

The pragmatic implications of “boilerplate” in news coverage of California ballot initiative controversies

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Introduction. A good news story is more than just scandal, victory, upset, or a tale of woe or triumph. A good news story is also marked by how artfully it is compiled. In fact, well-formed news discourse—the kind found in stories that would be considered well-reported and well-written by news practitioners themselves—is structured by a fairly strict set of rules that govern how information is selected and presented. Three interrelated discourse requirements are especially relevant in the case of controversial long-running news stories, such as those I consider here, because they can unwittingly work against the clarity that journalists are striving for. The injunctions of newswriting—(1) to simplify, (2) to maintain an authorial distance or neutrality, and (3) to summarize previously reported details of a story when reporting it afresh—are all made manifest in “boilerplate.” Boilerplate is recurring material that is inserted into stories extending longer than a single day to remind readers of prior context.

Boilerplate summarizes, simplifies, and is presented as non-evaluatively as possible according to reporter codes of balance. Because of its very ordinariness and relative unimportance in relation to the “main point,” or the most recent or newest dimension of a story (the lead), boilerplate is easy to overlook. Nonetheless, as an identifiable component of news discourse, it follows certain constraints on content and placement within the text. Its discourse purpose, while backgrounded to other goals, is orientational, orienting the public to the status of a story to date. My point is to show how the “shorthand” language and text design that result from the pragmatic requirements of news discourse may end up shaping public debate and even actions on important issues. The pragmatic implications of discourse rules become especially significant when the underlying propositions of the language of a news story become linked to more divisive issues within the culture in which the discourse is situated.

To illustrate the features and implications of boilerplate and other types of background or explanatory material, I will use examples from a corpus of stories that dealt with a major hot-button issue in California in 1994—Proposition 187, a ballot measure that, as it has been described, “banned state benefits and public

education for illegal immigrants,” and whose implications are in the news to this very day. I will also make reference to another ballot measure passed two years later in 1996, which banned preferences in hiring and other situations based on race and gender. This measure, Proposition 209, known variously and somewhat problematically as the anti-affirmative action or anti-quotas measure, or California Civil Rights Initiative, is often linked with Prop. 187 in terms of its social impacts and underlying racist presuppositions. This ideological link was forged in the in-between, non-election year, 1995.¹

All of the articles in the corpus appeared in the three major California papers, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, and the *Sacramento Bee*, from June through November of 1994 and 1996, with selective sampling in 1995, and were collected using the Lexis-Nexis database. More than 2,000 articles are in the corpus, from which examples have been selected primarily to illustrate fundamental issues concerning boilerplate.

I begin with a discussion of the requirements for well-formed news discourse that motivate the use of boilerplate and help to construct its genre conventions. Then I outline and illustrate the defining characteristics of boilerplate in terms of content and structure. Finally, I consider the implications of boilerplate as a textual device that reports and thus represents the world to its readers. This work is intended to underscore the value of looking at media discourse as a multifunctional, interactionally grounded system (Cotter, Unpublished), and to show how one textual component is revealing of the complex relationship of journalists, their texts, and their audiences and the emergence of public understanding of social and political issues.

Requirements of news discourse. Reporters, who comprise their own discourse community and thus share norms of interaction across the profession, are grounded in the principles of reporting and editing, or the selection and presentation of information about the world, in ways that nonjournalists are not (Cotter 1999). They learn, internalize, reproduce, and reinforce “ways of speaking” that are indigenous to the journalism profession. In terms of worldview, a reporter in Florida would likely have more in common with a colleague in Alaska than he or she would with someone behind them in line in the grocery store in Tampa or Anchorage. Indeed, there is a mismatch between how the public perceives what journalists do and how journalists view their craft. This mismatch has been substantiated empirically by an ambitious “credibility” research project initiated by the American Society of Newspaper Editors (see ASNE 1999 and Woo 1999).

Academic researchers traditionally have focused on examining the media from the public or end-user perspective. It is important to expand our knowledge of how the media works by taking an ethnographic approach, as I do here, to better understand what communicative behaviors constitute membership in the professional community and to consider how journalistic practice intentionally or not

relates to the public. Explicitly or implicitly, a well-socialized journalist knows the requirements behind producing a good news story. These requirements vary according to story genre; for example, there is more latitude in a feature story and even more in a column, and the least flexibility in a news story, a correlation that intensifies according to the extent of controversy. On the textual level, then, the rules that involve simplification, neutrality, and provision of sufficient explanatory information—operating factors behind the production of all stories—also lead to the production of boilerplate.

Simplification. The injunction to simplify derives from the general rule of brevity. Daily, a reporter is charged with grasping the significant particulars about a complex situation, synthesizing those particulars, and writing accessibly about them—with a minimum number of words, often in a minimum amount of time, and for readers with a minimum amount of time and attention. For example, the descriptions of Propositions 187 and 209 in all three of the newspapers in the study amounted to a couple of short paragraphs at most, as subsequent examples will show, whereas the language of the propositions themselves were much lengthier and reproduced in entirety, as a public document, in the paper usually once or twice during the election season.

Distance. Another interactional and thus discursive goal is to maintain an authoritative distance between reporter and story. Through discursive means a reporter should convey a sense of distance—of relation and ideology—between him- or herself and the material being reported. I call this the Principle of Neutral Authority, because the reporter adhering to the profession's ethical code will attempt to be neutral or balanced—to speak from a more distanced institutional or professional position rather than a personal one. This effort simultaneously supports the authority of the report as a compiled, vetted, multisourced, and neutralized text and suppresses the potential perspective of the reporter as an individual self.

Various textual strategies allow manifestation of this principle, which tie into linguistic assessments of evidentiality, or the distribution of responsibility for knowledge or the claims of an utterance (a relation that invites discussion beyond what I provide here). The principle in particular governs lexical choices and influences the use of quoted material. Value-laden words relating to the ballot initiatives are supposed to be eliminated or marked. For example, before propositions are assigned numbers, like 187 or 209, they are given identificatory names by their authors—typically, names that frame the initiative so as to appeal to particular voters. By using quotation marks and phrases like “so-called” and “dubbed” when referring to these names, the reporter marks that portion of the utterance, distancing the journalist from the partisan conceptual context with which the meaning of the word or phrase is associated, as in the following examples:

(1a) *8/4/95 Chronicle*: The ideological divide was most evident on the issue of illegal immigration, the subject of November's Proposition 187, the "Save Our State" initiative.

(1b) *8/12/94 Bee*: Venegas said he opposes Proposition 187, the so-called "Save our State" measure set for the November ballot that seeks to deny public education and social and health services—except for emergency medical care—to undocumented immigrants.

(1c) *8/15/94 LAT*: In addition, the council will consider endorsing Proposition 187 on the November ballot. The controversial initiative, dubbed Save Our State, would bar illegal immigrants from receiving public schooling, non-emergency health care and social services.

The examples in (1) illustrate the use of particularly identifiable and obvious distancing devices. The quotative nature of these devices, like quotes themselves, represents the material as coming from the source, and not the reporter.

Background. Another discourse requirement is to provide necessary background. In the case of long-running stories that appear before the public frequently, or in stories that have been out of the public eye for a long while, this background material—sometimes referred to as boilerplate by the general public as well as journalists—is used as an efficient way of getting readers up-to-date. Boilerplate, defined by its unreflective, unoriginal replications, works in conjunction with the fact that reporters are to assume that each day's readers are unfamiliar with the previous material, and yet they must also simultaneously background the previous information *and* highlight the new information.

As a story progresses over time, relatively little attention is given to boilerplate by reporters or editors if it is factually accurate. Boilerplate allows different reporters to cover a story at different points because it is assumed to be a comprehensive, neutralized summary of the main issues of the story to date—it is assumed to be given or rhemic information—and is repetitively inserted into stories. Boilerplate is one textual aid that allows reporters to focus on breaking news or to develop a new angle without having to do all the reporting work from scratch.

The placement of boilerplate, in modifying clauses on first-mention and in paragraphs at or near the end of a story (where, if necessary, they could be cut), demonstrates its secondary importance to the main angle of the story and allows an easy apprehension of the story's given-new hierarchical relation, as example (2) shows.

(2) *8/14/94 LAT*: Supporters and opponents of the Nov. 8 ballot measure—*which would deny schooling, non-emergency health care and other public benefits to illegal immigrants*—have spent the summer gearing up countywide campaigns aimed at winning over voters.

The underlined material is the background material, set apart from the main framing of the story not only by the clausal structure of the sentence, but also by punctuational means, through use of the dashes.

The discourse rules noted here work together in the construction of boilerplate, which represents an extreme distillation of the simplicity rule as it eases the textual workload and reader comprehension: active goals of the newswriting enterprise. Its characteristic generic, non-evaluative, and non-attributed format, as well as its subsidiary and thus expendable relation to the *current* installment of the story (its rhemic nature means it becomes optional in relation to more salient issues, such as newness) follows the Principle of Neutral Authority. Additionally, the summary structure of boilerplate as a piece or pieces of text repeated almost verbatim from story to story allows unmarked repetition over time, also easing the work of comprehension. But what boilerplate allows a reporter to achieve in relation to the larger requirements for the story (primarily those relating to newness) and for reader comprehension may have other consequences, which invite examination, particularly when the story is controversial.

Features of boilerplate. Reporters are taught explicitly about presenting background and context within a story, and, indeed, students in beginning newswriting classes often have difficulty interpreting what counts as contextual and necessary and what is expendable, as some sorts of background material often are. Unsurprisingly, this difficulty occurs even when novices are provided textbook definitions that describe background in part as “material placed in the story that explains the event, traces its development and adds facts that sources have not provided” (Mencher 1996: 252). This writing facility problem suggests that to be viewed as communicatively competent (and employable), a reporter must consciously learn the full range of conventionalized aspects of newswriting. Sacrificing chronology of events to the highlighting of the most newsworthy aspect of a story is a primary rhetorical characteristic of news genres, one that a reporter must learn how to do successfully, and one that also serves as a constraint on background or boilerplate material.

Boilerplate, because of its often “canned” nature, can be viewed as a particular, more conventionalized form of background. Mencher’s definition refers to the explanatory, additive, and chronological nature of background—necessary to the extent that its addition makes news-of-the-moment intelligible. To call something

“boilerplate” suggests additional features: it is repetitious, unattributed, identificatory, descriptive, often expendable, and summarizes what have been interpreted as key “complicating actions” of a story (to refer to and to situate news discourse in Labov’s [1972] narrative framework).

The following paragraph from the April 27, 1999, *San Francisco Chronicle* will stand as a reference example (3a) of boilerplate from which I will make other comparisons:

(3a) Proposition 187 bars illegal immigrants from receiving social services and government-paid nonemergency health care. Federal law already forbids them getting those benefits.

The measure also bars illegal immigrants from public schools, even though the U.S. Supreme Court has ruled that unconstitutional.

Example (3a) bears structural and informational resemblance to examples (1b), (1c), and (2), illustrating one feature of boilerplate: it is *repetitious*. Almost every example in the pre- and post-election corpus, as well as randomly selected 1999 stories, contain mention of the following informational components down to the very words chosen:

- illegal (or undocumented) immigrants
- deny (or bar, ban, restrict)
- health, schooling, social services (or public benefits)

The examples also show how the boilerplate summary is repetitious: from story to story, both across newspapers and within newspapers, and across time. Additionally, this information is *not attributed* to a source, another characterizing feature. Attribution is a primary discourse requirement of a news story, except in cases of common knowledge, and boilerplate is thus viewed by the reporter—and viewable by the reader—as received information. Further, these examples show the *identificatory* positioning of boilerplate. Boilerplate identifies or describes what has occurred, avoiding interpreting or explaining, which allows brevity and repetition. Because it refers to the most observable, concrete aspects of a story, it is more *descriptive* than evaluative. It *summarizes* the story’s key events (as in disaster, accident, or crime coverage) or the main necessary propositional information to date (as in coverage of government or legal news). Example (3a), from 1999, contains information similar to examples (1b), (1c), and (2), from 1994. But after the measure passed in 1994, and challenges were subsequently filed in court, the measure’s legal relationships were highlighted in news stories, and thus the 1999 example (3a) contains relevant addi-

tional phrases as listed in (3b), which themselves are unattributed, identificatory, descriptive, and summarizing:

(3b) Federal law already forbids them getting those benefits. . . . even though the U.S. Supreme Court has ruled that unconstitutional.

The physical-conceptual placement of boilerplate within the structure of a news story also positions it as background and allows for its potential *expendability*. It is material that can easily be cut to fit the fluctuating exigencies of the “news hole,” the space allotted for that day’s stories. Most boilerplate is placed near the bottom of the story² where it can be cut (or ignored) if necessary without sacrificing the completeness of the story. For instance, example (3a) represents paragraphs 14 and 15 in a 17-paragraph story. (Final paragraphs 16 and 17 contain additional background material, dating from after the election in which Proposition 187 passed; extra material is usually presented in continuing stories if there is sufficient space.)

I have also considered the nature of the summarizing material appearing on first reference, which could be termed “first-reference boilerplate,” as in examples (4a) and (4b), which are separated by nearly five years:

(4a) *8/13/94 Chronicle*: San Francisco’s Social Services Commission voted unanimously Thursday to support a resolution by Supervisors Susan Leal and Tom Hsieh that would oppose Proposition 187, *which would deny public benefits to illegal immigrants.*

(4b) *4/27/99 Chronicle*: While the whisperers and fingerpointers worked the Capitol corridors and phone lines, the federal appeals court accepted Davis’ request for the mediator, a low-key method of handling the court challenge to the 1994 measure, *which banned state benefits and public education for illegal immigrants.*

When repetitious, unattributed, identifying material appears on first reference in the story itself, it is often in a modifying clause at the end of a paragraph, as in (4a) and (4b). Modifying clauses are easy to cut, often gaining the copy editor (who will generally do the cutting) an extra line. But given its informational value in first-reference position, this would be the last resort and only if the copy editor assumed a general knowledge within the readership. Interestingly, only stories in the corpus that appeared *after* the elections and passage of the propositions regularly eliminated first-reference boilerplate, suggesting that journalists were

assuming a fair degree of shared knowledge on the part of readers (and pointing up the journalists' own mutable view of carefulness, affected when something is officially or ritually disputed or under contention, as all electoral contests are).

There is even a hierarchical relationship within boilerplate itself, which relates to expendability. The information in (3b), by its very location in the text—at the end of a paragraph, in a modifying clause at the end of a paragraph—is positioned as possibly expendable and thus subsidiary to the primary summary (see [3a]), which has been integral to the Proposition 187 story from its beginnings. This relationship is made clearer in example (5), which more extensively shows the text from which examples (3a) and (3b) are extracted. Example (5) also illustrates the extent to which boilerplate is restricted as to *placement*, and points to the distinctions between boilerplate and background elements secondary to the story. Note that the underlined material in the example marks the primary summary of the issue, which predates the election, and the italicized material marks the additional facts of the issue, which occurred after the election. The most recent development in the story—the reason for publication—is marked by boldface type in the lead or first paragraph.

(5) 4/17/99 *Chronicle*

HEADLINE:

Point Driven Home In *Prop. 187* Feud

Davis, Bustamante at odds over how to handle appeal of case

PARAGRAPH (#)

- (1) SACRAMENTO—A **feud** sparked by differences over *Proposition 187* between Governor Gray Davis and Lieutenant Governor Cruz

—> *lead, new* Bustamante took a **new turn yesterday over parking.**

(2—5) [. . .]

- (6) While the whisperers and fingerpointers worked the Capitol corridors and phone lines, the federal appeals court accepted Davis' request for the mediator, a low-key method of handling the court challenge to the *1994 measure, which banned state benefits and public education for illegal immigrants.*

- (7) *Nearly all of Proposition 187, passed by 59 percent of voters, has been blocked by U.S. District Court Judge Mariana Pfaelzer in Los Angeles.*

(8–13) [. . .]

- (14) *Proposition 187 bars illegal immigrants from receiving social services and government-paid nonemergency health care. Federal law already forbids them getting those benefits.*
- (15) *The measure also bars illegal immigrants from public schools, even though the U.S. Supreme Court has ruled that unconstitutional.*
- (16) *Pfaelzer blocked the ban from taking effect, saying that regulating immigration is solely the job of the federal government.*
- (17) *Davis said mediation would allow the state and the measure's opponents a chance to negotiate a settlement.*

The first five paragraphs of the story develop the lead, or new aspect of the ongoing story. Paragraph 6 is interesting as it relates the immediate situation of the parking feud (“While the whisperers and fingerpointers worked the Capitol corridors”) to the current status of the proposition (it is in mediation) and reminds readers what the proposition (passed in 1994, five years earlier) was designed to do. It is in a pre-emptive position: the reader must not be left too long to wonder about the relation of Prop. 187 to the immediate story. Nonetheless, the clause in the last sentence of paragraph 6 highlights the given or rhemic nature of the information, implying a status as background shared by the majority. As first-reference boilerplate, the clause contains identificatory elements that have gone along with the story since its inception (“ban,” “benefits,” “illegal immigrants”), mentioned in the examples in (1). Paragraph 7 builds on the background function of the text and the preceding paragraph, summarizing the court challenge, the most salient dimension of the story since the election.

Paragraph 7's position in relation to the identificatory material reaffirms the temporal order of the story, which serves reader comprehension and narrative coherence, and, by its second-order placement, also marks the identificatory facet of the proposition in Paragraph 6 as essential and possibly immutable. This pattern is repeated in the concluding paragraphs (paragraphs 8 through 13 develop the feud story line) and follows the general order of the “inverted pyramid,” the basic structure of news texts in which information is placed in diminishing order of importance or salience, the least important in last place. The story could easily be cut after paragraph 13 and still be well-formed; indeed, it could be cut after paragraphs 6 or 7 and still count as a fully fledged news story. Of course, what is cut out—either on the page at any optional moment or

in the formulation of boilerplate as a standardized summary—influences what information the public has access to.

Implications of boilerplate. Boilerplate has implications for public understanding as it both responds to and frames the nature of a news story and its social entailments. Beyond its role in information structure affecting the reader and the public record, boilerplate also has a bearing on the reporter's own position in relation to the information being reported. It supports the ideology or professional stance of "being a reporter," because it marks a form of neutrality and distance. It is contingent—on the story process, its placement, and expendability—creating various editing options depending on what else needs to be addressed that day. It is only a partially representative summary that is never overtly evaluative. Nonetheless, boilerplate as read or interpreted by both reporter and reader serves to background what can be viewed as a more covert evaluative dimension that may be embedded within the text and within the production of news.

Given and new status. Boilerplate's reflection of the general rules of well-formed news discourse as well as its unique characteristic features jointly support the backgrounding of what is presented. This backgrounding essentially renders uncontested (or incontestable) the information it sets apart, making the issue of given information key when one considers how the structure of texts and the meaning of their constituent parts have an impact on public understanding.

Boilerplate is essentially information about some facet of the story that pre-dates the new angle being freshly reported; it is given or rhemic information that is assumed to be generally known but cannot be left out because it explicitly gives background or a history of the issue to date. As the given information that accompanies stories that are long-running, boilerplate is a standard textual element because reporters are always to assume a new and uninformed audience at the same time they must background the previously presented material and foreground the new information. Not knowing what prior discourse the audience has had access to, the reporter has boilerplate as a tool to serve a multifunctional discourse purpose. Its features (repetition, nonattribution, identification, structural placement) lead to an interpretation of genericness that allows a reader to either skim or ignore the information as given at the same time it can be read for its informational value by a first-time or forgetful reader. Either way, the framing of the issue, as we have seen in the example case of Prop. 187 in two different years, becomes part of the public record. If a story is an ongoing one, as most stories that have an impact on the sociopolitical sphere are, the preliminary depiction of the issue gets replicated and repeated through boilerplate.

The neutral authority model. Reporters spend a fair amount of professional and thus discursive energy distancing themselves from the claims, propositions,

narratives, and beliefs they are reporting on. Concurrently, an utterance has more credibility when it is directly or indirectly viewed as coming from a source other than the reporter, hence the tremendous emphasis placed on attribution of information. The reporter thus positions himself or herself as a neutral authority, using professional identity and the resources of the text to do so. As mentioned earlier, the principle of neutral authority would account for words such as “so-called” or “dubbed,” as in “Prop. 187, dubbed the Save Our State initiative.” These quotative textual markers isolate the phrase that follows as not of the journalist’s creation—“Save Our State” and its accompanying “SOS” acronym are value judgments. These textual devices (including scare-quotes) allow the perpetuation of a neutral authority and distance the reporter from the evaluative stance of the source.

Of course, despite the professional-ideological constraints governing personal affiliations to the matters being reported, the boundary between social self and professional self is semi-permeable, as are the issues of authorship in the discursive process of reporting the news in which one story is the outcome of many contributing participants. Boilerplate, despite the features that lead to a generic or neutral reading, nonetheless owes its origin to the primary framing of an issue. In the case of a ballot measure, the authors of a ballot proposition provide a baseline definition of an issue, creating and setting the terms for debate against this baseline. Given the source of what ends up as boilerplate, the use of “neutral” or unattributed information can better be seen as representing the journalist’s *intention* to hold to a neutral authority model rather than instantiating a neutral authority alone.

Contingencies in the story process. The majority of news stories are keyed to cycles—seasonal, economic, legislative, historical, meteorological, and so on—and their coverage becomes routinized (Cotter, to appear). There are markers (constructed by either the journalist’s world or the larger social world) in the process of reporting over time that influence how a story is reported. (Thanksgiving travel stories, which involve large numbers of Americans and play simultaneously to reader interest and journalistic news values of importance and effect, are a case in point.) In the case of a ballot initiative, election day becomes a defining event in the story process.

Boilerplate is contingent on the story process as it unfolds over time and changes to meet changing informational needs. There were substantive changes in the presentation of boilerplate after the elections, when modifying clauses after first mention—as in examples (1a) through (1c)—fall off and acronyms such as CCRI (the California Civil Rights Initiative) or SOS (Save Our State) to refer to propositions 209 and 187 all but disappear. One could hypothesize that after the proposition becomes ratified by voters, its presence becomes unmarked and viewable as shared knowledge; or that editors and reporters are less careful. More care is generally taken with stories before an election—by reporters *and*

editors—because of the potential loss of credibility and a status as neutral authority, which newspapers (and individual reporters) want to maintain.

Boilerplate usage changes not only in response to actual events, but also in connection with developing social attitudes. In fact, the meaning of Prop. 187 and its implications changed over time from a legislative proposition with specific consequences for a specific group of people to a symbolic marker that invoked a larger and more abstract set of social meanings. The related stories that ran in 1995, the year after the proposition's passage, began to cite Prop. 187 in passing as tangential to the main point of whatever the current story was—as a way to illustrate what was viewed as a general decline in tolerance, particularly toward immigrants and minority communities generally. In this way, Prop. 187, which was viewed by detractors as punitive and racist, became linked to the next election cycle's Prop. 209, itself viewed by detractors as racist and exclusionary. The boilerplate remained the same, but the contingencies of its use changed. Boilerplate can thus be viewed as a highly contingent and situated discourse element on a number of levels.

Partial representation. Related to its contingent status, boilerplate is only a partial representation of the fuller meaning of what it is characterizing. Although it does not carry an overt evaluative stance, it offers a position by its presence. I have already noted that boilerplate in Prop. 187 coverage functions to identify the proposition by articulating what it will do (limit benefits for a particular segment of the population). This information is drawn from the actual language of the ballot initiative, which itself does not include the social agenda or rationale of its authors. The implications of Prop. 187 are not included within the boundaries of boilerplate because implications are evaluative and therefore not compatible with “neutral,” unattributed information.

There are a number of features of Prop. 187 that seldom appear in the majority of the hundreds of summaries (i.e., background and boilerplate) presented in the three California papers. These include the following:

- that it is a measure to get federal attention with the hopes of changing national immigration policy,
- that federal laws would supersede the state initiative (this fact comes out in boilerplate well after the election, as example (5) shows,
- who the detractors and supporters of the measure are,
- the fiscal impacts,
- the partial unanimity across the opposing camps that the issue of illegal immigration needs to be addressed,
- the most dire implications raised by either side (at their worst: zero-sum diminution of life-as-we-know-it vs. diseased, uneducated, underserved underclass), and

- its relation to other events and anti-immigrant attitudes from California's recent past, such as Japanese-American internment during World War II.

These details, which are less identification and more socially complex, are often relegated to invisibility because they are not currently “new,” and because they cannot easily be summarized without all the apparatus of proper reporting (e.g., balance, attribution, fairness to all positions, fresh quotes), they go unreported. Example (6) from the *Los Angeles Times* shows the points that are seldom raised or represented in boilerplate about Prop. 187 (issues under debate, jobs and the border, and the viewpoints of authorities outside of the political sphere):

(6) 8/10/94 LAT: But even as polls show the measure gathering widespread support among voters, its very *premise*—that public services and schools draw illegal immigrants—remains a matter of fierce *debate*. The initiative doesn't directly address *jobs*, widely considered by *scholars and other authorities* to be the principal lure for immigrants. Nor does Proposition 187 do anything about the porous U.S.–Mexico *border*.

One could also look at the presence of boilerplate in relation to a host of intertwined agendas, themselves inherently partial. Proponents and detractors have their own complicated political agendas, which become the content of what is reported, while journalists themselves, under the mantle of neutral authority, have a stated position of balance that is intended to supersede personal political agendas. But the issue of balance itself is a negotiated and conventionalized notion, entailing a certain *kind* of balance: getting an equal number of (two) sides; quoting the originator of a claim, which is preferable to a third-party spokesperson quote; verifying and testing claims against the other side; giving the person singled out a chance to respond, to voice another view.

From this perspective, journalistic partiality is rarely overt and instead becomes reflective of a mainstream orientation to a topic and of professional practice. But as the requirements of discourse stand, the neutrality or balance rules sometimes work against balance when the issue is complicated and the meanings are negotiable or contested. This is where journalists can pause: Not only are assumptions embedded within boilerplate, but more importantly, the summary of story is only partial. It is good to keep this in mind: the elements of a “complete,” well-formed news story represent an interpretation of what is considered important—on the journalistic level as well as on the level of shared, public knowledge.

Discourse-level evaluation. Although every effort may be made to eliminate value judgments on the levels of semantics and journalistic practice, there are discourse-level issues that can be seen as privileging an evaluative stance

because they inherently contextualize information and how it may be interpreted. Quotes and repetition are two components of narrative structure that orient an audience to the material being presented. I have already mentioned the relation between the repetition of boilerplate and given vs. new information. From the journalistic perspective, repetition might be better viewed not so much a reinforcement of the propositions, but as a way of marking elements of the story so that a reader has what he or she needs to process the news of the moment—the emphasis being on what is new and not on what is comprehensive.

The use of quotes by reporters serves not only to disavow responsibility for an utterance but to sometimes also point to a frame of reference or perspective that cannot be expressed personally or within the parameters of the reporter's textual participation (otherwise the "intrusion" or violation of expected norms will be noted by editors and disallowed before it reaches print). In the Prop. 187 coverage, restricted material such as the rare overtly racist or "politically incorrect" comment by sources was carried within quotations, as in examples (7a) and (7b).

(7a) 8/10/94 LAT: "Illegal *aliens* are killing us in California," said Ronald Prince, a Tustin accountant who heads the Proposition 187 campaign. "Those who support illegal immigration are, in effect, *anti-American*."

(7b) 8/13/94 LAT: "*Thanks for sticking up for white people!*" says a call-in listener from Del Mar Vista to Buck's radio show, pleased with the host's support of Proposition 187, which would take away most public benefits to illegal immigrants. [Note: the caller is being ironic.]

Even so, reporters may be so grounded within the professional ethic in which quotes are predominantly viewed and used as distancing devices that they do not also see another perspective: that reporters are co-responsible—along with the speaker being quoted—for the content they produce, including their choice of what they include within quoted material (cf. Tannen 1990). But the responsibility does not only reside with the reporter and newsmaker. If the quote is an implicit way reporters can present information about the participants in a story without violating the discourse-level norms governing news writing or the reporter's own perceived role in the discourse, the reader is also implicated. The reader becomes part of the inferential process, distributing responsibility for the construction of meaning beyond the newsroom and into the living room (or coffee shop or commuter train).

Failing to directly point out a potentially discriminatory reading in a source's comment or quote would not be viewed as unbalanced or irresponsible to most journalists, but an exercise of First Amendment rights by all involved, provided

that the competing perspective is also offered. But it may also be viewed as reprehensible by others, including a significant portion of the public for whom the balancing routines and evidentiality processes of journalism practice are not made explicit.

Conclusion. The discourse requirement to provide accessible synopses and background information in news stories leads to textual elements like “boilerplate” and other shorthand devices of reference. General journalistic writing rules—simplification of complex issues or events, authorial distance and the value of neutrality or balance, and the recurrence of sufficient given information to render all new versions of a story intelligible by the majority of intended readers—guide the production of boilerplate, which has intrinsic characteristics. It is repetitious, unattributed, identifies and describes, summarizes, and is potentially expendable as text.

Nonetheless, there are implications for the transmission of meaning that are inherent in even the most innocuous or expendable forms of text. For example, Santa Ana (1999) argues that the issues of immigration were formulated rhetorically by journalists to ultimately minimize humanitarian responses in discussions of Prop. 187, whether it was consciously intended or not. These meanings, which likely extended beyond journalists’ intentions, were also potentially mediating with social values held by the larger public collective (the proposition, after all, was voted in). Nonetheless, they are potentially replicated in each iteration of the story because background material—which carries the story’s history over time—is seldom challenged on behalf of its content. Boilerplate, for its part, contributes just as significantly to the orientation of the public debate as does the lead and other textual components of a story.

Because boilerplate assists in responding to and framing the nature of public discourse, it is worth noticing by journalists, linguists, and the public. Like all linguistic and discursive elements situated contextually, it plays a multilevel role in shaping social action. Considered generic and uncontested information, boilerplate is also a textual device that allows the reporter to distance authorially from the material and helps establish the professional persona of a neutral authority. As a summarizing mechanism, it only partially represents what it is characterizing, a feature that may have greater significance when the issue is complicated, socially contested, and relates to issues of authority, power, and responsibility in society.

On their own, mainstream journalists generally resist changing or tinkering with the rules that they perceive as supporting free speech. But perhaps linguists can argue the point for them, by pointing out the rituals and routines of news production and texts, exploring the connection of text-level behaviors to social meaning, and thereby bringing the discussion to another footing—one that could offer alternative readings and meanings in the presentation of contested issues to the public.

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NOTES

1. Stories in the 1995 corpus illustrate this link, although I will not discuss it here. Additionally, I use Prop. 209 only as a point of comparison at this stage, although it is worth examining in the context of the subject of boilerplate and its ramifications.
2. News practitioners' use of the metaphorical term "bottom," rather than "end," suggests a physical, spatial orientation to the story rather than a more *literarily* narrative one—another difference between the perceptions of practitioners and nonjournalistic writers. With a different metaphorical frame in operation, the entailments for the text and how to shape it would also vary.