

# Can the Powerless Speak? Linguistic and Multimodal Corporate Media Manipulation in Digital Environments: the Case of Malala Yousafzai

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## *Abstract*

Paraphrasing Spivak's essay, "Can the subaltern speak?" (1988), this paper will discuss how blogs can be manipulated by corporate media at both a linguistic and multimodal level, analysing Malala Yousafzai's 2009 blog. Malala won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2014 and is known for her activism in women's rights, but critics have questioned the authenticity of her voice, maintaining that her language is not likely to be produced by a child. This paper will address the question as to whether her blog has been manipulated, analysing linguistic features - such as lexical density, readability, keyness, modality markers in English, and multimodal resources. Linguistic and visual data will be discussed to see how multimodal approaches to communication can disentangle corporate mass media manipulation.

Keywords: *blogs, corporate media, Malala Yousafzai, media manipulation, multimodality*

Just because something isn't a lie does not mean that it isn't deceptive.  
Criss Jami (<<https://www.facebook.com/officialcrissjami>>, 12/2014)

## *1. Introductory remarks*

In the tradition of media and communication studies, digital texts are often considered as artefacts bringing together different semiotic resources that are orchestrated to make meanings. This is often the case and further research is needed to explore how and to what extent these texts are mani-



pulated by different parties at different stages of their production process. For example, a text may have been written down by one author and then turned into a webpage by third parties, e.g. web designers. Or a script can be added to a ready-made video, as in the case of fansubbing, altering the initial mono-language reception and intended audience. Multimodality can be of great help in unpacking the different stages of the production of a multimodal text. Full understanding of a text can be achieved only through the recognition that multiparty manipulation (serving different interests and purposes) affects digital texts and, especially so, when amateur writing meets professional mass media corporations (Sindoni 2013).

### *1.1 The background*

Malala's BBC blog in Urdu in its English translation (January-March 2009), together with the *New York Times* documentary shot by Adam B. Ellick and Irfan Ashraf in 2009 and distributed on web channels worldwide, contributed to Malala's rise to prominence on an international level. These digital texts have been a platform that some people, including Ellick himself (2013), believe played a role in her subsequent shooting by the Taliban in October 2012.

Malala was at the time a twelve-year old girl who lived in Mingora, in the Swat district, North Pakistan. A Sunni Muslim, her family is of Pashtun ethnicity. She was mainly educated by her father, Ziauddin Yousafzai, poet, school owner and education activist, who would play a key role in Malala's political and social involvement. Her BBC blog (MB henceforth) documented the first battle of Swat and the gradual school abandonment by girls. In Malala's town, Mingora, the Taliban had set an edict that no girl was allowed to attend school after January 15, 2009.

When her blog and the documentary started to circulate on a global level, Malala became well-known in her country and abroad. She appeared in numerous TV shows and spoke out for women's education in Pakistan. She was also active on Facebook, but fake profiles under her name were created and she received death threats that became serious as soon as she was identified as a target to Taliban, who decided to kill her in 2012. After the attack, when she was severely hurt, Malala rose to international prominence and received awards and wide recognition, including the Nobel Peace Prize for children. She became one of the "The 100 Most Influential People in the World" (Clinton 2013) and on 12 July 2013, subsequently termed "Malala Day", she gave a speech at the UN calling for worldwide open education for women, addressing the world leaders (Yousafzai 2013). She also received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2014, an official recognition of the importance of her contribution to peace process and education, especially women's education, on a global level.

In her attempt to raise awareness about the humanitarian causes she is involved in, she has produced a wealth of digital and non-digital texts that have

had a resounding power in the Western world. However, critics in her country contest that her voice is not *her own*, but that of Western mainstream media and of politicians that exploit her for their purposes (Arnoldy 2012; Siddiqui 2013; Waraich 2013; Zahra-Malik 2013). For example, Malala's speeches are today written by her robust team of media advisers, and some opponents, especially in the Muslim milieu, argue that they turned her into a puppet (Zada 2014) and make her ventriloquize the Western agenda on education (Aziz, Buncombe 2013).

### 1.2 Research questions

This paper will focus on Malala's early production, namely her blog in Urdu in the English translation provided by the Pakistani journal *Tanqueed* and originally published by *LUBP* (Nishapuri 2009). The ten-part blog, entitled "Diary of a Pakistani schoolgirl", was published pseudonymously under the pen name of "Gul Makai", a local folklore heroine. This blog is probably one of the texts less manipulated by the media, even though she did not have the chance to write and publish her blog entries freely, but she hand-wrote her notes that were passed to a journalist who scanned and emailed them to the BBC Urdu website. The first set of research questions investigated in this paper is: to what extent is it possible to assume a genuine voice in Malala's blog entries? Have BBC staff manipulated Malala's original notes? What kind of problems can be identified *a posteriori* in the translation process from Urdu to English?

The second set of research questions deals with the process of turning Malala's notes into a blog. If bloggers usually organize their text multimodally, using an array of socio-semiotic resources to create their texts, MB is a different case. How has the intervention of designers changed the original text? What kind of semiotic choices have altered the original text, for example in reading pathways (Baldry, Thibault 2006) or in different degrees of text focalization? A discussion on compositional functions and how the visual text is organized as to cohere internally will be provided (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006).

### 1.3 The method

This study is based on a multidisciplinary approach, putting together different but compatible heuristic tools to explore the complexities of the research questions addressed. To explore in more detail the questions as to whether MB can be read as the product of a twelve-year old child, basic heuristic tools of analysis from corpus linguistics have been used, for example investigating MB's lexical density, readability (computed by Gunning-Fog index), and type/token ratio, among others. In computational linguistics, lexical density is the estimated measure of content per functional and lexical units in the overall text: this is used to give indications about register and genre. Spoken texts tend to have a lower level of lexical density than written genres and, as such, can be indicative of Malala's skills in mastering

written genres. Furthermore, the Gunning-Fog index is a measure of readability of English writing, as it is a weighted average of words number per sentence or clause complex, and the number of polysyllabic words per word (Gunning 1952). Despite the fact that these measures cannot be considered as completely reliable indicators of specific genres, it cannot be nonetheless overstated that they represent an effective way of allowing generalizations or approximations with regard to issues such as genre prediction. In other words, they can be useful to deal with the issue as to whether Malala is likely to have produced the blog in question.

Furthermore, to explore the range of themes dealt with, a keyness analysis has been carried out, comparing MB to a reference corpus of general English (BNC World Edition 2001). MB has also been studied analyzing all the entries and focusing the analysis on other parameters, such as repetition, cohesive ties, paratactic vs. hypotactic text structuring, and use of modality markers. All these parameters are used to check the claim that MB was originally written by a child of Malala's age and education (Halliday 2003).

In the second section of this paper, the second set of research questions will be addressed. Comparing the verbal text to the blog version as appeared in *BBC Urdu.com*, some considerations on the nature of media manipulation will be discussed. The blog's compositional meaning will be investigated, in particular singling out the visual strategies used.

MB is a hybrid text in that it was hand-written by the author and then digitalized by third parties, who were responsible for the design and other visual properties that the text has incorporated in becoming a blog. In other words, bloggers usually have the chance to operationalize a series of semiotic choices. In the case of MB, the text can be segmented into two discrete semiotic entities: 1) the verbal text produced by Malala and 2) the transformation of it into a blog by third parties belonging to the BBC corporation.

Furthermore, one may wonder whether there has also been an intervention on MB's verbal component or whether the intervention of BBC journalists and designers was limited to digitalization and organization of the text into blog form.

## 2. *A linguistic analysis of MB*

The first set of research questions discussed in this paper deals with the question of MB verbal manipulation. We must first recognize that the text analyzed in this paper is the English translation, as the source-text was originally written and digitally published in Urdu. However, the present analysis is based on two considerations: 1) some general text properties that will be taken into account (i.e. text organization, cohesion, repetitions, lexical density, etc.) can be analyzed following similar criteria in different languages, including Urdu, even though yielding different results; 2) the English translation is the text that has been made available on an international level, so that it is the most widespread and thus the most relevant for the purposes of this study.

Furthermore, given the highly referential nature of the entries and the low level of modulation and modalization (Halliday, Matthiessen 2004), the *Tanqueed* translation did not alter, or at least not to a significant degree, the core message. The following analysis is thus based on the English translation for the reasons discussed above.

The blog's few entries can be read manually for a fine-grained analysis. However, some heuristic tools from corpus linguistics help identify linguistic features that are rough indicators of the simplicity of the text. The results discussed below have been computed using *Wordsmith 6* (Scott 2012).

To start with, complexity factor (lexical density) is 38.8% and readability (computed by Gunning-Fog index) is 6.8, when 6 stands for "easy" and 20 for "hard". The average syllable per word is 1.58 and average sentence length (words) is 14.63. Standardized type/token ratio is 39.18. All these indicators clearly show that Malala's language and style are consistent with her age (i.e. 12) and level of education at the time of composition.

A positive keyness analysis can also be of help when analyzing the *aboutness* of a text (Tribble, Scott 2006; Bondi, Scott 2010). In this study, the Malala's blog corpus (MBC henceforth) has been compared to the BNC World edition, because the reference corpus (RC) includes some major English varieties, incorporating over 100 million words, in both written (90%) and spoken (10%) texts (British National Corpus 2011). "Keyness" is a measure of statistical unusuality and is useful to find the most prominent positive and negative words, i.e. the words that recur more or less frequently than they do in a corpus taken as a reference. In the present analysis, only the positive keywords have been taken in consideration, because the general aim was to discover the most frequent themes dealt with by Malala, or, to be more precise, the *aboutness* of her text. The resulting top 20 positive keyword list is shown in Table 1.

N	Key word	Freq	%RC Freq	RC %	Keyness	P
1	SWAT	62	1.05	34	1.083	2.00000000
2	TALEBAN	54	0.92	0	1.052	0.00000000
3	MY	96	1.63	146.775	0.15	288.21000000
4	SCHOOL	60	1.02	36.121	0.04	285.10000000
5	GIRLS	36	0.61	9.085		231.96000000
6	SCHOOLS	39	0.66	15.424	0.02	216.98000000
7	MINGORA	11	0.19	0		214.23000000
8	MILITANTS	17	0.29	279		200.98000000
9	MAULANA	11	0.19	5		194.35000000
10	SCARED	18	0.31	1.315		160.00000000
11	DIARY	19	0.32	1.936		156.38000000
12	TODAY	33	0.56	23.003	0.02	147.36000000
13	EDICT	10	0.17	96		128.52000000
14	FM	11	0.19	239		124.03000000
15	FATHER	27	0.46	19.685	0.02	118.22000000
16	BANNU	6	0.10	0		116.85000000
17	FAZLULLAH	6	0.10	0		116.85000000
18	PAKISTANI	11	0.19	380		114.02000000
19	FEBRUARY	20	0.34	8.331		109.18000000
20	PEACE	20	0.34	8.707		107.46000000

Table 1 - MBC ranked for top 20 positive keywords

Analysing the top positive keywords (PKs) in MBC, it emerges that the most prominent words are socially, culturally and geographically loaded. Table 1 shows that 7/20 PKs are personal nouns or locative adjectives or nouns. The “aboutness” of MB is thus clearly centred on local themes: “Swat” is the valley where Malala lives, “Mingora” is her home city in Swat Valley, “Pakistani” is the adjective of her country. There are also mentions of the protagonists of her narrative, namely the entities that are represented as the opponents on the one hand, i.e. “Taleban”, the “militants”, “Maulana” (i.e. Islamic scholar), “Fazlullah” (i.e. a Taleban leader), and lexical items pointing to her familiar world, namely “father” and “school-s”, on the other. “Maulana” collocates with both “Fazlullah” and “Shah Dauran” (the Taleban cleric who announced the ban on girls attending school). In-between lexical items, creating a material and metaphorical link between the two worlds, the “they” and the “us”, is for example instantiated by items such as “FM”, an antonomasia standing for “radio”, which broadcast Taleban propaganda across the Swat Valley.

A view to the overall list of PKs in MBC allows for other considerations: the blog is focused on “contents”, or ideational meanings, and is scarcely cohesively tied (Halliday, Hasan 1976). The entry below is taken for in-depth analysis:

MONDAY 1 MARCH	
Attendance is getting better day by day and today 19 students were present out of 27. Exams are scheduled for 9 March and we try to spend more time studying.	1
Today I went to Cheena Market with others and shopped a lot because one of the shopkeepers was shutting down and had a clearance sale. Most of the shops in Cheena Market have been closed down.	3
We sleep well because there is no shelling these days. It is said that the Taleban are still carrying out their activities in their areas. They also loot the relief goods meant for the displaced persons.	6
My friend told me that her brother was quite amazed to see his acquaintance searching vehicles at night along with the Taleban. Her brother said that his acquaintance works as a labourer in the morning and along with the Taleban at night. Her brother asked him why he was with them if he was not a Talib. He replied that he earns in the morning and then at night while working with the Taleban.	9

Most paragraphs present paratactic links, such as coordination by “and”, while hypotactic links are much fewer. Subordination is instantiated by unsophisticated means, for example using a projection after a verbal process, e.g. “My friend told me that...” (l. 9) or “Her brother said that...” (l. 10). A considerable amount of repetition - instead of a higher use of cohesive ties and of varied syntactic structures - signals the plain quality of the prose used,

for example in the last paragraph (ll. 9-13). As a matter of fact, “her brother” is repeated three times and only in the last sentence, Malala uses the third person personal pronoun “he”. Other undue repetitions can be found in ll. 3-5 (“Cheena Market” could have been omitted in the second occurrence) and ll. 10-13, where “with the Taleban” is repeated unnecessarily three times and with the overall material meanings reiterated without providing extra information. Redundancy is in general a feature more common to spoken discourse in English as in other languages, so this textual characteristic can be interpreted as an indication of a poor command of written registers.

A second entry is reproduced below for further analysis:

MONDAY 2 FEBRUARY: SCHOOL CLOSED ON TALEBAN ORDERS	
I am upset because the schools are still closed here in Swat.	1
Our school was supposed to open today. On waking up I realised the school was still closed and that was very upsetting.	2
In the past we used to enjoy ourselves on school closure. But this is not the case this time because I am afraid that the school may not reopen at all on the orders of the Taleban.	4 6
My father told me that following the closure of private girls’ schools, private schools for boys had decided not to open until 8 February. In this regard notices have appeared outside the schools saying that they will reopen on 9 February.	8
My father said that because no such notices have been displayed outside girls’ schools, that meant they would not be re-opening.	10

Paragraphs 1, 2, and 4 present clauses starting with the first person pronoun “I”, instantiating a personal narrating voice. This strategy is common to all blog entries. Sentences are concise and present factual information. Scarce lexical variation is found in all paragraphs, for example with the repetition of “school/s” (9 times), “upset”, “upsetting” (ll. 1-3), “my father” (ll. 7-10), “notices” (ll. 8-10). Furthermore, these repetitions also signal loose cohesiveness and preference for redundant noun phrases instead of the use of pronouns. However, some basic use of nominalizations (e.g. “closure”, “notices”) indicates at least a loose awareness of the written genre.

Modality markers in MBC are almost absent. Focusing on an interpersonal analysis and, more specifically, on Finite modal operators (Halliday, Matthiessen 2004), our findings show that:

1. “can” occurs 6 times, indicating “modulation of obligation”;
2. “could” and “ought to” are absent;
3. “would” occurs 16 times, used mostly in indirect speech after past reporting verbs (e.g. “said”). In other instances, it occurs: 1) as an indicator of past habits; 2) to formulate future in the past; 3) only once it is used to formulate

- a hypothesis. This means that “would” is used more as a temporal operator (i.e. past of will) instead of as a modal operator;
4. “will” occurs 19 times, always expressing future, thus working as a temporal operator;
  5. “may” occurs 6 times, indicating “modalization” (i.e. degree of probability) or formulaic vocative expressions (i.e. “May God keep them safe”);
  6. “should” and “must” both occur once, indicating “modulation of obligation”; “need” also occurs once;
  7. “have to”/ “has to”/ “had to” occur 5 times overall, indicating “modulation of obligation”.

A search for Modal Adjuncts of “probability” and “usuality” showed similar results, signalling the same inclination to a low use of modality markers.

The blogger is thus providing information, narrating things and events as they appear to her without using modality markers, at least not to a significant degree. These findings are strong indicators that the blog writer may be a child without substantial manipulation, mainly because children tend to learn to use agent-oriented modalities later than epistemic modalities. Furthermore, in the case of agent-oriented modalities studies show that children use them to say what they want and need before saying what others want and need (Halliday 1978, 1979, 2003). In the case of epistemic modalities, they express certainty (of the truth of a proposition) before uncertainty and inference (Choi 2006). What the blogger is narrating is mostly presented as a mere report on “facts”, at least in the writer’s eyes. This is consistent with the idea that the blog has been, if any, little manipulated by third parties. Furthermore, from a systemic-functional perspective, the full mastery of the modality system in English is acquired at a late stage in language development (Halliday 1983; Torr 1998). Modality is in effect an elaborated part of grammar that only adults can get to grips with to best effects. Adults take advantage of a complex set of choices from language-as-a-system, for example to express opinions as to the likeliness of an event in contexts of information exchange, or about the degree of obligation involved (in contexts of demand). The awareness of the presence of other people around us and of the possibility of interaction with them by means of verbal processes is, to all intents and purposes, a crucial feature of the development of abstract thinking that is, in turn, a specificity of adult language (Halliday 1975, 1978; Hasan 1991). Additionally, modality is considered as a central strand of analysis for the study of the development of children’s literacy in systemic research literature (Simon-Vandenberg, Taverniers, Ravelli 2003). This brings us back to the first set of research questions addressed, confirming the assumption that a low use of modality markers correlates with the unlikeliness of strong adult (and professional) manipulation of MB.

However, the contents or ideational meanings conveyed by the blog entries are not read in a “vacuum”. To become a blog, the hand-written notes



had to be digitally reproduced and inserted in a platform, namely the BBC Urdu website. The process of semiotic and multimodal manipulation will be discussed in the next section, analyzing what has been altered in MB's textual organization. Furthermore, the question of translation will be hinted at.

2.1 A multimodal analysis of MB



Fig. 1 - Screenshot of Malala's blog in Urdu, part 2



Fig. 2 - Screenshot of Malala's blog in English (by Google Translator), part 2

Figs. 1-2 show two screenshots of the same webpage that appeared on *BBC Urdu.com*. Fig. 1 presents the webpage as it is visible, to date, in its original version, whereas Fig. 2 shows an English translation obtained via Google Translate (GT) for the purpose of illustrating to an English-speaking reader how the original blog contents are organized in the webpage, at least approximately. It cannot be overstated that the GT translation shown in Fig. 2 cannot be used as a reference point for *verbal* analysis, as it is only a rough *visual* guide to orient a non-Urdu speaker into MB's visual compositional features. Considerations on the translation from Urdu to English are thus not based on the GT translation.

As has been anticipated, digitalization, technicalities and general material affordances are fundamental in understanding the full communicative and sociosemiotic text properties and the challenges that digitality brings about (Roswell 2013). In the case study analyzed in this paper, some hand-written notes by a twelve-year old child, Malala, have been turned into webpages of a corporate mass media website, namely *BBC Urdu.com*. A diary that would have had a less than local impact has been placed in the hands of professional writers, designers and web managers and has thus reached a much wider audience. But how has this text been altered? Has the process of digitalization, that was doubtless out of Malala's reach, produced other significant alterations in the text? And if so, to what extent?

Multimodal studies can shed light on such crucial issues (Kress 2010). For example, the analysis of how information is organized and distributed in the webpage can help identify possible reading trajectories and put in relation the compositional meaning of the page and viewers' interpretations (Baldry and O'Halloran 2013).

To begin with, entries have been titled and inserted in sub-headings in orange as can be seen in Figs. 1-2. Titles are typical mini-genres of media discourse (Baldry, Thibault 2006) and were unlikely to have been written by Malala. They are descriptive and summative of the main entry so they have been probably composed by third parties. Furthermore, another visual strategy is used to highlight some specific paragraphs that have also been inserted into a small light blue box. An example of this strategy can be seen in Fig. 2, bottom page, where the same paragraph is repeated twice: on the right, it is inside the box, on the left, it is written alongside the rest of the entry. This is a typical example of a "pullout quote" and is used extensively in online newspapers. However, it is not completely clear what it was about, as the GT translation, as mentioned beforehand, provides only the gist of the original source-text. So a comparison with the official English translation from <www.bbc.co.uk> is shown in Figure 3.

**WEDNESDAY 7 JANUARY: NO FIRING OR FEAR**

I have come to Bunair to spend Muharram (a Muslim holiday) on vacation. I adore Bunair because of its mountains and lush green fields. My Swat is also very beautiful but there is no peace. But in Bunair there is peace and tranquillity. Neither is there any firing nor any fear. We all are very happy.


Today we went to Pir Baba mausoleum and there were lots of people there. People are here to pray while we are here for an excursion. There are shops selling bangles, ear rings, lockets and other artificial jewellery. I thought of buying something but nothing impressed - my mother bought ear rings and bangles.

**MONDAY 5 JANUARY: DO NOT WEAR COLOURFUL DRESSES**

I was getting ready for school and about to wear my uniform when I remembered that our principal had told us not to wear uniforms - and come to school wearing normal clothes instead. So I decided to wear my favourite pink dress. Other girls in school were also wearing colourful dresses and the school presented a homely look.

My friend came to me and said, 'for God's sake, answer me honestly, is our school going to be attacked by the Taleban?' During the morning assembly we were told not to wear colourful clothes as the Taleban would object to it.

I came back from school and had tuition sessions after lunch. In the evening I switched on the TV and heard that curfew had been lifted from Shakardra after 15 days. I was happy to hear that because our English teacher lived in the area and she might be coming to school now.



Swat has been a centre of militant activity

Fig. 3 - Screenshot of Malala's blog from British BBC translation

The process of resemiotization is even more evident in this version, as that which was a whole entry in the Urdu version, has here been divided into two separate entries with different titles and different dates (i.e. January 7 in the Urdu version *vs.* January 5 “and” 7 in the English translation). Apparently, the BBC translation has segmented information in different blocks and, more importantly, at different dates. This would allow us to assume that the BBC translation has modified to some extent the original Urdu version and this is confirmed when we realize that the BBC translation includes only 7 entries out of the original 35 written in Urdu. In fact, the BBC translation only provides the first part of the diary that was originally segmented into 6 parts. Furthermore, the BBC translation provides a significant addition, namely a “stand first” or “subhead”, that is a brief paragraph located immediately below the headline and typographically different (i.e. boldface in this case) from the body of the article. This is reproduced in Figure 4 below.

**BBC** News Sport Weather Capital TV Radio More... Search BBC News

**NEWS** Watch ONE-MINUTE WORLD NEWS

News Front Page Page last updated at 11:03 GMT, Monday, 19 January 2009

E-mail this to a friend Printable version

## Diary of a Pakistani schoolgirl

Private schools in Pakistan's troubled north-western Swat district have been ordered to close in a Taliban edict banning girls' education. Militants seeking to impose their austere interpretation of Sharia law have destroyed about 150 schools in the past year. Five more were blown up despite a government pledge to safeguard education, it was reported on Monday. Here a seventh grade schoolgirl from Swat chronicles how the ban has affected her and her classmates. The diary first appeared on BBC Urdu online.

**THURSDAY JANUARY 15: NIGHT FILLED WITH ARTILLERY FIRE**

"The night was filled with the noise of artillery fire and I woke up three times. But since there was no school I got up later at 10 am. Afterwards, my friend came over and we discussed our homework. Today is 15 January, the last day before the Taliban's edict comes into effect, and my friend was discussing homework as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

Today, I also read the diary written for the BBC (in Urdu) and published in the newspaper. My mother liked my pen name 'Gul Makai' and said to my father 'why not change her name to Gul Makai?' I also like the name because my real name means 'grief stricken'.

The Taliban have repeatedly targeted schools in Swat

**PAKISTAN IN TURMOIL**

**MILITANCY**

**Why Lahore?**  
Possible reasons for militants to attack Pakistan's cultural capital

- On the march
- Tide turns against Taliban
- Journey to 'war zone'

Fig. 4 - Screenshot of Malala's blog from British BBC translation

The "stand first" creates a stark contrast with the rest of the text. Nominalizations, use of ideational grammatical metaphors (e.g. "it was reported on Monday"), use of cohesive ties, hypotactic links and high lexical density firmly place this text into the written genre, and, to be more specific, the newspaper article genre (Bednarek and Caple 2012). Textual evidence suggests that this text is likely to have been produced by professionals. However, no mention of the process of "condensation" of the original source-text is made. No credits to translators are provided, further erasing the presence of third parties. It is as if the diary had been originally written in English and in the version presented in the webpage.

A massive manipulation occurs on a multimodal level. Readers, even professional readers (such as media commentators, researchers, etc.) are well aware of verbal manipulation that may occur during the different stages of text production. However, less attention has been paid to other, more subtle manipulations that can multimodally alter otherwise non or little manipulated texts. The experience of reading can be greatly influenced by these strategies, for example in the selection of what is (or is supposed to be) more important information, i.e. pullout quotes, that can also attract reading before other parts of the text are read. In this sense, the choice of pullout quotes are significant for both reading trajectories and truth value assigned to them.

Furthermore, photos and related cutlines are other significant and meaning-making additions to the blog. The use and combination of different semiotic resources in blogs have been discussed elsewhere (Sindoni 2013). However, when it comes to assessing the addition of resources by professional writers and designers, it is important to notice that all the photos have nothing to do with the personal story narrated in the diary. Of course, the diary tells a story that resonates with Swat predicament, as the Swat Valley is a borderland between Pakistan and Afghanistan and its history is interspersed with fratricidal wars, feuds, and struggles for peace that have been challenged by autocratic rulers and, more recently, by the Taliban. However, what Malala voices is “her story”. This is completely lost in the use of photos in British BB, whereas BBC Urdu reproduces many children’s faces in both the main pictures and other mug shots in the sidebar.

### 3. *Conclusions*

In her groundbreaking essay (1988), Spivak claimed that subaltern subjects, in particular subaltern women, who suffer from a double form of discrimination (i.e. being women and being postcolonial reified objects), cannot “speak”. The condition of being the “object” of essentialist descriptions provided by Western-centred and neocolonial perspectives makes the philosophical chance to express “another” perspective impossible (Said 1993). The very definition of “Otherness” implicitly erases the possibility of existence – and of self-expression, of individual and non-essentialistic viewpoints. However, digital technologies and wider access to such technologies have opened new possibilities, enabling those whom I have defined the “powerless”, unprecedented chances of self-expression.

Despite media manipulation at various stages, Malala Yousafzai’s blog is a case in point, as the blog provided Malala with an international platform that she could have never found in other ways, suffering from three different forms of powerlessness: being a child, being a woman, and being a reified object by the Taliban autocratic rule.

However, no gains without losses in digital textuality: media manipulation – be it verbal or multimodal – can be constrained by “medium” affordances (e.g. a diary turned into a blog); mainstream forms of distribution (e.g. translation from the original language, i.e. Urdu, to the “lingua franca” of international communication, i.e. English) and, last but not least, the often conflicting ideological positioning of those concerned with providing information at various stages in the media communicative chain (e.g. Malala, her father, BBC Urdu, BBC UK, and various other social and political stakeholders in the Swat Valley, in Pakistan and abroad).

The much debated question as to whether the powerless can speak should be addressed by taking into due account the degrees, levels and layers of manipulation, for example considering whether they are optional or not, e.g. con-

strained by “medium” affordances or translational approaches. Additionally, corporate mass media manipulation can occur on both linguistic and multi-modal levels and tamper with ideational, interpersonal and textual meanings.

Applying tools from the specific agenda of different fields of studies, such as corpus linguistics, critical discourse analysis or translation studies provides some insights in the issue of media manipulation of digital texts and genres. The specific use of a “multimodal lens” when analysing the complex digital arena can enhance the experience of reading and interpreting contemporary digital texts as it facilitates the unpacking of several semiotic resources and communicative strategies. Ultimately, digital textuality can in effect empower the powerless, but not silence mainstream – be they male-centred, Western-centred, etc. – views of the world.

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