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Core Blighty? Metaphors in the British Journalism Review 2011-2014

Martin Conboy and Minyao Tang

Journalism has long relied on certain core metaphors in order to express its claims to social and political usefulness. The deployment of metaphors to describe a practice that in contrast asserts its truth-telling and plain prose style is in itself interesting. Since metaphor acts as a powerful indicator of presuppositions it can be used to reify complex public discourses, reducing them to common-sense thinking. This paper will explore what metaphors have been used in association with journalism in the pages of the British Journalism Review since the closure of the News of the World. This publication was launched in 1989 in response to a previous crisis in public and professional confidence in journalism and has since then provided an intriguing insider dialogue on developments within the area. Do metaphorical articulations of the current role and image of journalism demonstrate an awareness among journalists of changes in its values or do they rather tend to reinforce more traditional attitudes to a practice under threat? Post-Leveson what can the patterning of such figurative language across articles by a wide range of prominent journalists in the UK tell us about the values and aspirations of journalists in a time when journalism is under intense scrutiny?

KEYWORDS: metaphor, British Journalism Review, journalistic identity, hacks, Leveson

Introduction

Ambivalence of journalists towards their field of employment is nothing new and can be read, laced within many contemporary accounts. For a recent, striking example we can read Robert Peston, the BBC's economics editor, an impressively influential figure within British television and certainly not a social outsider, the son of a life peer, a former stockbroker and graduate of Balliol College, as he differentiates himself from genuine expertise in his field:

A bit of history has been made with the disclosure that prices fell 0.1% in April - because the consumer price index has never before dropped since official records began in 1996.....

So my natural impulse is to say that deflation has arrived in Britain - because there is no other word in the English language than "deflation" to describe this phenomenon.

However many of those who define themselves as "serious economists" (that's not me, by the way - I'm a hack) are desperately anxious that I and you don't use the "d" word....

This piece explores contemporary journalism's values as expressed through metaphors deployed by journalists themselves when reflecting upon their own practices during a time of widespread debate on the central aims and ambitions of journalism in the wake of the Leveson Report. Exploring these metaphors allows us to consider the language with which journalists' ethical principles and moral standards are being debated in a particular national context.

Enter the British Journalism Review

1989 was not a good year for British newspaper journalism. The longer term consequences of the Murdoch Wapping Revolution were becoming clear. The invasion of privacy scandals which were to lead to the convening of the Calcutt Enquiry were in full swing. The Sunday Correspondent was already showing the signs of flagging that would cause it to fold a little over twelve months after its 1989 launch. The accumulating problems prompted a group of concerned journalists to approach Sage Publications with an idea for a serious journalism quarterly. The British Journalism Review was launched. The title echoed the prestigious American publication, the Columbia Journalism Review which had been in publication since 1961. Unlike the CJR, the BJR was not embedded within a particular university in the UK but rather developed its editorial coherence around a group comprised of academics, publishers and senior journalists. It is certainly not a peer-reviewed journal but nevertheless it is different from the run-of-the-mill trade press. It has combined topicality, brevity and seasoned assessments of a range of issues affecting journalism over the past two decades. Most importantly, and perhaps on account of these very reasons, it provides a relatively spontaneous commentary outside the bounds of normal editorial loyalties from writers who are authoritative within their field and acutely aware of journalism's challenges. The title of its first editorial articulates something of the ambiguity of the journal's role: "Why we are here". This relates on the surface, at least, to the function of the journal but it could, on reflection, equally be posing an existential question about journalism.

In his opening editorial, Geoffrey Goodman as editor 1989 expresses the view that: "Our primary aim is to help journalists themselves reflect on the changing character and problems of their job."

That was in 1989.

Metaphors and Definitions of Journalism

Over a quarter of a century later, this paper will explore the ways in which the journal continues to articulate the role of journalism, focusing specifically on metaphor. Journalism has long depended on certain core metaphors in order to express its claims to social and political usefulness. These include the "Fourth Estate", "watchdog", "muckraker". As if to reinforce this, newspapers themselves have often been given titles which are rich in metaphorical assertion of the same functions such as "Argus", "herald", "leader", "recorder", "sentinel" (Larson 1937) while in the British newspaper world the same pattern has been identified by Jones (1996, 28-46). Embedded within these metaphors, as if to underscore the fact that metaphor is an important aspect of how we structure reality, are commonly shared understandings of what journalists do and what they believe the values of journalism are. At a time of crisis in British journalism post Leveson, it is salutary to consider what metaphorical range is being deployed and the extent to which it draws upon or challenges common perceptions of journalistic identity. Perhaps they might also show how new identifications are being created. Unlike Voss (2011) who has focused on one metaphor, that of the mirror in American journalism, this study will explore a wide but interrelating set of metaphors in the contemporary British context. The deployment of metaphors to describe a practice that highlights its truth-telling and

plain prose style is in itself interesting and beyond this, metaphor is a powerful indicator of presuppositions and can be used to reify complex public discourses, supplying them with all the potency of common-sense thinking.

We will argue that the contemporary crisis of journalism is perhaps a definitional crisis even before it is a crisis pertaining to the ethics of journalism or of technology's encroachment on the practices of journalism. We will not go looking for explicit definitions of journalism as some sort of journalistic 'credo' but rather seek out subtler patterns expressed through metaphorical associations used by journalists when describing their work.

Metaphor as Audience Design

Metaphor can be used to explore contemporary British journalists' own sense of identity as it provides a set of tacit assumptions about how journalism functions as well as their own definitions of their practice. To a large extent, the very nature of the BJR lends itself to a relatively spontaneous set of discussions, providing an everyday approach to contemporary issues in journalism. This everyday approach draws unselfconsciously on metaphors in expressing the views of journalists on journalism. Beyond the analytical, in probing the internal discussions among British journalists we hope to open up a space where these expressions of contemporary journalistic identity might be discussed further with journalists themselves at a later date enabling the British Journalism Review to claim a continuing status as a most productive forum for reflections on the state of journalism in the UK.

Much analysis of journalists' writing is either analytical of their product (Bell 1991; Fairclough 1995; Van Dijk 1998; Conboy 2007; Richardson 2007) or of the production process and their attendant linguistic patterning (Cotter, 2010; Perrin, 2013). Despite the fact that journalists often refer to themselves and their professional activities in metaphorical terms - e.g. watchdogs, mirrors, marketplace, cornerstone of democracy, crusaders, window on the world, Fourth Estate (Weaver and Wilhoit 1996; Christians et al. 2009)- little attention has been paid to broader metaphorical representation apart from Gravengaard (2011) and Vos (2011) and none to our knowledge in a specifically British context. Our approach may not align micro-linguistic analysis directly with news production processes (Catenaccio et al., 2010) but it offers a looser, more spontaneous and even more off-guard set of observations on the relationships expressed between journalists and their practice. Such an approach insists that professional identities are created through discourse.

Our analysis draws upon research inspired by the cognitive linguistic approach introduced by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) which suggests that metaphors, beyond a merely decorative, poetic function provide a level of shared cultural and social associations which take on the full force of a psychological reality. In terms of professionals talking about their own practice, metaphor therefore gives us an insight into deep but often unspoken assumptions of people associating as a group. As Gravengaard points out for our purposes:

Metaphors are conventionalized, hardly noticed and effortlessly used in the routinized linguistic practice.... In other words, metaphors are not just expressions of how journalists perceive reality, metaphors also play an

important role in creating the reality in which they are used – and they affect the actors’ perceptions of this reality and the way they act in it (2011, 1068).

Such an observation implies that in deploying metaphors which are already part and parcel of a highly conceptualized set of frameworks, the journalists are to a large extent constructing and disseminating their professional identity and their relationship with the social and political world in which their work takes place. This aspect of metaphor makes it all the more important when we consider the historical roots of some of the commonplace assumptions within journalistic identity.

On account of the fact that metaphors are always deeply embedded in longer cognitive patternings, metaphorical analysis contributes to the cultural history of journalism. It enables us to reflect upon how sedimentations of commonplace understandings of journalism’s roles and the associated self-perceptions of journalists relating to these roles impact upon contemporary discussion. Vos (2011) has provided an exemplary account of how the mirror metaphor was used as an explanation of the journalistic norm of objectivity in nineteenth century America and perhaps the much messier range of metaphorical associations in contemporary British discussions of journalism are an indicator of its current “crisis”. Vos is correct in pointing out that words and indeed metaphorical associations change over time (2011, 576) but this makes it all the more interesting why metaphors which emerged in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries specifically relating to British journalism should continue to hold such central positions in journalists’ discourse (e.g. “Fourth Estate” and “hack”).

The metaphorical process is conventionally divided between source domain (the fields from which the images are drawn) and the target domain (the literal topic of discussion). Beyond this approach referred to as conceptual metaphor theory (Lakoff and Johnson 2003, 5) Fauconnier and Turner have argued that metaphor blends source and target domains with readers’ (or in our case journalists/writers) background knowledge to create a new “emergent structure” (2002, 45). What is interesting in the sample selected is that it is not strictly speaking “journalism” it is more a metadiscourse on journalism being examined. This means that the usual expectations for metaphor in journalism are suspended; expectations such as, helping readers conceptualise an abstract event or something alien to their everyday experience or enhancing the news value of a particular story including by sensationalizing it (Burns 2011, 2).

Bell (1991) explores the audience design of media language but in our particular corpus we are looking at the audience design of an insider community. Journalists are being created and reinforced in their common and sometimes changing assumptions through their underlying use of metaphorical commonplaces. In enumerating the spread and quantity of metaphors we are exploring how this particular journal identifies its ideal audience (journalists) in much the same way as newspapers identify their commercial and advertising-driven readerships (Fairclough, 1995: 40). Metaphor is a highly value-laden discourse and carries a high level of preferred reading within its associations.

Searching the Corpus

We took four years of the *British Journalism Review*, comprising 16 editions with approximately 35,000 words in each volume of the journal which totals approximately 560,000 words as our corpus. This is a significant body of language about journalism by journalists to draw our deductions from. All 16 volumes of the journal were read by both researchers and metaphors coded manually. The coding was then cross-referenced between the researchers.

We went through our material and performed an inductive categorization of the metaphors used by journalists directly relating to either journalism or journalists. Other metaphors were ignored as irrelevant to our research. The tables below give a breakdown of the different groups of conceptual metaphors, the numbers of metaphors which we placed in each of the groups and an overall percentage of the total relevant metaphors. The range of metaphors even on first viewing indicates a set of conceptual frames which are sometimes complementary and at others quite contradictory, especially when dealing with some of the core claims that journalism in the British context constitutes a public good, a Fourth Estate or a component of democratic society.

The total of metaphors associated with journalists or journalism was 834. We grouped metaphors in conceptual clusters in order to map sets of associations which pragmatically act in order to create new and challenge old values and identifications of journalists. Our approach in a relatively small corpus allowed for a manual and more sophisticated identification of metaphorical range than a more mechanistic and pre-determined inventory approach. Frequency of metaphors concerning journalism/journalists was one in 670 words indicating that while relatively uncommon in absolute terms, there was a regularity of metaphorical use around one single topic – journalism - which draws attention to itself. These were then divided up into categories as they emerged. The top four categories in numerical terms and in term of the percentage of the total were:

Corporeal 71 (8.51%); Hack (79 (9.47%); Bestial 94 (11.27%); Military 104 (12.47%).

Table 1

Table 2

Table 3

Bestial

Bestial is a key source domain for metaphors which play down any noble or politically liberating set of associations. The use of the source domain of bestial behavior is extremely prevalent in the data and most of these references are negative in implication. The routines of journalism for example are presented in a series of bestial metaphors which highlights an unthinking, mechanical set of utterances much in contrast to any notion of the journalist as an intelligent interpreter of events: “parroting of official truths”, “parrot cry of press freedom”, “journalists came to parrot a phrase”. Likewise, in contradiction of traditional assertions of the journalist as rugged individualist, there are references to the defining feature of journalists being an ability to conform and sometimes depart from what is characterized as a

predominantly group ethic identified most strongly as the “press pack”. Those who depart from this behavior are “separate from the herd” or “departing from an insistent bleat”. Neither of the associations implied here as representative of journalism’s norms of behavior are flattering. Journalists are commonly referred to pejoratively such as in one resonant phrase which identifies their group behavior as: “feral press”, while their activities often draw upon source domains of highly unflattering association: “Reporters who can worm their way into a place”; “he ferrets away”; the “freelance who dwells at the bottom of the food chain”.

References to “rats” are rather more ambivalent since although the rat is not a positive bestial image, it is turned variously to the advantage of the journalists and their outsider status, held up as an exemplar of behaviour appropriate for a successful journalist: “rat-like cunning”, “the rat of Fleet Street” while also being available as a feature of journalistic investigation. Journalists can for example, “smell a rat” and can be described as “like ratcatchers” and are advised “not to rat on him” or behave like a “a rat deserting a sinking ship”. A less ambivalent image, drawing upon and extending a powerful and pejorative cartoon image of journalists in popular culture (Spitting Image), one article depicts journalists simply as: “pigs in raincoats”. As a striking contrast to such deprecatory associations, we can perhaps consider reference to an idealization from a previous era when journalists could be referred to in more heroic terms, very distinctive from bestial metaphors of the present, as in Lord Beaverbrook’s “Young Eagles”.

It is interesting to see how one of the core metaphors of journalism, its watchdog status, is explicitly drawn upon to cast the contemporary varieties of journalism in a negative light: “the one-time watchdog has become a particularly ferocious, not to say rabid, attack dog”. The contemporary negativity is nowhere more powerfully expressed than in the observation: “journalism is to politician as dog is to lamppost” which adds, savagely, that it is uncertain which refers to which. Contradictorily while one writer can assert that journalism is a “dog-eat-dog profession”, another in a separate piece can state that there exists: “the written journalistic code that ‘dog does not eat dog’ ”. Journalists can claim dog-like behavior as a virtue when it matches their claims to tenacity: “dogged persistence” and one of journalism’s chief claims to public service is also expressed in canine terms as representing “the underdog”. However, we can revert to the combination of group behavior and the canine metaphor as a specific sub-set of the bestial when considering one of the distinguishing core metaphors of British journalism: the “hack pack”.

Hack

Hack is interesting as a category but also in its relatively limited range of extension. It is used and repeated throughout our sample as a noticeably consistent anchor to definitions. This brings an aspect of very British anti-heroism into play and tells us much about the historical self-perception of the British journalism; a sort of celebration of the unsavoury aspect of the role of the British journalist even at a time where the unsavoury aspects of some of the activities associated with British journalism are in the spotlight.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary the word “hack” emerges as a metaphor, associating from 1700 with horses for hire with the poor East London borough of Hackney. It soon became associated with poor women for hire (1730),

prostitutes, and at the same time (1734) a writer hired for a short-term employment or writing speculatively for payment.

The extended subtitle of Pinkus's book provides an insight into the emergence of the reputation of such independent professional newswriters at the cusp of the eighteenth century.

The scandalous lives and pornographic works of the original Grub St. writers, together with the bottle songs which led to their drunkenness, the shameless pamphleteering which led them to Newgate Prison, and the continual pandering to public taste which put them among the first to almost earn a fitful living from their writing alone.

A comment by Pinkus (1968, 14) is worth holding in mind for its pertinence to the modern-day mythologizing of journalism. He writes:

To the blue-nosed tradesman, the hacks were a drinking, whoring lot, abandoned to every vice – worse, they were a blasphemy against the sacred principles of thrift, industry and cash payment. The gentleman class found them rather useful in its political wars, at times entertaining, but always contemptible, because they wrote for bread.....

It is part of the myth that the Grub Street writers created for themselves, and, of course, it is only partly true. Many of the hacks lived austere, colourless lives..... Yet a sufficient number believed in the dream and aspired to it so that it became associated with the contemporary image of Grub Street. It is part of what Grub Street came to mean.

One of the legacies of this self-mythologizing is the resonance of the term “hack” which survives in descriptions of journalists to the present day in the UK. It is one of the distinguishing features which underlines the point made by Weaver and Wu's extensive research that each national variant of journalism has its own historical and cultural contours (Weaver and Wu 1998). For Grub Street we can substitute another now-defunct street of disreputable writers which continues to act as the symbolic heart of British journalism - Fleet Street - the once centre of the metropolitan British newspaper trade. The mythological red-line connecting Grub Street to the contemporary is the figure of the “hack”. Driven by the need to earn a living, often by digging up dirty details which might embarrass someone in a position of power, the “hack's” reputation and reward were contingent upon frequenting a social milieu and indulging a lifestyle which were always likely to compromise any more straightforward concept of a “professional” (Conboy 2013, 22-23).

This brings us back to the opening discussions of the nature of the centrality of self-deprecating, anti-heroic self-perceptions of journalists as “hacks”. We see the term related to dissolute behavior as in: “hacks hang around” as well as seeing a whole host of varieties of new context for an ancient usage: “wannabe hacks”; “a Daily Mirror hack”; “retired hacks”; “lady hack”; “the seasoned hack”; “former tabloid hack”. Furthermore the word is used to extend and shift its range of meaning: “Hackademic”; “Hackgate”; “the hackiest”; “hackettes”. The group behavior mentioned above can also be expressed in terms of the “hack”: “a posse of hackettes”.

Ironically, despite the low-level of regard for the work of the journalist expressed in this semantic strain, there is also a series of collocations which imply that these same “hacks” require some degree of formal training: “trainee hacks”; “trained hacks”; even “a proper professional hack”

Finally we need to consider the very specific national context to this metaphorical domains. There does seem to be evidence that the ‘hack is a peculiarly British, even English phenomenon not to be found anywhere else in the world of journalism: “being an English hack”; “Those British hacks” and all the more pertinent as an area for exploration on account of this.

Military

Military metaphors abound and yet paradoxically they highlight conflict within the context of news organisations, the economic environment and the work of ordinary journalists while rarely touching upon the people or the democratic processes on whose behalf journalism often assumes it is acting. Organisationally journalism can be presented “as the military wing of the TV business”; “marshall their big guns”; “clear chain of command”; “from the media side of the barbed wire”; “the corporate fortresses” and senior personnel are fitted within this domain: “news editors are the generals”; “The bullying warrant officers”; “The media baron”. Gendered debate within the organizational hierarchy is also militarized; “there is also a gender pay gap that must be fought”; “as a battle between a feisty woman and a male establishment”.

The fierce contemporary competition within the news media is also included within the military source domain: “battled for commuters’ attention”; “A barrage of free print”; “had to wipe out the opposition first”; “newspaper sales have nosedived”. Within these processes of production ordinary journalists are often categorized in contrast to the metaphorical senior military staff within the organization flow as the honourable but exploited infantry: “disciplined frontline troops”; “foot-soldier journalists”; “talented foot soldiers” and investigative journalism can be cast as “a crusade”. There are however occasional expressions of the public in whose name such activities are taking place although these expressions do tend towards the abstract; “the battle could be won and lost in the trenches of public opinion”.

Military metaphor indicates quite clearly that British journalists see their activities as in conflict with authority and yet there is little to suggest on whose behalf these battles are being fought. The military excursions seem to be in defence of journalism itself as a particularly solipsistic activity from which the broader beneficiaries have been erased. Jansen and Sabo point out that “the language of sport/war represents the values of hegemonic masculinity (i.e. aggression, competition, dominance, territoriality, instrumental violence) as desirable and essential to the social order” (1994,10). When transferred metaphorically into the discourse of journalists we can see that much of this insider identification of the work and identity of the journalist is threaded within such a machismo especially when it self-referentially portrays itself in terms of military engagement. The military source domains remains highly culture-specific within the British context.

Corporeal

Journalism is regularly categorized in terms of it having a body that can be damaged, that requires sustenance and has physical attributes of sensory perception. This allows journalism to be framed in terms which are at once more emotive than if describing a communicative process and also distanced from any explicit political function. This range of metaphorical associations allow journalists to express emotional attachment to their practice.

Journalism can be described as being a “wounded industry” but most often, the current predicament of journalism, in particular print journalism, is described in terms of dying: “newspapers as they were in their death throes”; “print journalism was dying”; “newspapers are dying”; “the death of traditional journalism”; “the Scottish press appears to be dying on its feet”. The death of journalism as a physical entity is emphasized by frequent references to bones; “Newspapers have been pared to the bone”; “skeleton staff”. In contrast, claims for the vitality of journalism are often encapsulated through references to heart beat and blood: “through the veins of journalism”; “BBC’s values running through his veins”; “The media, which should be the lifeblood of the debate”; “cultural heartbeat of the organization”.

Journalists, developing the cliché of having a “nose for news”, can “sniff a coming political storm”, “sniff an injustice” and this olfactory association is complemented with one of appetite even addiction; “a constant hunger for fresh stories”; “embrace the print habit”; “The heroin users of the news junkie world”. Journalism’s power is corporalized: “the sinews of broadcasting”; “the paper regaining the editorial muscle of its illustrious past”; “statutory muscle”; “toothless”; “broadcasting council with teeth”. As with militarized metaphors, it is rare to read of the press acting as a body function on behalf of its readers: “The press is at once the eye and the ear and the tongue of the people.”

Conclusion

In this piece, we have explored in some depth four of the metaphorical domains which journalists use in the British Journalism Review to quantify their feelings about their own work and professional identities. The presence of repetitions of older tropes of journalist such as “hack” clearly remain central to these contemporary patternings of self-understanding. Across corporeal, bestial and military associations, journalism and journalists are routinely constructed within a range of discourse which highlights negative parameters as a form of mock-heroic self-identification. The most common metaphors indicate that journalists in the UK continue to express their identity in terms which isolate themselves and their practice from their audience. The fact that these representations are featured in a publication which assumes that the majority of readers are ‘insiders’ adds more weight to the presumption that these are core aspects of British journalists’ self-identification today. In an era when the value and distinctiveness of the figure of the journalist is more than ever under threat, such a consistent set of metaphorical articulations of British journalists as outsiders to the society whose interests they purport they serve is surely a cause for concern.

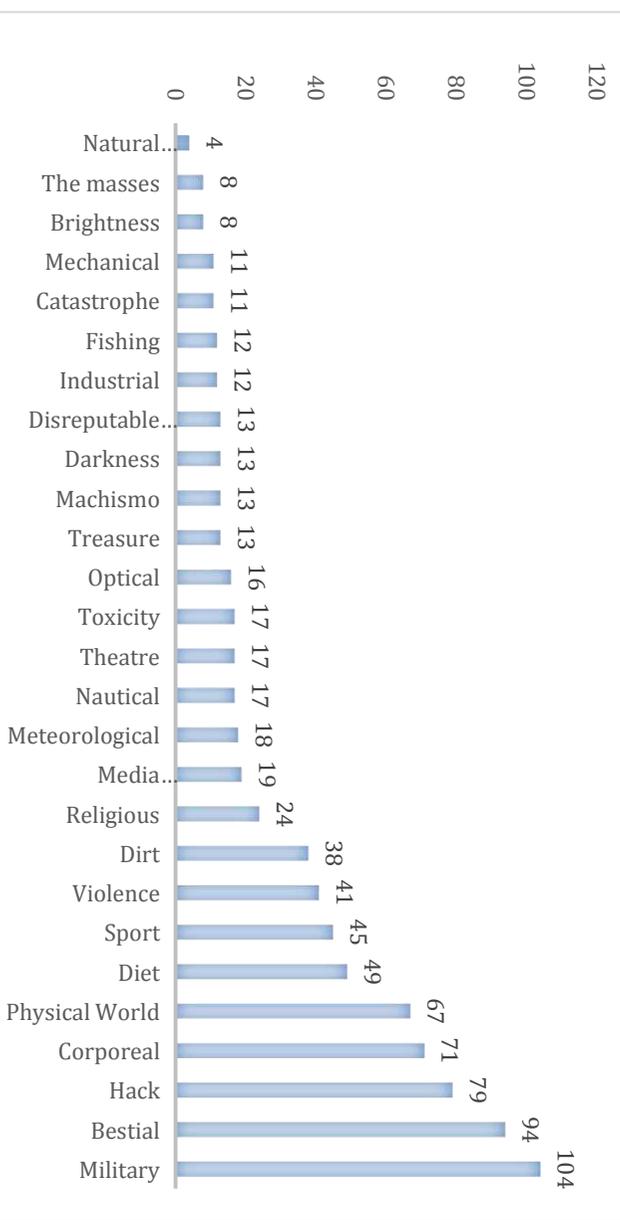
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Natural Disaster	4	0.48%
The masses	8	0.96%
Brightness	8	0.96%
Mechanical	11	1.32%
Catastrophe	11	1.32%
Fishing	12	1.44%
Industrial	12	1.44%
Disreputable Behavior	13	1.56%
Darkness	13	1.56%
Machismo	13	1.56%
Treasure	13	1.56%
Optical	16	1.92%
Toxicity	17	2.04%
Theatre	17	2.04%
Nautical	17	2.04%
Meteorological	18	2.16%
Media Management	19	2.28%
Religious	24	2.88%
Dirt	38	4.56%
Violence	41	4.92%
Sport	45	5.40%
Diet	49	5.88%
Physical World	67	8.03%
Corporeal	71	8.51%
Hack	79	9.47%
Bestial	94	11.27%
Military	104	12.47%
Total	834	

METAPHORS IN BRITISH JOURNALISM REVIEW 2011 - 2014



METAPHORS IN BRITISH JOURNALISM REVIEW 2011-2014

- Natural Disaster
- Mechanical
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