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Qualitative Research Methods in Visual Communication. Case Study: Visual Networks in the Promotional Videos of the European Year of Volunteering

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Abstract: European Years are a means of promoting European issues at a macro and micro-level. The **objective** of this paper is to provide the visual differences in the framing of the issue of volunteering at a European and national level. The **approach** focuses on a blending of two qualitative research methods in visual communication: ATLAS.ti (computer assisted/ aided qualitative data analysis software) and social semiotics. The **results** of our analysis highlight two network views on volunteering promoted through videos, a salience of transactional processes in the implementation of volunteering at a European and national level, and a classification of various types of social practices specific to Romania. This study provides an insight into the way in which two different qualitative methods may be combined in order to provide a visual representation and interpretation to a European issue.

Keywords: network views; semiotic processes; European Year; volunteering

1. Visual Communication – Qualitative Research Methods

Visual communication has become more and more pervasive nowadays since visual framings are "more reliant on the viewer's ability to make intuitive sense of implicit meanings" (Messaris & Abraham, 2001, p. 219) and since they convey meanings which might seem controversial if expressed verbally. The two syntagms which may describe the dominance of visual communication are "the power of images" and "the images of power" (Mitchell, 1994, p. 324). Whereas the latter syntagm refers to the represented participant(s), the former refers to the various meaning potentials of a picture. As Messaris and Abraham (2001, p. 220) pointed out, images "subtly camouflage the constructed, historical, and social roots of ideology".

Within the context of visual research, Gillian Rose (2002, pp. 15-16) makes a plea for a critical approach to images. This type of approach will take images seriously (visual representations have their own effects), think about the social conditions and effects of visual objects, and consider the viewer's own way of looking at images (a historical, geographical, cultural and social way of looking).

The analyses of visual images have mainly focused on two types of research methods:

- quantitative methods: content analyses of advertising and photographic images, using either variables, such as gender, role, setting, size, and modality (Bell, 2001) or different strategies for the

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systemic coding of images (context of design, context of incident, context of production, context of production, media context, context of reception/ context of cognition, Knieper, in Bock et al., 2011);

- qualitative methods: (1) semiotic and narrative analyses, that blend (Banks, 2007, p. 11) the internal narrative (the story that the image communicates) with the external narrative (the social context that produced the image and the social relations within which the image is embedded at any moment of viewing) ; (2) CAQDAS (computer assisted/ aided qualitative data analysis software). The development of new technology has had an impact on "the ways in which qualitative researchers can collect data" and also on "the settings and situations from which data can be collected" (Gibbs et al., 2002, p. 4).

Social semiotics and ATLAS.ti are two qualitative research methods used in the interpretation of images. We will present these two approaches, trying to provide an integrated framework on visual networks.

1.1 Social Semiotics

Within the field of semiotics, there have been identified two trends of qualitative inquiry: structural semiotics and social semiotics. In the article "Social Semiotics and Fieldwork: Method and Analytics", Phillip Vannini (2007) provides a fourfold difference between the structural semiotics and social semiotics:

- *structural determinism*. Whereas structural semiotics provides the signs and the structures of semiotics' rules as the makers of people, social semiotics places the human beings as participants within context-bound and conflict-laden interpersonal interactions.

- *the study of power.* The shift of meaning and power within the process of attributing (Hodge & Kress, 1988, p. 2) constitutes the proper way of making a difference between structural semiotics which attributes power to meaning and social semiotics which attributes meaning to power. Thus meaning is relational, referential and attributed to power.

- *the relation to the nature of the sign*. Unlike structural semiotics, social semiotics investigates how semiotic resources are used in "specific historical, cultural, and institutional contexts" (Van Leeuwen, 2005, p. 3). According to Theo van Leeuwen (2005), the semiotic resources, which help to the shaping of social representations, have a double nature: physiological (voice, gesture, facial expressions) and technical (objects of value: clothes, instruments etc.). Social semiotics provides a toolbox (represented participants, interactive participants, composition, and modality) used in the decoding of (visual) texts. This toolbox provides the resources that individuals or organizations may choose from in order to shape representations of realities.

- *the scope of analysis.* Unlike structural semiotics which is not concerned with concrete instances of usage (speech), social semiotics provides a shift of the scope of analysis, towards exo-semiotic phenomena (Vannini, 2007, p. 120) which are under the influence of society, politics, and culture. Thus, social semiotics focuses on *parole*/ speech as an act of speaking and on concrete signifying practices in other codes (Hodge, Kress, 1988, p. 18). Focused on diachrony, time, history, process and change, social semiotics provides resources with a twofold potential: a theoretical semiotic potential (past and potential future uses) and an actual semiotic potential (uses known by specific users with specific needs in specific contexts). This threefold specificity is a significant feature of social semiotics which does three kinds of things (Van Leeuwen, 2005, p. 3): (a) collects, documents and systematically catalogues semiotic resources; (b) investigates how these resources are used in specific historical, cultural and institutional context, and how people talk about them in these contexts; (c)

contributes to the discovery and development of new semiotic resources and new ways of using existing semiotic resources.

In social semiotics, each represented participant is involved in two semiotic representations (Kress, van Leeuwen, 2006) which embed four visual processes:

a) in narrative representations which "design social action" (*ibid.*,p. 45):

- *transactional processes*: relate participants in terms of a transactional structure represented by vectorial patterns (e.g., convergent vectors of attraction, divergent vectors of rejection). For example, images of different actions: "give and take", "order and perform", etc.

b) in conceptual representations which "design social constructs" (*ibid.*, p. 79).

- *classificational processes*: relate participants in terms of a kind of relation, a taxonomy (different types of watches form the class of watches; different types of men form the class of men);
- *analytical processes*: relate participants in terms of a part-whole structure (a hand is part of a body, a wheel is part of a car);
- *symbolic processes*: the participant whose meaning is established in relation with another participant (a girl represented through the image of a flower).

1.2 ATLAS.ti – Qualitative Data Analysis Software

ATLAS.ti is one of the computer assisted/ aided qualitative data analysis softwares (CAQDAS) whose main functions include "coding of data; searching, retrieving, and defining codes; making connections between codes and/ or documents; clustering data or codes; outlining emerging understandings of the data visually; writing memos, and abstracting and exporting tables of numerical and textual data to Excel or SPSS" (Bassett, 2011, p. 532).

As every CAQDAS, ATLAS.ti provides a research project space, namely a Hermeneutic Unit (HU). The HU (Figure 1) is the electronic environment where everything that is relevant resides[1]: the Primary Documents representing the data sources, the quotations, the codes, the conceptual linkages (families, networks), and the memos, etc.

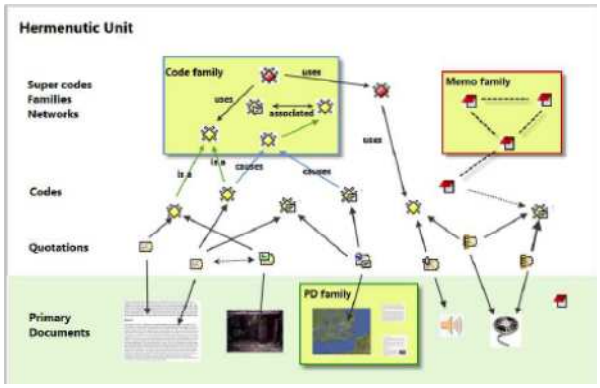

Figure 1. The Hierarchy of Objects inside a Hermeneutic Unit

Source: http://www.atlasti.com/uploads/media/miniManual_v6_2011.pdf, p. 11

[1] *ATLAS.ti 6. Concepts and Functions.*
http://www.atlasti.com/uploads/media/miniManual_v6_2011.pdf, p. 10.

We will provide a brief insight into the ATLAS.ti main concepts[1]:

- Primary Document (PD or PDoc): data sources (text, image, audio, video, or geographic materials – to be interpreted and their content stored in data files in computers is assigned to an HU);
- quotations: a segment from a PD which is considered important or interesting to the researcher. They can be a single character, word, sentence, paragraph or a graphic, audio or video segment.
- codes: classification devices at different levels of abstraction in order to create sets of related information units for the purpose of comparison. The researcher can assign code names to the texts, images, or videos to be interpreted. Codes can be linked symmetrically or asymmetrically in one or more network views (Bassett, 2011, p. 540).
- families: clusters of PDs, codes, and memos. They can be combined using logical operators similar to codes.
- network views: ways of conceptualizing the structures of connecting sets of similar elements together in a visual diagram. A network view embeds nodes, links, and relations. The Network Editor provides a method to create and manipulate network structures (codes, quotations, or other objects can be grabbed, using the cursor, and moved around the screen in order to create links between them). The codes from the Code Manager can be dragged into the Network View Editor and they can be linked using either a list of default relations ("is associated with", "is part of", "is cause of", "is a", "is a property of", etc.) or new relations created for the project.

We consider that the network views provided through ATLAS.ti may be interpreted in terms of the three social semiotic processes mentioned above. A transactional process renders a network view between codes linked by a relation, such as "implemented by" or "offered by". An analytical process may be represented by a network view between codes linked by a relation, such as "is part with". A classificational process may be represented by a network view between codes linked by a relation, such as "is associated with".

2 The EYV Promotional Videos and Network Views

EYV stands for the European Year of Volunteering, an issue promoted by the European Union in 2011. A European Year is a theme of action[2] chosen each year by the European Union authorities since 1983 in order to educate the widest possible audience and to attract the attention of Member States' governments on a particular issue, in order to change the citizens' attitudes or behaviors.

The Official Journal of the European Union[3] mentions the following objectives for the European Year of Volunteering (2011): (1) to work towards an enabling environment for volunteering in the EU; (2) to empower organizers of voluntary activities to improve the quality of voluntary activities; (3) to recognize voluntary activities; (4) to raise awareness of the value and importance of volunteering.

European Years have as main goal "to go beyond the macro-level and raise awareness and to encourage actions on the part of national authorities at the micro-level" (Cmeciu, 2012, p. 38). The findings of the Eurobarometers reveal the present situations regarding the issue under discussion at a national level. The Eurobarometer 378 showed that 30% of Europeans are engaged in voluntary work whereas only 20% of Romanians took part in this type of activity. The main reason for this low percentage of Romanians involved in voluntary work is the fact that the voluntary sector is emerging in Romania, a former communist country.

[1] The information on ATLAS.ti main concepts may be found in *ATLAS.ti 6. Concepts and Functions.* http://www.atlasti.com/uploads/media/miniManual_v6_2011.pdf.
[2] http://en.strasbourg-europe.eu/european-year,27569,en.html (accessed May 13, 2012).
[3] http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2010:017:0043:0049:EN:PDF.

The European Commission and some appointed Directorate Generals are responsible for the implementation of the European Years at the macro-level. In 2011, the DG of Culture and Education and the DG of Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion was in charge of the EY 2011. At the national level, the Centre for Research and Consultancy on Culture was in charge of promoting the issue of volunteering in Romania.

2.1 Network Views on Volunteering at a European and National Level

We will provide the network views on volunteering starting from the two videos promoting this issue at a European and national level. We will code the two primary documents using various code names. The next steps will be: a) to group the code names in clusters; b) to provide labels for the relations between codes; c) to link the codes using the relations that we identified. The interpretation of the two network views (Figure 2, Figure 3) will be provided in terms of the three semiotic processes (transactional, analytical and classificational).

Figure 2 is the network view generated by ATLAS.ti, for the issue of volunteering at a European level:

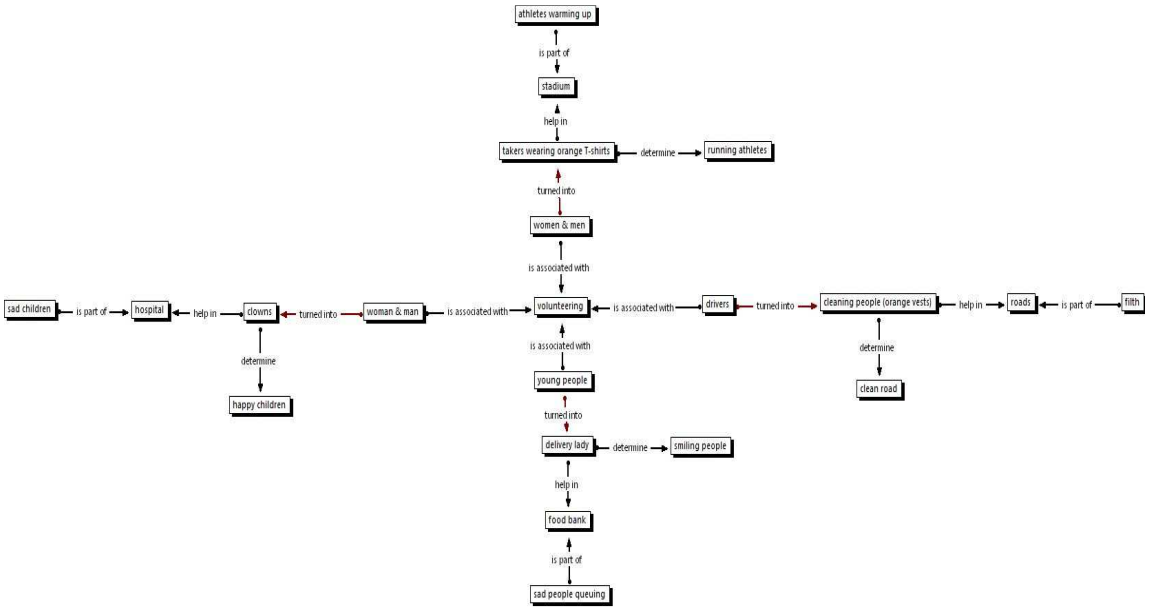

Figure 2. The Network View of Volunteering at the European Level

As observed, the central node "volunteering" is linked to four main strands, which stand for types of volunteering. Each strand is formed of five codes. We will provide the explanation for the left-hand strand: the type of volunteer (woman & man), the type of character they turned into (clowns), the place of their performance (hospital), the type of persons to be found in that place (sad children), the impact of the volunteers (happy children). We have identified five relations linking these codes: "is associated with", "turned into", "help in", "is part of", "determine". The most salient semiotic processes are transactional processes rendered by three coding relations: "turned into", "help in", and "determine". All these relations actually focus on a metamorphosis ("turn into") of women and men, drivers, young persons (social Actors) into four visual instances of volunteering (clowns, takers, cleaning people, and delivery lady – Goals), the articles of clothing being the indexical signs of this change. The other two coding relations ("help in" and "determine") play an important part because the Goals turn into Actors who are responsible for a change: "sad children" ("part of" a hospital/ analytical process) → "happy children"; "filthy roads" ("part of" a hospital/ analytical process) →

"clean roads"). The relation "is associated with" renders a classificational process, highlighting various types of volunteers: women and men, drivers, or young persons.

Figure 4 is the network view generated by ATLAS.ti, for the issue of volunteering at a national level:

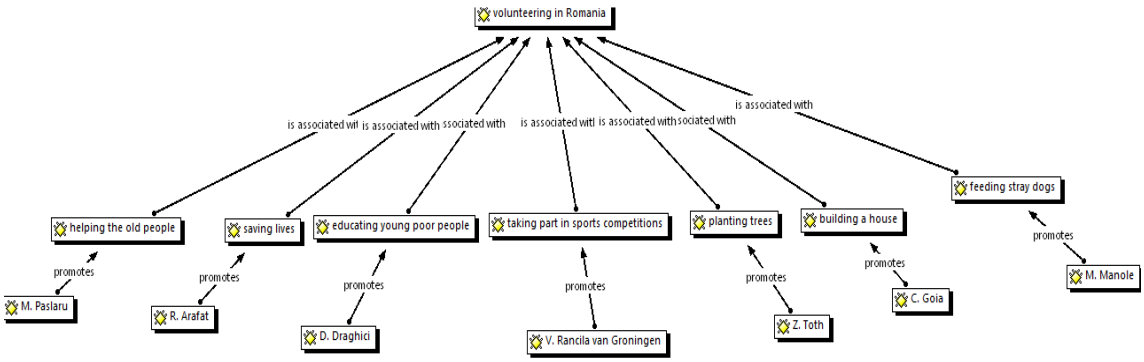

Figure 3. The Network View of Volunteering at the National Level (Romania)

Volunteering at the national level (Romania) was framed through two coding relations: "associated with" (classificational process), "promotes" (transactional process). There are seven actions visually promoted through comic strips (the 2nd layer, "helping the old people", "saving lives" etc.). The identification is provided through anonymous Actors and Goals (beneficiaries: old people, sick people etc.). The action of promotion is visually performed by seven well-known Romanian representatives (M. Pâslaru, D. Drăghici, R. Arafat etc.). Whereas the taxonomy of promoters (classificational process) is visually represented through type-referents (unknown generic participants: women, men, drivers, young people) in Figure 2, at the national level (Figure 3) this taxonomy is framed through token-referents embedding endorsers from three well-known fields: cultural (five artists: M. Pâslaru, D. Drăghici, Z. Toth, C. Goia), governmental (R. Arafat), non-governmental (V. Rancila von Groningen).

3 Conclusion

The blending of ATLAS.ti and social semiotics, as qualitative research methods in the interpretation of the promotional videos of the European Year of Volunteering, has highlighted the following aspects:

- the content may be structured through network views formed of various codes and relations, which may render transactional, analytical, and classificational processes;
- transactional processes prevail in the visual representation of volunteering both at the European level (persons turning a place into a welcoming environment) and at the national level (well-known persons as promoters of social practices);
- different framings of volunteering: (1) European level – volunteering as a type slice of life (generic participants involved in familiar social practices: cheering up children, cleaning parks, streets etc.); (2) national level (Romania) – volunteering as a token slice of life (particular referent-participants identified through names, sharing their experiences: M. Pâslaru, D. Drăghici, R. Arafat, etc).

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