

# POLARISATION OF EXPERTISE IN THE NEWS MEDIA: THE THAI CAVE BOYS' RESCUE

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**Abstract:** *A corpus of English-language texts from news media sources worldwide was analysed to verify how the polarisation of the various options reported about the rescue of 12 Thai boys trapped in a cave in 2018 was constructed linguistically and realised discursively. Quantitative findings were interpreted from the perspectives of domain-specific languages, media language studies and media psychology. News sources were able to construct polarised opinions among experts but not among lay audiences, for lack of expert knowledge of both the journalists and their readership.*

**Keywords:** *Tham Luang Cave Rescue; caving; English-language news media; lexical analysis; ESP; specialised terminology; popularisation; polarisation; Critical Discourse Studies*

## 1. Background

The event contemplated in this study refers to the disappearance, on 23 June 2018, of the Wild Boars football team, made up of 12 boys aged between 11 and 17 and their 25-year old coach. They remained trapped in the well-known Tham Luang cave, situated in the North of Thailand, having walked into it for a short visit, but being surprised and imprisoned there by an unexpected flood. As the water level rose, making it impossible to enter the cave, for several days the world remained suspended about the fate of the football team, whose young age contributed to making the news particularly emotional and engaging. Not only, as the days passed, the media worldwide kept covering the story with the little news that filtered from the official Thai sources. The scarcity of information added to the heated debate that arose among professionals as well as non-professionals about the possible ways of extracting the boys, all ultimately rescued alive from the cave after 22 days. The operation set up to save them required a mighty complex effort by experts from various disciplines, such as geology, hydraulics, and medicine, with cave-divers being especially involved. No speleological accident had ever had such great resonance and coverage by the media before, and it earned itself an almost immediate *Wikipedia* entry (cf. “Tham Luang Cave Rescue”, first created on 30 June 2018).

For the purposes of this study, it seems relevant to report a timeline of the events that took place over slightly more than three weeks.

Date	Events
23 June 2018	Soccer team boys and coach get lost
02 July 2018	Team and coach found alive trapped deep into cave
02-07 July 2018	Local and worldwide debate on rescuing options
08-10 July 2018	Four boys extracted per day over three days, including coach
<i>Tot. 12 days</i>	
10+ July 2018	News of boys' sedation published

Table 1. Timeline of events

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## 2. Aims

This study aims to analyse the positions that emerged in the debate as to what the best way to rescue the boys was, comparing the different solutions proposed by the various experts. These apparently tended to be presented by the press in dichotomic pairs, as (multi)-polarised positions:

- those of the experts endorsed by and answering the Thai government's (henceforth the local experts) vs those of the international (or non-local) experts,
- the cave diving experts' opinions vs those of all the other experts.

Specific research questions therefore included how this sort of polarisation in the press is 1) constructed linguistically and 2) realised discursively. The former is meant to focus on the lexical and syntactic choices and usages; the latter will take into account textual strategies as well as social practices employed in conveying news with a specific angle and, thus, steering the audience's views in certain directions.

## 3. Corpus and methods

In order to carry out the analysis, a corpus of texts was collected from English-language newspapers worldwide, which included the Thai local paper *The Bangkok Post* published in English. These were retrieved from the *Factiva Global News Database*, with settings including all English-language newspapers, authors, companies, subjects, industries, regions, and the search terms being *CAVE AND BOYS AND THAILAND AND RESCUE AND DIVERS*. Nouns were deemed the most suitable word class for corpus selection, since they are known to occur frequently both in newspaper headlines, for conciseness (Fowler 1991: 98), and in specialised language, which makes ample use of nominalisation as a general trend (Gotti 2003). In the following, qualitative analysis, verbs and other lexical words were of course also considered. The time range selected went from the day of the accident, 23 June 2018, to the end of the year, 31 December 2018. The resulting corpus, named Thai Cave Rescue (*Thai.Ca.Re.*), comprised 2489 articles. After manual screening, 1819 duplicates and 14 irrelevant articles (which, although containing all the search terms, were related to other stories) were eliminated, making the final result a collection of 656 texts from 38 countries, totalling 510,613 tokens, 443,156 words and 20,702 sentences. Although this is by no means a large corpus in absolute terms, it was considered sufficiently sized and varied for the qualitative analysis that was meant for this study. The temporal distribution of the articles (Fig. 1) logically sees a peak between the end of June and the beginning of July, during the unfolding of the event itself, but a slight increase was recorded in December, when the media review the year's main stories.

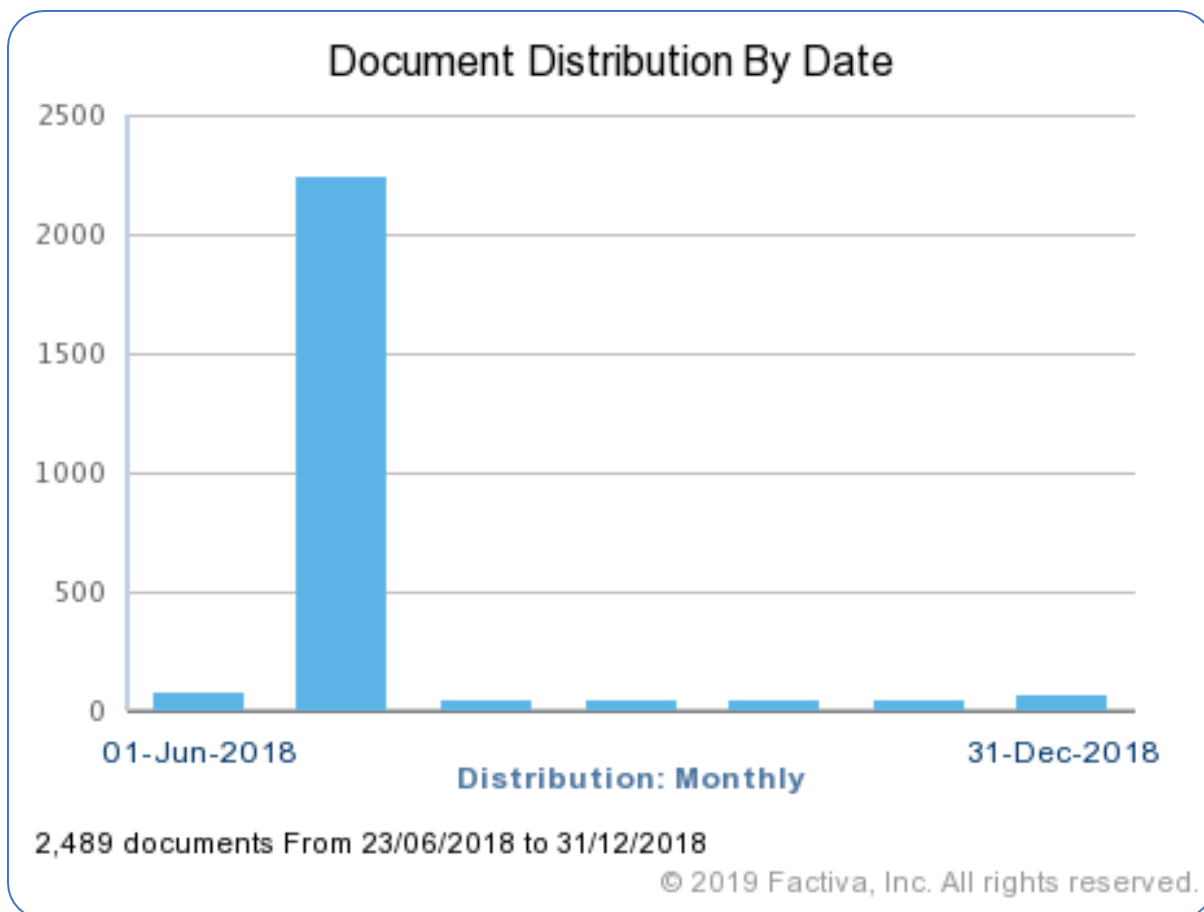


Fig. 1. Document distribution by date, before selection

The method applied was mixed, using *SketchEngine* (Kilgarriff & Rychlý 2003) to analyse the data quantitatively, but essentially going for a qualitative investigation, whose main interest was mostly lexical. Domain-specific English, or English for Special Purposes (Garzone 2006) were useful to identify and extract specialised terminology through *SketchEngine*. Media studies (Himmelboim, Chang, McCreery 2010, Kang et al. 2011; McCluskey, Kim 2012) and media psychology provided the means to discuss the issues of discursive construction (Richardson 2007), especially through appraisal (Martin & White 2005), argumentation (Walton 2007) and attitudes (Briñol & Petty 2015).

#### 4. Linguistic construction

##### 4.1 Naming the experts

It is ascertained that “[c]ontemporary news values offer reasons for news presence favoring polarization. Those advocating polarized views offer a higher potential for conflict, a common news value”, since “[p]olarized views provide more clearly identified “two sides of a story” that represent balance” (McCluskey, Kim 2012: 576-577). The first step of this investigation was therefore quantitative, to establish who the ‘poles’ or the experts in the story were. The corpus was thus searched for the lemma *EXPERT\**. As a noun, it appears 414 times or 81.08%<sup>2</sup>, and its most typical modifiers are as in Table 2.

<sup>2</sup> Frequencies are given as normalised to 10,000.

Modifiers of <i>EXPERT*</i> (n.)	Frequency (absolute)	Score (Typicality)
diving	28	10.58
medical	16	9.95
British	23	9.83
foreign	12	9.82
international	16	9.77
diving	9	9.72
cave	51	9.58
cave-diving	7	9.40
caving	7	9.39
disaster	6	9.11

Table 2. Modifiers of *EXPERT\** (n.) and frequencies

It appeared clear that the experts involved in the event were mostly from the caving/cave-diving and the health-related fields. Not only, looking at the verbs with *EXPERT\** as a subject, to see what the experts ‘did’ in the story: it emerged that they especially said (*SAY\**, f. 43), had (*HAVE\**, f. 35), were (*BE\**, f. 23), and warned (*WARN\**, f. 23), see Fig. 2.

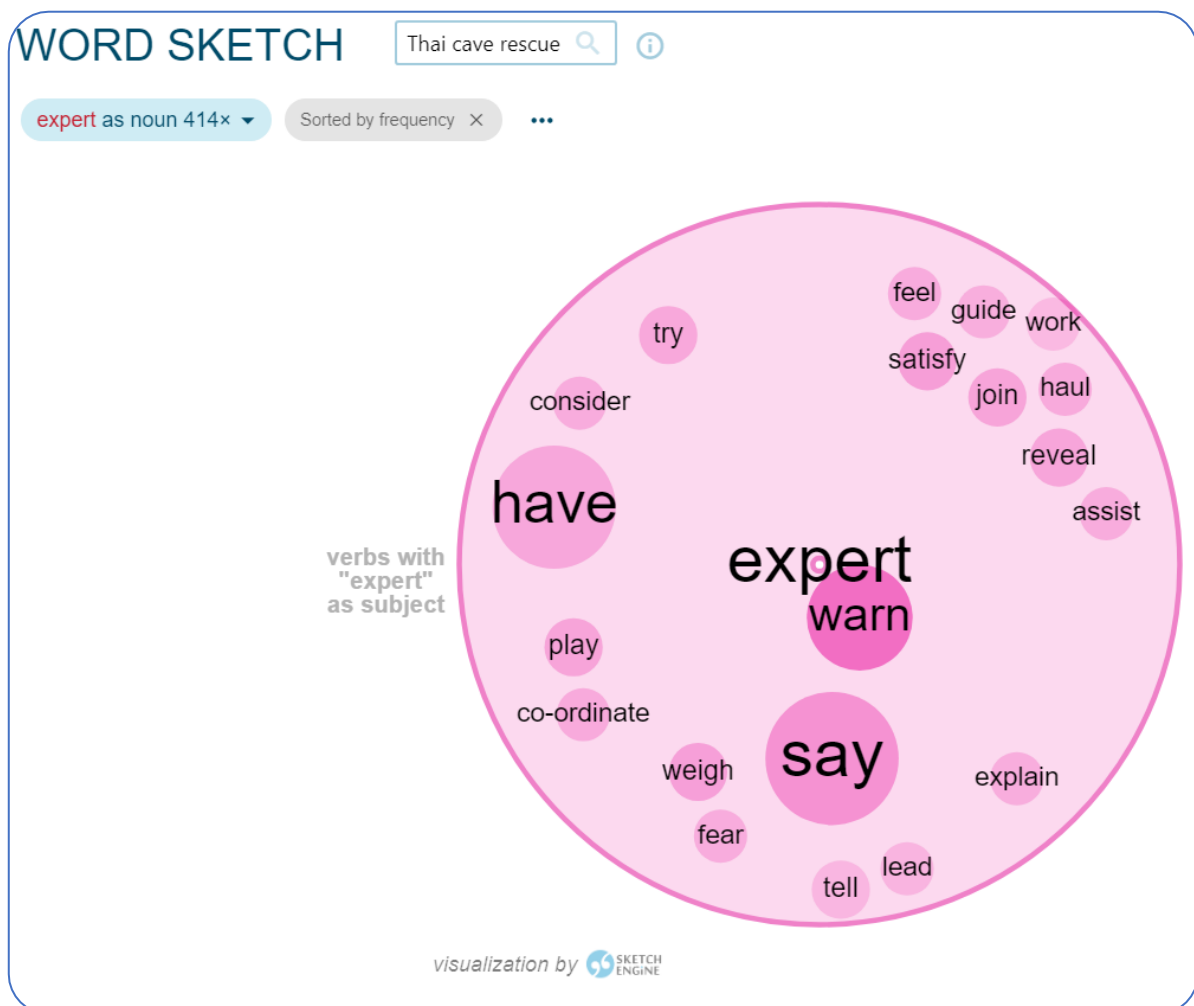


Fig. 2. Verbs with *EXPERT\** as subject

The ensuing picture was one in which caving and medical experts (see Table 2) were described, (*BE*, *HAVE*), and their statements and opinions were reported (*SAY*, *WARN*, *HAVE* and *BE* as auxiliaries) (see Fig. 2).

The next quantitative step, aimed at detailing all the specialists involved in the rescue, apart from cave-divers and doctors, was the extraction of multi-word key-terms, since these, which are often the result of scientific word-formation, were deemed especially representative of specialised discourse, while single-word ones would be more generic (Garzone 2006). The operation was carried out setting the minimum frequency to 1 (the corpus being of a limited size), comparing it against *SketchEngine*'s English Web 2015 (enTenTen15) own reference corpus, and considering the first 1,000 items retrieved. These were then manually labelled, applying to them hand-picked 'semantic labels', to classify them qualitatively into four different groups:

1. general experts, especially representatives of the Thai government, in charge of operations and especially of external communication (TG);
2. cave-diving experts (CAVD);
3. health and medical experts (MED);
4. Elon Musk (EM).

Category number 4, though unexpected at first, on second thoughts was no complete surprise. The involvement of the famous tycoon of Tesla fame and cofounder of PayPal is due to his also possessing The Boring Company, an enterprise founded in 2016 that specialises in the construction of underground tunnels. For this reason, he became involved in the Thai boys' rescue when he volunteered to build a small submarine capsule that could contain and extract one boy at a time. He did manage to have the prototype realised in a few days, although in the end it was not used. A serial tweeter, he also got involved in the debate between specialists that is of interest here, often providing harsh and even questionable statements. His presence may not be quantitatively enormous but, if we are to consider the various 'voices' in the debate, his ought to be included. Table 3 sums up the semantic labels assigned to the first 1,000 most frequent multi-word key-terms connected with specialised discourse.

Expertise	Label	Frequency
1. general experts, esp. representatives of the Thai government	TG	21
2. cave-diving experts	CAVD	231
3. health and medical experts	MED	47
4. Elon Musk	EM	25

Table 3. Semantic labels assigned to multi-word key-terms

#### 4.2 *The Thai Government's and the cave divers' views*

The following step was the study of the lemma *OPTION*\*, as an indicator of the variables in the debate. Apart from occurring 137 times (2.68%), it indeed proved useful in revealing the different positions and opinions in the debate about how to save the boys. These can be differently attributed to the four kinds of expert actors identified before. For instance, it is clear how, in the first days of the debate<sup>3</sup>, the Thai Government were inclined towards either waiting for the water level to decrease or digging the boys out, while the cave-divers were always in favour of diving them out, see examples (1) and (2).

- (1) Options considered included **waiting until water levels subside** [TG], or **teaching the group to use diving gear** to navigate the flooded cave [CAVD].

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<sup>3</sup> Considering that the missing team were spotted late at night on 2 July and the rescue operation began on 8 July, the debate lasted 5 days. Thailand's time zone also meant most English-speaking countries would report what had happened there the following day.

03.07.2018, CY, *Cyprus Mail*, 59, emph. added<sup>4</sup>

- (2) Here are a few ways the hungry and weak boys could get out, none easy options. Could they **dive out** [CAVD]? Could they **be dug out** [TG]? What about **walking out** [TG]?

03.07.2018, UG, *New Vision*, 66, emph. added

After the first couple of days, though, the local government also started to consider the diving options, as seen in ex. (3).

- (3) Chaing Rai Governor Narongsak Osatanakorn said **teaching the group to swim and dive with breathing masks was one option** [CAVD, TG], while **finding mountainside shafts and other entrances was another** [TG]. The other option is to **wait for the waters to recede**, which could take some time [TG].

04.07.2018, AU, *Shepparton News*, 91, emph. added

By the third of the five days that passed between the discovery and the rescue of the football team, the options did not seem to change much, with waiting, drilling, and diving remaining the three most discussed possibilities. A fourth option had to be added, though, when Elon Musk produced the idea, first and, in almost no time (it was ready by 9 July and arrived at the location the following day), a prototype of a child-sized pod that could be used to extract the boys through the water, see ex. (4).

- (4) Plan A is to teach the boys to dive so that **they can dive out** of the cave escorted by navy divers, and the governor reported that the boys have begun doing practice dives in the cave [CAVD]. Plan B is to drain the cave system so that **the children can walk out** of the caves wearing life jackets [TG]. Plan C is to **drill down to the cave** where the boys are stranded and rescue them that way [TG]. A novel idea is being floated around the site this morning: the possibility of **inserting a tiny capsule into the cave**, in which the boys can be placed one by one and guided the approximately 4km journey from their cavern to the cave's entrance [EM].

05.07.2018, UK, *The Guardian*, 121, emph. added

While most experts and non-experts agreed that these were the four most viable options, not every one of them tended towards each in the same way. In fact, some harsh criticisms were also voiced, by other experts interviewed by news journalists:

- (5) "You're going to take people with no experience and put them in water that is not only moving, but there is no visibility," said **Rick Murcar, president of the U.S.-based National Association for Cave Diving**. "Without having proper training, putting them in that environment **greatly increases risk level**, not just for the child, but also the diver."

08.07.2018, US, *New York Daily News*, 219, emph. added

- (6) But the plan has detractors.

"Cave diving is a very technical skill and **it's extremely dangerous, especially for an untrained diver**," **Mr Anmar Mirza, coordinator of the US National Cave Rescue Commission**, told AFP.

**Mr Pat Moret, a rescue consultant**<sup>5</sup>, told CNN that **diving the boys out would be a "worst-case scenario"**.

"It will be diving in what is effectively muddy water, possibly fast-flowing, with no sense of direction. You can't tell what's up, down, sideways."

04.07.2018, SP, *The New Paper*, 96, emph. added

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<sup>4</sup> Each example reports the date, the country of the source, the publication, the progressive identifying number of the document in the *Thai.Ca.Re.* corpus.

<sup>5</sup> What is a 'rescue consultant' exactly, anyway?

Other times, appreciation was expressed for one of the experts directly involved in the incident, in this case the local governor, i.e. a representative of the Thai Government:

- (7) The former governor of Chiang Rai province has emerged as the public face of the rescue operation, which has captivated and unified Thais for more than a fortnight.

**Osatanakorn** had officially been transferred to a governorship in the smaller, neighbouring province of Phayao since the boys became stuck in the cave on 23 June.

But his **training as an engineer** and his **management skills** earned him a continuing role as head of the command centre.

His leadership has won him **national popularity**, including calls on social media that he become prime minister.

08.07.2018, UK, *The Guardian*, 206, emph. added

By 7 July, however, the situation had become critical, due to lack of sufficient oxygen in the cave where the team was stranded and, in addition, more monsoon rain was expected to start on 11 July, so an emergency decision about acting had to be taken, see ex. (5).

- (8) Most critically, the oxygen supplies in the cave where the group is located are dropping. This has led to media reports citing Belgian **divers working with the rescue** suggesting a rescue attempt is imminent [CAVD].

09.07.2018, UK, *Independent Online*, 250, emph. added

Since waiting was out of the question, drilling required time and Elon Musk's mini-submarine would reach Thailand by 10 July, only the cave-diving option was left. The debate between experts, amplified globally by the press and taken part in by the lay people through the channels of the participatory Web 2.0, was over – or maybe not.

#### 4.3 *The medical experts' view*

Missing from the picture for the whole time of the initial debate on the rescue options were, indeed, the health and medical experts. Four at a time, between 8 and 10 July, all the teenage footballers and their coach were extracted from their natural prison in a blitzkrieg-like operation, authorised by the Thai Government but not highly publicised until it was all and successfully over. Starting from 10 July, once the positive news had spread around the world, the details of the rescue started to emerge, and a new debate, this time involving the medical experts, began.

In the *Thai.Ca.Re.* corpus, the days between 2 and 8 July only see the presence of multi-word key terms from the health and medical domain in relation to the conditions of the trapped victims and the possible repercussions they could face inside and/or once outside, but not during the actual rescue. For this reason, perhaps, the MED terms did not emerge once in connection with *OPTION\**. Analysing the 47 multi-word key terms from the MED domain, the second most frequent one (after *GOOD HEALTH*, obviously referring to the condition of the survivors once rescued) is *AUSTRALIAN DOCTOR* (f. 44, s. 84.8). A manual check of its occurrences revealed that the first mention of this expert is in a *Sydney Morning Herald* article from 8 July, which reports he had given the medical 'go-ahead' for the rescue to begin, see ex. (6).

- (9) And an **Australian doctor** with **specialist caving expertise**, Richard Harris, has **played a key role** in the rescue operation - **giving final medical approval** for the operation to proceed on Saturday after examining the boys deep inside the cave complex.

Harris, an anaesthetist from Adelaide, has extensive cave-diving experience and it's understood his presence was specifically requested by some of the British divers participating in the rescue mission, as they were familiar with his expertise in what is a relatively small cave-diving community.

As well as the Australian doctor, another Australian, a friend of Harris, and six Australian Federal Policedivers are involved in the operation - meaning a total of eight Australians are participating.

08.07.2018, AU, *The Sydney Morning Herald – Online*, 203, emph. added

The short article also provides the name of the doctor, his specialisation as an anaesthetist, and his own expertise as a cave-diver. The focus of the text, however, seems to be not particularly on Harris but on the role and number of Australians in the operation: that is a trend that emerged after the successful completion of the operation, i.e. each country participating in it with one or more of their 'experts' proudly reporting about it.

Thus, it is probably for his Australian nationality and for the proximity between Thailand and Australia, even in time zones, that the first occurrence of *AUSTRALIAN DOCTOR* was in a Sydney paper. It did not take long for European, US and other sources to relate and amplify Harris's presence, as details of his role emerged as more than just 'giving the ok' to extracting the boys. On 8 July, UK time, the *Guardian* was already writing that

- (10) Richard Harris, an **Australian doctor** with **extensive cave-diving experience**, went into the chamber on Saturday, examined the boys and **approved them for the operation**, authorities said. He was also part of the rescue.

08.07.2018, UK, *The Guardian*, 206, emph. added

Yet, it was in the days following the complete extraction of the Wild Boars soccer team and their coach that other MED single- and multi-word key terms appeared in the press. When checking, *ANAESTHETIST* (f.: 63 or 1.23%), obviously referring to Dr Harris, does appear as a frequent keyword, and it is moreover correlated to other terms such as *SEDAT\** (f.: 42 or 0.82%), *DRUG\** (f.: 42 or 0.82%), *ANTI-ANXIETY MEDICATION* (f.: 12, s.: 23.95), *MILD SEDATIVE* (f. 6, s.: 14.43), *ANTI-ANXIETY DRUG* (f.: 6, s.: 12.62), *KETAMINE* (f.: 15 or 0.29%), *ALPRAZOLAM* (f.: 2 or 0.03%), *ATROPINE* (f.: 2 or 0.03%). Indeed, looking at the multi-word key terms, it was initially reported that the boys had just been given mild anxiolytics:

- (11) Those concerns led rescuers to approve a **mild sedative** that calmed the youngsters, according to Thailand's junta chief Prayut Chan-O-Cha.

10.07.2018, UG, *New Vision*, 334, emph. added

- (12) Prayuth Chan-ocha, the Thai prime minister, confirmed that they had been given **anti-anxiety medication** to help stay calm.

10.07.2018, UK, *The Telegraph Online*, 336, emph. added

- (13) THE schoolboys rescued from a flooded cave system in Thailand were dosed with an **anti-anxiety drug** to stop them panicking during the terrifying underwater mission, the country's prime minister has admitted. The authorities had previously denied the children were drugged but Prayut Chan-o-Cha confirmed that they had been given anxiolytic 'to make them not excited, not stressed'.

12.07.2018, UK, *Scottish Daily Mail*, 453, emph. added

However, scanning the 42 occurrences of *SEDAT\** in the corpus, one learns that, as the days went by, the youngsters were, in an escalation,

- (14) **heavily sedated** to prevent them panicking

08.09.2018 UK *The Press and Journal* 608, emph. added



(15) **sedated** - they were **unconscious**

12.07.2018, KY, *iNews Cayman*, 468, emph. added

(16) each boy was **sedated and strapped** to a stretcher with a full-face goggle and an air tank to ensure they would not panic.

18.07.2018, UK, *coventrytelegraph.net*, 554, emph. added

(17) administer **life-threatening drugs to sedate** the 12 boys and their soccer coach on their way out

27.07.2018, AU, *The Advertiser*, 599, emph. added

(18) **sedate them with a cocktail of drugs** (the **heavy hitter** being **ketamine**, applied by injection into the thigh) during the rescue operation.

01.12.2018, CH, *South China Morning Post*, 639, emph. added

This information obviously stirred up shocked reactions and a debate among both the various specialists involved and the lay people, for the deontological, ethical and moral implications involved in that choice. However, it cannot be said to have been so harsh as the debate preceding the rescue, because the event was known to have had a happy ending and the story was no longer as newsworthy as before. For example, the Thai Government first denied the news, then had to admit it:

(19) There were **conflicting reports** in the hours after the rescue about the extent to which the boys had been medicated before they were brought out. The **Thai prime minister** on Tuesday **denied** reports that **they had been sedated**

12.07.2018, KY, *iNews Cayman*, 468, emph. added

(20) **Mr Prayut denied** this, saying: ‘**All of the children were conscious** during the operation.’

12.07.2018, UK, *Scottish Daily Mail*, 453, emph. added

(21) **Thailand’s PM admits** that **schoolboys were dosed** with an anti-anxiety drug

15.07.2018, UK, *Mail Online*, 514, emph. added

The ‘popular’ debate revolved mostly around the information, highly advertised by British tabloids for instance, that ketamine in particular had been used. The first to report the news was the *Scottish Daily Mail* on 12 July:

(22) One of the British divers said: ‘I was told the boys were given a dose of **ketamine [a horse tranquilliser often used as a recreational drug]** to keep them calm. An American military diver added: ‘Those kids were proper **knocked out.**’

12.07.2018, UK, *Scottish Daily Mail*, 453, emph. added

But it was mostly the *Sun* and the *Mail Online* that picked up the story and made it into a topic for popular debate:

(23) Cave kids given drug for rescue. The 12 boys trapped in a flooded cave **were given club drug ketamine** to stop them from panicking while they were rescued, a source told *The Sun*. [...] **Ketamine**, an anaesthetic which induces a trance-like state **known by clubbers as the k-hole**, can have **serious side-effects.**

12.07.2018, UK, *The Sun*, 467, emph. added

(24) Thai rescue boys ‘were **drugged with KETAMINE**’: Youngsters given doses of **horse tranquilliser** to stop them panicking say divers as gripping footage of underwater mission is released

Because the shocking piece of news was told with the benefit of hindsight, a combination of alarming and reassuring language is used, with phrases such as

“boys WERE sedated”, “gripping footage”, “were dosed”, “terrifying underwater mission”, “proper knocked out” (text 453); “given club drug ketamine”, “Ketamine, an anaesthetic which induces a trance-like state known by clubbers as the k-hole, can have serious side-effects” (text 467); “Youngsters given doses of horse tranquiliser”, “were dosed with an anti-anxiety drug”, “The treacherous conditions in the cave system”, “claustrophobic tunnel compared to the ‘S-bend’ of a toilet” (text 514),

alternating with

“the boys and their coach had been ‘incredibly resilient’”, “We were extremely fortunate that the outcome was the way it was”, “It all went according to plan” (text 453); “BOYS’ JOY AFTER ESCAPE”, “have been filmed smiling in a hospital”, “Their recovery is said to be going well”, “Thankfully, it worked. We’re all delighted that everyone made it out safely” (text 467); “the cave will be turned into ‘a living museum’” (text 514).

The result is that the *Sun*’s and *Mail Online*’s articles, rather than raising a real debate, tried to stir an *ex-post* polemic on comparing the medical and recreational use of the same drug, and hoping this would cause people to be scandalised. Their nationalistic inclination nonetheless tended to take over, since the story had ended up well anyway, and the rescuers were mostly Britons.

In the *Thai.Ca.Re.* corpus, the first detailed and ‘expert’ mention of how the sedation of the young boys really took place occurs quite late during the year, in an article dated 30 November:

(25) Dr Harry consulted widely, seeking the opinions of other medical experts in Thailand and abroad. In the end, the anaesthetist came up with **a combination of three drugs**. First, he would give them **a 0.5 milligram oral dose of alprazolam**, an anti-anxiety drug better known by its trade name, **Xanax**. Giving the boys a tablet of this while they were still with their friends would hopefully take the edge off any fear they had as they prepared to leave.

**Next, he would inject ketamine** into a muscle in one of their legs – this would be the main sedative. A powerful drug originally developed as an animal tranquiliser, it has also been used as a painkiller for humans and, in more recent times, as a recreational drug by partygoers. It was also known to knock out memories – perfect for the job inside Tham Luang.

Dr Harry would use five milligrams of ketamine per kilogram of body weight, to put the boys to sleep. Ketamine acts fast but doesn’t last long – about an hour. The rescue, however, would take several hours. This meant that Dr Harry had to instruct each of the recovery divers how to re-administer the drug using a syringe pre-loaded with a top-up dose of 2.5 milligrams for every kilogram of body weight. The divers would carry the drugs and needles in pockets in their dive wetsuits.

**The last drug, atropine, was to reduce the amount of saliva in the boys’ mouths.** This would also be injected into their leg muscles.

30.11.2018, AU, *Courier Mail – Online*, 636, emph. added

Both the amount and the accuracy of the details, in addition to what could be identified as a slightly more specialised style than most newspaper articles, lexically and syntactically, called for a manual screening of the Australian article. This, indeed, turned out to be nothing else but an excerpt from one of the first books about the Tham Luang cave rescue, Cochrane (2018). This is in fact a completely different genre from the newspaper articles in the corpus – often written overnight from scant press releases from a military government, to go online as

soon as possible – it is a long journalistic report, for which the author has had the time to collect a significant amount of information once the story was already over, to consult with experts and possibly to interview the primary and secondary actors in the story. The extract that appears in the article can on the one hand be rightfully considered as part of the corpus, as it was published by a newspaper and retrieved according to the selecting criteria, but of course, on the other, is not in itself representative of the standard language of the *Thai.Ca.Re.* corpus. Even if it may have come too late during the year to leave on readers the same impression that the articles from the event’s period did, it did, nonetheless, clarify the actual medical details of the rescue operation for the same audience, who could then decide informedly and for themselves what position to take in this particular – the sedation – debate.

#### **4.4 Elon Musk’s view and the people’s opinion**

In general, most of the lay people’s opinions may be found in the comments to the online versions of the various articles, which have not been collected for this particular study but could naturally be a useful source of information to research. An impression of the popular view may be seen using *SketchEngine*’s word sketch function applied to *PEOPLE*: as the main pre-modifier, it shows *MANY*, which testifies to the emotional and practical worldwide involvement in the story; the same applies to two of the verbs having *PEOPLE* as an object, *INVOLVE* and *CAPTIVATE*; instead, the verb *BLAME* following *PEOPLE* only appears 3 times (0.05%), and each time to say the opposite, i.e. that nobody blamed the coach for the accident.

Possibly, it was Elon Musk who mostly represented – as well as stimulated – the popular opinion. As a graduate in economics and physics, with a lifelong involvement in technical and engineering companies (e.g. PayPal, SpaceX, Neuralink, Tesla, The Boring Company), he represents a real hybrid between an expert and a layperson: he (and his staff) certainly knew about drilling tunnels, but he was also as certainly no cave-diver. As such, he clearly had a right to express his informed opinion on the rescuing options, as any other expert in one of the fields involved in this international and multi-disciplinary operation. What stood him apart from many other potential opinion makers is how he imposed himself on the scene of the rescue through his high visibility as a billionaire entrepreneur, enhanced by his quantitative and qualitative use of Twitter as a communication channel. This also created a hybrid type of sub-genre in many of the *Thai.Ca.Re* corpus articles, since those that reported his tweets often did so by simply pasting screenshots of his tweets directly within the article, thus maintaining the entire multimodal framework of the tweet genre, as well as its collaborative multimodality, since most of these articles would be online and allow comments by readers. Analysing the lemma *TWEET\**, whose frequency is 135 or 26.44%, when used as a verb (f.: 43 or 0.84%), 29 out of 43 times it has Musk as a grammatical and/or a logical subject. The peculiarity of Musk’s position in the story also includes his heated exchange of opinions with other experts, again taking place on Twitter, but being dutifully reported in the papers, which in this way ended up writing not only about the physical reality but about a digital reality too. The pivotal example is the exchange between the British cave-diving expat Vernon Unsworth, who had long been exploring the Tham Luang cave area, and Elon Musk. On 13 July, Unsworth said of Musk’s child-sized capsule idea “He can stick his submarine where it hurts” and “It just had absolutely no chances of working” (CNN 2018). In an equally gentlemanly way, Musk tweeted back at the criticism expressed against his pod, on 15 July, calling the one behind it a “pedo guy” (Musk 2018). The incident quickly returned on the level of reality when Unsworth sued Musk for defamation, asking 190 million dollars in damages on 17 September 2018 (17.09.2018, US,

*NYTimes.com Feed*, 611), and losing to him on 6 December 2019 because Musk's tweet, by then long deleted, did not mention Unsworth explicitly.

Whether Elon Musk's prototype submarine could have been a viable rescuing option or not, his role in the incident remains highly representative of the bickering between the various experts, and between them and the lay people (who flooded Musk's Twitter account with comments, replies and retweeted him endlessly), made possible by the technological means – in this case Twitter, as well as the Internet itself – that allow them to convey their views and conduct their debates continents away from each other but only a few minutes apart.

#### **4.5 A main actor's view**

Four months after the Tham Luang cave incident, Italy's annual caving associations' meeting hosted a talk by the European Cave Rescue Association about the Thai boys' rescue, given in that particular occasion by Chris Jewell, a cave-diver from the British Cave Rescue Council, and one of the four rescuers who personally took part in the operation<sup>6</sup>. Having attended the talk as a caver belonging to an official caving association, the author decided to contact Mr Jewell for a short interview about the facts of July 2018, with the aim of directly reporting a main actor's view on it. Among the questions, two were about the various experts' opinions and the ensuing debates, and were answered as follows<sup>7</sup>.

Q1. About the medical aspect of the rescue - *The sedation of the boys caused some sort of commotion in the press when it came to be known. Could you say how the final decision was taken, i.e. whether it was decided by the Australian anaesthetist and veterinarian<sup>8</sup> alone or was that a group of medical operators and/or the cave-divers themselves?*

A: The idea of sedation [MED] was pitched by team UK [CAVD] and Dr Harris [MED] was invited [CAVD] with this in mind. However, it was only when he arrived that he could consult [MED] with the Thai military medical professionals [TG] and see the boys for himself [MED] that the final authorisation was given [TG]. He [MED] had to believe it was possible it would work and convince [MED] the Thai authorities [TG].

Q2. About Elon Musk - *Would you like to say a word or two about his role and presence in the story?*

A: Nothing to say really. It's true we [CAVD] did consult with Elon [EM] and suggest [CAVD] he [EM] try building a capsule but, when the item arrived [EM], we [CAVD] never had the chance [TG] to inspect it and didn't need it [CAVD]. I [CAVD] can't say for sure if the capsule [EM] could have fitted in the narrow passageways, but I suspect not [CAVD].

The labels as per the categorisation illustrated in Table 3 were added afterwards, of course, to create a visual rendering of the different views by the main actors in the debate. Even a simple graphic expedient such as this quite clearly shows how intertwined and interdependent the options were, as well as the quantity and quality of the roles played by the actors in the decisions. It also suggests that a) no matter what the official sources first denied or later admitted, the idea of the sedation had been there from the beginning, and that b) no matter what his tweets or the various actors stated at the time about it, the idea of using Elon Musk's

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<sup>6</sup> "Risultati e soccorso speleosubacqueo, il caso della Tahilandia", presented by Chris Jewell (British Cave Rescue Council), during the 12<sup>th</sup> European Cave Rescue Meeting, on 2 November 2018, within the International Caving Meeting 'Casola 2018, Nuvole', Casola Valsenio, 1-4 November 2018.

<sup>7</sup> Permission to report the contents of the interview, citing his name, was given to the author in writing by email on 22 August 2019.

<sup>8</sup> Dr Craig Challen, see section 5.

submarine once it arrived was never practically taken into consideration. Whereas the answer to the second question clarifies aspects of the ‘experts vs non-experts’ debate, the belief is that Mr Jewell’s answer to the first question frames the debate between experts especially well, focusing as the press did not or could not do on the low-profile yet fundamental role of the medical experts, possibly kept quiet intentionally for the disastrous consequences that the whole operation could have had, starting from, but not limited to, the sedation part.<sup>9</sup> Although the administration of the specific combination of drugs could still be debated scientifically and deontologically, it seems as evident that only the cave-diving expertise of the medical professionals could provide their view with an added value that other medical specialists might not have had.

## 5. Discursive realisation

The articles in the Thai.Ca.Re corpus were examined according to the ‘polarised’ categories of experts identified in Table 3 (TG, CAVD, MED, EM). A limited but hopefully representative number of examples of the opinions of each were reported in the previous sections, showing in synthesis that, as far as the experts are concerned, **the Thai Government’s** ones appear constructed as hard-working and well-intentioned as indecisive and immobile, fundamentally without the necessary expertise to reach a viable solution. They are also represented as concerned and pressing for the kids’ safety, both sincerely, as a national concern, but also from the pressure of the international scrutiny on what is, *de facto*, a military-governed country. Expressions of appreciation for the former local governor Narongsak Osatanakorn (ex. 6) alternate with critical portraits of the Thai Prime Minister Prayut Chan-O-Cha (ex. 10, 11, 12, 18, 19, 20). Clearly, the press found it difficult to sympathise with the self-appointed ex-military turned head-of-government of Thailand, a well-known figure, while the local governor possibly represented a new face, easier to reach and communicate with, and the spokesperson from whom most of the information that was literally let filter through about the incident came, and thus on whom reporters depended for their work. The good portrait of Osatanakorn painted by a broadsheet like *The Guardian* (6), however, highlights his *expertise* as the main reason for depicting him positively (“his training as an engineer and his management skills earned him a continuing role as head of the command centre”, ex. 6), therefore insisting on his *specialised knowledge* as a solid reason for his political leadership. The suggestion that he be possible Prime Minister material (“His leadership has won him national popularity, including calls on social media that he become prime minister”, *ibid.*) surely comes, as stated, from social media comments, and is possibly influenced by the liberal stance of the newspaper, certainly not in favour of a military regime. Regarding the military, the Thai navy seals are shown in yet another different light: perhaps due to the two casualties among them, and even as representatives of the Thai people, too low in the ranks to represent the regime, they usually receive a sympathetic appraisal. They seem to embody the hard-working though not-expert-enough, in spite of their rigorous training, labour force that did most of the initial dirty work, before the foreign cave-diving heroes moved in.

Speaking of whom, **the international team of volunteers** that contributed to bringing the soccer team out of the cave and into safety again obviously emerge as the heroes of the day.

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<sup>9</sup> Indeed, as emerged on 16 July, “Thailand gave diplomatic immunity to three Australians who helped a boys’ soccer team escape from a flooded cave, in case “something went wrong”, its foreign minister said on Monday.” (16.07.2018, VN, *Tuoi Tre Newspaper*, 534)

From a Critical Discourse Studies perspective, the British team, in particular, are especially celebrated and placed in a higher position, power-wise (“the sourcing and construct of the news is intimately linked with the actions and opinions of (usually powerful) social groups”, Richardson 2007: 1). It is indeed true that it was them who led the successful rescue, but the key issue lies exactly in the *success* of the operation: what if it had not turned out well? They could have made the wrong choices or simply been unlucky, and the whole thing could have turned into a corpse recovery. Would they have still been celebrated so much? The hypothesis is that they would, as they are depicted as the stereotypical Western hands-on, no-nonsense experts, who land in a peripheral, less technologically developed country and save the day with their *expertise* and practical attitude, gaining the respect, benevolence and gratitude of the people locally and worldwide. Apart from or perhaps in addition to their stereotypical representation provided by the media, they did embody some real Western values: the primacy of technology (back to the notion of expert and expertise), the right and duty to make free choices (in this case having potential life-saving effects), the willingness to take responsibility for the outcome of such choices, the generosity to offer help voluntarily without a personal gain. These very same features of the international rescuers could have made them perceived as standing in a dominant position, patronisingly looking down on the locals that were unable to solve their own problem. Was the positive outcome of the story the reason why they were not perceived as such? Was it the volunteers’ humble attitude emerging from all their interviews, statements and declarations before, during and after the incident?<sup>10</sup> Did the international press, interested in highlighting the role that each country that sent an expert to the field had, portrayed them as uninterested, selfless heroes? The British and the Australian press, respectively ‘owning’ the CAVD and the MED experts, certainly worked towards such a discursive construction, but this could not have been successful or even possible if indeed the main actors had said something different from their matter-of-fact (under)statements like “Rick Stanton: ‘Are we heroes? No, we were just using a very unique skill set’” (18.07.2018, UK, *coventrytelegraph.net*, 550) – which, incidentally, brings the issue back to the notion of expertise. The British cave-divers expertise was never put into question, and they could actually negotiate from a higher standpoint with the fastidious Thai regime, yet not for their white, European, Commonwealth, English-speaking powered social profile, but for the mere reason that they possessed unusual specialised skills restricted to a very small number of people worldwide. It was the fact that they were ‘invited’ by a helpless Thai Government for their unique expertise that allowed them to push for the buddy-dive (one kid held by one cave-diver) option when the time ran out. It was the same thing that let them deal amicably yet firmly with Elon Musk, who could be said to incarnate the same Western values. The role of their cave-diving expertise in the successful rescue is unquestionable, that of luck will never be fully ascertained.

The view in the debate of **the medical experts**, as shown by the analysis, did not surface clearly before the rescue was completed, but only came out and was thoroughly discussed – criticised, in certain cases – afterwards. The fact that their functions and decisions emerged once the danger was over, on the one hand, protected them from open criticism (after all, things *had* gone well), on the other, it did not show them as powerful actors in the game, or not as powerful as the frontmen, the British divers. Thus, in the corpus studied, it could be said that the MED experts came in second in the story – except perhaps in the Australian press, who

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<sup>10</sup> The lemma *HERO\** occurs 272 times or 53.27%, but always attached to the CAVD team by journalists and never self-attributed.

could boast the presence of both Dr Richard Harris the anaesthetist and Dr Craig Challen the veterinarian as representatives of their country.

(26) Dr Harris's dive partner, Dr Craig Challen, has been revealed as the second key Australian involved in the rescue mission. The vet, from Western Australia, is one of Australia's leading technical cave divers.

12.07.2018, AU, *The Morning Bulletin*, 402

The role of the Perth veterinarian in the story would deserve a separate study of its own: by some popular sources associated to the choice of ketamine as a 'horse tranquilliser', he was one of the medical experts in the rescue team who injected the boys during the dive out. The fact that he happens to be a "world-class cave diver" (01.12.2018, CH, *South China Morning Post*, 639), *as well as* a veterinary, is what justified his presence, of course, although an inversion of the relevance of his double expertise – veterinary first and cave-diver as a secondary aspect – is what probably made him the subject of speculations. This leads to two considerations about the MED experts. Firstly, they were not really seen as decision-makers in the team until their role emerged *after the rescue* as actually very powerful actors in the story. Secondly, they brought to the fore the issue of multi-layered expertise, of which cave-diving is only one: for instance, the recognised leader of the four British cave-divers, Richard Stanton, is a former firefighter, which adds another set of highly specific skills to cave-diving.

Finally, the fourth expert considered in the pre-rescue debate was **Elon Musk**. He was self- and media-constructed as a day-saving jack-of-all-trades, a self-made tycoon with a big brain and a bigger heart. As such, he definitely also embodied the same Western values mentioned in relation to the CAVD experts (belief in technology, freedom of choice, individual responsibility in taking action but also corporate-like teamwork and coordinated problem-solving, as well as selflessness in lending help to the weaker). What, then, made the Thai Government lean towards the CAVD men and not Musk? The possible answer is multi-layered. Firstly, with his show of real generosity, decisiveness and constant flow of social media communication, his position was, paradoxically, much clearer for a public who had little idea of what a cave system like Tham Luang (or any other, for that matter) is like. Probably envisaging a cave like a straight tunnel, and a submerged cave like a tube filled with water, the layperson would share with Elon Musk the common 'Jules Verne-like' sci-fi background of a submarine being an optimal way of navigating it. However, even the sensationalist *Mail Online*, although days after the happy ending, came to see that the situation was not, literally, so straightforward, describing the cave as a "claustrophobic tunnel compared to the 'S-bend' of a toilet" (15.07.2018, UK, *Mail Online*, 514). The simile is basic but, for once, realistic: the syphons connecting the various chambers are precisely as bending, at times twisting around their own axes and, especially, featuring very narrow strictures (Ellis 2020). It was never tried out, but the rigid mini-Nautilus designed by Musk's engineers would have at least encountered issues in its journey through the toilet-like tunnel which at times allowed the passing of only one single oxygen cylinder at a time (Grafton-Green 2018). Nonetheless, during the days of the pre-rescue debate, Musk's option seemed to stand some chances, even being listed as a candidate for a Plan D by the *Guardian* on 5 July (ex. 4), and received some huge if mixed feedback by Twitter's popular audience. Back to why it was ignored, if not openly scorned, by the Thai authorities, the second consideration to make is possibly about the origin of Musk's role in the story. While the British, Australian and other international cave-divers (after a lot of hesitation and under as much pressure by foreign cave-divers living locally, like Mr Unsworth)

were ‘invited’ by Thailand, Elon Musk, as well as being a self-made man, also arrived on the spot self-invited. And, in spite of the money, time, staff and work that he actually poured into his option, which was initially appreciated and amplified by the press worldwide to share with their audiences, what soon went wrong was, at the popular level, the suspicion that his aim might be seeking publicity for his enterprises more than trying to provide help, while at the specialised level it was that he and his people’s *expertise* (drilling not caving, spacecrafts not submarines, and certainly not cave-diving) was not fully relevant to the problem. Once more, it was not a matter of *quantity* of expertise as much as of its *type* and *quality*.

## 6. Critical analysis

As seen from the analysis, all the above experts’ options (TG, CAVD, MED, EM) were repeatedly laid out in numbered and lettered lists in long and frequently updated newspaper articles (ex. 4), random experts in just one of the plurality of disciplines involved in the rescue were interviewed locally when journalists looked for authoritative opinions, like “Mr Pat Moret, a rescue consultant” (ex. 6), or “Dr Petrina Craine, an emergency medicine resident physician in Oakland, California, [who] warned the fungal lung infection can cause death, in extreme circumstances” (10.07.2018, UK, *Mail Online*, 350). Occasionally, the voices of cave-diving experts – “Mr Rick Murcar, president of the U.S.-based National Association for Cave Diving, ex. (5); “Mr Anmar Mirza, coordinator of the US National Cave Rescue Commission”, ex. (6) – were also reported, and often made to debate with or even against those of the CAVD team. Incidentally, in the reported examples, (5) and (6), the views opposing those of the CAVD team came from US cave-divers who, although Americans contributed in several ways (“UK cave experts and an American military team are helping Thai navy Seals in their efforts”, 29.06.2018, UK, *The Independent*, 16), were conspicuous for their absence among the leading rescue.

In spite of the clarity of the options on the plate, the discursive construction was not and could not be conducted in a strictly argumentative way: for a start, because the proposers of the various options clearly did not debate them on the papers but on site, under the protective cover of the Thai regime filtering the information. Then, since it was left to the press to lay out the options and discuss them, the journalists appeared disoriented due to their lack of knowledge and expertise about such a complex situation, sometimes consulting their own local experts, far from the site and as uninformed, to little avail. Thirdly, the technical debate seemed out of reach of the lay public, who “is presumed to have certain goals, and the public is also taken to have certain information on a particular issue at any given time [...] constantly changing as a news story breaks” (Walton 2007: 223), but who in this case was even more ignorant about the details of the context and could not judge. Finally, it was difficult for the press to create polarisations *within* the public about this story, because “a mass media argument must be built on what van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1984) called ‘common starting points’ in a discussion” (Walton 2007: 224), while in the Tham Luang incident all of the world’s audiences agreed on the fact that the boys’ safety was the priority and that anything that could be done to save them should be done. Also in terms of attitude, the popular audience was difficult to steer toward one or another of the options: for example, thinking along the lines of elaboration and validation (Briñol & Petty 2015), the readership could give as much thought as they wanted to the various options, but the little knowledge they owned and were provided with by the press was probably not enough to sway their attitude or even to develop one. Just as well, validation, and self-validation in particular, could not very much take place either, as their own stereotypes and experience about cave-diving accidents was, statistically, from limited to non-existent, and even



the original source, another key factor in news evaluation, were the Thai Government's restricted, repetitive and occasionally contradictory press releases. Then again, overall, there could be no appeal to popular opinion in favour of one option, when it was all naturally bent toward the single aim of saving the young team – “personal relevance”, or the appeal to the idea that ‘they could be anyone’s children’ – intertwined with the “entertainment goal” (Briñol & Petty 2015: 283). Speaking of sources, Kang et al. (2011: 723) proposes that “source credibility cues not only activate heuristic processing, but could also influence systematic processing”; their study finding “evidence suggesting relative heuristic values of source cues based on perceived psychological distance. The more proximate the source cue, the greater its influence on perceived credibility of the message.” (ibid.: 731). While true in the case study they produced and applicable to several others, it should nonetheless be considered that, although the structure, administration and reception of news in recent decades has been changing globally, especially in the online format, “those in the periphery and in the core do not necessarily take full advantage of it to overcome historical inequities in international communication” (Himelboim, Chang, McCreery 2010: 309). Thus, since “the location of the major news agencies in core countries – AP in the United States, AFP in France, and Canadian Thomson-Reuters with headquarters in the United States” (ibid: 310), proximity was not considered “a good predictor for foreign news coverage” (ibid.: 309). In this case, the story was very newsworthy even if it came from the ‘periphery’ of the world and, though it is true that the main press agencies did get most of the news faster than the others, the location, the language and especially the military government of the country did not make it any easier for them, and possibly favoured some nearby sources in Southeast Asia and, among the English-speaking countries, in Australia. It is also true that, no matter the place and quantity of the sources, both central and peripheral countries worldwide showed some deep interest in the story, as demonstrated by the variety of countries that the articles in the *Thai.Ca.Re.* corpus come from, limited to English news sources as they are. For this reason, it may be affirmed that the polarisation evidenced in the media mostly regarded the main expert actors, and not the lay audience. Among them, for the motives laid out above, the press was not precisely able to create polarised opinions but rather a form of “entertainment”, in Martin and White’s (2005: 104) understanding: “those wordings by which the authorial voice indicates that its position is but one of a number of possible positions and thereby, to greater or lesser degrees, makes dialogic space for those possibilities. The authorial voice entertains those dialogic alternatives”. These dialogic alternatives entertained by the press were indeed picked up by the readers in the interactive channels, i.e. in comments to articles and in the huge “number of different venues, ranging from websites of news media (e.g., nbc.com) to social-bookmarking sites (e.g., digg.com), social-networking sites (e.g., Facebook), and microblogs (e.g., Twitter)” (Kang et al. 2011: 719), as well as in “news portals, such as Yahoo!News (<http://news.yahoo.com>), and news-aggregator sites, such as Google News (<http://news.google.com>), where each piece of news is accompanied by several source labels, often displayed together on the interface” (ibid.)

## 7. Conclusions

This investigation meant to analyse the different positions emerged in the debate around the Thai Luang Cave incident of June-July 2018, and how such expert and non-expert positions were linguistically and discursively represented as polarised in the press, since “extremes are more intuitively novel, entertaining, and colorful, representing another common news value

[...] [while] [m]oderate voices may be more difficult to portray as exciting than extreme voices” (McCluskey, Kim 2012: 577).

Thus, having reviewed the main actors’ views as presented in the *Thai.Ca.Re.* press corpus, and having compared them against the information received directly from one of the British cave divers personally involved in the rescue, it may be concluded that expert opinions about the Thai cave rescue were represented by the press explicitly constructing polarisation and binary thinking, especially between the experts’ opinions, for the sake of newsworthiness, but also partly out of their scarce knowledge of cave-diving technical expertise and language, which were consequently often ineffectively transposed to the lay public (Grego 2019). In the overlapping polarizations between cave-diving experts and other experts, and between experts in general and non-experts, the cave-diving niche skills emerged as the most persuasive for the Thai Government under pressure. The positive outcome of the operation did not allow any real criticism or further debates afterwards. On the contrary, it consolidated the primacy of the Western values embodied by the CAVD actors, at a global level, and rewarded, among the Western participants, the Britons and the Australians in particular. What could have happened if things had gone wrong, luckily, cannot be fathomed. It appears that, whatever the reasons why it was successful, or just simply *because* it was successful, this story for once reaffirmed the relevance of specialised over partly- or non-specialised expertise: “not all ‘powerful’ voices are malicious: they might be powerful by possessing useful knowledge and skills, for example healthcare workers”, Partington, Taylor (2018: xiv), or even cave-divers. It also proves that science and technology dissemination is still needed in persuading non-expert audiences and leading the popular debate, because “nor is ‘empowerment and ‘disempowerment’ a binary distinction; there are degrees of (dis)empowerment and also different types” (ibid.), especially when one of the main issues in news production and reception remains “how well or poorly informed the main-stream media are, as well as its inbuilt privileging of drama, crisis and alarmism” (ibid.: xvii).

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