent conflict.

Narrative theory is adopted not only as an analytical tool with which to approach the data, but in order to investigate and develop the theory itself. Thus, the study offers a revised typology of narratives, it intentionally combines narratological and sociological approaches, elaborates an intratextual model of analysis, and emphasises the importance of narrators and temporary narrators in the (re)configuration of narratives.

The bulk of the thesis is a detailed, sustained textual analysis examining online reporting of the events in Beslan published by three different Russian-language news websites - *RIA-Novosti*, *Kavkazcenter*, and *Caucasian Knot* - during the course of the hostage-taking and its immediate aftermath, that is, from Wednesday 1 to Saturday 4 September 2004. By examining both Russian and English texts published by the three websites, the study also explores issues of translation, particularly in regard to online publishing, and ways in which translation impacts on the (re)construction of narratives.

The case study is firmly grounded in socio-narrative assumptions that narratives do not merely represent, but constitute, reality, and furthermore, are fundamentally (if complexly) linked to human agency and behaviour. Thus, conclusions are drawn from the analysis that concern not only the construction and translation of narratives but ways in which narratives are used to account for, legitimise, and challenge individual behaviour and the practices of institutions. With its particular focus on narratives and violent political conflict, the project also reflects upon the potential for certain kinds of narratives to either perpetuate or dissolve such conflict.

KEYWORDS: Beslan, narrative theory, news, online media, Russia, terrorism, violent conflict.

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