

Sociocognitive perspectives on discourse expectations in online news coverage of the Serbian student protests

This paper examines the role of discourse expectations in the online news coverage of the 2024–2025 Serbian student protests. Drawing on sociocognitive approaches to discourse analysis (Đorđević, 2020; van Dijk, 2018), particularly the relationship between local linguistic cues and broader ideological context models, the study explores how online political news discourse guides anticipatory interpretation during the comprehension of politically polarised events. The paper is situated within current discussions of discourse expectations and predictive interpretation (Ryskin & Nieuwland, 2023), with a particular focus on how readers construct expectations about political actors, legitimacy, conflict, and social order during online news processing (van Berkum et al., 2005).

Research on discourse processing has increasingly emphasised that discourse comprehension involves predictive and expectation-driven mechanisms in which recipients continuously generate and update interpretations based on both immediate linguistic input and broader background knowledge. From a sociocognitive perspective, these processes are closely linked to socially shared representations, ideological schemas, and context models that shape how political events and social actors are interpreted. Rather than viewing media discourse solely as a vehicle for explicit persuasion, the paper approaches online political news discourse as a mechanism that guides readers toward particular anticipatory interpretations before complete information is processed. In this sense, discourse expectations emerge through the interaction between local lexical and syntactic choices and broader sociopolitical knowledge activated during comprehension.

The paper focuses on online news headlines published between 1 December 2024 and 31 January 2025 in two pro-government Serbian news outlets (*Informer* and *Kurir*) and two anti-government outlets (*N1* and *Nova.rs*). The dataset was compiled during a period marked by mass student protests, escalating political tensions, public accusations against protesters, and growing ideological polarisation in Serbian media discourse. Headlines were selected because of their strategic role in directing attention, foregrounding interpretations, and shaping expectations before readers engage with the full news article. As condensed and highly evaluative discourse units, headlines offer particularly suitable material for examining how predictive interpretations are activated in online political communication.

Methodologically, the study combines qualitative content analysis with sociocognitive discourse analysis and framing theory (Đorđević, 2025). The analysis examines how specific discourse patterns contribute to the construction of expectations regarding protest legitimacy, political agency, democratic participation, violence, and institutional responsibility. Particular attention is paid to the interaction between local and global levels of discourse organisation. At the local level, the study analyses evaluative lexical choices, emotionally charged expressions, syntactic foregrounding, metaphorical language, and labels that position students as either legitimate civic actors or disruptive, violent, or politically manipulated agents. At the global level, the analysis examines how these linguistic patterns activate broader ideological narratives and sociopolitical schemas that shape how readers interpret the protests and anticipate potential developments.

The findings indicate substantial differences between pro-government and anti-government media representations of the protests. Pro-government outlets frequently rely on hostile and delegitimising discourse characterised by negative labelling, moral evaluation, and the foregrounding of disorder, violence, and alleged external political influence. Such discourse patterns foster expectations of instability, social threat, and illegitimacy, positioning the protests as dangerous disruptions to political and social order, even betrayal of national interests. Through repeated lexical and thematic framing, students are discursively constructed not primarily as civic actors, but as politically manipulated agents connected to broader narratives of national destabilisation.

In contrast, anti-government outlets predominantly frame the protests through narratives of democratic participation, institutional accountability, state pressure, and civic resistance. Their coverage foregrounds student demands, peaceful protest, and questions of democratic legitimacy, encouraging expectations associated with social solidarity, victimisation, and political responsibility. These competing discursive constructions suggest that readers are guided toward substantially different predictive interpretations of the same political events depending on the media outlet's ideological orientation.

The paper argues that online political news discourse operates not only through explicit ideological positioning but also through the anticipatory structuring of interpretation during online comprehension. Predictive expectations are shaped through the continuous interaction between local discourse cues and

broader sociocognitive models activated during processing. In politically polarised media environments, such expectations may reinforce ideological alignments by shaping how audiences interpret unfolding political developments before full propositional information is processed.

By connecting sociocognitive discourse analysis with current discussions of discourse expectations and predictive interpretation, the study contributes a qualitative discourse-analytic perspective to debates that have often been dominated by experimental and computational approaches. More broadly, the paper highlights the importance of examining how online political discourse shapes public understanding through expectation-building mechanisms operating simultaneously at the linguistic, cognitive, and ideological levels.

Keywords: discourse expectations, predictive interpretation, sociocognitive discourse analysis, ideological framing, student protests, Serbia

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