

Universal Usability in Mass Media via Discourse Analysis: A Case Study

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Abstract. The Mass Media involve mechanisms that are intended to reach a wide audience by means of radio, television, newspapers, and Internet, among others. The Mass Media are also responsible for providing the suitable perception of news from different areas such as for instance politics, business, crime, or technology. However, this perception is often manipulated in order to accommodate the information according to a given criteria. This manipulation of the information is suddenly not captured by everyone causing a distortion of the real scenario. In this paper, we illustrate how the use of discourse analysis can improve understanding of such hidden information. We present a case study where this methodology is effectively used to analyze the information provided by news about a social phenomena related to the dehumanization of the female gender. Interesting results are discussed about how this useful methodology could be used to detect communication products that are not usable nor understandable for a wide audience.

Keywords: Discourse analysis · Universal usability · Mass Media

1 Introduction

The Mass Media involve mechanisms that are intended to reach a wide audience by means of a given communication form. The mechanisms via which this communication takes place may vary, for instance electronically such as radio, television, and Internet; and also in print form such as newspapers, books, and magazines. Regardless of the employed communication form, Mass Media constitute a privileged platform to distribute information. They are responsible for providing the suitable perception of news related to different areas such as politics, business, crime, technology, sports, and entertainment among others. However, this perception is often manipulated by handling the speeches, contexts, and images in order to accommodate the information according to a criteria imposed

for instance by the political tendency of the media, by government influences, or to force an ideology. This manipulation of the information is suddenly not captured by everyone causing a distortion of the real scenario.

In this paper, we illustrate how the use of discourse analysis can improve understanding of information provided by Mass Media in a universal usability context [3]. Discourse analysis [4] is a qualitative and interpretive methodology for analyzing social phenomena through any communication mechanism. It allows us to understand the way that social power abuse, inequality, and dominance are reproduced and enacted in the social context. We present a case study where this methodology is effectively used to gather and analyze the information that really aims at transmitting a popular Chilean newspaper with respect to a social phenomena related to the dehumanization of the female gender. Interesting results are discussed about how this useful methodology could be used to detect communication products that are not usable nor understandable for a wide audience.

2 Results and Discussion

In this paper, we employ discourse analysis as a research technique to observe how the female gender representation [1] is constructed in the chosen Mass Media. This technique allow us to analyze the language used by journalists, which take part and influence the representation of the female gender in the society. In particular, we select the “La Cuarta” newspaper as is a popular newspaper with a particular writing style. We refer to style as the personality that is introduced into the writing on the given subject. We analyze 97 news from the “La Cuarta” newspaper, from which the female gender was present on 39, those 39 appearances have been classified on three categories: female victim, woman sexual object, and fighter-professional discredited woman. From the 39 appearances, 5 correspond to the first category, 27 to woman sexual object, and 7 to fighter-professional discredited woman. Details about the three categories are given in the following:

Female Victim. This situation is caused when women are seen as victim because they suffer due to men actions. The 75 % of cases in which women are victims is produced by infidelity. We observe also that women appear in news by events of his private life which are clearly irrelevant for anyone. This lead us to conclude that the female gender is present in Mass Media only in minor issues, being unable to appear in news related to relevant topics for the country. The idea behind these messages is to relate the female gender with weak people only appearing in irrelevant news and constantly suffering because of man. In contrast, men are presented as “super-males” who control the couple relationships and have the power to deceive. Now, regarding the images related to news where the woman is constructed as a victim, all graphic elements present women as young people (not exceeding 35 years), sensual, smiling, even though all of them are living painful situations.

Woman Sexual Object. The texts where women are constructed as sexual objects abound in the “La Cuarta” newspaper. In these cases a dehumanized construction of female gender is presented. The woman exists and is displayed as a product to observe and be consumed by the male gender; its purpose on the newspaper cover, is being desired by man. Constant infantilization to which women are subject in this media is also observed. This happens when childlike qualities are attributed by diminutives. These situations take away credibility to women and to their speeches. Indeed, news sources are only of minor importance, being unable voices to act on more relevant thematics. As the news where the female is portrayed as a victim, the information where they are presented as sexual objects are also located on important parts of the newspaper cover. Again, in the images accompanying the texts, woman are always exposed with sensual and light clothing, smiling and using poses related to sex.

Fighter-Professional Discredited Woman. We observed that female gender is also represented as a fighter. In the analyzed texts, they appear to be envious of other women, reason why they constantly criticize and disqualify each other. They are built as conflicting people and capable of exposing her private life to achieve fame. Therefore, they have no limits when they attempt to get they want. The aforementioned can be seen as a new element used by the media to undermine the construction of the female gender. The woman disputes are motivated by unimportant situations, they are not clashes that produce changes in the country, they are disputes that have no laudable purpose. In these news, as in other ones, the use of double-entendre is repeated. Regarding the use of images, the same tendency occurs, that is, smiling and sensual women, and suddenly their breasts and buttocks are almost uncovered.

These results demonstrate a clear manipulation of speeches, contexts, and images in order to represent the woman as an inferior gender compared to men. As stated in [2], this can be considered dangerous in the sense that this manipulation can have a great influence on the construction of social representations of gender and the roles that each should play in society. Then, regarding this concern from an universal usability standpoint, the “La Cuarta” newspaper is not an usable nor understandable communication product for every citizen, since it generates a forced and negative representation of the female gender via manipulated and hidden messages.

3 Conclusions and Future Work

In this paper, we have employed discourse analysis for understanding the hidden messages embedded in news related to the female gender representation. The news have been gathered from a popular newspaper called “La Cuarta”. We have analyzed 97 news, where the female gender was present on 39. We have detected three categories: female victim, woman sexual object, and fighter-professional discredited woman. After applying the analysis, we have observed a clear inferiority of the women representation with respect to men, where woman

is always seen as a subordinated object. Based on [2], we conclude that this is dangerous since this manipulation can have an important influence on the construction of social representations in society. We have also observed a connection between discourse analysis and the universal usability concept. In fact, the “La Cuarta” newspaper is not an usable nor understandable communication product for every citizen, since it generates a forced and negative representation of the female gender via manipulated messages.

We visualize different research directions to follow, the most straightforward one is to employ the same technique to discover new social phenomena in Mass Media. Another interesting idea is to automatize the discourse analysis process to validate if a given communication product is usable and understandable for every citizen. Finally, we aim to employ the same methodology to explore analogous social behaviors on social networks.

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