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Analysing the news coverage of 'pet regret' in the UK through the framework of Nonviolent Communication

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Abstract

Drawing on the tenets of Nonviolent Communication (NVC), this paper presents a discourse analysis of UK news coverage regarding the phenomenon commonly referred to as 'pet regret'. This is an informal expression coined by mainstream media to indicate feelings of remorse experienced by individuals who acquired a companion animal during the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequently found themselves questioning their decision, leading some to consider relinquish or leaving without care their pet. This paper will discuss examples from newspapers that used a moralistic framework to depict pet owners by resorting to forms of value judgments woven into rhetorical and syntactic structures. The tone of these judgments reinforces a type of representation grounded on binary thinking, potentially encouraging classifications of people based on reductive notions of right and wrong.

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic underscored the interdependence of various societal concerns, including inequality, economic uncertainty, the significance of human values, and collective emotional and physical shock (Watson et al. 2020). The latitude and unforeseen effects of the pandemic reminded us of the role that professional information dissemination plays in times of health emergency (Olsen et al. 2020). A survey conducted by the Reuters Institute showed that while most people in the UK said that news reports enabled them to better respond to Covid-19, it also found that news media contributed to worsening the crisis (Nielsen, Kalogeropoulos, and Fletcher 2020). This article draws on the Nonviolent Communication (NVC) concept developed by Marshall Rosenberg during the 1960s to show that what can intensify a polarization of attitudes in the news is the deployment of value-laden communication. Values can be defined as judgments of the 'desirability, usefulness, or worth of something within a given culture which is frequently treated as if it were an absolute quality intrinsic to the object' (Chandler 2016). A value judgment is a subjective bias, an evaluative proposition in which

ideas about what stands at the basis of the relations between humans and their environment is communicated. Therefore, the existence of subjective evaluations might easily lead to excluding perspectives that do not conform to the value system or that specific criterion upon which the evaluation is based. A type of communication which is mostly driven by value judgements distances us from human compassion and may feed on appraisals that 'infer wrongness or badness on the part of people who don't act in harmony with our values' (Rosenberg 2015, 15). This article aims to apply the NVC framework to an analysis of media discussions related to animal welfare during the pandemic, with a focus on how they contribute to a discourse directed at blaming, through both implicit and explicit language, pet owners.

'Pet regret' is a compound noun, which is a noun made up by combining two or more individual terms. It describes a sense of remorse that individuals may feel after acquiring a companion animal, which sometimes leads them to reassess their decision. The expression, popularised by mainstream media, gained prominence in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. According to Rosenberg (2015, 15), labelling can be an instance of violent communication because it focuses on 'who is what', limiting people in a world of judgments. Rosenberg (2015,16) explained: 'When we speak this language, we judge others and their behaviour while preoccupying ourselves with who's good, bad, normal, abnormal, responsible, irresponsible, smart, ignorant, etc'. The process of labelling and name-calling is a common occurrence in news, if only because compounds such as 'Pet regret' are memorable slogans that catch the audience's attention, maximising impact in a brief span, and aiding authors in staying within their target word limit. However, the terms tend to carry with themselves stigmatizing connotations as they suggest approximate categorizations of groups of people. This paper will show that the news coverage of the phenomenon 'Pet regret' employed a moralistic framework by resorting to forms of evaluations within its rhetorical and syntactical structures. The tone of these judgments reinforces a form of representation rooted in binary thinking, which might promote a simplistic categorization of individuals based on a value system that does not fully account for their distinctive needs.

The language of conflict in the news

A focus on conflict, as both a thematic category and a representational schema, has historically been a defining feature of the liberal model of journalism. In the Western journalistic industry, it is well known that news stories incorporating elements of conflict are significantly more likely to be published compared to those that merely report the status quo (Phillips 2014). In 2017, Harcup and O'Neill introduced 'conflict' as an independent category in their revised list of news values; the notion of conflict was broadly intended to encompass a wide range of topics including controversies, arguments, splits, strikes, fights, insurrections and warfare (Harcup and O'Neill 2017). Conflict, like any other news subject, in order to attract the attention of the audience, needs to be sustained by a correspondent linguistic apparatus. A traditional constructionist view holds that journalism represents the world, creating antithetic categories, such as 'normal' versus 'deviant', or 'militant' versus 'moderate', which are then deployed to shape public policies of inclusion and exclusion (McNair 2009). Polarity is a distinctive feature of what we call values because they present themselves through their positive side and corresponding negative one (Frondizi 1963). They are so successful in popular narratives because:

The existence of a hierarchical order is a perennial stimulus to creative action and moral elevation. The creative and lofty sense of life is based, fundamentally, on the affirmation of positive value, as opposed to the negative, of superior value as opposed to the inferior (Frondizi 1963, 10).

See for instance the cross-national study by García-Perdomo, Harlow, and Brown (2022) that showed how Columbian media reported the country's peace process by adopting a two-party conflict narrative scheme, using the 'good' and 'bad' labels, and adopting disparaging language. Teo (2000) pointed at over-lexicalisation, a phenomenon whereby an idea is distorted by unnecessary repetitions, as one of the linguistic strategies used by Australian newspapers to conceptualize in a polarised way the white majority versus the ethnic minority. Gonçalves (2023) looked at British and Brazilian newspapers to demonstrate how the use of objectifying metaphors to describe immigration fosters hierarchization, marginalization, and 'othering', hence contributing to hate speech.

Scholars have advocated a more balanced portrayal of people and facts; and the use of less military-connoted language and more inclusive reporting, which could help destigmatize people whose opinion is under or mis-represented (Ischebeck, et al. 2021; Noorzai and Hale 2021). As Armoudian and Milne (2021) argued, there is a mutual relationship between blame and violence: judgmentally targeting a certain group for a negative outcome can create resentment towards the group, producing even more hostility. By looking at the media coverage of Covid-19 through the model of peace journalism, Ersoy and Dambo (2021) highlighted the presence of a conflict-oriented approach in the news in which there was a focus on sensationalism characterised by the use of blame-driven language and the 'us versus them' binary, confirming that much of the Covid-19 news carried a violent linguistic and thematic register. Gorsevski (2004, 173), in *Peaceful Persuasion*, explored the relationship between peace-making and nonviolent rhetoric, calling attention to 'the hidden social texts of inequalities buried in language' where, as the book's editor explained, rhetoric is used to conceal violence by disguising it through a vocabulary of divisions and reverence.

Nonviolent Communication (NVC)

Nonviolent communication, also known as compassionate communication, is a progressive methodological approach that uses techniques of communication to de-escalate disagreements and increase empathy in situations of human conflict. It was developed by American psychologist Marshall Rosenberg in the 1960s to promote empathy, as a peace-making tool, and to improve personal relationships. Rosenberg (2015) explained that the route to connection in communication goes through four steps. These are categorised as 1. observations (a preliminary objective assessment of a situation), 2. feelings (mental and bodily sensations shaping our cognitive abilities), 3. needs (necessities originating from personal values), and 4. requests (wishes expressed with a positive language), as opposed to well-established patterns of 'defending, withdrawing, or attacking' (Rosenberg 2015, 3). As Arieli and Armaly (2022) clarified:

The aim of the progressive four-step method is not to make one side do what the other side wants them to do. Rather, its aim is for both sides to

relinquish the negative image each holds of the other party, and to become open to hearing – and becoming compassionate about – the other party's needs (2).

The essential principle of this model is that 'everyone's needs matter'. Rosenberg (2015) uses this example: a sentence like 'I want you to stop drinking' would be a negatively formulated request because it focuses on what the speaker doesn't want. In order to create a positive connection with the other person, a less violent way to express the request would be 'I want you to tell me what needs of yours are met by drinking, and to discuss with me other ways of meeting those needs' (89).

This paper focuses on the first aspect that led to the development of the NVC model, that is, how violent communication takes shape. Rosenberg (2015, 15-16) identified specific forms of communication that 'alienates us from our natural state of compassion'. These include moralistic judgments 'that imply wrongness or badness on the part of people who don't act in harmony with our values'; comparisons, whereby people compare their own achievements with others; the denial of responsibilities, when we use a language that 'obscures awareness of personal responsibility'; and demands, when we threaten our interlocutors with guilt or castigation if they fail to align with our expectations (Rosenberg 2015, 15-24).

Rosenberg has been often criticised for producing a self-help model that, according to Gorsevski (2004), overemphasises the responsibility of the individual whilst leaving in obscurity the structural problems generating violence. In fact, the framework may not function optimally if participants don't have a comparable level of literacy and can engage in effective oral communication. Another problem in the applications of Rosenberg's NVC is the definition of 'observations'. For Rosenberg, an observation should bear no judgement or evaluation, it should state things as they are. However, according to the theory of intersubjectivity by philosopher Brummett (1976), there is no objective reality and observations cannot be value-free. For Brummett (1976), between an observation made and the reality observed there is a relationship of mutual influence that makes neutrality unattainable. Elaborating on Brummett, Jasinki (2001, 221) explains that reality is shaped or formed through the discussions and communication that take place within a community; hence 'truth,

knowledge, and reality are all a matter of communal consensus' whereby rhetoric has the function of soliciting communal consensus. Despite these potential shortcomings, Rosenberg's albeit simplistic categorizations of the pillars of communication may give us useful insights when applied to the professional use of communication, especially when backed up by rhetorical theory. The application of nonviolence to rhetoric demonstrates that the way we create and maintain our perception of the world, through language and culture, can minimise aggression, provided that we pay attention to our linguistic formulations (Gorsevski 1999). Moreover, as Rosenberg (2015) himself suggested, the four-step model does not have to be adopted as a rigid formula. In fact, its potential rests on its flexible nature and on the focus on the human and individual dimension of communication.

Non-human animals in media discourses

Animal-related stories constitute a significant portion of soft news today because they can easily arouse feelings, provide entertainment, and serve as an uplifting counterbalance to the emotional impact of hard news (Molloy 2011). Yet, news about non-human animals can also be divisive because it is likely to shed light on a variety of controversial deep-rooted societal issues pertaining to agriculture, conservation, testing, trade, climate change, hunting, welfare, and cruelty, just to name a few. Human responses to animals and animality can be erratic, contradictory, and ambivalent, as the popular press has often shown (Baker 2001); the human attitude is torn between *dominance and affection*, to quote a famous work by humanistic geographer Yi-Fu Tuan (1984), in which he contends that domestication implies domination (Kalof and Fitzgerald 2007). Human dispositions to animals have an intrinsically antithetic nature that can be understood in a dialectic of attraction and repulsion, control and fondness (Griffiths, Poulter, and Sibley 2000). This contrast is poetically captured by the lead of a news article in the *Independent* parodying the famous opening lines of Dickens' *A Tale of two Cities* (1859): 'It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness...' which in the news article became 'They were the best of felines, they were the worst of felines; they brought us light and they brought us darkness; pros and... prolapses' (Gore 2023).

Drawing on constructionist theory, Herda-Rapp and Goedeke (2005) looked at the various categories of discourse related to human-wildlife issues, identifying a number of conflicting symbolic interpretations of nature, which are generated within social groups. In general, exploring our relationships with animals can provide insightful frameworks for examining power dynamics among humans (Guenther 2020). Ehrlich (2016) demonstrated how exploring human-animal relations in the news, through the lenses of cultural journalism history, produces stimulating views into the trajectory of journalism's past and future directions. In his study on the news coverage of cats in the *New York Times*, Ehrlich identified six recurring modes of cat depiction including commodity, hero, villain, victim, women's best friend, and urban symbol. According to Ehrlich (2016), media controversies surrounding issues, such as cat relinquishment, can become the focal point of public policy debates featuring well-defined opposing viewpoints. In fact, the animal as a narrative subject allows for creative flexibility since its representation can be easily shaped to create a character in dramas, conflicts, and romances (Molloy 2011).

A recent study by Hooper, Aiello, and Hill (2022) on the UK media coverage of animals, during the Covid-19 pandemic, found that British newspapers deployed animals in a variety of ways to advance their editorial agenda and meet the interests of their target readership. The authors, by using keyword-based searches within the LexisNexis digital archive, found that:

The tabloids used animals for the promotion of bigotry, xenophobia, and racism. In comparison, the *Guardian* held a pro-environmental stance by framing the zoonotic disease as a platform to challenge the human–animal dichotomy and advocate for environmental, human, and animal equality. Domestic companion animals received the greatest positive media coverage across the newspapers, particularly in relation to the value of the human–animal bond for human health during the lockdown (237).

The phenomenon of 'Pet Regret' in the UK

The Covid-19 pandemic brought to the forefront the benefits of human-animal interactions, which have also been demonstrated to aid in addressing various mental

and physical issues (Compitus 2020; DeMello 2021). A report generated within the UK Campaign to End Loneliness highlighted the advantages of bringing in a companion animal to nurture social connections in the neighbourhood and beyond (Jopling 2020). In 2022, the National Office of Animal Health reported that three in ten cat or dog owners acquired a new domesticated animal during the Covid-19 pandemic in the UK. However, while during the pandemic the number of people buying companion animals soared, as restrictions on mobility eased, companion animals were re-sold, handed on to shelters, or left on the streets (Pet Abandonment 2023). According to the Animal Kindness Index (2023), the relinquishment of animals in the UK grew by 11% in 2023 with increased financial struggles being a contributing factor to the way that people behave towards their companion animal. The Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA) reported that the number of animals being let go increased by 17%, between 2020 and 2021, and by 24% in 2022, with dogs being the most relinquished animal. The RSPCA suggested that the sudden rise in pet ownership during the pandemic together with the cost-of-living crisis burdened people's finances leading to more animals being left (More than 100, 2022).

The phenomenon of 'Pet Regret' gained widespread media attention in March 2022 when, during a segment of the popular British daytime television programme 'This Morning', veterinary surgeon, and also TV personality, Scott Miller, explained how individuals were experiencing 'regret' over acquiring animals during the pandemic. This remorse led some to relinquish pets due to the unforeseen challenges and responsibilities of ownership that were underestimated during the lockdown. The story was extensively covered by the *Daily Mail* (Chiorando 2022) which explained how social media users had stirred up a discussion online by expressing explicit condemnatory words against 'pet regretters': "Your a d***** if you took a pet in during lockdown and took it back,"; 'It's disgusting how people see animals as disposable items'; 'Anyone that got a pet during lockdown and got rid [of it] should be banned from having pets' (Chiorando 2022).

Regret is generally understood as an emotion causing grief, distress or disappointment. Dent's *Emotional Dictionary* (2022) defines regret as 'remorse or repentance that comes from reflection upon past events and actions, when we did it our way' (271). Landman (1993) calls it 'a more or less cognitive and emotional state

of feeling sorry for misfortunes, limitations, losses, transgressions, shortcomings, or mistakes' (36). Gilovich and Medvec (1995) distinguished two types of regrets: those that originate from moral infringements, which are likely to be connoted by blame and ignominy, and those that stem from a failed attempt at self-actualization, which are hence characterised by grief and longing.

The UK provides a rich historical and cultural context for a case study on the utilization of value-laden communication in the news coverage of human-non-human animal relationships. This is due to the country's unique attributes, which involve longstanding discussions about animal welfare and the significant attention the topic gathers in the news. Britain was the first country in the world to establish an animal welfare charity in 1824, the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA). Ancient artworks and illustrations offer evidence that between the 18th and 19th centuries, companion animals like cats, dogs, and rabbits gained fresh moral significance, solidifying their role as integral members of British domestic life (Hamlett and Strange 2023). The flourishing pet economy, including pet food, medications, goods, and services, played a role in shaping contemporary British lifestyles, analogous to the transformative influence of the industrial, agricultural, and urban revolutions (Hamlett and Strange 2023).

This study

The application of Rosenberg's NVC to journalism so far focused especially on media training (Friesem and Friesem 2021; Kundu, 2021). Kundu (2021, 154) proposed the integration of nonviolent communication in media literacy didactics to train students to produce nonviolent media messages, hence challenging a journalistic culture made up of violent narratives, through the pedagogical promotion of 'plurality and dialogue'. NVC has been academically applied in several disciplines including corporate communication (Dhir 2006); peace research (Martin and Varney, 2003; Gorsevski 2004); psychotherapy (Holmström 2023); political communication (Hsiao and Scott 2021); and media activism (Lizarazo et al. 2023; Scalmer 2018). However, little attention has been paid to it within a rhetorical analytical approach to news discourse, even though the use of violence and therefore, its opposite, nonviolence, has been extensively debated in the study of news media production, especially within the peace and war spectrum. This work builds on the existent

literature with the aim of presenting a critical reflection on implicit and explicit behaviour judgements embedded in the news coverage of stories framed under the compound noun 'pet regret'.

This research aims to address the following research questions:

- 1) In what ways does the news coverage of 'pet regret' in the UK convey value judgements?
- 2) What rhetorical devices are deployed in the news coverage of 'pet regret' in the UK to communicate value judgements?

Methods

The data for this article were collected by using a keyword-based search with the digital news database LexisNexis, to filter the compound noun 'pet regret', in both hyphenated and non-hyphenated forms, within UK newspapers spanning from March 2020 to May 2023. The timeline's endpoints correspond to the month when the first Covid-19-related lockdown was announced in the UK and to the World Health Organization (WHO) declaration marking the end of Covid-19 as a global health emergency. LexisNexis is a public digital research database, usually available through institutions and libraries. It is updated daily providing full text access to a range of sources, including all UK national, regional, and local newspapers. The keyword-based search led to the retrieval of both news reports and commentaries. The former, as per journalistic convention, focused on accounts of recent events communicated through a seemingly factual style, including direct and indirect quotes, and observations carried in the third person. Commentaries were told in first person with the aim of sharing personal opinions and providing insights into a news topic. Typically, words and phrases chosen in opinion articles express values and norms to formulate value judgments (Van Dijk 1998). However, an undue emphasis on moralizing language that portrays someone unfavourably rests upon personal editorial choices.

As Williams (1983) explained, developing keywords as a research tool is a form of socio-cultural inquiry into word usage that enables us to uncover implicit meanings

and their role in discourse formation. 'Pet regret' was chosen as a search tool to explore value laden communication in the news because it inherently embodies a form of value judgement, both morphologically and semantically. 'Pet regret' is a compound noun formed by combining two words, the word 'pet', signifying companion animal, and the word 'regret', signifying a negative emotion. 'Pet regret' is a catchy slogan, also known in rhetorical theory as condensation symbols. A condensation symbol is 'a name, word, phrase, or maxim which stirs vivid impressions involving the listener's most basic values' (Graber 1976, 289). McGee (1980) calls them 'ideographs' because they can be used as both a rhetorical device and a research method to detect underlying systems of ideas and ideals, and the political and social consciousness of composite groups of people (Stassen-Ferrara 2017).

Rosenberg (2015) grouped ways of communication that block compassion broadly under four categories: moralistic judgments; making comparisons; denial of responsibility; and demands. In order to unearth and understand the mechanisms behind violent communication, the articles retrieved were analysed by focusing on rhetorical effects and stylistic devices drawing on rhetorical studies including Jasinski (2001) and Wales (2011), which provided a corollary of the most common figures of speech and rhetorical devices used in contemporary discourse. Below, is a working definition of the linguistic aspects identified in the texts that carried a negative connotation, whereby 'negative' means sentences and words expressing disapproval, antagonism, criticism, or unfavourable sentiments, and also something devoid of 'distinctively positive attributes' ('negative' adj. *OED*).

- Modality: syntactic and lexical choices qualifying probabilities. Includes the use of modal auxiliaries, like 'could'; 'will'; 'can' and others, which are usually deployed to indicate propositions expressing possibilities and obligations (Wales 2011).
- Lexical fields: groupings of words related to a particular subject or domain, also known as semantic fields (McArthur, Lam-McArthur, and Fontaine 2018).

- Rhetorical devices: linguistic techniques including figures of speech and language patterns used to achieve specific expressive and stylistic effects, often in support of arguments.

Findings and Discussion

A search for the compound name 'pet regret' within the digital archive LexisNexis, spanning from March 1, 2020 to May 31, 2023, returned 18 unique results, after eliminating two duplicate articles. The results comprise eleven news reports and seven commentaries: among the broadsheets, the *Guardian* featured two news reports and two commentaries; the *Independent* one news report and one commentary; the *Observer* one news report; and the *Telegraph* three commentaries. Within the tabloids, the *Daily Star*; the *Express*; the *Daily Mail*; the *People*; and the *Sun* each contributed one article. The regional newspapers included the *Middlesbrough Evening Gazette* and the *Yorkshire Evening Post*, each contributing one article.

The first part of the findings and discussion section of this research paper initiates the analysis and discussion by using headlines as its point of departure. The second part takes extracts from the main body of the article as a discussion catalyst.

Although the two sections work together to conventionally present news reports and commentaries, linguistically they are different media texts. While in the headline the communicative purpose must be summarily condensed in just one sentence, the main body allows the author to provide information, incorporating a range of direct and indirect quotes, context, background, and descriptive elements. The two key forms of value judgments identified included moralistic judgments and demands, as defined by Rosenberg earlier. These were conveyed through the use of modal verbs; the concentration of words within similar lexical domains; and the use of rhetorical devices.

Evaluations in the headlines

A headline can function as the primary means to attract the interest of a potential reader, and the inclusion of concise and emotionally resonant words is often a

hallmark of its effectiveness (Kuiken et al. 2017). It follows that the language and style of headlines must be optimised for impact in order to captivate the reader's attention. Therefore, any evaluations made in the headline are more likely to leave a lasting impression on the reader, especially if the article, with its explanations and clarifications, goes unread in its entirety. Studies have repeatedly demonstrated that this is often the case as most people will carry on reading only if the headline entices them (Hyatt 2012; Gabielkov et al. 2016).

The three examples that follow, one of which is from a news report and the others from commentaries, show how the use of modal verbs such as 'may', 'could', 'might' shape attitudes and perspectives concerning the ideas they express, leaning towards the prediction of adverse outcomes.

'One million dogs could be homeless during festive season' (Gibbons 2020)

'It may soon be raining unwanted cats and dogs as pet regret follows the end of Lockdown' (Shilling 2021)

'Think twice about buying your children a pet for Christmas - you might regret it like I do' (Chapman 2021)

The deployment of the modal verbs 'could', 'may', and 'might' to suggest a possible negative scenario can be seen as a form of threatening communication. It uses a language that tries to exercise influence by invoking what can be collectively seen as an unwanted occurrence. This type of sentence is also rhetorically known as an argument *ad baculum*. As Jasinski (2001) noted, these phrases have an ambiguous nature because it is not clear whether they constitute a threat, or they are to be interpreted as cautionary warnings. This goes against one of the tenets of Nonviolent Communication, which is clarity stemming from factual observations. As Wales (2011, 272) explained, 'Modality is essentially a subjective and qualifying process: judging the truth of propositions in terms of degrees of possibility, probability or certainty [...]'. However, the uncertainty inherent in this situation could trigger a reaction of interest, not only due to the dramatic outcome that is being projected, but also because it creates an expectation of finding the resolution to the ambiguity in

the article itself. This aligns with the primary purpose of headlines, which is to seize the reader's attention. Of the three, the last one, 'Think twice', reveals a more pronounced moral undertone. This is evident in the imperative use of the idiomatic expression 'Think twice', which is reinforced by the pause introduced by the dash. This pause emphasises the message 'you might regret it like I do'. In the commentary Kate Chapman, a freelance journalist for the *Telegraph*, elaborates on the challenges she encountered with her newly acquired guinea pigs. The use of anecdotal evidence, as signalled in the ending words of the headline 'like I do', might serve two rhetorical purposes. On the one hand, while subjective, the personal experience bolsters the argument presented as a warning: that failing to carefully consider your choices when selecting Christmas presents may lead to eventual disappointment. On the other, the appeal to anecdotal evidence softens the peremptory tone of the piece, putatively aligning the author with the readers. Nonetheless, the imperative modality 'just be' accompanied by a warning 'careful' reappears in the last sentence of the article, where the author reminds readers, 'All I can say is, just be careful what you buy this Christmas'. This closing sentence is echoed in the tone of the title of another commentary:

'Creature comforts require a little more consideration' (Shilling 2021).

In both cases the authors seem to be simply suggesting what sounds rather common-sense but is often neglected by humans, that is, pay attention to choices made and enlist possible implications. Rather than requests, the fourth component of NVC, that is 'what we would like to request of each other to enrich each of our lives' (Rosenberg 2015, 85), these sound more like demands permeated by a moralistic tone.

'A little more consideration' is a form of understatement, another symptom of value-laden communication in which the importance of what is being said is euphemistically downplayed. Once again, the author of the piece *de facto* assumes a role of dictating values but alleviates the impact of her wording using anecdotal evidence and figurative language. The closure of the commentary again encapsulates the implicit value directive of the message:

Years ago, I found an abandoned tortoiseshell kitten in a remote lane. She was hungry, vermin-infested and had clearly once been a pet, as she was desperate for human company. This is not how I would like to meet my next cat - but I'm keeping a close eye on the hedgerows just in case (Shilling 2020).

An argument from anecdote is considered an informal logical fallacy in that a personal experience is brought forward as proof. As Porta (2014) observed, this device is often used 'to raise a warning or danger'. Moreover, according to Rosenberg (2015), storytelling is a mode of communication that can hinder empathy because it directs attention to a single interlocutor only and does not invite dialogue, as a personal experience can hardly be questioned.

Below is the example of a headline trying to elicit the curiosity of readers by promising to explain what led people to let go of a companion animal acquired during the pandemic.

'Yappy dogs, moody cats... why lockdown owners are full of 'pet regret'
(Ferguson 2021)

The presence of the interrogative adverb 'why' identifies this headline as a forward-reference. Forward-referring headlines are clauses that contain a reference to forthcoming discourse (Blom and Hansen 2015). The condensation of two compound names, connected figuratively through the complement 'full of ...' contributes to the objectification regarding 'pet owners' because it eliminates the concept of individual human distinctive characteristics. Compound nouns imply generalizations regarding how people experience an emotion, ultimately 'othering' within the category 'regretful lockdown owners'. Other examples of compound nouns featuring in the headlines include: 'pet rescuer's remorse' (Gore 2023); 'pandemic pet' (Ferguson 2022); 'creature comfort' (2021); 'lockdown bunnies' (the *Sun* 2021); and 'lockdown animal' (Javed 2021). Compounding is a creative stylistic choice because by combining two lexical units a new one is made. It is an efficient device for journalists because compounding can suggest vivid images and unexpected relationships whilst maintaining conciseness and semantic clarity. The following example shows how the

use of temporal adverbs placed in parallel clauses, with its emphasis on time, aids in adding a caustic tone to the headline:

‘Pet owners are already regretting buying lockdown animals - just as the shelters predicted’ (Javed 2021)

‘Already’ is a time indicator that stresses not only the surprise, as the regret surfaced earlier than anticipated, but also a sense of continuity with the ongoing news coverage of the topic. The predictions turned out to be accurate; in fact, by the time that article was published, ‘pet regret’ in connection to the lockdown had already appeared four times in four different newspapers. The prepositional phrase ‘just as the shelter predicted’ accentuates the authority of the shelter. That is an ‘appeal to authority’ because it suggests that shelters had foresight. This imbalance in favour of shelters can be problematic, as Guenther illustrated in *The Lives and Deaths of Shelter Animals* (2020):

The discourse of irresponsible owners obscures the complex reasons why animals end up in shelters in favor of an individualistic narrative that blames these so-called irresponsible owners for their lack of personal responsibility to their companion animals (66).

The news discourse that blames pet owners is evident in this tabloid headline:

‘The rise of pet regret: People who got animals to cope with loneliness and stress lockdown and are now giving them up after ‘reality kicked in’ are branded ‘selfish’ and ‘disgusting’ (Chiorando 2022).

The metaphorical use of ‘rise’ depicts ‘pet regret’ as something that is growing, suggesting a sense of emergency and anticipation. The juxtaposition between the first and second parts of the sentence connected through the perspective setting adverb ‘now’ (Altshuler 2009 and Kamp and Reyle 1993) foregrounds the utilitarian nature of the gesture, thereby reinforcing the derogatory adjectives associated with it. The *Daily Mail* is not directly targeting pet owners but the syntactic construction of the sentence, together with the use of direct quotes, reinforces the message of

animosity towards pet owners. Although for most of the article, the use of offensive language is attributed to external unnamed sources, the news reporter amplifies the communication with complementary value-laden terminology; see for instance the sentence below taken from within the main body of the article:

'Furious viewers took to Twitter, branding people who ditch pets as 'selfish'
(Chiorando 2022)

The adjective 'furious' sets a strong emotional tone, portraying viewers as extremely angry and upset about people who acquired companion animals during lockdown and then realised that they could no longer keep them. 'Branding' and 'ditch' are figurative verbs that strengthen the label 'selfish' attached to pet owners. 'Branding', in particular, symbolizes the act of marking someone with infamy, hence stigmatizing the category the viewers of the TV show are referring to. The moral judgment continues in the article through the words of celebrity vet Dr Scott:

"Because it's a little bit short sighted, isn't it?," he said. 'Did we all think lockdown was going to never end? Maybe some people.'" (Chiorando 2022)

The rhetorical question tries to engage the imaginary interlocutor making a query that expects no answers. In this case it is used to make an assertion, hence guiding the audience towards a putatively mutually agreed response, through an indirect speech act. To be precise, the example above is a form of 'rogatio', which, as Fahnestock (2011, 299) explains, is a question that the speaker asks and then answers himself in order to streamline the argument construction by arranging it in subtopics, producing the effect of an 'emotional rant'. The *Mail's* article ends:

'Anyone that got a pet during lockdown and got rid should be banned from having pets' (Chiorando 2022).

Once more, the judgment is not expressed directly by the article's author, but its position at the end of the article bolsters its effect, leaving a lasting impression on readers.

Other examples of rogatio, in other words, of rhetorical questions that are answered within the body of the articles by the writers themselves, can be found in four more examples, as follows:

‘Let’s leave the city! Let’s get a dog! Let’s get a divorce!’ Do we regret our pandemic life changes? (Williams 2022)

‘Pandemic pets: how do owners cope as costs bound ahead?’ (Ferguson 2022)

‘How much does it cost to have a pet? The most expensive breeds of dog and how much money vet bills are in the UK (Whistance 2021)

‘What did I learn from my lovely pet rabbit? The truth about mortality’ (Williams 2021)

In a way analogous to the example discussed earlier, the extracts just listed above are forward-reference headlines. The articles under these titles are meant to provide information to address the questions posed but also to prompt a reflection in contemplation of choices made during the lockdowns, and possibly on lessons learnt when ethical principles are at stake.

Evaluations in the main body of the articles

The first tenet of NVC is separating observation from evaluation (Rosenberg 2015). For Rosenberg, an observation is what is happening, what can be noticed, what can be observed. However, as explained in the literature review, Brummett contended that observations can never be truly objective as they constitute a form of engagement with reality (1976). While the articles on ‘pet regret’ largely comprehended statistics, data, and verifiable facts, some instances blur the lines between observation and evaluation. For example, the set of five phrases listed below broadly comply with Rosenberg’s perspective on non-judgment.

‘A third of them did not have time to look after their pet and a fifth turned out to be allergic’ (*Pup paws* 2020).

'Twice as many rabbit owners have called on the charity for advice and assistance this year, compared with last year' (Ferguson 2021).

'The average cost of owning a cat or dog is now estimated to be £1,340 a year, or up to £17,420 over the lifetime of said pet' (Whistance 2021).

'Rabbits defecate 200 to 300 times a day' (Ferguson 2021).

'Many puppy classes were cancelled during lockdown' (Ferguson 2021).

The sentences above are relevant to the argument inherent in 'pet regret' because they provide supporting evidence for the rationale behind what the press has portrayed as a growing trend. However, these statements were accompanied by additional observations and quotes incorporating elements of judgment, blending factual information with evaluations, as in the following case:

'Animal behaviourists and charities are warning of a surge in lockdown pet regret as owners struggle to cope with pets bought during the last year' (Ferguson 2021)

This is the lead of a *Guardian* feature explaining frequent problems encountered by pet owners, hence suggesting what is likely to lead to a change of mind, after bringing a companion animal into one's home. In order to establish credibility, the sentence begins with an appeal to authorities associated with animal welfare. The negatively connoted words 'regret' and 'struggle' add emotional weight to the message. Portraying 'pet owners' as struggling could elicit empathy, but what makes this sentence truly evaluative is the use of the construct 'warning of a surge'. The verb carries a negative connotation and suggests impending danger while 'surge' creates a visual image of a rising trend. As the article explains further on, animal welfare authorities are making an assessment to voice their concerns over the increase in inexperienced pet owners who are having difficulty managing their companion animal's behaviour. A warning is a designation that alerts the reader that something destabilizing could happen, thereby creating an ominous atmosphere for

the reader. The trope of the 'warning authority' is also found in a news article published in the *Express*:

'The Dogs Trust found more than one in four owners said their pet had developed at least one new problem since the virus's outbreak. The charity warned of an impending behaviour crisis' (Spyro 2020).

Another word used in the articles that is closely related to the conceptual domain of 'warning' is 'fear'. 'Warning' and 'fear' share the same lexical domain, which revolves around the anticipation of potential threats or dangers, as in the examples below.

"Unfortunately, we feared that some people who took pets on during lockdown did so without doing enough research and realising the commitment and responsibility involved in caring for a pet, or thinking about what would happen post-lockdown," the spokesperson added' (Javed 2021).

'We fear this could worsen as people return to the office, or struggle with the increasing costs of living' (Ferguson 2022).

And more explicitly in this one:

'An alarming 16 per cent of dog owners admitted their purchase was an impulse decision and 11 per cent stated that lockdown was the sole reason why they welcomed a dog into their family' (Gibbons 2020).

The employment of the verb 'admit' in the sentence above underscores the assignment of responsibility for an action, particularly in the context of a crime, as defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* (admit, v.). The same verb is used below:

'Meanwhile the poll, by pet insurance provider Protectivity, found Londoners experienced the most regret, with 10 per cent admitting to second thoughts about their purchase compared with six per cent on average' (Spyro 2020).

‘Admit’ implies that the person making the admission is inviting blame and acknowledging a moral responsibility. The sentences below provide information but the word choices like ‘even admit’; ‘sense of guilt’; and ‘regret’ impart a tone of reprimand and position the writer as superior to the subject.

‘And 9% of those who purchased a cat or dog even admit they have pet regret’ (Lamb 2022).

‘Almost a third of dog owners have admitted they regret purchasing their pet, with one in 10 going as far as considering putting their dog up for adoption’ (Gibbons 2020).

The sentences below illustrate how antithetic constructions can be used to frame the condition of making choices that result in shortcomings or acting according to expectations that turn out to be unmet.

‘Expectations of these pandemic pets were high: many new owners said that they had "helped with their mental health issues". But as the responsibility of ownership became more onerous, many newly acquired pets proved to be a cause of stress, rather than a panacea’ (Shilling 2021).

The antithesis highlights the contrast between ‘helped with their mental issues’ and ‘a cause of stress’, underlining the disparity between hope and actual occurrence, between positive prospect and subsequent negative outcome. A spokesperson from an animal charity quoted in the *Guardian* replicated the antithesis by juxtaposing ‘wonderful’ with ‘difficult’:

“‘They expect pets are going to come into their lives and it will be wonderful and they’ll all live happily ever after. But the reality is it can be difficult’” (Ferguson 2021)

The theme of having to face the facts of life after having been supposedly in denial is embodied by clauses featuring the cognate terms ‘reality’; ‘really’ and ‘realisation’.

'are now giving them up after 'reality kicked in' [...] 'then gave them up once the reality of the responsibility dawned on them' [...] and the 'the reality set in' (Chiorando 2022)

'Forbes Advisor has revealed how much it really costs to own a pet after the lockdown puppy boom saw more adopting dogs [...] It seems clear that many people bought a pandemic pet without fully thinking-through the implications, and some have realised they can no longer keep it, [...]' (Whistance 2021).

This insistence on the antithetic bifurcation between facts and reality creates an imbalance in favour of logic reasoning, implicitly casting a negative light on characteristics of human cognition, including the ability to imagine and visualise a reality, as well as to engage in abstract reflections about it.

Conclusion

The judgmental nature of much of contemporary journalism prevents us from connecting to the news in a way that makes it possible for our natural compassion to thrive, thus enhancing an empathic understanding of people and facts. Examining how long-established news writing practices shape collective consensus regarding attribution of blame is important to understand how media disseminates both literal and symbolic expressions that fuel aversion. Taking as a departure point Rosenberg's work on Nonviolent Communication, this research sought to discuss examples of newspaper articles framed under the expression 'pet regret', signifying the state of remorse or second thoughts experienced by individuals after acquiring a companion animal. This paper showed how media discussions about animal welfare during the pandemic can foster a discourse directed at blaming, through both implicit and explicit language, individuals who need to relinquish their companion animals. The examples analysed serve as examples of the use of moralistic judgments that, by implying a right versus wrong dichotomy, feed a mode of communication that drives us away from a sense of compassion, a quality inherent to being a human (Rosenberg 2015).

A rhetorical analysis of the articles enabled the identification of three main ways through which negative evaluations were embedded in the text. The first was

modality: the authors of the texts deployed modal verbs such as ‘may’, ‘could’, and ‘might’ to impart a sense of looming threat to their propositions, e.g. ‘you might regret it’. The second was the use of lexical domains where the insistence on emotional terms substantiated an effect of alert and preoccupation. The use of modal auxiliary verbs coupled with word choice pertaining to an impending danger, such as ‘warning’ and ‘fear’, amplified the effect of the arguments *ad baculum* (appeal to consequences) whilst reinforcing the image of both newspapers and animal charities as the authoritative voice on the subject, hence suggesting a dichotomy of ‘experts’ versus ‘pet owners’. In additions words pertaining to the semantic fields of ‘guilt’, ‘regret’ and ‘culpability’ highlighted the role of the owner as the one responsible for the destiny of their companion animal. The very use of ‘pet regret’ is the first symptom of a judgemental attitude because it suggests ineffectiveness in decision making, compounding two terms to make the message more incisive. The third is the reliance on rhetorical devices. The analysis demonstrated that dichotomic representations took the form of antithetic constructions to contrast expectations with outcomes, subtly condemning a lack of careful planning through the use of ironic understatements. The inclusion of rhetorical questions and anecdotal evidence added to the condescending tone of the language, solidifying the newspaper’s position as a superior judgmental authority. This paper demonstrated how value laden words and linguistic constructs can contribute to make news language divisive, exacerbating forms of blame, and creating easy to borrow and disseminate expressions that could lead to stigmatizing individuals whose choices do not conform to a given system of values. A use of binary language in the news can translate into an understanding of a reality as split into two distinctively opposite elements, disregarding what exists on a spectrum, hence producing inaccurate representations.

This exploratory work aims to provide an in-depth rhetorical analysis of a limited number of articles. The research method takes a case study driven approach; hence, it is inherently based on a few examples. Generalization is not the goal; instead, this paper aimed to concentrate on news texts at word and sentence level, and thus the project results are highly focused. While it provides an accurate representation of the usage of the compound noun ‘pet regret’, broader aspects of pet ownership,

personal choices and media discourse are missing. In order to fully unpack the NVC four-step process and provide a mapping of the categories of 'observation'; 'feeling'; 'need'; and 'request' a quantitative approach is warranted, broadening the keyword - based search to the compound 'pet abandonment' to elicit more results, notwithstanding that these categories are easily subject to cultural variations. However, it must be taken into account that the application of the four-step process of NVC to textual analysis would imply that to each 'feeling' and 'need' there corresponds a specific word or phrasing to express it, posing the question of how to code 'feelings' and 'needs' expressed implicitly.

Rhetorical analysis, despite drawing on a canon of rules and stylistic variations that have been being shaped for centuries, entails a form of non-automated human creative thinking. Rhetorical analysis seeks linguistic connections between ideas and words that are not apparent and often are unknown to the authors of the articles under analysis themselves. Disagreements can arise over the explanation of a syntactic construct or a figure of speech. However, it is important to take into consideration that one important goal of a qualitative textual analysis is precisely an interpretation of the interplay between words, meaning, and ideas.

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