





Discourses of Hope and  
Reconciliation

*J. R. Martin's Contribution to Systemic  
Functional Linguistics*

Edited by  
Michele Zappavigna and Shoshana Dreyfus



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Bloomsbury Publishing Plc  
50 Bedford Square, London, WC1B 3DP, UK  
1385 Broadway, New York, NY 10018, USA

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First published in Great Britain 2020

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

ISBN: HB: 978-1-3501-1606-1  
ePDF: 978-1-3501-1607-8  
ePUB: 978-1-3501-1608-5

Typeset by Integra Software Services Pvt. Ltd.  
Printed and bound in Great Britain

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# Attitudinal alignments in journalistic commentary and social-media argumentation: The construction of values-based group identities in the online comments of newspaper readers

Peter R. R. White  
*University of New South Wales*

## Introduction

In June 2019, Australian Federal Police (AFP) officers entered the home of a prominent political journalist, Annika Smethurst, in search of evidence relating to the sources Smethurst had used for a report published the previous year in News Corporation's *Sydney Daily Telegraph*. The story, based on leaked confidential Australian federal government documents, concerned proposals by senior bureaucrats that a key Australian security agency should be given the power to monitor the electronic communications of Australian citizens. This police action was, predictably, very widely covered in both the Australian and international media.

In the immediate aftermath of the 'raid', *The Daily Telegraph* published multiple news articles on the topic, which, in almost all cases, were critical of the police action in terms of a perceived threat to press freedom. These items proved to be very popular with those readers who contribute online comments in response to these stories – the reader/user postings which appear beneath the article, what I will here term the 'comment trail'. These comment trails include reader comments presented by way of direct responses to the article and those comments presented as responses to the prior comments of other readers.

This chapter provides an account of findings arising from an analysis of the attitudinal positioning undertaken in these comments and the opinion piece to which they were a response with a view to reaching conclusions as to how contributors to these trails thereby construe for themselves a particular social identity or persona. While these comment trails have received a good deal of attention from journalism scholars and discourse analysts (see, for example, Manosevitch & Walker, 2009; von Sikorski & Hänelt, 2016; Ziegele et al., 2018), to my knowledge there is currently no other literature which reports on how they might function with respect to attitudinal

alignment and the performance of identity. In this, of course, the chapter connects with a longstanding interest in socio-linguistics, applied linguistics and discourse analysis – interest in discursively performed ‘group identity’ and ‘persona’ (see, for example, Edwards, 1985; Hyland, 2010; Pérez-Milans, 2016). More specifically, such a consideration of these comments trails provides the opportunity for the further development of ideas emerging from the work of J. R. Martin and his collaborators into how speakers ‘affiliate/dis-affiliate’ through the enactment of relations of solidarity and thereby indicate their membership in communities of shared value. Key earlier work by Martin on ‘affiliation’ and the performance of identity can be found in Martin (2008, 2009, 2010). Related work on how communality and social identity are based on shared values can be found in Stenglin (2009) and in Tann (2010, 2012). In Knight’s work (2008, 2010), a framework was developed for the analyses of the values-based dialogic negotiation of such ‘group identities’ in face-to-face conversation – specifically casual conversations between friends. Somewhat more recently, Zappavigna (2011, 2012, 2014a, b, 2018, 2019) and Zappavigna and Martin in collaboration (Zappavigna & Martin, 2018) have developed analyses of the performance of social identity via what Zappavigna has termed the practices of ‘ambient affiliation’ – as afforded by micro-blogging platforms such as Twitter.

In this context, these sequences of reader comments are of interest in that they very clearly involve what Martin and his colleagues have placed at the centre of the communicative processes by which social identities are discursively enacted and negotiated – assertions by which speakers<sup>1</sup> position addressees to accept and/or infer positive and negative evaluations. Such assessments involve positive or negative evaluations of some ‘target’ or ‘trigger’ – persons, human behaviours, objects, artefacts, situations and processes – and for Martin and his colleagues, it is through the sharing or rejecting such assessments of particular targets that speakers indicate or negotiate membership in the social networks which constitute group or communal identities. In this scholarship, this attitudinal targeting is analysed as a mechanism by which an interpersonal meaning (a positive or negative assessment) is ‘coupled’ with an ideational meaning (the referenced/construed person, object, artefact, situation or process). For these scholars, the sharing of such ‘couplings’ of attitudinal meanings with experiential references creates ‘bonds’ between interactants and as Martin proposes: ‘It is these bonds which form the building blocks of the individuation hierarchy [a hierarchy of identities], clustering into sub-cultures and master identities to which the community members subscribe’ (Martin, 2010, p. 26).

The most cursory viewing of the online reader comments attached to news media articles reveals that one key purpose they serve is the enactment of ‘identity’, in the sense outlined above – as contributors forthrightly declare their membership in a range of culturally, politically and ultimately ideologically charged communities of shared value. Here ‘identity’ is both an effect of the commenters’ indicated alignments with particular value positions (and the other commenters who share these value positions) and an effect of their indicated dis-alignments with competing value positions (and the other commenters who advance these competing positions). Thus, Knight notes: ‘Communal identities are negotiated by participants according to who they are, who they are not, and who they might otherwise be or affiliate with ...’ (Knight, 2010, p. 49).

## Data, methodology and key questions

This chapter reports the findings of an analysis of one article and a selection of the online reader comments ‘trail’ which were attached to it online. The article is an ‘opinion’ or ‘comment’ piece – termed an ‘op-ed’ – published in News Corp’s *The Daily Telegraph*, a Sydney daily newspaper generally characterized as ‘tabloid’ in its style and intended audience.

In addition to dealing with the ‘affiliatory’ workings of the op-ed piece itself, I report findings arising from an analysis of just those comments which I classify as ‘Openings’ – comments where the commenter is responding directly to the article, and not to some other prior commenter. (This is for reasons of space limitations.)

An abbreviated version of the article is provided below.

### **Annika Smethurst raid was more than an invasion of privacy**

*Seven federal cops. Seven hours. The rubbish bins. The oven. The underwear drawers.*

Tuesday’s raid on the home of our national political editor Annika Smethurst was a shocking invasion of privacy – but it was much more sinister than that.

This is an attempt to intimidate journalists, and more importantly their sources, who attempt to reveal information that is in the public interest.

Annika’s story, published in April 2018, was absolutely in the public interest: it revealed secret plans at the highest levels of the Canberra bureaucracy to allow the Australian Signals Directorate to cyber-spy on Australian citizens.

That’s a chilling prospect: this agency was created to keep Australia safe from external, i.e. foreign, threats. [...]

[The police officers] went through every drawer and cupboard from the bedrooms to the living room and, in the kitchen, knelt on the floor rummaging through drawers of whisks and spoons. They looked in the oven. They looked at every page of every cookbook.

Now Annika is left wondering whether she’ll be charged with a breach of the Crimes Act relating to official secrets.

News Corp Australia, which publishes this masthead, has been campaigning for many years for politicians to explicitly protect journalists from laws that infringe upon the freedom of the press. They have failed to do so – and today we see that in fact federal agencies are inclined to do absolutely the opposite. This raid was about intimidation, pure and simple.

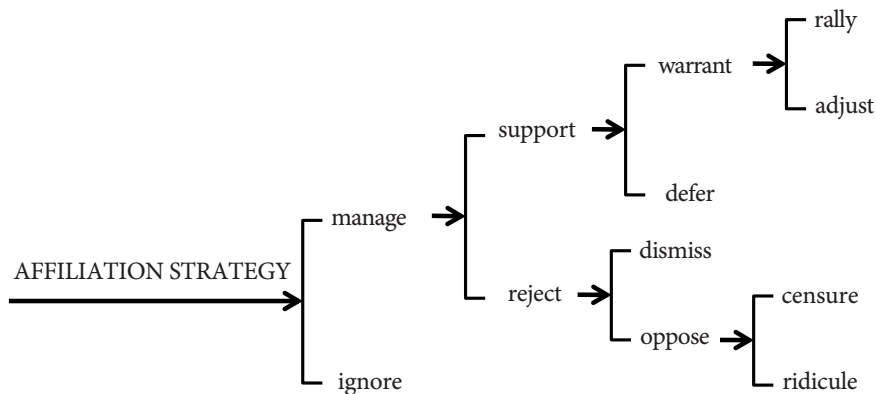
*(The Daily Telegraph, 4 June 2019)*

The opinion piece was downloaded, along with its comments ‘trail’ (sixty-eight individual comments), for analysis. There were some twenty-two individual commenters who contributed to the trail – some making just the one contribution and others commenting multiple times as they engage interactively with other commenters. The trail was composed of eighteen different comment chains, where a ‘comment chain’ (or thread) is made up of an initiating comment (i.e. what, as indicated above, I have termed an Opening) and subsequent interconnected reactions and responses (i.e. termed Follows).

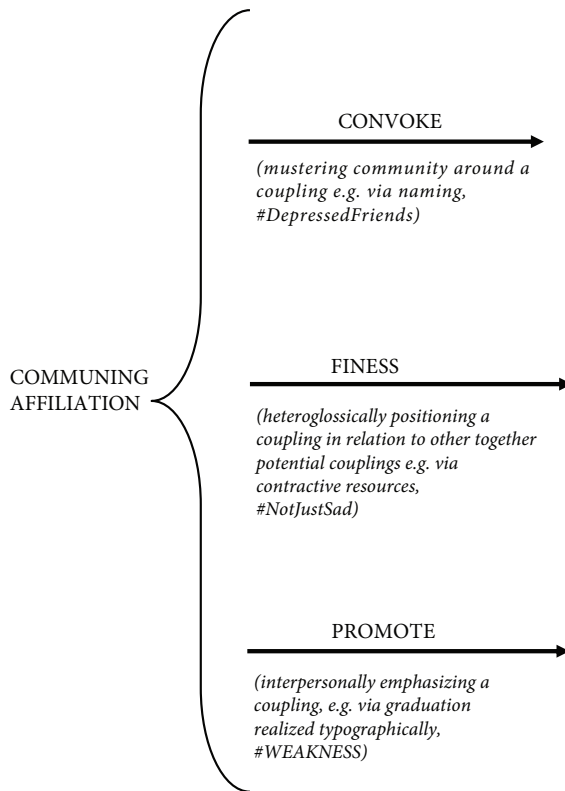
Plainly, Openings present as offering some sort of reaction to the original opinion piece, and, as such, potentially enter into relations of attitudinal alignment ('affiliation') or dis-alignment ('disaffiliation') with the opinion piece's author. As well, of course, as social media texts, they can be viewed as communications offered up to the unknown mass audience of those readers of the article who have chosen to attend to the comments trail. In this sense, there is the potential construal of what Zappavigna has termed 'ambient affiliation', a process by which 'imagined' rather than directly addressed respondents are invited, or called upon, to align attitudinally with the commenter. Issues around such 'imaginary' addressees (otherwise variously termed the 'implied', 'putative' or 'virtual' reader) are taken up below.

There were eighteen of these Opening in the data set, twelve of which were at-odds with the op-ed (dis-affiliatory) and six of which were supportive (affiliatory).

The chapter is thus concerned with the construal of communities of shared value (lines of affiliation/dis-affiliation) in the op-ed piece itself and these Openings. Obviously, the op-ed is 'monologic' in the traditional sense of the term while the Openings are 'dialogic' in that they involve the commenter reacting directly to the article. It might, therefore, be anticipated that different frameworks of affiliation strategies (different possibilities for relations of attitudinal alignment/dis-alignment) would be applied – one for the analysis of the 'monologic' text and another for the 'dialogic' texts. This is certainly an approach which is suggested by recent work by Zappavigna (2018) and Zappavigna and Martin (2018). Here it is indicated that 'dialogic affiliation' (when relations of attitudinal alignments/dis-alignments are being directly and interactively negotiated through turn-taking) should be analysed separately from 'ambient affiliation' (operational, for example, when a Twitter user conveys an attitude in a 'tweet' apparently directed at the 'Twitterverse' in general – rather than by way of a response to a specifically identified tweet or tweeter). Thus, for example, building on prior work by Knight, Zappavigna offers the following taxonomy for the analysis of 'affiliation strategies' in 'dialogic affiliation' (see Figure 2.1 below).



**Figure 2.1** Strategies of dialogic affiliation, adapted from Zappavigna (2019, p. 58), and Zappavigna and Martin offer the following framework for the analysis of 'ambient affiliation' (see Figure 2.2 below).



**Figure 2.2** System of communing affiliation, adapted from Zappavigna and Martin (2018, p. 8).

This account of mechanisms of ‘ambient affiliation’ is extremely helpful in terms of the understandings it offers of the specific workings of the highly condensed forms of communicative exchange which operate on the Twitter platform, with specific reference to the particular functionalities of hashtags. However, in what I present below I offer another perspective, by way of a framework for the identification and characterization of discursively performed relations of attitudinal alignment/dis-alignment which can equally be applied to both ‘monologic texts’ (i.e. the op-ed piece under consideration) and texts which are ‘dialogic’ in the manner of these news article-attached comments (i.e. the Openings under consideration). The motivation here is both to bring to the fore the fact that even the most ‘monologic’ texts dialogistically negotiate relations of attitudinal alignment/dis-alignment and, simultaneously, to highlight that, in texts which are overtly dialogic, there is often more at stake in terms of attitudinal alignment/dis-alignment than what is being overtly signalled. In order to develop such a framework, it is necessary to attend not only to construed alignment/dis-alignment relations with any directly addressed interactants (when these are indicated) but also to relations with what, as indicated



above, has been termed the 'implied', 'putative' or 'virtual' reader/addressee (see, for example, Thompson & Thetela, 1995; Hasan, 1999, p. 228; Schmid, 2014). A significant part of the following discussion, therefore, is devoted to a consideration of how beliefs, feelings and values may be projected onto this implied/putative/virtual addressee and what may be the (often) covert signals of authorial attitudinal alignment/dis-alignment with this thereby construed addressee.

The framework I have proposed and demonstrated below is as follows. Firstly, the relationship might be what, for ease of reference, I will term 'embracing' (broadly corresponding to Zappavigna's 'dialogic affiliation' strategy of 'support'). Obviously and most straightforwardly, an 'embracing' relationship can be retrospective, involving some concurrence with a prior attitudinal assertion by some external source. For the commenters, this would be a matter of concurring with the value positions advanced in the op-ed, with an earlier commenter (not dealt with in this chapter), or with some other prior external source whose views are referenced (also not dealt with in this chapter). For the op-ed author, this would occur were they to choose to reference the views of some prior speaker on the current subject so as to indicate agreement or approval. (As it turned out, there were no such instances in the opinion piece of the author overtly 'embracing' a prior source.)

Less straightforwardly, 'embracing' can involve a prospective rather than a retrospective relation when the text signals some expectation of how an actual or potential respondent might react, and in so doing signals an assumption of agreement or compliance on the part of this anticipated respondent. Here we are dealing with this notion of the 'implied/putative/virtual' reader/addressee (the reader written into the text). Here 'embracing' is a matter of the speaker deploying formulations which signal an assumption that the addressee will necessarily share the speaker's views – i.e. find a particular value judgement unproblematic. Such prospective addressivity will clearly be deployed not only by the author of the op-ed but also by the commenters, since, addressing as they do the 'ambient audience' of other readers of the article, they can be interpreted as projecting beliefs and values onto both the op-ed author and/or the members of this unknown audience. In this sense, the comments can be seen as 'polylogical'.

Secondly, the relationship might be what, for ease of reference, I will term 'spurning' (broadly corresponding to Zappavigna's 'dialogic affiliation' strategy of 'reject'). This is obviously the converse of 'embracing'. Most straightforwardly, a 'spurning' relationship involves the contradicting or repudiating of some prior attitudinal proposition. For the commenters this is a matter of repudiating value positions advanced by the op-ed's author, or a prior commenter (not dealt with in this chapter), or by some other external source (not dealt with in this chapter). For the author of the opinion piece this would occur were they to explicitly reference the views of some (not necessarily specifically identified) prior speaker on the current subject so as to repudiate these views. In order to prospectively 'spurn' the implied/putative reader, it would be necessary for the speaker to explicitly address the reader so as to indicate an anticipation that they will be intractable in their rejection of the author's own viewpoint – for example, by way of an invented illustration: 'I accept that you, the reader/some readers/some of you, will never find this an acceptable, fair or plausible proposition but ...' (Predictably there

were no instances of this in the opinion piece.) Through such ‘spurning’, the addresser construes the addressee as having membership in some alternative or adversarial community of shared values.

Finally, the relationship might be what, for ease of reference, I will term ‘proselytizing’. This is a prospective relationship with the implied/putative addressee by which the speaker presents as ‘reaching out’ to an undecided, doubtful or even dissenting addressee by supplying his/her attitudinal assertion with motivating argumentative support and justification. By this, the value position is framed as, to some degree, contentious or problematic and the addressee as potentially needing to be won over to the value position at risk. In this sense, the speaker/writer presents as acting to win over or to ‘convert’ the addressee so as to ‘induct’ the addressee into the speaker’s community of shared value.

These three alignment relations can be summarized thusly:

- ‘Embracing’: retrospectively concurring with prior speakers or prospectively construing a putative addressee as likeminded (aligning with the addressee in a values-based identity);
- ‘Proselytizing’: treating other interactants, or construing the putative addressee, as ‘persuadable’ (construing the addressee as ‘inductible’ into the speaker’s group identity);
- ‘Spurning’: treating other interactants or the putative addressee as implacably at odds.

The above proposals as to alignment relations rely on an account developed in the appraisal framework literature (Iedema et al., 1994; White, 1998, 2002, 2016; Martin, 2000; Macken-Horarik, 2003; Martin & White, 2005) with respect to the options in English for dialogistic positioning (the stances the speaker/writer can take vis-à-vis prior utterances on the current topic or vis-à-vis potential responses to the current proposition) – options set out as options for ‘engagement’, as the term is used in this literature (see, for example, White, 2000, 2003, 2010).

By reference to these three possibilities, the first stage of the analysis aimed to reach conclusions as to the nature and manner of formulation of value positions advanced by the author of the opinion piece and thus as to the relations of alignment/dis-alignment thereby entered into. The second stage was concerned with which of the options for alignment relations were taken up by the commenters as they positioned themselves reactively to the value positions (assessments of particular targets) asserted or implied in the article. This discussion involves some comparisons with Zappavigna’s proposals for strategies of ‘dialogic affiliation’ as outlined in Figure 2.1.

With respect to the nature of the value positions at stake, the analysis relied on the APPRAISAL framework’s proposals as to the different types and realizations of attitudinal meanings (positive or negative assessments) available in English – what the literature terms the system of ATTITUDE (Martin & White, 2005). Under this account, attitudinal assessments of particular targets (e.g. of human actors, artefacts, objects, happenings and situations) are sub-classified as: (1) Judgement (assessments of human behaviour and character by reference to systems of social norms), (2) Appreciation (assessments of entities, situations and happenings in terms of their aesthetic qualities or their social

value) and (3) Affect (indications of positive or negative emotion towards some trigger or target). A key distinction, also relevant to the concerns of this chapter, is between explicit expressions of ATTITUDE (termed ‘inscriptions’ – e.g. ‘the raid was a shocking invasion of privacy’) and implied activations of ATTITUDE (termed ‘invocations of ATTITUDE’, e.g. ‘The police officers went through every drawer and cupboard from the bedrooms to the living room and, in the kitchen, knelt on the floor rummaging through drawers of whisks and spoons’). In the case of such ‘invocations’, even while the writer may provide indicators as to the attitudinal assessment which is at stake, there is no explicitly and stably positive/negative lexis offered, with the reader being relied on to supply some attitudinal assessment through a process of inference. Thus, in the case of invocation just cited, the police actions are not explicitly characterized as exceptional or untoward. Rather, it is left up to the reader to provide an interpretation of the described action as in some way wrong or inappropriate. In this, attitudinal invocation is also implicated in construing addressees (either actual or putative) as ‘likeminded’, as ‘affiliated’ with the speaker, at least to the extent that they reveal an assumption that the addressee will be subject to the same attitudinal entailments as the speaker, will reach the same attitudinal conclusions as are elsewhere indicated in the text.

More specifically, the methodology employed tracked all instances of attitudinal assessment (explicit or implicit) in the op-ed and the subsequent Openings, considering at the same time authorial positioning with respect to these assessments (e.g. were they categorially asserted, justified, presented as contingently grounded in the author’s own subjectivity, and so on). In this way, it is possible to be specific about exactly what particular attitudinal assessments were being advanced (which assessment of which attitudinal targets), which attitudes were being projected onto the implied/putative reader and around which attitudinal assessments commenters aligned and dis-aligned with the op-ed author.

This is essentially the same methodology applied in the work on affiliation/disaffiliation mentioned above. However, this group of scholars choose to operate with the metaphor of ‘coupling’, specifically that attitudinal assessments can be analysed as a ‘coupling’ (fusion, combining, co-selection) of ideation and attitude – the ‘ideation’ element being the human actor, artefact, object, process or situation which is positively or negatively assessed by the ‘attitude’, that is, the particular value of Judgement, Appreciation or Affect. In the discussion below I will use less technical formulations in which attitudinal assessments are analysed and described by reference to the ‘value of ATTITUDE being promulgated’ and the specific phenomenon which is the ‘target’ of this value.

### ATTITUDE and alignment in the op-ed piece

The findings emerging from the first stage of the APPRAISAL analysis (as described above) enable a case to be made that the author of the opinion piece very largely ‘embraces’ a putative reader construed as like-minded – i.e. one who, it is assumed, will find unproblematic the value positions being advanced. Thus, this implied addressee is, for the most part, construed as having membership in the same community of shared value as the author, and as subscribing to the same values-based group identity.

This can firstly be seen in the article's headline:<sup>2</sup>

Annika Smethurst raid was more than an invasion of privacy  
(‘inscribed’ judgement/impropriety of the raid as a human behaviour)

Significant here is the fact that one of the article's key attitudinal propositions – that the police action was improper (an ‘invasion of privacy’) – is treated as a ‘given’ via the presuppositional grammatical structure of the sentence. That is to say, to assert that the action was ‘more than’ an invasion of privacy is to treat the proposition that it *was* an invasion as already decided, that is, as universally accepted.

Elsewhere, like-mindedness is projected onto the putative reader when potentially highly contentious attitudinal propositions are presented as if they are unproblematic and not in tension with alternative viewpoints. That is to say, they are barely and hence categorically asserted without any recognition that they are based in the contingent subjectivity of the author – a formulation that the APPRAISAL literature terms ‘monoglossic’.<sup>3</sup>

The first instance of this occurs when the headline is restated in the body:

Tuesday's raid on the home of our national political editor Annika Smethurst was a shocking invasion of privacy

Of note here is that the author has ‘upped the attitudinal ante’. The police action is categorically characterized not only as ‘an invasion of privacy’ (inscribed judgement/impropriety of the police action), but also as ‘shocking’, an assessment by which the action is said to globally trigger a negative reaction (negative appreciation with the ‘raid’ as its evaluative target). Thus, the author doesn't present as personally being ‘shocked’ by the action, rather presenting the quality of being ‘shocking’ as inhering in the act itself. And thus, the proposition that the police action is both improper and emotionally troubling is presented as unproblematic for the reader – as a proposition that need not be tempered, justified or grounded in any specific subjectivity.

The attitudinal invocations similarly anticipate a like-minded reader. Consider, for example, the stand-first at the head of the piece:

Seven federal cops. Seven hours. The rubbish bins. The oven. The underwear drawers.

There are several ‘flags’ here that these informational details should give rise to negative attitudinal assessments of the police action (i.e. an invoked assessment of judgement/impropriety on the part of police), for example, the unusual grammatical structure – a series of short noun groups, rather than a clause or complete sentence; similarly, the numbering of the police officers; the fortuitous parallelism of ‘seven federal cops’ with ‘seven hours’; the use of the potentially disparaging term ‘cops’ and the specific details of ‘underwear drawers’. The text thus points the reader in one attitudinal direction, but nevertheless still presents as assuming the reader can be relied on to supply the necessary inference.

There is, however, one exception to this rule – the treatment of the proposition that Smethurst's original 2018 article, which has prompted this police action, was 'in the public interest' (positive appreciation of the story and/or positive judgement of Smethurst's actions in publishing the story). Tellingly, in putting into play this proposition, the author both signals recognition that this is in conflict with an alternative viewpoint (even while this viewpoint is not explicitly sourced) and supplies the proposition with extensive argumentative justification:

Annika's story, published in April 2018, was absolutely in the public interest: [because] it revealed secret plans at the highest levels of the Canberra bureaucracy to allow the Australian Signals Directorate to cyber-spy on Australian citizens. That's a chilling prospect: this agency was created to keep Australia safe from external, i.e. foreign, threats.

To be noted firstly is the use of 'absolutely' in 'was absolutely in the public interest'. Termed 'pronouncements' in the APPRAISAL framework literature, such expressions involve heightened emphasis on the part of author by way of pushing back against rival propositions. Such pronouncements thus recognize heteroglossic alternatives while simultaneously confronting them. This allows for the possibility that the putative reader may be aware of, or party to, this alternative viewpoint. But then the evaluative proposition at stake is bolstered by a series of justifications – that, for example, the story was revealing plans for 'cyber-spying' on Australian citizens. In moving to offer readers these reasons, the author thereby constructs the putative reader as possibly not wedded to the idea that the story was 'in the public interest', but nevertheless as still 'persuadable', as potentially to be won over and thereby capable of being 'inducted' into the author's community of shared values.

## Attitude and alignment in the comments trail Openings

### Openings: Embracing

I begin the discussion of the attitudinal alignments/dis-alignments in the comment trail by considering the six Openings which were broadly supportive of the opinion and piece (i.e. 'embracing'). These would broadly fall under Zappavigna's dialogic affiliation category of 'support' (see Figure 2.1). An analysis of these 'embracing' Openings reveals three primary modes of, or orientations to, alignment: bolstering, broadening and barracking. In the cases of some of these Openings, the entirety of the comment can be treated as performing just one of these aligning functions, while in other cases, multiple functions will be observable in the one comment.

### *Bolstering*

In 'bolstering', the commenter goes beyond simply indicating agreement with the op-ed's author or applauding her for the positions she has advanced by offering additional argumentative support or evidence for one or more of the author's value positions.

The commenter thus aligns with the author in a values-based identity through strengthening a value position. The following is an example of such an Opening:

1. Vincent: Grossly disgraceful conduct by those responsible for that home invasion. Whoever authorised it should be sacked immediately. All Annika did was to report the fact that our Government is planning to have Australian spies spying on Australian people. That is hardly breaching National Security. I could understand the concern about National Security if she was having dinners with multi-millionaires from a Communist Country.

Here the commenter essentially reiterates the author's negative assessment of the police action (negative judgement/propriety of 'those responsible for the action'), while interestingly being more direct in his/her attitudinal targeting – assessing the behaviour of 'those responsible' as 'disgraceful conduct'. As well, he/she ups the attitudinal force by characterizing the behaviour as a 'home invasion' – a rather more serious 'crime' than an 'invasion of privacy'. The commenter similarly positions the reader to view positively Smethurst's 2018 story in that it revealed that 'our Government is planning to have Australian spies spying on Australian people'. Beyond this, the commenter develops the argument in drawing a distinction between what Smethurst was doing in revealing confidential government information and what others would be doing if, for example, they revealed such information to foreign agents. The value position is thus bolstered as the commenter recognizes that, yes, in some cases revealing confidential information is 'wrong', but this is certainly not always the case.

### **Broadening**

A number of these aligned Openings 'embrace' by broadening the scope of the attitudinal positioning in play. Consider, for example, the following two instances:

2. Stephen: Have a read of 1984 and see where we are heading, the safer we are the more danger we are in, KGB.
3. John: Another Julian Assange moment, we should be protecting journo's [sic], not jailing them.

In both comments, the issue at hand (the police action in searching Smethurst's home) is, by implication, treated as an instance of a much more widely operating 'issue' of concern. 'Stephen' in comment 2 above draws a very long bow, implying that this action by the police takes us down a path towards the totalitarian extremism of George Orwell's dystopian novel 1984 or the excesses of the Soviet Russian secret service. In comment 3, 'John' connects Smethurst's actions with the groundbreaking actions of WikiLeaks over many years in revealing the innermost workings of the US government, military and security services. In both cases we have instances of what Stenglin has termed 'bonding icons' or 'bondicons' (Stenglin, 2004). By 'bonding icon' Stenglin refers to certain experiential references (e.g. Orwell's 1984, the KGB, Julian Assange) which, for a particular community of shared value, have become so

attitudinally charged that they signify a particular value position – to the extent that, for that community, all it takes to invoke a particular value position is to mention the relevant ‘bonding icon’. Crucially, of course, the experiential reference will not work in this way for other communities of shared value. In assuming that ‘Assange’ can be used as a rallying point in this way, ‘John’ plainly construes his/her addressees as very much like-minded.

### ***Barracking***

One further mechanism of ‘embracing’ could be observed in the opening comments. This is exemplified in the following two Openings:

4. Peter: Strength to Annika. A great journo, an astute commentator, a brilliant mind. Keep on keeping on.
5. Michael: Annika don’t feel threatened buy [sic] this. Just keep on keeping on. Just shows some of the forces involved in silencing the right to speech and the Press. On the anniversary of the Tienanmen Square incident, we do have the right to voice an opinion and not be stifled by government. I have your back.

Obviously, comment 4 doesn’t set out to engage with any of the substantive issues raised by the article. Instead, the ‘embracing’ here is more directly personal as the speaker offers ‘moral support’ and encouragement, in this case to Smethurst, the individual with whom the op-ed aligns and presents as the injured party. The commenter can therefore be said to be ‘barracking’ for Smethurst, to be indicating that he/she is ‘on the same side as’ the op-ed and the person it presents as unfairly dealt with.

Comment 5 operates in the same way, even while, of course, it also involves ‘broadening’ of the type discussed above. Again the police action is construed as just one instance of a much wider phenomenon – the action of ‘forces’ to suppress democratic freedoms. Note also the rather interesting use of another ‘bonding icon’ – the reference to the ‘Tienanmen [sic] Square’ incident.<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, it is left entirely up to the reader to determine the relevance of the ‘Tienanmen [sic] Square incident’ to the actions of Australian police in undertaking a search of a journalist’s home. The commenter construes the addressee as having membership in a community of shared value (a value-based identity) for whom it is not only uncontentiously ‘wrong’ for the police to take this action but for whom there is an obvious likeness between this action and the Chinese authorities violently suppressing the pro-democracy movement in Beijing in 1989.

## Openings – proselytising and spurning

As indicated above, twelve of the Opening comments in the data set indicated broad dis-alignment with the op-ed and its author. (They would fall within Zappavigna’s category of ‘reject’.) In two of these Openings the commenter did ‘reach out’ to the addressee by offering reasoning in support of a counter-view – thereby construing the addressee as ‘persuadable’, as being ‘inductible’ into the commenter’s values-based group identity. In the remaining cases, one or more of the value positions advanced in the

op-ed were rejected, repudiated or basically ignored. They thus construe one or more adversarial communities of shared value, one or more values-based group identities.

### Openings – proselytizing

The following exemplifies this ‘reaching out’ or ‘proselytising’ alignment function just mentioned:

6. Damien: I know journo’s [sic] have to support each other but this is ridiculous. By your own acknowledgement the documents were secret. They involved our most secret agencies tasked with protecting us from threats both here and abroad. By all means, if a story is handed to her, let her investigate. But if she, as with Assange, decide [sic] to go public with secret documents then you have to expect investigations to ensue. Regardless of whether it’s in the public interest or not these agencies have not only the right but the responsibility to investigate the source of the leaks. Being a journo doesn’t make you exempt from the laws which govern the rest of us, and her actions have consequences. What she must decide is if the story is worth the pain that will follow.

While the comment does begin by disparaging the op-ed and its directly addressed author in generalized terms (‘... this is ridiculous’ – non-specific negative attitude directed at a vague target, presumably the article in general or what the commenter views as its key propositions), the key point here is that the remainder of comment does present as a genuine attempt by the commenter to ‘reason’ with the op-ed author, to win her over by pointing to gaps or inconsistencies in the article and to make a case for the alternative view that the police action was entirely proper. We note that the commenter doesn’t present as operating from a position which is diametrically at odds with that of the op-ed. Rather, he/she presents as pointing to certain aspects of the issue which appear to have been overlooked or given inadequate attention in the op-ed – namely the fact that the police were actually operating according to current Australian laws with regards to ‘leaked’ confidential documents, laws by which it is ‘illegal’ for anyone – ‘journalists’ or otherwise – to be knowingly in receipt of leaked classified documents.

### Openings – spurning

In Zappavigna’s approach (Figure 2.1), tweets which ‘oppose’ are divided into those which ‘ridicule’ and those which ‘censure’. As it turned out, none of the Openings in my small data set seemed to ‘ridicule’. Rather, all the ‘spurning’ Openings in the data set could broadly fit within Zappavigna’s category of ‘censuring’ – i.e. they all involve negative critiques or contradictions of positions advanced in the op-ed.

### *disparagement*

It is perhaps not surprising that Openings which ‘spurn’ often deploy disparagement, as the commenter signals his/her membership of values-based identity which is adversarial to that of the op-ed author. For example (disparagements indicated in italics):



7. Ross: She's *crossed a line*. (negative judgement/propriety of Smethurst) It's *delusional* (negative judgement/capacity of the author of the op-ed and anyone who shares the author's views) to think society has right to know everything that's going on .... *grow up people*
8. Damien: I know journo's [sic] have to support each other but *this is ridiculous*. ...

However, as these examples demonstrate, these disparagements are not typically offered in isolation, but are part of a wider-ranging repudiation of the op-ed's value positions.

### ***Bare antithesis***

A repeated method of spurning observed in Openings involved what, for ease of reference, I will term 'bare antithesis'. In these cases, none of the value positions advanced in the op-ed are directly engaged with. Instead, a flatly antithetical position is categorically asserted, without any form of argumentative support:

9. Greg: i am glad the afp (Australian Federal Police) take the broadcasting of confidential leaked documents seriously (positive affectual response by the commenter to the mindset of the police)
10. Ross: She's *crossed a line*. It's *delusional* to think society has right to know everything that's going on. There always has to be a level of secrecy across various parts of government, *grow up people*.
11. SCOTT: National security should ALWAYS take precedence.

Such comments clearly function as acts of group identity demarcation. They are contributed simply to signal the commenter's membership of an adversarial values-based identity.

### ***Axiological substitution***

The final 'spurning' mechanism observable in this data set involves what I will term 'axiological substitution'. In this I understand 'axiology' to designate a particular system, 'theory' (formal or informal) or set of related assumptions as to what should be the basis by which phenomena are to be assessed as good/bad, laudable/illaudable, right/wrong, pleasing/displeasing and so on. Thus, speakers/writers may operate with different 'axiologies' – with different bases on which a phenomenon will be evaluated positively or negatively. A number of the commenters 'spurn' by substituting their own axiology for that which operates in the article. For these commenters, the rightness or wrongness of the police action is to be determined on the basis of the moral standing of journalists generally, and not on any consideration of benefits or harm associated with the police action itself:

11. Matt: A journalist the victim of an invasion of privacy? How does it feel now the shoe's on the other foot?

12. Col: So it's okay for a journalist to pry into other people's lives in pursuit [sic] of a story, but it's not okay for the police to pry into the journalist's life to find out how she came into the possession of top secret papers?

Comment 11 obviously operates, via the initial rhetorical question-like minor clause, on the assumption that journalists generally are guilty of 'invasions of privacy' (negative judgement/propriety of journalists as a vocational grouping), thereby shifting the attitudinal focus from the police action and/or Smethurst's own action to generalized attitudes towards journalism as social process. It is this assessment which is then treated as providing the 'axiological' basis for the spurning of the value position advanced in the article – specifically that the article has failed to acknowledge the hypocrisy of any journalist complaining about invasions of privacy. Comment 12 operates along very similar axiological lines.

Interestingly, the community of shared value in which the commenters here announce their membership is one broadly based on one's views of journalists/journalism – those who are positively disposed to journalists (the op-ed) versus those who are negatively disposed (these commenters).

## Conclusion

Based, as it is, on an APPRAISAL analysis (an analysis of evaluative workings) of part of the comments trail of just one op-ed piece, the above discussion is necessarily of a preliminary nature. Nevertheless, I am hopeful that it does point forward to further, more comprehensive treatments of how the participants in this one-to-one/one-to-many format conduct themselves interactively and rhetorically and of how it is they construe and demarcate values-based group identities. The chapter has demonstrated how both 'monologic' op-eds of this type and the 'dialogic/polylogic' comments attached to them can be analysed from the perspective of the attitudinal alignments and dis-alignments they enter into, and hence how it is possible to identify the particular values-based group identities enacted by author and commenters. It was proposed that between the extremes of the 'embracing' of and the 'spurning' of some prior or prospective speaker lies the intermediate option of 'proselytizing'. In 'embracing', the speaker aligns with the addressee in a values-based group identity, in 'spurning' signals group-identity disjunction, and through 'proselytising' the speaker construes the addressee as 'inductible' into the speaker's values-based group identity.

The chapter also offered some proposals, arising from this admittedly limited data set, as to what appear to be various options by which 'embracing', 'proselytising' and 'spurning' can be managed communicatively. It was shown, for example, that a number of the commenters 'embraced' by bolstering the value positions advanced in the op-ed (by providing additional justifications), while others broadened a value position (by presenting the event being assessed as an instance of a much wider social, political and ethical issue). Similarly, a number of the commenters 'spurned' through a process of 'bare antithesis' (simply asserting a contrary assessment to that

advanced by the op-ed), while others engaged in ‘axiological substitution’ (ignoring the principles operating in the op-ed by which positive/negative assessments are made and deploying entirely different bases for attitudinal conclusions). Plainly, this can only be a preliminary sketch as to various options taken up by participants in these comments trails – an analysis which of necessity could only deal with the commenters’ attitudinal positionings vis-à-vis value positions advanced in the op-ed, rather than also dealing with the ‘polylogical’ arrangements by which the commenters also position themselves vis-à-vis other prospective respondents (via signals as to assumptions of the implied/putative addressee’s beliefs and values). More research is needed across a much wider data set to determine how these relationships are typically construed and what might be the wider repertoire of options available.

## Notes

- 1 In this chapter I use ‘speaker’ as a general term for the source of any verbal communication – i.e. it includes those who communicate through writing.
- 2 The headline, according to customary newsroom practice, may well not have been composed by the journalist author, being added later by a sub-editor. This, however, is irrelevant for our current concerns, since it is with the article as presented – headline + body – that readers, and hence commenters, engage.
- 3 For extended discussions of bare assertions as ‘monoglossic’, see White (2000, 2003, 2010).
- 4 The violent suppression of pro-democracy protests by the mainland Chinese authorities in Beijing in 1989.

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