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**COGNITION, RELEVANCE AND IDEOLOGY  
FORMATION THROUGH TRAVEL DOCUMENTARIES:  
A LONGITUDINAL APPROACH TO AUDIENCES**

**Abstract.** The paper proposes a novel longitudinal approach to the study of the rhetorical effects of media by combining Audience Research (e.g. Schröder *et al.*, 2003), Social Semiotics (e.g. Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996, 2001; van Leeuwen, 1999; Machin and Mayr, 2012) and Relevance Theory (Sperber and Wilson, 1995). After introducing a more nuanced model of RT's *contextual effect*, the paper reports an empirical case study to explicate the methodological approach. Evidence is provided that a specific text can have a long-lasting effect on an audience: a *hierarchy of effects* and the cognitive circumstances under which this may happen are discussed.

*Keywords:* multimodality, ideology, cognition, Relevance Theory, Audience Research, hierarchy of effects.

**1. Introduction**

The question of whether individual media texts have effects on audiences has been debated both in media and communication studies and Critical Discourse Studies (henceforth CDS). In media studies the debate is often divided between critical approaches that see discourse as always ideological and often serving hegemonic purposes, and the more liberal approaches to media that deny any top-down effects on the grounds that it is the audience that freely chooses what to engage with and how, therefore being in complete control of their ideology and its development (see Curran 2002, Ch. 1). Media and communication studies have researched media effects for a century, and the widely agreed conclusion resulting from such a lengthy research endeavour is that “[t]he notion of the anonymous, powerless mass audience is no longer the dominant assumption in effects research. Nevertheless, the media effects literature approaches the audience as

a collective that potentially requires protection from dangerous outside influences” (Sullivan, 2019, p. 57). Finally, the media research tradition known as *cultivation theory* (Gerbner and Gross, 1976) pointed at a long-term, cumulative effect of the media on audiences, rather than at immediate effects attributable to a specific media text. The latter type of effects, that is those attributable to a specific media text and its rhetorical influence, is what this paper will explore and discuss.

In CDS, on the other hand, research on the effects of texts on a real audience has always been “relatively invisible” (Phelan, 2018, p. 291) as research has generally focused on the meaning potentials of the texts rather than the actual understanding of the recipients of such texts. Attempts at integrating reception studies within CDS research, in the form of what I have called *recontextualisation* and *engagement* studies (see Castaldi, 2021, p. 57, for details), seem to have validated two main theories in media communication: Hall’s *encoding/decoding* model (2005), in so far as the participants do or do not align with the ‘preferred readings’ identified by the analysts (see section 4 for details), and Condit’s concept of *polyvalence* (1991), in so far as the participants unambiguously understand the denotative message of the texts but apply their own connotative filters by expressing different opinions on the themes and contents of the texts they engage with. These types of studies, however, cannot satisfactorily address the issue of media effects, either because the participants are not put in a naturalistic, agentive position in relation to the choice of the text to engage with (in the case of the *recontextualisation* studies), or because a more nuanced analysis of the participants’ ideologies cannot be undertaken as the participants are beyond the reach of the researchers (in the case of the *engagement* studies).

More recently, studies of an experimental nature (e.g. Hart, 2018) and of a qualitative, exploratory nature (Castaldi, 2021, 2022, 2024) have brought the issue of analysing media effects back onto the CDS research agenda. This paper aims to contribute to this renewed interest, and reports on a longitudinal extension of a previous case study (Castaldi, 2021) that focused on ideology formation through the popular genre of travel documentaries. The original study integrated a reception study element with the multimodal text analysis of a travel documentary chosen by the participant, *Burma with Simon Reeve* (BBC, 2018), and a qualitative investigation of the participants’ interaction with the documentary. The purpose of the study was to explore the extent to which the documentary affected the *factual* and *evaluative* beliefs (van Dijk, 1998) of the participant. The results showed that the participant’s beliefs were indeed affected by the documentary in the immediacy of the post-viewing experience, but left the question open

concerning the extent to which these effects would be long-lasting. The longitudinal extension to that study, which this paper discusses, addresses this issue. The longitudinal study, however, as was the case for the original one, is not of an experimental, neuro-scientific nature, but of a discursive, cognitive-pragmatic nature. Giles (2003, pp. 28–33) highlights how experimental research in media psychology has provided evidence on short-term media effects, while at the same time drawing criticisms for the artificial nature of the experiments and the tendency to overgeneralise results. The original study (Castaldi, 2021, 2022, 2024) and the follow-up one presented here make allowance for naturalistic media experiences while limiting the findings to the context of the case study and arguing for further research of a similar kind to provide more substantial evidence of the potential long-term effects of media representations.

The paper starts by introducing some key concepts in Relevance Theory (henceforth RT, Sperber and Wilson, 1995) and by reviewing multimodal studies that have employed this communicative framework. Subsequently, a more nuanced understanding of *contextual effect* will be introduced with the purpose of operationalising RT for the analysis of ideology formation. After this, the methodology and method of the case study will be discussed, and the example of one of the main themes of the documentary, the Rohingya crisis, will be analysed in detail to explore the long-lasting effects of the documentary on the participant. Finally, a discussion of the implications of the results will address cognitive and semiotic aspects of media effects, and some conclusions will be drawn regarding the strengths and limitations of the methodological approach.

## **2. Relevance Theory and (cognitive) multimodal research**

RT can be defined as a cognitive theory of meaning whereby communication is conceived as an *ostensive-inferential model*, according to which “communication is achieved by producing and interpreting evidence” (Sperber and Wilson, 1995, p. 2). The exchange of information within the model of RT happens between two or more *cognitive environments*. The latter term refers to the “set of facts that are manifest” to an individual, whereby ‘manifest’ means that the individual is capable at the time the communicative event occurs “of representing [facts] mentally and accepting [their] representation as true or probably true” (*ibid*, p. 39). Relevance is based on two factors: the extent to which the new information *modifies* or *improves* the old one (the *contextual effect*) and the extent to which the effort required to

process the new information is small (the *processing effort*). The bigger the contextual effect and the smaller the processing effort, the higher the level of relevance attainable within a communicative exchange.

Sperber and Wilson (*ibid*, p. 265–266), however, point out that relevance for individuals is connected to their *cognitive goals*. When the two cognitive domains, i.e. goals and effect, align, we have a *positive cognitive effect*, that is “a cognitive effect that contributes positively to the fulfilment of cognitive functions or goals [of an individual]” (*ibid*, p. 265). Yus (2011) complements the notion of cognitive goals with that of *cognitive rewards* to allow for an individual’s emotions and attitudes to be taken into consideration. He defines cognitive rewards as “feelings, emotions, empathy, phatic connotations, community membership, socialisation, [which constitute] sources of user satisfaction” (p. 65). The issues of cognitive goals and cognitive rewards are important aspects to take into consideration within the research design discussed here: if, in our example of travel documentaries, the cognitive goal of the viewer was only to be entertained and not to be informed about the socio-political events in the country discussed by the programme, then it would be reasonable to conclude that the viewer did not provide any evidence of positive cognitive effects in that specific domain, as that was not part of their cognitive goals. I write ‘reasonable’ and do not assume unequivocal certainty, since the viewer may have not provided any evidence of a positive cognitive effect despite some occurring, for example because they deemed the topic to be taboo or not appropriate for the purpose and dynamics of the research project.

Several scholars have used RT in multimodal research. Forceville (1996) is the first to take a decisive cognitive perspective in the field of multimodality while adapting aspects of RT for analytical purposes. His research looks at how metaphors are constructed in static advertising texts, and includes an investigation of participants’ reactions to some of the billboards he analyses to explore “whether the participants understood the pictorial phenomena in the billboards as metaphors and, if so, to what extent they agreed on the metaphors’ interpretations” (p. 167). One of the implications from RT that Forceville finds useful is that “the theoretical distinction between aspects of a message that are unequivocally communicated (‘strong implicatures’) and aspects that are weakly, more ambiguously, conveyed (‘weak implicatures’) may well be particularly pertinent to pictures, especially static ones” (Forceville, 1999a, p. 174). Despite having himself integrated a reception element in some of his work (e.g. 1996, 1999b), Forceville (2020, pp. 253ff.) recently highlights the need for further research into audiences and their interpretations of mass-mediated texts.

Yus (1998, 2006) provides a discussion of a visual-verbal model of communication to analyse media discourse. The research uses humorous comics as examples of multimodal texts and RT principles are used to theorise what aspects of the texts guide their interpretation. The aim of the model proposed is to explain how interpretation is negotiated between the author and the imagined reader, sometimes also through the added layer of the fictional characters. Yus highlights the difficulties posed by the fact that, unlike in face-to-face communication, in mass-mediated communication the text producer can only hope that the readers will make the correct interpretation for the humorous effect of the comics to work, and the readers are aware they cannot obtain any further clarification regarding the intended interpretation than what they can find in the text. More recently, Yus (2022) explores the idea of cognitive rewards within the context of smartphones apps and, drawing on RT principles applied to his theory of *cyberpragmatics*, argues that “smartphone communication users are also bound to show a biological tendency to pay attention to the most relevant stimuli on their smartphones”, often spending additional processing effort “if they get some reward from these interactions that compensates for this extra effort” (p. 4). This latter point is also applicable to other mass-mediated contexts, where users may make a conscious decision to increase their processing efforts if they believe this will yield cognitive rewards of some kind.

Infantidou and Tzanne (2006) analyse one of the 2004 Olympic Games television advertisements in Greece. The paper argues that the advertisement is an instance of multimodal metaphor (ATHENS 2004 OLYMPIC GAMES ARE A FESTIVAL), and given the minimal presence of verbal signs, the study is characterised as “a genuine non-linguistic experiment assessing viewers’ reaction to an exclusively non-verbal multimodal stimulus” (p. 204). RT is then used in combination with a reception study element to analyse the positive cognitive effects and the processing effort of the multimodal metaphor identified, as well as to investigate how both Greek and non-Greek participants understood the message of the advertisement and whether they found it successful. In both cases there was a very high level of alignment between the interpretation of the advertisement given by the authors and that of the participants, which supports the idea that RT principles can be successfully applied for the analysis of non-verbal communication in a similar fashion as the original theory did with face-to-face communication.

Piazza and Haarman (2016) use RT to propose a model for the classification of verbal-visual relations, with a focus on how implicatures are made accessible to the imagined viewer. The genre analysed is news programmes

and, given the need for news programme producers to address as wide and diverse an audience as possible, the “interest [...] is not in the actual reception of any particular viewers, but rather in identifying the potentialities inherent in the television text for creating meaning” (p. 462). The model builds on Barthes’ (1977) concepts of *anchorage*, *illustration* and *relay*, and on Montgomery’s (2007) Principles of Intelligibility for new reports, which comprise two rules: the first is that viewers will search for a relevant referent in the visual track for any referring expressions in the verbal track; the second states the opposite, that is that relevant referents in the verbal track will be sought to aid the interpretation of visual content. Piazza and Haarman conclude that in the examples they analysed “[c]omprehension is based on inferring and providing the inexplicit links between textual elements” (2016, p. 481). The visual and verbal tracks stand in a reciprocal relation that allows implicatures to be inferred, and the model proposed enables the analyst to describe the type of relations used and their function in the meaning-making process.

Finally, Castaldi (2021, 2022, 2024) exploits the analytical power of RT to investigate “how individuals discursively constitute themselves” through the genre of travel documentaries (Castaldi, 2021, p. 56). These studies theorise and make use of a more nuanced understanding of *contextual effect* (see section 3) and use pre- and post-viewing methods of data collection to explore how the cognitive environment of participants is affected by the travel documentary they chose to watch and engage with. All these studies, however, only looked at ideology formation within a short temporal distance of watching the documentaries. The current study adds a longer temporal dimension to investigate not only the extent to which some of the changes to the participant’s cognitive environment lasted over a prolonged period of time, but also which types of effects lasted longer.

The work and findings from the integrated approaches of multimodality and cognition reviewed in this section have given us some very useful insights on the interpretation of multimodal texts, and also shown how RT principles can be fruitfully applied beyond face-to-face communication.

### 3. Relevance Theory: *contextual effect* revised

I would now like to focus on the idea of *contextual effect*, which has been defined as the alteration of one’s cognitive environment through the accommodation of new information derived from a communicative exchange (Sperber and Wilson, 1995, p. 109), and unpack it further to introduce the

concepts of *evidential effects* and *ideological effects*.<sup>1</sup> In order to accomplish this, I propose the analysis of new information at two different levels: the level of *knowledge* and the level of *opinions*. This differentiation is based on van Dijk's (1998) concept of ideology and his definition of *knowledge* as being the set of "factual beliefs" and *opinions* as being the set of "evaluative beliefs" that, together, form individual and social ideologies (p. 48). *Evidential effects*, then, is equated to modification or improvement of the old information, by virtue of the new, at the level of *knowledge*, whereas *ideological effects* refers to modification or improvement of the old information at the level of *opinions*.

A second differentiation stems from the definition of 'relevant information' given by Sperber and Wilson (1995), who define this as "information that *modifies* and *improves* an overall representation of the world" (p. 71, *my emphasis*). Amongst the contextual effects produced by *modifying* relevant information we can include the creation of a new idea or piece of knowledge in one's cognitive environment, as well as "the abandonment of old assumptions" (*ibid*, p. 109). Amongst the contextual effects produced by *improving* relevant information, we can include information that "may provide further evidence for, and therefore strengthen, old assumptions" (*ibidem*). I would argue that only *modifying* effects can be solely attributed to a specific text, whereas *improving* effects reflect pre-existing ideologies that may have been reinforced by a specific text.

Furthermore, through the audience research element of my research design, *evaluative* and *ideological* effects can be further divided into *explicit* and *implicit*. The former will be identified through the acknowledgement of the *preferred reading* (Hall, 2005) of the programme with regard to a particular topic or ideology, found in the participants' responses to or recontextualisation of the text. *Implicit* effects, on the other hand, can be defined as implicit alignment with the *preferred reading* of the programme with regard to a particular topic or ideology, by way of not challenging it, and hence they are still relevant as they reinforce existing information. Implicit effects would very likely happen, for example, with ideologies that are highly naturalised or presupposed in both the interacting cognitive environments (the participant's and the programme's in our case).

This latter type of effect, however, can only be assumed to have occurred as there is no evidence from the participant data. Absence of evidence, however, should not be unequivocally equated to lack of relevance, as the participant might not have explicitly mentioned information they found relevant for several reasons. As noted, we may be looking at naturalised ideologies that the participant does not find worth discussing. Al-

ternatively, it may be that genre expectations may direct the participant’s attention towards other types of *preferred readings*, for example aesthetic or cultural ones, as these are found to be more rewarding (cf. Yus, 2011) and worth discussing. Additionally, the participant may find certain information relevant, but not as much as other information, and therefore does not prioritise it in their recontextualisation of the text, or may even consider a relevant topic to be taboo. A schematic summary of the revised *contextual effect*, together with examples taken from the case study, can be found in Figure 1.

Type of Effect	Ideological Domain Affected	Examples	Explanation in RT terms
Improving Evidential Effect (IEE)	Knowledge (or factual beliefs)	[Knowing already about the Rohingya crisis] “I was shocked by the scale of the issue.”	Knowledge of the Rohingya crisis was already present in the cognitive environment and the new information added more knowledge.
Modifying Evidential Effect (MEE)	Knowledge (or factual beliefs)	“I thought [Myanmar] was a name they had before Burma, before the colonies, but it turns out that’s the name the militia chose without a referendum.”	A previously held factual belief about the name of the country is contradicted by the new information and the previous belief is changed as a result.
Improving Ideological Effect (IIE)	Opinions (or evaluative beliefs)	“I think it’s pretty disgusting, but that’s how militaries run countries. And it’s not any different to any other, say African or Asian state that is just run by the military.”	Evaluative beliefs on the way militaries run countries was already present in the cognitive environment and the new information confirms this to be the case.
Modifying Ideological Effect (MIE)	Opinions (or evaluative beliefs)	“I would say shock, because I was shocked by them. I thought contrary, maybe even paradox, to everything that I understand of Buddhism and the value of every life.”	A previously held evaluative belief about Buddhism is contradicted by the new information and the previous belief is changed as a result.
Implicit Effect (IE)	Knowledge and/or Opinions	N/a	New information might have been considered relevant, but the participant did not make an explicit mention of it.

Figure 1. Contextual Effect revised



#### 4. Method

The research design for the original case study discussed in this paper, which I have described elsewhere in detail (Castaldi, 2021, pp. 58–60), follows the audience research tradition of granting participants *agency* in the choice of media texts they engage with (e.g. Schrøder *et al.*, 2003). The participant, a white, British male in his 30s, chose the travel or cultural documentary he wanted to watch, using whichever media outlet and device he wished. He filled in a questionnaire containing two elements: a pre-viewing part aimed at finding out the reasons for choosing the specific programme, his expectations and background knowledge on the expected social actors (van Leeuwen, 1996) and events; a post-viewing part aimed at recording his immediate impressions and feelings, focusing on aspects he found particularly interesting. I then watched the programme myself and met with the participant within one week of his original viewing experience for a semi-structured interview. Here we discussed the programme, based on the notes and answers on his questionnaire, as well as some more general aspects pertaining to his intercultural and political ideologies.

The purpose of both questionnaire and interview was also to establish which *interpretative code* the participant applied for specific aspects of the programmes. Hall (1980/2005) calls *preferred reading* the interpretation the text producers hope the viewers to reach. According to him, the preferred reading can be interpreted through *dominant*, *oppositional* or *negotiated codes*. A *dominant code* entails viewers recognising the message conveyed and accepting its validity; an *oppositional code* sees viewers recognising the message, but deciding to reject it for not fitting in with their worldview; a *negotiated code* involves viewers recognising the message and accepting it under certain circumstances (e.g. at a global or national level), but not under others (e.g. within the specificity of their lives), hence negotiating its validity. Figure 2 provides a summary of the social actors discussed by the participant in the questionnaire and interview data, as well as the potential *evidential* (indicated as ‘knowledge’) and *ideological* (indicated as ‘opinions’) effects that might have occurred after watching the documentary (Castaldi, 2021, p. 64):

Finally, I carried out the multimodal text analysis. The semiotic analysis was carried out for the totality of the programme and not only for the aspects highlighted by the viewer in their questionnaire and interview. The main reason for this being that I was interested in analysing not only what the viewer seemed to have focussed on, but also on those aspects he did not discuss, whether because of no interest or because he preferred

	Rohingya	ARSA Militants	Military	Aung San Suu Kyi	International Community	MaBaTha Monks
<i>Before watching the programme</i>	Aware of the existence of a problem but not the full scale of it.	No evidence of knowing ARSA but was aware of the existence of Muslim 'extremists'.	Aware of a military government in Burma at some point in history and thought it was an oppressive one.	Aware of such a political personality and, possibly, connects her with the idea of 'borders being now open'.	Saw international exchange as a means towards freedom and economic progress.	Not aware of the existence of 'militant' monks.
<i>After watching the programme</i>	Feels sympathetic towards the plight of the Rohingyas and was shocked and moved by the scale of the phenomenon.	Can understand why the militants committed violent acts.	Feels that there was not enough information about the military.	Does not think she is developing infrastructures to support tourism and foreign investments. Thinks Simon Reeve was disappointed at her incapacity or unwillingness to act for the Rohingyas.	Surprised that benefits of open borders did not go beyond big cities.	Surprised by the existence of this militant faction and thinks that maybe not all Buddhists are as peaceful as he thought.
Contextual and Ideological effects?	<i>Knowledge:</i> expanded on existing knowledge, i.e. scale of the phenomenon.  <i>Opinions:</i> confirmed existing opinion, i.e. sympathetic to their cause.	<i>Knowledge:</i> created new knowledge, i.e. ARSA.  <i>Opinions:</i> confirmed existing opinion, i.e. violence can be justified under certain circumstances.	<i>Knowledge:</i> nothing new.  <i>Opinions:</i> not enough input to challenge or confirm existing opinions.	<i>Knowledge:</i> expanded on existing knowledge, i.e. her role in the Rohingya crisis.  <i>Opinions:</i> possibly challenged the opinion that people were more liberated and generally better off with her in power.	<i>Knowledge:</i> expanded on existing knowledge, i.e. only cities in Myanmar benefited from open borders.  <i>Opinions:</i> confirmed existing opinion, i.e. open borders are a means towards freedom and progress.	<i>Knowledge:</i> created new knowledge, i.e. MaBaTha.  <i>Opinions:</i> challenged existing opinion, i.e. Buddhists are all peaceful.

**Figure 2.** Summary of the potential effects of the documentary on the participant based on the social actors he discussed in his recontextualisation of the events

not to talk about them. The interpretative framework used for the multimodal analysis relies, to a large extent, on analytical and interpretive constructs from *Social Semiotics* (e.g. Kress, 2010; Kress and van Leeuwen, 2001, 2006; van Leeuwen, 1999, 2005) and *Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis* (Machin, 2014; Machin and Mayr, 2012). Given the multimodal nature of the audio-visual texts chosen, the analysis looks at all those semiotic modes accessible through the *auditory* sensory channel, i.e. speech, sound and music, and through the *visual* sensory channel, i.e. shots, still images and writing. From an analytical point of view, the focus is on matters of *connotation* (Leech, 1983), *representation of actors* (van Leeuwen, 1996) and *representation of processes* (e.g. Halliday, 1978; Halliday and Matthiessen, 2014). Figure 3 provides a summary of the meaning-making parameters analysed (Castaldi, 2021, p. 60):

Sensory channels	Semiotic modes	Meaning-making parameters		
		<i>Connotation</i>	<i>Representation of actors</i>	<i>Representation of processes</i>
Auditory	<i>Speech</i>	Lexicon Prosodic features	Naming conventions Inclusion vs. exclusion Im/personalisation	Agentive vs. receptive vs. stative constructions
	<i>Sound</i>	Provenance Experiential meaning potential Perspectival depth Friction	Quality (of voices) Pitch range (of voices)	Dynamic vs static
	<i>Music</i>	Provenance Melody	N.A.	Rhythm Pitch movement
Visual	<i>Writing</i>	Lexicon Font, size, character, etc.	Naming conventions Inclusion vs. exclusion Im/personalisation	Active vs. passive vs. stative constructions
	<i>Shots</i>	Attributes Settings Salience	Gazes and poses Distance Camera angle Individuals vs. groups Generic vs. specific Inclusion vs. exclusion	Dynamic vs static

**Figure 3.** Summary of sensory channels, semiotic modes and meaning-making parameters analysed

The longitudinal extension to the initial study, which provided the original data discussed in this paper, consisted of a 35-minute structured interview which took place almost exactly one year after the participant watched the programme. Unlike in the first follow-up interview, however, the questions in the delayed one address two dimensions. On the one hand, a set of three unprompted, open-ended questions aimed to investigate what the participant remembered and what opinions, if any, the documentary had helped change or form.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, a set of prompted questions were structured around the social actors identified as interesting both by the participant himself in the original data and by me through the multimodal analysis of the documentary. The aim here was to compare the participant’s opinions about specific social actors a year after, and also to ask for opinions about social actors the participants had not focused on during the original data collection exercise, but who had emerged

as prominent through the multimodal text analysis. This interview was carried out over ‘Skype’ as the UK was in lockdown at that time due to the government restrictions related to the Covid-19 pandemic; it was video-recorded with the consent of the participant and then manually transcribed.

## 5. Case Study: the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar (Burma)

In the original study (see Castaldi 2021) six social actors were identified by the participant, in their recontextualisation of the events discussed in the documentary, as being particularly *relevant* (in RT terms): the Rohingya people, the ARSA militants, the Burmese military, Aung San Suu Kyi, the international community and the MaBaTha monks. Burma itself, as a country and tourist destination, was also commented on by the participant, but since the analysis will be focusing on the ‘Rohingya crisis’ I will omit Burma as one of the topics discussed. After giving a little background information on the television documentary and the ‘Rohingya crisis’ to provide necessary contextual information, I will look at each of the six social actors. The focus will be on how they were represented semiotically in the documentary,<sup>3</sup> how the participant recontextualised them in the first set of data (summarised at the beginning of each sub-section), what interpretative codes were used, the type of effects that were created by the text, the level of relevance in the year-after interview (by looking at the answers to the unprompted questions) and the recontextualisation of the social actors in the second set of data (by looking at the answers to the prompted questions). The relevance levels in the year-after interview were coded as ‘low’, ‘medium’ and ‘high’ based on how many of the three unprompted questions elicited comments on a given social actor. Therefore, if only one question did, relevance has been coded as ‘low’; if two questions did, relevance has been coded as ‘medium’; if all three questions did, relevance has been coded as ‘high’. In the quotes presented here from the participant interview, I have highlighted verbs that point at modifications of his cognitive environment.

*Burma with Simon Reeve* (BBC, 2018) is a two-part travel series, which is categorised by the BBC as *factual/travel* under ‘genre’ and *documentary* under ‘format’. The host, Simon Reeve, is a popular television personality and has written and presented many travel programmes for the BBC, including this one. According to the host, the programme was planned during the summer of 2017 before the events of 25<sup>th</sup> August 2017 (Reeve, 2018).

On this date the Myanmar authorities reported attacks on thirty police outposts by men belonging to the insurgent group ARSA (Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army), after which ‘clearance operations’ by the Myanmar military started that caused the forced mass exodus of Rohingya Muslims to neighbouring Bangladesh. The subsequent events have generally been referred to in the media as the ‘Rohingya crisis’.

### ***Social Actor #1: The Rohingya people***

The Rohingya people are represented multimodally as the victims of the ongoing crisis, both through the host’s and their own representation. The semiotic modes operate to create an emotional, sympathetic connection with the viewer, and the participant seemed to employ a *dominant code* in the data collected soon after watching the programme: he felt sympathetic towards the plight of the Rohingyas and was both shocked and moved by the scale of the phenomenon. In terms of effects on his cognitive environment, two types of effects were highlighted by the cognitive analysis: *improving evidential effects* (IEE) in relation to learning about the scale of the phenomenon, and *improving ideological effects* (IIE) resulting in enhanced feelings of sympathy towards their cause. The reason the effects were coded as *improving* and not *modifying* is that the participant was already aware of the Rohingya crisis prior to watching the programme and, presumably, already felt sympathetic towards their cause.

In the year-after interview (henceforth I2), the representation of the Rohingya people was coded as having ‘low’ relevance in the long term, as the participant only commented on them in response to one of the three unprompted questions (Q1): “I remember quite vividly his [Simon Reeve’s] experiences in that huge refugee camp” (I2, line 16). The sympathy towards the Rohingya people’s cause, as well as some resentment towards other parties involved in the crisis, both national and international, for not intervening more decisively is evident in some of the comments he made when asked specifically what he thought about the Rohingya people:

“So, compassion for them. Frustration for them. Maybe even a bit of anger: I feel they’ve just been pushed aside.” (I2, lines 82–83)

“I feel like they’ve been made victims, they’ve had no support from the wider government.” (I2, line 86)

“So, yeah, frustration and anger on their behalf, just because of a cultural or religious belief, they’re just... I don’t know, they’re cast aside like... yeah, just... not subhuman, but looked down upon.” (I2, lines 90–92)

From the longitudinal data, two aspects can therefore be highlighted. First, the *improving* effects that were noted in the initial set of data are still present in the cognitive environment of the participant. This could, of course, also be based on other media input the participant might have come across over the year period, but some of the comments, i.e. about the size of the camp and about the experience of the host there, are clearly related to the documentary. Furthermore, to a specific question in the I2 interview asking whether he had heard, read or watched any more news concerning the Rohingya crisis he replied that “that was kind of limited” (I2, line 48) and that “from time to time if something pops up in the news about Burma, or Myanmar, I will then follow that up, but I haven’t really watched a great deal of [that]” (I2, lines 53–55). Second, the low relevance of the representation of the Rohingya people also needs to be noted: I would argue here that this was likely because the effects only *improved* the participant’s cognitive environment, hence carrying less ‘cognitive weight’ than the representation of other social actors that resulted in *modifying* effects.

### ***Social Actor #2: the ARSA militants***

The ARSA militants are represented as the victims who fight back because of exasperation and, as with the Rohingya people, the semiotic modes operate to create an emotional, sympathetic connection with the viewer. Again, the participant seemed to interpret this preferred reading through a *dominant code*, as in the initial set of data it transpired that he could understand why the militants committed the violent acts that they talk about in the documentary. In terms of effects, the representation of the ARSA militants resulted in the three different types: *modifying evidential effects* (MEE) created knowledge of ARSA as a militant organisation, *modifying ideological effects* (MIE) created an opinion about the organisation consisting of ordinary people (rather than ‘professional terrorists’) and acting in self-defence because of oppression and violence against them, and *improving ideological effects* (IIE) confirmed what presumably was an already existing opinion, i.e. that violence can be justified under certain circumstances.

In the I2 data, the relevance of the representation of the ARSA militants was coded as ‘medium’, as the participant commented on them in response to two unprompted questions (Q1 and Q3):

Q1 “He met up with some of the perceived militia, I think.” (I2, lines 15–16)

Q3 “It’s probably also **changed my mind** on who would be part of the militia. It’s just normal, everyday people feeling helpless, and I suppose that’s

what people do when they join [...] picking up their, you know, like pickaxe or their cheap... or their farm weapons and just feeling they have to, quotation marks, go to war or to stand up for what they... well, their rights. Their human rights.” (I2, lines 256–264)

The effects on the participant in the long term with regard to the ARSA militants can also be seen in his answer when asked to comment specifically on them. The verbs highlighted point at a modification of his cognitive environment, rather than an improvement of already existing knowledge and opinions:

“Those two **I was surprised** about how un-militia-like they were. [...] They seemed very casual to me, **not how I perceive** someone who’s part of the militia. **I thought** they’d be angry all of the time or shouting [...] **I was surprised** by how humane they were, I guess.” (I2, lines 101–107)

“Maybe more empathy. Empathise that they are in a situation they have no control over. They’re just cast aside [...]. So, they have to do everything for themselves so... the [inaudible] they just seemed like normal people. **I thought** they’d be shouting, furious. **I thought** they’d be dressed in military attire, with guns and armed that way. But that just gives you an indication of how these people... they’re fighting with nothing, really. Frustrated... or how backed into a corner they feel.” (I2, lines 118–125)

In relation to the representation of the ARSA militants, the longitudinal data suggest two points. The first, as was the case for the Rohingya people, is that the interaction with the documentary seems to have had a long-lasting effect on the participant. The second point is that *modifying* effects seem to have resulted in a higher degree of relevance in the long term.

### ***Social Actor #3: the Myanmar military***

The military are represented as the culprit in the Rohingya crisis and bear the responsibility for the current situation; they are portrayed as cruel and irrational at the same time and, therefore, a political player that cannot be trusted. In the initial data the participant felt that there was not enough information about the military in the documentary, even if he did comment on some marginal aspects that were shown. However, he did imply that the military rule was worse than the British colonial rule, which I argued is one of the preferred readings that came out of a scene at the beginning of the documentary (Castaldi, 2024), thus suggesting an interpretation through the *dominant code*, at least as far as this aspect is concerned. So, it can be argued that, in terms of effects, there were some *modifying evidential effects* (MEE) regarding the representation of some of the things

the military did while in power and some *improving ideological effects* (IIE) with regard to the comparison between the military rule and the British colonial rule.

In the I2 interview data, the relevance for the representations of the Myanmar military was coded as ‘low’, as the participant only commented on them in response to one of the unprompted question (Q3): “I guess with [...] the military, it was more buffoonery. But it just seemed so child-like in the laws that they were wanting to implement.” (I2, lines 248–250). Answers to the prompted question about the Myanmar military confirm the effects discussed from the original data, and the language I have highlighted in the quotes below reflects the cognitive states of improvement and modification of the participant’s cognitive environment:

**“I don’t think that changed at all**, because **I had prior knowledge** of how the country was being governed, how for years it was blocked off completely from the Western world.” (I2, lines 138–139)

**“A bit surprised** of how reckless they are or how pointless some of the legislation they were putting in place. I don’t know, how petty. Changing the side of the road that people could drive on, changing measurement of monetary... measurements, just for the heck of it. They’ve got this power now and they want to be seen as acting and the changes just seem petty. Obviously, what they have done with the Rohingya, I think it’s pretty disgusting, but **that’s how militaries run countries**. And **it’s not any different** to any other, say African or Asian state that is just run by the military.” (I2, lines 143–149)

The longitudinal analysis of the relevance of the representation of the Myanmar military yielded some interesting results. First, the MEE are clearer here than they were in the first dataset: whereas in the original interview all the participant commented on were “the donations a lot of these ex-military made to... to, like, gaudy temples, stuff, as a way of expressing [...] recompenses, and like confession”, in the second quote above, it can be seen that he remembers further details about the military and their regime. Second, it is interesting to note that, despite there being some modifying evidential effects, these only resulted in low relevance in the long term, which could suggest a hierarchical structure of the effects identified, which sees the *ideological* ones having more power than the *evidential* ones in the long term.

#### ***Social Actor #4: Aung San Suu Kyi***

In the documentary, Aung San Suu Kyi is represented as a travesty and an accomplice to the military horror; she is depicted as a traitor of



the West and a player who cannot be trusted in solving the Rohingya crisis. Although the participant does not give a direct opinion on her in the original data, he believes Simon Reeve was disappointed at her incapacity or unwillingness to act for the Rohingyas: this could suggest an interpretation of the preferred reading for the representation of Aung San Suu Kyi through the *dominant code*. Moreover, the participant also argues that “the Burmese” are not doing enough to develop infrastructures to support tourism and foreign investments, which could be seen as partly attributable to her since, at the time of the documentary and of the first interview, she was the democratically elected prime minister of the country. In terms of effects in the immediate post-viewing of the documentary, then, the analysis showed *improving evidential effects* (IEE) with regards to the representation of Aung San Suu Kyi’s role in the Rohingya crisis and, possibly, an *implicit effect* (IE) in challenging the participant’s existing opinion that people were more liberated and generally better off with her in power.

The I2 data showed no relevance at all in the unprompted part of the interview, where neither Aung San Suu Kyi, nor her government are mentioned. His prompted answer, on the other hand, hints at a change in his cognitive environment between what he thought about her initially and what he thought about her at a later time. It is not clear, however, if the ‘later time’ was already before watching the programme or after watching it:

“Well, with her is just frustration... well, anger at her and the perceived lack of action she’s taken to prevent this. In fact, it’s almost... she’s not condoning it but she’s not condemning it either. She’s letting it happen. And especially **what you know of her before**, as like a liberator, democratically elected. **I thought** she was like the anti-junta, anti-militia. **I thought** she’d be taking a step to make this a global issue and look after them. Obviously, she cares about the people of her country, but it seems to be limited to the ethnic Burmese. So, that’s annoying, isn’t it? Because it’s just a country where people think ‘look after your own’, that sort of mindset. So, for her, I guess disappointment as well, **from what I’d read about her before, from what I understood about her before**. And then understanding that [inaudible] reaction throughout this crisis, I guess one of disappointment.” (I2, lines 127–136)

The longitudinal data for the relevance of the representation of Aung San Suu Kyi seems to align with the patterns highlighted so far, as lack of *modifying* effects resulted in her representation not to be deemed as relevant in the long term. This, however, does not mean that the representation of this social actor went unnoticed altogether; rather, it might have matched

information and opinions that were to a large extent already existing in the cognitive environment of the participant and thus not treated as highly relevant.

***Social Actor #5: the international community***

The documentary portrays the international community, predominantly in the form of the United Nations and of UNICEF, as neutral, expert and humanitarian. The semiotic modes operate to instil trust in them as the only political player that is already doing charitable actions to alleviate the sufferings of the Rohingya and that would guarantee freedom in Myanmar. The participant did not comment at all about this in either the original data, or in the unprompted part of the I2 data. When prompted in the longitudinal interview, however, he commented:

“I couldn’t believe the willingness, you know to brush it under the carpet, the fact that until that time no one really had an awareness or none of the governments shared their knowledge of the awareness and it’s been down to charities really to... I don’t, I don’t know this factually, but charities to raise the money to support them, I’ve not heard of our government like committing so much to help the people of this crisis like they do with other, I guess, humanitarian causes, because I think it is a humanitarian issue, a massive scale. **But then it’s not... it’s not one of surprise.** A lot of the other people’s behaviours and actions throughout that documentary, I’m surprised by. **But knowing what I know** through, I guess, other media outlets and just through life experience that it’s always the way, if it’s not on their doorstep, they’re not gonna prioritize it at all.” (lines 183–193)

Here the participant seems to be making a distinction between foreign (to Myanmar) governments and charities. Interestingly, the former were not really mentioned in the documentary, whereas the United Nations, which is quoted in the programme on more than one occasion, is not mentioned by the participant. When it comes to the charities, the participant seems to align his views with those in the documentary, despite the lack of ‘factual evidence’ that he admits. Moreover, the language highlighted in the quote above suggests representations of the international community in his existing cognitive environment that match the representations in the programme, hence resulting in no relevance.

***Social Actor #6: MaBaTha***

MaBaTha are a Buddhist monastic order in Myanmar, whose acronym can be translated as ‘The Organization for the Protection of Race and Religion’ (Walton, 2016, p. 144). In the documentary they are portrayed as

part of the ideological justification for the suffering of the Rohingya, as well as shown spreading propaganda and indoctrinating younger monks. In the immediate post-viewing questionnaire and interview, the representation of MaBaTha was the one that caught the participant's attention the most: he was surprised by the existence of this militant faction and observed that maybe not all Buddhists are as peaceful as he thought. In terms of effects, two types were noted: *modifying evidential effects* (MEE) created the new knowledge of the existence of MaBaTha; *modifying ideological effects* (MIE) challenged the existing opinion that all Buddhists are peaceful.

In the I2 data, the relevance for this social actor was coded as 'high' as the participant talked about them in responses to all three of the unprompted questions:

Q1 "He visited some nationalist, ultra-nationalist monks." (I2, lines 14–15)

Q2 "I think I've mentioned previously the monks. **I remember being pretty much shocked** that there were these nationalist... can't remember what they were... militarised monks. But, you know, condoning the hate of the Rohingya people." (I2, lines 25–28)

Q3 "So firstly, well, not firstly, but most I guess. [...] It'll be the monks, **I was just flabbergasted** that they would act in such a way. **I've never known of such a thing** of like Buddhist monks, you know **we all have opinions** on religion and we all know that religions start war or have started wars or they're to blame for the wars. But **I've never known** Buddhism as a faith to be so confrontational." (I2, lines 226–230)

Q3 "But yeah, the biggest shock... **it changed my mind** about those monks. I wasn't expecting that. I've not changed my mind about monks on a whole, but **it's changed my perception** that everything, monk-y may not be, you know, pure." (I2, lines 267–269)

As for previous quotes, an analysis of the language used by the participant reflects the modification of his cognitive environment as a result of interacting with the documentary. Answers to the prompted question show more examples of this:

"Yeah. So, firstly, I would say shock, because I was shocked by them. **I thought contrary, maybe even paradox, to everything that I understand** of Buddhism and the value of every life." (I2, lines 151–153)

"**I was just surprised** that because someone wasn't ethnically Burmese, I was horrified that they would then see them, I don't know, almost as a parasite, or go along with the treatment of those people. Not only go along with it, but preach it. You know, inciting the hate against them and assigning the

loss of their culture due to these people coming into their country. So, yeah, **confusion. Confused by that... this is not how I understand Buddhism, this is not how I understand monks.** Yeah, so shock, confusion. Obviously, anger that they'd be preaching all that guff and hate against some other people who just have a faith like them, based on their faith." (I2, lines 157–164)

As noted for the ARSA militants, the occurrence of clear *modifying effects* both at the level of knowledge and of opinions seems to result in the highest levels of relevance in the participant in the long term. As I will discuss in the conclusion, this aspect could be developed into a hypothesis for future empirical studies of media effects and ideology formation.

## 6. Discussion and conclusion

From the findings of the original case study, it seemed that even watching a single documentary programme resulted in short-term effects (Castaldi, 2021, 2022, 2024). Other studies within the CDS tradition that included a reception element looked at the *recontextualisations* of the participants in artificially created media experiences (Richardson 1994, 2000; Phillips 1999; Chouliaraki 2000, 2003; Benwell 2007; Kosetzi 2007; Kalyango 2011; Edward 2016; Paterson, Coffey-Glover and Peplow 2016), or investigated spontaneous *engagement* of the audience with media texts (e.g. Angouri and Wodak 2014; Demetriou 2019; He 2019). Neither of these types of studies, however, could methodologically address the issue of media effects. In the first case (recontextualisation studies) this was because the texts were chosen by the researcher, and it was difficult to establish the participants' prior interest or whether different interpretations were driven by the text or already existing ideologies. In the second case (engagement studies) this was because the data were not rich enough (being solely based on comments found on websites) to establish the pre-existing ideologies of the commentators or immediate effects on their cognitive environments. The integration of audience research principles within my original case study, i.e. granting participants an *agentive position* within the research setting, and the possibility to explore their cognitive environments before and after the media experience, attempted to address those limitations.

The short-term effects highlighted by the original study, however, could be due to the immediacy of the media interaction, and there was no indication of whether they could turn into long-term effects. The longitudinal follow-up study attempted to address this issue, and the findings discussed

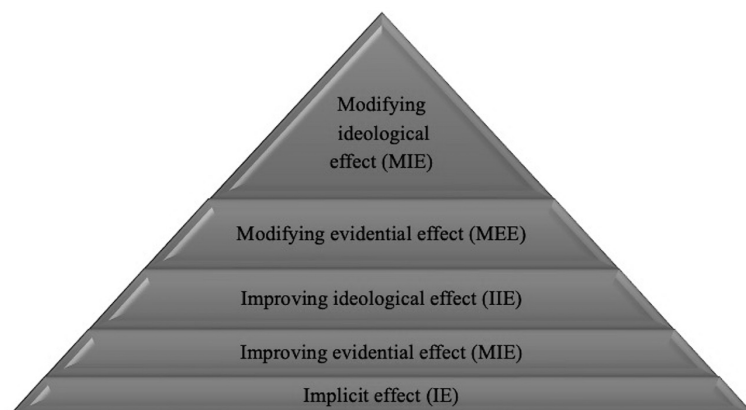
in this paper point to long-term changes to the participant's cognitive environment. This case study, therefore, seems to offer an additional explanation to the one outlined by *cultivation theory* (Gerbner and Gross, 1976), which sees ideology formation as the cumulative exposure to certain discourses in the study of media effects. Assuming the limited results of this case study are confirmed on a larger scale, then ideology formation through the media should be attributed to the co-occurrence of the effects of individual texts and of the same discourses encountered over time in different texts. It has to borne in mind, however, that some of the long-term changes may also be due to the participant's exposure to other media representations that occurred between the first and second data collection points. Although this can represent a limitation for this study (and indeed any longitudinal studies of this kind), the data reported here do seem to refer to specific events that were present in the media representation of the documentary watched by the participant.

Effects caused by individual media interactions seem to occur at both levels of ideological formation, *factual beliefs* and *evaluative beliefs*, and hence a more nuanced categorization of the *contextual effect* from RT is necessary for analytical purposes. The one proposed in this paper differentiates, first of all, between *evidential* and *ideological* effects based on van Dijk's (1998) definition of ideology, secondly between *improving* and *modifying* effects at both levels based on the original formulation of RT, and finally between *explicit* and *implicit* effects based on the viewer's acknowledgement of the *preferred reading* (Hall, 2005) of the programme.

This differentiation also allows us to go back to the text data and point the researcher towards the pragmatic and persuasive (and sometimes manipulative) roles played by the different modes within the multimodal ensemble, which can be defined as *bottom-up processes* (i.e. text-driven). In the specifics of the programme analysed, and consistent with the other two case studies conducted in Castaldi (2022), the linguistic and visual modes seem to attend to both the *evidential* and *ideological* domains. Sonic modes, on the other hand, and music more specifically, seem to attend more to the *ideological* domain. Furthermore, differentiating between the different types of effects facilitates a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between the different effect types and what is required to produce long-lasting effects.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, *modifying effects* seem to carry a higher degree of relevance in the long term than *improving effects* do. However, and perhaps more surprisingly, *modifying ideological effects* seem to be at the top of what can be defined as a *hierarchy of effects*, and seem to persist even

in the absence of a clear recollection of the *evidential effects*. Such a *hierarchy of effects* can be visually represented as in Figure 4. This hierarchy is only a preliminary working hypothesis based on this limited case study, and further research should aim at putting it to the test.



**Figure 4.** Hierarchy of Effects

As with all qualitative research, the strength of its analytical depth needs to be traded for the generalizability of the results obtained. Although the results presented in this paper cannot be generalized to other media or larger audiences, the case study allowed a level of detail that resulted in a new, more nuanced categorization of the *contextual effect* from RT, and in the formulation of research hypotheses based on the suggested *hierarchy of effects*, which can be taken forward in larger scale studies.

#### N O T E S

<sup>1</sup> Elsewhere (Castaldi, 2021) I called the *evidential effects* ‘contextual effects’; however, I have decided to resort to *evidential effects* so as not to create confusion with the original RT terminology and to stress the fact that both my *evidential* and *ideological effects* are parts of RT’s contextual effect. The term *ideological effects* has been used in film studies with the broad Althusserian meaning of ‘mystification’ (Baudry and Williams 1974). Here, however, it specifically refers to a change in one’s cognitive environment at the level of *opinions*.

<sup>2</sup> The three unprompted questions were:

Q1: “What can you remember? Can you give me a summary of the programme and what you remember from it.”

Q2: “What would you say are your more vivid memories?”

Q3: “Which, if any, of your opinions about the things that you saw in there did the programme change or help form?”

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed summary of the multimodal analysis of the social actors, see Castaldi (2021, pp. 63–67).

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