**Economy Talk as Blaming Strategy: Crisis Framings in *The Guardian* News Stories and Recontextualisations in User Comments during the Greek Bailout Referendum**

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**Abstract**

This paper explores how the Greek financial crisis is mediatised and recontextualised in newspaper articles and their respective comments in *The Guardian* during the Greek bailout referendum in July 2015. Focusing on the use of economic terms that were prominent in both media discourse and laypeople’s follow-up comments, I explore the interaction between media discourses on crisis and users’ own discursive positionings. I argue that news stories frame crisis as chaos and uncertainty which results in the reproduction of a discourse of fear. *The Guardian* users, in turn, recontextualise chaos and fear into discourses of blame and responsibility. Specifically, they resort to economy talk as a strategy of blame attribution which gives rise to a discourse of superiority. These processes of mediatisation are enabled by the interactive formats of online media affordances and can shed some light on the complex layers of meaning embedded in responses to crisis stories.

**Introduction**

Of the period of economic instability that surrounded the Greek bailout referendum, 2015 was the peak of a broader Greek financial crisis that started in 2008-2009. The crisis was intensified in June 2015 due to a lack of agreement on the new bailout conditions between the Greek government and its lenders, namely the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the European Commission (EC), and the European Central Bank (ECB). In particular, the official announcement of the referendum by the Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras on June 25, 2015 was followed by bank closures and ‘capital controls,’[[1]](#endnote-1) which were a result of the ECB's decision not to increase the Emergency Liquidity Assistance (ELA) for the Greek banks. During the period of strict capital controls, economy talk was prevalent and quite technical economic terms were rendered accessible to ordinary, non-specialised social actors through both traditional and online media environments. For example, terms such as ‘ELA,’ ‘capital controls,’ and ‘quantitative easing’ were used extensively in news articles that appeared as top stories in the main sections of broadsheet newspapers. These terms were key themes in, among others, follow-up stories, live blogs, and comments and postings by laypeople, including online subscribers to *The Guardian*, who are the topic of investigation in this study. At the same time, the lack of an agreement on the new bailout conditions between Greece and its lenders cultivated fears in media discourse of a Grexit[[2]](#endnote-2). For this reason, the referendum, the closure of the banks and the ensuing capital controls were presented in both the traditional and the social media as major milestones in the Greek financial and broader Eurozone crisis.

This study looks into ‘talk about the referendum’ as it overlaps with ‘talk about the economy.’ Specifically, it focuses on the interaction that is created between news articles reporting on the referendum and the ensuing capital controls and their accompanying user comments, as part of a communicative format brought about by digital media. The increasing degree of interactiveness afforded by digital media such as online editions of newspapers enables ordinary recipients to assume the role of some kind of co-producer, as recipients become actively involved in the co-construction of mass mediated discourse by posting, exchanging, and negotiating comments and follow-ups on news stories (Fetzer, 2014; see also Dynel, 2014). This relatively new interactive communicative format contributes to, among others, the blurring of boundaries between media production and reception and between public and private spheres, in that recipients become active agents in the shaping of the news (Fetzer, 2014).

Starting from an investigation of the ways economy terms are used to frame the crisis and the ensuing discourses circulating in *The Guardian*’s online news articles, I then focus on how users recontextualise said terms and process crisis discourses in the comments below the articles. I argue that the selective use of economy terms contributes to the framing of crisis as fear in news articles, and that this, in turn, is recontextualised into a discourse of blame and responsibility in the associated user comments. I observe that during the process of responding to news stories, readers of *The Guardian* engage in stance-taking (DuBois, 2007; Georgakopoulou, 2015) and, at the same time, position themselves vis-à-vis the crisis discourses in wider circulation in the mass media context. I consider the interaction between news articles and their associated comments as part of the process of mediatisation, through which, I suggest, we can unpack the complexity and multi-facedness of ‘crisis’ and deconstruct its ideological and discursive framings in the specific media environment. To this end, I turn to the concepts of mediatisation and recontextualisation in online media in the next section, after which I address crisis framing, blame, and responsibility and discuss how they interconnect and underpin this study.

**Background**

**Mediatisation, Recontextualisation, and Digital Media Affordances**

This study follows a line of research that views media not as an external influence on social behaviour but as a platform that integrates with and actively shapes peoples’ socio-cultural practices (Agha, 2011; Androutsopoulos, 2014). According to Agha, “social processes in any complex society derive their complexity from practices oriented to forms of mediatization” (2011, p. 163). Mediatisation emerges from the connection of processes of communication to processes of commoditisation; these occur when the scale of production and dissemination of messages across a population are expanded by institutional practices (Agha, 2011). Within this view, although the consumption of mass media discourse may take place in private spheres of life, its status as public discourse make it accessible to a general public, “including other media, which may follow-up on programmes, events or people and their contributions, commenting upon them and recontextualising them” (Fetzer, 2014, p. 369). Expanding the scale of production and dissemination of messages across a population allows for continuous responses to said re-contextualised messages, thus creating an endless network of communication.

This network of communication determines the nature of contemporary media discourse. Communication in digital media is characterised by interactive practices of audience engagement, as recipients may also assume the role of message producers by posting their responses, comments, and follow-ups in online media platforms, challenging, thus, the traditional dichotomy of message producer vs. message recipient (Dynel, 2015, p. 45). At the same time, due to the immediacy of audience engagement in relation to the ongoingness of events, media platform affordances enable meaning negotiation and audience positioning in how participants make sense of news stories. Georgakopoulou (2015) refers to the process of “*narrative stancetaking*, where the teller is in the position to announce that something has just happened and to tell more and update if necessary” (p. 65). In this study, I suggest that meaning negotiation and audience positioning is a process that involves following-up, commenting upon, and recontextualising messages in crises representations, as crisis talk is not fixed to the moment of reception; rather it circulates in endless processes of mediatisation during which participants make sense of crisis.

The diverse ways in which responses or uptakes occur are referred to as “uptake formulations” by Agha (2011, p. 163). These “increase the complexity of an already ‘complex society’” (Agha, 2011, p. 163). Given that response to crisis is a heavily mediatised social practice, it is useful to investigate its different layers of mediatisation. Through an analysis of uptake formulations, aspects of a complex socio-political and socio-economic phenomenon can be unfolded in order to provide a more holistic insight into sub-processes in which crisis is constructed and communicated in associated genres of media talk. Additionally, “mediatized social processes unfold in internally reticulated ways. Yet their construals by participants tend to focus only on fragments” (Agha, 2011, p. 163). In an interpretation of uptake formulations, “a conception of public action lies with the audience’s capacity for appropriating the meanings of the news – in reproductive but also in resistant or subversive ways” (Chouliaraki, 2010, p. 610). As I discuss later, the processes through which readers of *The Guardian* make sense of economic crisis stories make prominent the concepts of blame and responsibility.

Uptake formulations inherently involve recontextualisation, as “any act of responding to a message recontextualizes that to which it is a response” (Agha, 2011, p. 166). When context, temporal, and spatial loci change, words acquire new social meanings and indexical values, because meanings are formed in use. This process was originally described by Bakhtin (1986) as re-accentuation or recontextualisation. Recontextualisation is never a pure transfer of meaning, though; instead, changes are inherent. Speech representation, namely the transfer of words and voices from an anterior spatiotemporal context to a posterior one, is a linguistic device through which the intricately contextual aspect of language can be explored (Lampropoulou, 2013). Closely connected with evaluation in storytelling, speech representation (and its various forms including direct and indirect speech) constitutes a selective means that may reveal or obscure the reporter’s standpoint and respective discursive positioning (Georgakopoulou, 1997; Lampropoulou, 2014). It is one of the tangible aspects of recontextualisation of text and talk and forms part of the dialogic chain that is created in the framing of crisis; thus, it is worthy of linguistic investigation. The types of responses that are produced during the recontextualisation process effectively re-orient and re-group participants by creating new discursive and social positionings. These can be explicit or obscured, depending on the social scale of the group (Agha, 2011).

To sum up, an analysis of the processes of recontextualisation can shed light on the interaction between “mainstream media promoted discourses” and the interactive “processes of meaning making by ordinary people” that are enabled by the affordances of digital media (Georgakopoulou, 2014, p. 520).

**Crisis Framing, Blaming, and Fear Discourse**

Whether personal, local, or global; whether transient or long-lasting; the concept of crisis represents a decisive or judging moment in time where everything is in question and during which critical decisions that will determine the future need to be made (Stråth & Wodak, 2009). Thus, the term crisis involves a lack of predictability and uncertainty about the future. Within such an account, crisis is also a process of potential transformation rather than an objective condition (Hay, 1996). In fact, it is “subjectively perceived and brought into existence through narrative and discourse” (Hay, 1996, p. 255). With specific reference to media language, the role of news media in selecting sources and shaping news values is important in the overall framing of crisis. Crisis stories are well-placed to attract newsworthiness, as crisis incorporates, among others, the news values of *negativity*, *consonance* (the fit with stereotypes about the events and people portrayed therein)*,* *superlativeness* (the size, scale, or exaggerated element of an event), and *personalisation* (the potential degree of personal involvement on the part of the audience)(Bednarek, 2006; Bell, 1991)*.* In Hay’s words, “such narratives compete in terms of their ability to find resonance with individuals’ and groups’ direct, lived experiences, and not in terms of their ‘scientific’ adequacy as explanations for the condition they diagnose” (1996, p. 255). It can therefore be argued that news stories provide the discursive context and interpretative framework within which the audience processes, perceives, and makes sense of the reported crisis (Hay, 1996).

The representation of crisis in media discourse is achieved through, among others, processes of abstraction and meta-narration (Hay, 1996). These correspond to vague and often simplified processes of selecting and promoting the relevance of specific events – and not others – as crisis – or not. Within this view, the media hold a constitutive role in co-constructing the political and public agenda through crisis management (Stråth & Wodak, 2009). For example, in a study of the recontextualisation of the 2014 Greek national elections, I showed that the predominant representation of elite figures’ voices contributes to the reproduction of dominant crisis discourses that shape the ways the Greek crisis is framed in *The Guardian* news stories (Lampropoulou, 2014).

The interconnection of crisis with uncertainty as well as its depiction as an ongoing process enables connotations of transition, transformation, and potentially decisive intervention, so that stability is restored (Hay, 1996). In an attempt to interpret crisis, to understand what went wrong as well as to reduce uncertainty by suggesting potential solutions, people attribute blame and responsibility to various social actors involved in certain decisions and practices considered as core properties of crisis, and/or identify agents capable of making a decisive intervention (Angouri & Wodak, 2014). The concept of blaming is thus timely here. It is a construct often associated with negativity and wrongdoing (Hood, 2011). As such, it requires an agent who initiates wrongdoing and is, consequently, blameworthy and a patient who is the recipient of wrongdoing. The Greek crisis, in particular, triggered an array of conflicts with regard to blame and responsibility as represented in various texts and talk from politics to the media and in the everyday domain. Various social actors, namely individuals, including politicians, organisations, and political systems, have occasionally been ascribed the role of wrongdoers (Wodak & Angouri, 2014). According to Hay (1996), “it is the media which sets the context and judges the evidence admissible in the attribution of responsibility” (p. 265). Within this view, a look into the representation of different degrees of involvement with the Greek financial crisis of several social actors in news stories can shed light on the overall framing of the crisis in terms of blame and responsibility.

That being said, the attribution of blame and responsibility does not only involve agents and patients but also “hegemonic narratives (what has gone wrong)” and “moral values (what is right or wrong)” (Wodak & Angouri, 2014). In online media environments, where the traditional unidirectional production-reception formats have been eliminated, these narratives are shaped by both media institutions and news recipients, as certain crisis events reported in news stories can be negotiated, contested, or challenged by the recipients in their processing of the stories. In this study, I aim to show that resorting to economy talk is one of the ways readers of *The Guardian* make sense of the represented crisis and attribute blame and responsibility to the various social actors involved. They specifically respond to a discourse of fear that, I argue, is reproduced in *The Guardian*’s news stories in the representation of capital controls and the ensuing crisis events. It follows that the ways people discursively attribute blame is central to interpreting crisis (Angouri & Wodak, 2014). To this end, crisis is a social construct that emerges as an outcome of peoples’ practices.

The intricate relationship among news sources, news values, and the political agendas of media institutions determines the discursive positionings of the public. In the last 10 years or so, the discursive practices employed in media and politics at times of crisis have been studied through the prism of fear discourse where, for example, in studies of the 9/11 attacks fear is linked to crime and terrorism (Altheide, 2002, 2006). Fear discourse, also associated with the increasingly popular tendency towards an entertainment style of journalism (Altheide, 2006; Fairclough, 1995), especially in tabloid newspapers and television, is reproduced through the representation of social problems in simplistic and often binary images. For example, terrorism coverage presents certain social groups as villains or victims (Altheide, 2006), or crisis accounts present several decisions as right or wrong, resulting in the promotion of a sense of insecurity and reliance on formal agents of social control. This leads to the personalisation of blame where, for example, the actions of dominant groups can be legitimated. This practice can potentially discourage criticism as far as the public is concerned and achieve social control by elite figures, institutions, and organisations. Within this view, fear discourse gives rise to the politics of fear that help sustain and reproduce unequal power relations and promote the interests of the elite or dominant groups.

**Data and Methods**

The dataset for this study consists of four articles from *The Guardian* published online as top stories on each day in *The Guardian* main section (World – Europe). Two were published on June, 29th and two on June, 30th. All four attracted a very high number of user comments, ranging from 720 to 2325 comments per article (see Table 1). They all address the financial crisis and associated instability of the Eurozone following the closure of the Greek banks. They discuss the upcoming bailout referendum and incorporate representation of the voices and experiences of the relevant social actors, namely Greek politicians, economy experts, and EU elites.

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Date of publication | Time | Section | Headline | Author | Number of comments |
| 29/06/2015 | 05.56 | World/ Europe | Greece crisis: markets begin to tumble as investors flee  | Justin McCurry in Tokyo & Agencies | 1635 |
| 29/06/2015 | 07.26 | World/ Europe | World stock markets tumble as Greece crisis deepens  | Ian Traynor (Brussels) & Helena Smith (Athens) | 2325 |
| 30/06/2015 | 17.17 | World/ Europe | IMF: austerity measures would still leave Greece with unsustainable debt  | Alberto Nardelli | 1658 |
| 30/06/2015 | 20.06 | World/ Europe | Greece on the brink of financial collapse as IMF deadline looms | Ian Traynor & Jennifer Rankin (Brussels) | 720 |

Table 1. The articles under analysis

*The Guardian* is representative of the broadsheet press, also known as “serious” or “quality” press (see Mautner, 2008; Richardson, 2004; Semino & Short, 2004). The audiences of broadsheet newspapers are “predominantly educated, professional, economically and politically powerful individuals and groups,” and the newspapers’ content and agenda reflect the preferences of their respective audiences (Richardson, 2004; Worcester, 1998). Specifically, *The Guardian* endorses a tradition of social liberal politics and independent journalism and is, thus, anticipated to offer its audiences a wide variety of – even contradictory – voices and perspectives without expressing strong editorial opinion. *The Guardian* subscribers form a virtual community where they create discussion fora by commenting on an article/news story as soon as it is published online and subsequently responding to the prompts of other subscribers. The process of posting a comment primarily involves two aspects: responding to the published article and simultaneously responding to a previously posted comment, whether adjacent or not. Commentators thus assume the role of recipients of news as well as producers of comments, engaging in multiple participation forms (Bou-Franch, Lorenzo-Dus, & Blitvich, 2012). Another characteristic of this type of online interaction is that comments are directed to a vast number of potential hearers, whereas the producers of the comments can optionally pick as addressees the authors of earlier posts (Dynel, 2014). This multi-layered participation framework and these multi-layered interactional formats shape the multifaceted nature of media discourse (Fetzer, 2014). It is through an analysis of the processes of mediatisation and recontextualisation that different layers of meanings associated with the represented crisis can be unpacked.

Adopting a qualitative, critical discourse analytic perspective, I first explore how economic crisis is framed in the news stories. My analysis centres on the use of economic terms and the provision of economic information, whether these are offered as reports or as embedded in the words of economy experts in various forms of speech representation. I focus on information structure (Halliday, 1967), specifically the order in which economic information is introduced, contextualised, and interpreted. I also analyse the effects of the use of metaphors selected to interpret technical economic terms. Additionally, I discuss how social actor representation (van Leewen, 1996) and speech representation are employed to dramatise and foreground certain aspects the projected crisis. I then look into how users engage in the process of recontextualisation by processing, interpreting, and recycling economy talk offered to them by news stories. I specifically single out user comments that involve some kind of reference to economy or make use of economic terms. All these provide the resources for understanding the discursive positionings of said users and the overall mediatisation of crisis.

**Analysis**

**The Scale and Consequences of the Projected Crisis: Factual Information and Experts’ Voices**

In the first news article, both headline (‘Greece crisis: markets begin to tumble as investors flee’) and lead (‘Markets across Asia slide and $35bn is wiped from Australian stock market on what is expected to be a torrid day following the closure of Greek banks’) bring to the forefront the economic impact of the closure of Greek banks on the world stock market. The explicit reference to Asia and Australia in the lead underscores the extent of the described problem, whereby an originally localised condition (‘Greece crisis’) obtains global effects. The inclusion of the exact amount of capital in numbers (35 bn) connects to the news value of superlativeness by providing measurable evidence for the size and scale of the represented event. It thus adds a tone of noteworthiness to the lead. The negatively evaluative term ‘torrid day’ contextualises all the factual information provided so far. Overall, the article is very rich in economic information content, as it reports extensively on the fall of the world stock market through, among others, the provision of numbers and percentages for different currencies. It also includes an assessment of the projected crisis through the representation of the speech of financial experts.

The opening phrase ‘Markets suffered across Asia on Monday as Greece shut down its banks for a week ahead of an increasingly likely debt default’ emphasises the scope of the Greek decision by juxtaposing the place name ‘across Asia’ with ‘Greece.’ By placing Greece as the subject of the action ‘shut,’ it assigns agency, presenting the closure of the banks as a Greek decision. According to van Leuween (1996), this is a form of objectification through spatialization, when social actors (in this case Greeks) are represented by means of reference to a place (Greece). This practice lends impersonal force to the represented action. At the same time, it simplifies the complexity of the described crisis by obscuring the reasons behind or the events that preceded the decision. Greek agency is also contrasted to the lack of agency in Asia markets, as in ‘markets suffered’ that are represented as passive recipients of Greek choices. The new information, ‘increasingly likely debt default,’ further dramatises the negative potential of the Greek decision. It also provides the context for the factual information that is going to follow:

(1)

Oil prices declined and the euro edged down against the dollar, while Tokyo’s Nikkei 225 index fell 2% to 20,283.98 points. The Shanghai Composite Index was off 0.4% at 4,178.56 despite China’s surprise weekend interest rate cut.

Hong Kong’s Hang Seng lost 1.7% to 29,192.67. Seoul’s Kospi shed 1.6% to 2,057.52 and Sydney’s S&P/ASX 200 was off 1.8% to 5,447.80. Market benchmarks in Taiwan, Singapore and New Zealand also fell sharply.

Turmoil in Asia had been widely expected after the failure of 11th-hour talks in Europe over the weekend raised the possibility of a Greek exit from the eurozone.

This is technical information that describes the economic impact of the closure of the Greek banks on world markets. It includes minimal interference on the part of the reporter in terms of overtly evaluative terms, as it includes measurable numbers that must have been copied from relevant sources. These work as factual evidence that validate the crisis described so far. This information is interpreted as ‘Turmoil’ in the statement that follows and then directly associated with ‘the possibility of a Greek exit from the Eurozone.’ Therefore, the scale and force of the projected economic crisis are corroborated with numbers and, at the same time, crisis is directly related to its negative consequences. The representation of the words of an expert, namely the US treasury secretary, functions as assessment of the previously described condition in (2) through an insider’s perspective:

(2)

The US Treasury secretary, Jack Lew, stressed the need for Greece “to take necessary steps to maintain financial stability” ahead of the referendum.

He told the Greek prime minister, Alexis Tsipras, on Sunday that Athens and its creditors needed to continue working toward a resolution ahead of a Greek referendum on 5 July on the creditors’ demands for austerity.

This is a case of free indirect speech (henceforth FIS), namely a form that shares linguistic features associated prototypically with both indirect and direct speech (Semino & Short, 2004). One of the effects of the combination of these features is that the perspective of the reporter, in this case ‘stressed the need,’ is blended with the perspective of the represented speaker in ‘to take … stability,’ so that it is difficult to know whether the reported words belong to the reporter or the original speaker. According to Leech and Short (2007) this is a form of speech representation frequently used in fiction through which readers feel that the reporter interposes him/herself between the words of the original speaker and the reader. In this context, the use of FIS attributed to an economy expert, a social actor holding a position of authority, not only serves to validate what is being reported but also works as additional evidence, as an assessment of the information provided so far in the article. Once again, it assigns agency to Greece by placing the country as the subject of the actions required to maintain financial stability. It therefore becomes evident that the Greek decision presented so far has impacted negatively on the whole world and that the represented crisis, described in detail through the provision of economic evidence, must be reversed. What follows is more information on the negative impact of the Greek decision and an evaluative interpretation of the decision, as seen in (3).

(3)

US stock futures dived 1.8%, hitting a three-month low, while US Treasuries futures price gained almost two points.

A cash-strapped Greece looks certain to miss its debt repayment on Tuesday as Greece’s European partners shut the door on extending a credit lifeline after Greece’s surprise move to hold a referendum on bailout terms.

In this extract, for the first time the Greek decision is explicitly presented as unanticipated in ‘surprise move.’ Again, Greece is presented as the agent only in acts that appear negative or unexpected, e.g., ‘miss its debt repayment’ and ‘surprise move to hold the referendum,’ whereas it is the recipient of ‘a credit lifeline.’ This choice helps maintain the distribution of power by positioning Greece as the weakest link in the European ‘partnership’; at the same time, it directly attributes responsibility to Greece for the critical and chaotic situation that has been so vividly described. The words of two financial experts in Asia are then presented in direct speech.

(4)

Yasunobu Katsuki, a senior analyst at Mizuho Securities, said: “Financial markets will say ‘it’s all Greek to me.’ Markets will reset their trend until last week and will start the week with risk aversion.”

Mitsuo Shimizu, deputy general manager at Japan Asia Securities Group in Tokyo, told Bloomberg News: “In the face of pressure from the eurozone to accept austerity measures, the Greeks answered that it’s hard to live just on water.”

“Carrying out a referendum buys the Greek side some time. Digesting the worst possible scenario of a Greek default, global stock markets could fall 1 to 2% today.”

In this extract, the words of the experts are all presented in direct speech, the form that is the closest to the original speech event, adding, thus, apparent faithfulness to the direct report with minimal interference on the part of the reporter (Semino & Short, 2004). In this way, direct speech lets the readers draw their own conclusions based on the represented words. What is more, the effect of faithfulness brings with it associated effects of vividness and dramatisation. ‘It’s all Greek to me’ works as a topical pun that places the focus on the Greek referendum decision as potentially affecting world market decisions. The conclusive point, ‘carrying out… today,’ made by the deputy general manager at Japan Asia Securities Group in Tokyo is an estimate of the negative impact of a Greek default on world stock markets. It functions as a coda, namely a conclusive comment that reinstates the point of the story and reflects on the results of the previously reported events (Georgakopoulou, 1997; Lampropoulou, 2014). Not only does it underscore a situation of uncertainty and instability, but also by emphasising the consequences of the described process, the perceived sense of depicted crisis is maximised (Hay, 1996).

I have so far focused on how economic information is reported, contextualised, evaluated, and interpreted. Through underscoring the negative impact and uncertainty of the described crisis, attributing agency and, in places, responsibility to Greece and validating the scale and force of the projected crisis through the perspective of expert insider’s voices, this news story sets the context for readers to position themselves in relation to the projected crisis in their processing of the information provided.

**Crisis as Chaos and Fear Originating in Greece**

The second news article follows the same pattern as the previous one in terms of the order, structure, and interpretation of information. The headline and the lead underscore the negative impact of the Greek decision on world markets. The main body starts to provide technical information, including percentages that measure the economic losses in Europe and the rest of the world. Then, in extract (5), the words of an expert in economics are reported to further authenticate the financial information provided thus far.

(5)

“The Greek butterfly looks set to cause a tornado in financial markets,” said Michael Hewson, chief markets analyst at CMC Markets UK. “In the process we could well also find out if this event turns out to be the equivalent of the butterfly flapping its wings in New Mexico, going on to cause a hurricane in China.”

The chosen metaphor ‘Greek butterfly’ refers to the concept that small causes can have large effects. Not only does it magnify the represented crisis, but it also stresses the unequal power distribution, whereby Greece is constructed as the weakest link that negatively affects a solid world financial market. Thus, the potential lack of stability is seen as a threat that explicitly originates in Greece. The represented crisis is further magnified and intensified through the choice of ‘hurricane’ which negatively frames the potential effects of the Greek decision as disastrous and uncontrollable. Similar effects are achieved through the use of metaphor representing the country as a sinking body or boat in examples (6) and (7).

(6)

The governing council of the ECB decided to freeze emergency liquidity assistance to the Greek banks, the lifeline that is keeping the national financial system functioning. The ELA was capped at last Friday’s level of €89bn.

(7)

The Greek government decided on Sunday night it had no option but to close the nation’s banks the following day after the European Central Bank (ECB) raised the stakes by freezing the liquidity lifeline that has kept them afloat during a six-month run on deposits.

The economic term ‘emergency liquidity assistance’ is referred to twice as a ‘lifeline.’ The conceptual metaphor representing the country as a sinking body or boat is deeply entrenched (Deignan, 2005). It is a device that creates an image appealing to an audience that is not necessarily knowledgeable about the term ELA (Emergency Liquidity Assistance). Through mapping an abstract concept, ELA, onto a more concrete one, ‘lifeline,’ an image is created that is more intense and long lasting compared to the technical terminology originally provided (**Kövecses**, 2006). The use of the metaphor also helps reduce the complexity of the term. As with most metaphors, it suggests a point of view and creates a context for dealing with it (Burkholder & Henry, 2009). To this end, it can be seen as a strategy of framing. Framing often corresponds to a whole set of beliefs and systems. Any change of frame is considered a difficult task, as to change language, one needs to change the underlying value system (Wodak, 2006). Here, our perception of the economy is structured by a metaphor that appeals to negative emotions associated with sinking. The chosen metaphor also expands on the image of uncertainty presented so far, as no solution seems to be offered.

Negativity is also promoted in the following example (8) through a three-part use of speech representation.

(8)

The fallout from the collapse of negotiations and the calling of the referendum brought recrimination on all sides and predictions of gloom.

The German finance minister, Wolfgang Schäuble, said he was “perplexed and depressed” by developments. Jeroen Dijsselbloem, the Dutch finance minister who heads the committee of eurozone finance ministers, said that with his referendum call, Tsipras was thrusting the country into a mess from which it would struggle to recover.

“We are millimetres away from the total collapse of the Greek financial system,” warned Herman Van Rompuy, until last year the president of the European council and heavily involved in years of Greek rescue negotiations. “It’s actually suicide that’s taking place in Greece right now.”

The first part consists of a narrator’s representation of voice, where there is a minimal reference to some kind of speech taking place (Semino & Short, 2004). In this form of speech presentation the narrator/reporter’s control is most palpable, whereas readers are most distanced from the original speech event (Semino & Short, 2004, p. 44). Narrator’s representation of voice is often used to make some introductory reference to what is going to follow, signalling to readers what to expect in the following text. Here it draws attention to blaming strategies and pessimistic predictions which later are expressed in detail through the indirect reports of the voices of the German and Dutch finance ministers and the direct reports of the words of the president of the European council. The speech representation pattern employed here progresses from apparent involvement of the reporter (in narrator’s representation of voice) to minimal involvement, where the directly represented words (in direct speech) make a point without the need for interference on the part of the reporter. I consider this a climactic use of speech representation, where the readers become more and more involved with the original speech events, while the propositional content of the represented words is gradually dramatised (see also Semino & Short, 2004). The effects of involvement and dramatisation serve to underscore the negative effects and risk involved in the represented Greek decisions. The choice of the reporting verb ‘warn’ in the most direct (and apparently faithful to the original) form of speech representation is not random. Together with the interpretative ‘It’s actually suicide that’s taking place in Greece right now’ assigned to an established authority figure in EU-Greek negotiations, this term delegitimates the Greek decision by presenting it as both risky and wrong from the perspective of the EU elites and decision makers. This is further supported by placing the Greek prime minister, Tsipras, as the agent of the undesirable act of ‘thrusting the country into a mess’ in the indirect report of the words of the Dutch finance minister. It thus provides the frame within which the actions of the relevant social actors are to be assessed and whose actions must be judged in relation to the context of uncertainty and negativity described so far (Hay, 1996).

The actions on the part of the Greek government are further undermined throughout the whole article through overtly evaluative language, such as ‘Tsipras put his country’s future in the balance by suddenly calling a referendum,’ ‘Greece’s rapidly shrinking options,’ and ‘the country’s plight deteriorated.’ It should be noted that all four articles under consideration report extensively on the words of financial experts and/or EU elites, as in examples (2), (4), (5), and (8), whereas they allocate little speaking space to Greek politicians. This confirms previous findings in that references to elite and expert sources serve a “legitimising function, supporting the author’s point of view and bolstering his credibility” (Mautner, 2008, p. 42; see also Lampropoulou, 2014). It follows that the decision to call a referendum is presented as undesirable, as it threatens the economic stability of the Eurozone and will result in Greece’s and potentially Europe’s financial collapse. Also, the framing of crisis as chaos and risk creates a sense of disorder that corresponds to insecurity and a lack of control. Consequently, it creates the awareness and expectation that risk is deviation and, at the same time, legitimates the action of a Greek agreement to the bailout terms as common sense (Chouliaraki, 2010); it follows that Tsipras initiated a referendum that is beyond common sense.

The overall framing of crisis as chaos and uncertainty contributes to the reproduction of a fear discourse where Greece’s and, by extension, Europe’s fate is concerned. Specifically, fear is constructed through intensely dramatic language, namely direct speech representation, evaluative terms, and conceptual metaphors, as well as through the presentation of conformity to the dominant ideology, namely a Greek acceptance of the new bailout package as a one-way road. In turn, non-conformity and deviance is associated with threat (Altheide, 2006). It follows that Greece should not have called a referendum, as this threatens the stability of the Eurozone. What is more, a rejection of the bailout terms as an outcome of the referendum will result in negativity, chaos, and further uncertainty. So, compliance with the bailout measures appears as the only possible legitimate outcome of the referendum. Fear discourse gives rise to a need for scapegoats (Wodak, 2015). Thus, I now turn to how chaos, risk, and fear are recontextualised in the comments of *The Guardian* readers.

**Positioning as Blame or Sympathy**

The following three comments reflect users’ common positionings, namely positive or negative assessments of events or characters (Georgakopoulou, 2014) that seem to be involved in certain decisions and practices considered as core properties of the crisis. The numbering of the comments corresponds to different users (e.g., User 1 posted C1; User 2 posted C2, and so on). The date and time of posting is also included.

C1 – 28/06/15, 11:09

One has to give props to Greece for standing all that humiliation and austerity. It's all about moralizing and near-racist fables about "lazy grasshoppers" (Southern Europe) vs "hard-working ants" (Northern Europe). Go Greece, go Tsipras!

C2 – 28/06/15, 11:38

This is getting boring. Just exit and be done with it

C3 – 28/06/15, 14:11

Boring?
It's riveting.

Politicians with the courage to stand up for their people?
Boring?

As can be seen from the above three comments, there is explicit stance-taking (DuBois, 2007) with regards to the ‘problem’ offered in the preceding news stories that embeds various evaluative viewpoints developed by users in their processing of the stories. In particular, participants interact through engaging in socio-political commentary and displaying their stance towards the projected crisis and in relation to themselves (see also Barton & Lee, 2013). In doing so, participants appear as EU citizens who empathise with the Greek people, legitimating the actions of the Greek government and/or attributing blame to EU elites. The above evaluative viewpoints correspond to different discursive positionings. Stance-taking is mostly realised through the recycling of words, concepts, and discourses introduced either in previous comments or in the news stories per se. This practice is enabled by the interactive communicative format of online media affordances. Recipients of the stories become participants who view the news on capital controls and the Greek referendum as stories within which the actions of the main characters are assessable (Georgakopoulou, 2014). In this way, they act as co-producers in the news-making process. This resembles the crisis-related positionings of Greece and the Greeks that, according to Georgakopoulou (2015), accompany the social media circulation of news stories.

As it is clearly stated in C1, the concept of morality underlies the majority of the analysed comments. C1 and C3 legitimate Greek political decisions by endorsing the moral aspect of Greek politicians’ actions as in ‘politicians … stand up for their people’ and ‘Go Greece, go Tsipras’. In doing so, users in C1 and C3 position themselves as *pro*-Greece. Also, C1 is a representative comment as, apart from orienting to morality, it brings up the Southern vs Northern Europe contrasting pair that is recurrent in various forms in many other user comments. This contrasting pair also relates to other divides such as powerful vs. powerless, elites vs. ordinary people that are made relevant in the crisis related positionings under analysis. The concept of morality as well as the prominence of such contrasting pairs, I later argue, is closely related to blaming.

***Economy Talk as Blaming Resource***

Next I will discuss how economy talk is recontextualised, with a specific focus on the new layers of meanings that economic terms add in users’ processing of the stories and/or previous messages, and how these correspond to different discursive positionings. For this purpose, I analyse five comments that were posted under article 1, titled ‘Greece crisis: markets begin to tumble as investors flee.’

C4 – 29/06/15, 1:41

This is what Tsipras wrought: investment flight. Let's see if the Greek populace thinks his tactics were worth it when they are introduced to the barter economy.

C5 – 29/06/15, 1:55

Austerity was destroying them already before. The current goverment just tried to change that.....

C6.1 – 29/06/15, 3:51

Schaeuble will be dancing happily on everyone's financial grave.

C7 – 29/06/15, 4:00

Wolfgang Shaeuble is a paraplegic confined to a wheelchair. He will not be dancing, real or metaphorical.

You lack of sensitivity, decorum, and financial acumen is readily and sadly apparent.

C6.2 – 29/06/15, 4:21

It was obviously a figure of speech, and yes, metaphorically Schaeuble may well bring down the world's financial system because of his pig-headed obsession with austerity.

C8 – 29/06/15, 5:14

Schaeuble is a democratically elected member of the German government, and represents the will and interests of the German people above all else. What you describe as his purported "pig-headed obsession with austerity" is a financial expertise that, in part, has made Germany one of the most powerful, respected and well run economies in the world. More importantly, his desire for austerity is shared by the vast majority of Germans who have financed both the funds provided to Greece as net recipient of the EU budget in which Germany is the largest net contributor, as well as the lion's share of the over $350 billion in preferentially conditioned loans since 2008. In fact, his willingness to even engage in extended negotiations with the Greeks, no less after the puerile Nazi comparisons by Syriza representatives and their allies, has been a subject of criticism within his country.

In any event, Greece need not subject themselves to the indignities of EC, ECB and IMF austerity. They also aren't entitled to any money from Germany, the EU or anyone else. If Greeks believe that the current demands for austerity are cruel, wait until they see what happens when they return to the Drachma. They'll pine for the good old days with Wolfgang...

As can be seen in C4-C8, the comments present a series of contrasting arguments which negotiate moral agency as to who is responsible for the crisis, and they incorporate several blame attribution strategies. The following social actors or institutions are construed as the recipients of blame: the Greek prime minister, Tsipras, the German finance minister, Schaeuble, the Greek people, and the Greek government. Sher (2006, p. 16) argues that “if morality has a claim on us, then blame is in place.” Thus, blame is a natural consequence of morality. Blaming essentially involves a normative stance. This means that it has to be proven that certain social actors are blameworthy through, for example, argumentation (Wodak & Angouri, 2014). The above comments attempt to provide grounds for “blameworthiness” (Wodak & Angouri, 2014). Economy talk here serves this particular role, namely as the evidence that proves that certain social actors are blameworthy. In C4, the term ‘barter economy’ is used in order to convincingly de-legitimate the tactics of Tsipras. C6 initiates a verbal conflict with regards to the personality and practices of Schaeuble, whereby his actions are either criticised (C6.1 and C6.2) or legitimated (C7 and C8). Although, in principle, this corresponds to a character-focused stancetaking typical of social media recycling of news stories, as described by Georgakopoulou (2015), the extended reference to financial expertise and the use of several economic terms in C8 add a politicised tone to the comments. Interestingly, in C7, the specific user refers to, among others, financial expertise as a criterion entitling users to comment on the practices of the German finance minister. It seems that resorting to economic terms reflects a financial expertise that authenticates and legitimates pro-Schaeuble and pro-Germany practices. The same theme is addressed in C8 where Schaeuble’s financial expertise is linked to the economic power of Germany. Financial expertise is presented as an asset, associated with power, respect, and, by extension, success and sustainability. The specific user employs a series of technical economic facts in order to defend the strategies of Germany and lay the blame on Greece. Financial expertise counts, therefore, as a blaming resource when it comes to attributing responsibility to Greece, and it seems to be considered as a value amongst the users who share the same discursive positioning.

The second part of C8 expands on blaming through the strategy of othering. Greece and Greeks are cast into the role of ‘the other’ that deviates from the normative judgements of Germany. Greeks are viewed from the perspective of a dominant group that defines into existence an inferior group (Altheide, 2006). Having legitimated the actions of Schaeuble and Germany earlier on, Greece and the Greeks are contrasted to powerful Germany and are assigned a series of negative traits due to their lack of conformity with the previously justified German actions. It follows that economy talk becomes a resource for constructing a superior, knowledgeable, and authoritative identity entitled to use blaming attribution strategies. To this end, members of the dominant group who own these traits may safely maintain a distance from the crisis. The dataset includes several comments that polarise ‘self’ and ‘other,’ as in C9, where the extensive and emphatic use of ‘we’ and ‘they’ corresponds to a moralised ‘us’ versus ‘them’:

C9 – 29/06/2015, 15:20

I'm getting pretty sick of all the Greek wailing and fault deflecting.

They should not have borrowed the money if they could not repay it from us EU taxpayers.

When they did borrow it they had ample time to restructure their public spending and tax systems. They did absolutely nothing.

Now it's time to pay some back on terms THEY agreed to, they winge, moan and strut as if we are in the wrong. As if we have to be worried about their threats, look Greece, our economies will not collapse tomorrow like yours.

Greeks are abstractly assigned to a large group (‘all the Greek’), who are represented as engaging in the negative acts of ‘wailing’ and ‘fault deflecting.’ They are then attributed a series of negative traits that explicitly differentiate ‘them’ from ‘us.’ The strategies of grouping and negative othering contribute to the contrastive depiction of ‘self’ versus ‘other,’ whereby self is portrayed in superior, positive terms in comparison to the other. Within this view, the unstable Greek economy is contrasted to the solid economy of presumably stronger European countries. This posting helps sustain an already established power distribution and at the same time helps dominant groups maintain a distance from crisis.

It follows that the use of economy talk through references to economic facts, figures, and the portrayal of financial experts appears as an attribute of ‘self’ and constructs ‘self’ as knowledgeable and superior. Talk about the economy works as expert/insider evidence that authenticates the information provided; it also constitutes cultural capital, a discursive mechanism through which users legitimate their superiority. Drawing upon economic resources, readers of *The Guardian* recontextualise discourses of chaos and fear into blame attributions in their attempt to find scapegoats and, at the same time, maintain a distance from the projected economic crisis. Economy talk therefore adds new layers of meanings that expand upon those offered by the news articles per se.

Finally, despite the character-focused stance-taking employed by participants in making sense of the crisis, resorting to economy talk contributes to the treatment of the projected crisis as a politicised issue with serious socio-economic implications. This is because commenters position themselves as capable of assessing the scale and consequences of the crisis, and they provide economic facts and economic-related evidence to validate their arguments. In this way, participants respond in parallel to the respective news articles in terms of crisis framing.

**Conclusions**

In this article, I have attempted to unpack the complex process of the mediatisation of the Greek economic crisis by exploring its sub-processes of recontextualisation through the investigation of speech representation included in news articles and the interaction between news articles and their respective user comments. The news stories under analysis emphasise the scale and consequences of the economic crisis and project the Greek bailout referendum as a period of chaos, risk, and uncertainty. In doing so, they de-legitimate the reported Greek actions and present the Greek compliance with the Eurozone currency as the only legitimate outcome. This framing contributes to the reproduction of fear discourse. Fear discourse is then transformed into a terrain of negotiation with regards to blame and responsibility in the user comments.

In their processing of economic crisis news stories, *The Guardian* commenters engage in stance-taking and express their evaluative viewpoints with regard to the social actors involved with the projected crisis. The selective use of economic terms allows users to appropriate and negotiate the crisis discourses reproduced in the news stories. For them, mastering economic jargon and comprehension of economic facts is associated with entitlement to use blame attribution strategies. These correspond to an *anti*-Greece/*pro*-elite Europe discourse and position the commenters as members of a social group that differentiates itself from ‘the other.’ Resorting to economic jargon further contributes to the reproduction of a discourse of superiority that constitutes a form of cultural capital owned by group members who share the same values. In this way, participants’ sense-making of crisis expands upon the ways in which it is depicted in news stories. At the same time, the fact that crisis is treated in principle as a politicised issue with socio-economic implications in user comments follows up on the ways economic information is managed in news articles.

Through an analysis of recontextualisation as a process of mediatisation, I have shown that recipients appropriate and negotiate discursive meaning by connecting to or disconnecting from and interweaving mediated meaning. This is made possible by the affordances of online media discourse that has blurred the traditional boundaries between media production and reception. In my data, participants either follow up or expand upon mediated meanings of economic crisis. An exploration of news articles in relation to recipients’ responses to crisis stories can thus unpack the different layers of meanings embedded in crisis and, by extension, attempt to deconstruct its discursive framings in the specific media environment.

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1. Greek bank account holders were permitted to withdraw up to €60 in cash daily, but payments and transfers abroad were banned. This was enforced until September 2015, when several aspects of the capital controls were eased. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. ‘Grexit’, a portmanteau word combining the words ‘Greek’ and ‘exit’ refers to a hypothetical scenario of Greece withdrawing from Eurozone.

**Biographical Note**

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