ANALYSING NEWSPAPERS

AN APPROACH FROM CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

JOHN E. RICHARDSON

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For Steve

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1 Introduction: Newspaper Discourse

This book is aimed at producing more critical language users. In it, I introduce an approach to the critical analysis of the language of journalism, with the aim of encouraging you to engage with and criticise newspaper discourse. Journalistic discourse has some very specific textual characteristics, some very specific methods of text production and consumption, and is defined by a particular set of relationships between itself and other agencies of symbolic and material power. These three sets of characteristics – that is, the language of journalism, its production and consumption and the relations of journalism to social ideas and institutions – are clearly inter-related and sometimes difficult to disentangle. In other words, 'they are different elements but not discrete, fully separate elements' (Fairclough, 2000: 122). Specifically: the sourcing and construct of the news is intimately linked with the actions and opinions of (usually powerful) social groups; it is impossible to select and compose news without a conception of the target or intended audience; and, while *possible*, I believe that it is flawed to consider issues such as contemporary democratic politics, social values and the continuing existence of prejudice and social inequalities without reference to the formative influence of journalism. Each of these three points represents key themes of this book that I will revisit when discussing the structures, functions and power of journalism.

This book represents an analysis of newspapers from the perspective of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). CDA is a perspective on critical scholarship: a theory and a method of analysing the way that individuals and institutions *use* language. Critical discourse analysts focus 'on social problems, and especially the role of discourse in the production and reproduction of power abuse or domination' (van Dijk, 2001: 96). CDA starts by identifying a social problem, 'chooses

the perspective of those who suffer most, and critically analyses those in power, those who are responsible and those who have the means and the opportunity to solve such problems' (van Dijk, 1996, cited in Wodak, 2001: 1). In response to social inequality and the abuse of power, CDA demands 'politically involved research with an emancipatory requirement' (Titscher *et al.*, 2000: 147). Such an approach inevitably means that CDA takes an overt moral and political position with regard to the social problem analysed – a characteristic of CDA that some scholars (particularly within the more descriptive tradition of Conversation Analysis) have objected to. However, we should recognise that all scholarly discourse is produced in social interaction, is part of a social structure and context, and hence is socio-politically situated whether we like it or not: research which takes a neutral or impartial approach to social injustice does not solve the problem, indeed it could be argued that academic neutrality contributes to the perpetuation of such injustice.

Given the power and significance of news journalism to contemporary society, it should come as no surprise that the discourse of newspapers has been, and continues to be, scrutinised (Fairclough, 1995a; Fowler *et al.*, 1979; Fowler, 1991; Richardson, 2001a, 2004; Richardson and Franklin, 2004; van Dijk, 1991). In line with the three characteristics of newspaper discourse referred to above, I argue that the analysis of how newspapers may (re)produce iniquitous social relations needs to be focused at three levels: on the material realities of society in general; on the practices of journalism; and on the character and function of journalistic language more specifically. Clearly, each of these three levels of analysis is enormous, attracting the attention of many, many scholars; hence I could not hope to attempt to portray them fully. It is nonetheless necessary at this stage to briefly introduce a number of key assumptions that this book makes of each of these three subjects.

This book's view of society

The contemporary world is characterised by the pre-eminence of capitalism; there are very few, if any, places in the world that are not affected by capitalist social relations. Certainly, capitalism affects different parts of the world in different ways. To this extent, I agree with Blommaert's (2005: 36) argument that CDA has been rather slow to recognise that the way late modernity has taken shape

'in First-World societies is very particular, and a majority of the people in the world live in conditions closer to those of villagers in Central Tanzania than to those of inhabitants of Manchester or Vienna'. However, I would nevertheless argue that the social relations that characterise both contemporary Manchester and Central Tanzania are similarly the product of the structuring influence of capitalism.

To say that a society is capitalist is to make a claim about the mode of production and the division of society into classes who are defined by their relationship to the mode of production. In essence, 'a class society is structured in such a way as to enable one set of people to live off the labour of others' (Shaikh, 1986: 73). Under a capitalist mode of production, workers are paid less for their labour than it is worth. As we are all aware, workers are rewarded for their labour (insofar as they are paid a wage) but only for *part* of the working day; for the rest of the working day 'labour is working free for capital' (Wayne, 2003: 11). To take a simplistic example: workers from the 'village in Central Tanzania' referred to above (see Blommaert 2005: 36) may carve a soapstone figurine and be paid 50p for a day's labour; the owner of the company they work for may then sell this figurine to a distribution company for £2; this means that the worker, in effect, worked three quarters of a day for free.[1] This is referred to as surplus labour, since (from a Marxist perspective) it is viewed as labour in addition to that which the labour force needs to survive. Surplus labour forms the basis of capitalist profit. The surplus (£1.50 in the case of our Tanzanian example) is appropriated by those who own the means of production – the company – which, in turn, 'keeps the capitalist class willing and able to re-employ workers' (Shaikh, 1986: 74). By Marx's (1998: 25) great turn of phrase, in a capitalist system 'those who work do not gain and those who gain do not work'.

In a little more detail, from a Marxist perspective, 'classes are defined by their social relations of production' – and the 'social' aspect of this relation needs to be stressed (Wayne, 2003: 17). Economically, there are only three classes: those who buy labour power (the bourgeoisie), those who sell their own labour power (the proletariat) and small-scale craftsmen/women and entrepreneurs (the petit bourgeoisie) who either create a product themselves or purchase a commodity and re-sell it for a profit. However within the proletariat, there are wide disparities in the *social* relation to the means of production – in other words, between those who have a degree of labour autonomy and those who do not, between those who have social control over the labour of others (managers, 'teamleaders',

foremen, etc.) and those who do not. The middle classes are a special case within this social formation, being those groups within the proletariat 'who sell their labour power and therefore effectively cede control over the production apparatus *as a whole* to capital, while at the same time retaining some real if limited and variable control over their *own* labour' (ibid.). Take journalists as an example: journalists sell their labour to news organisations – a relation that places them in the proletariat class, an identical economic relation as cleaners who do the same. However the journalist's *social* relation to capital is clearly not the same as the cleaner: their labour is more profitable (produces a higher surplus value) and hence they are paid more; and they (historically at least) have a greater degree of autonomy over their labour. Depending on their professional status, journalists may be able to leave the office, talk to others, eat when they want, write and file their copy from outside the office and not be watched or directly supervised for much of their working day. The same cannot be said of the cleaner, who will have to turn up at a given time, perform the same chores, will often be supervised and as a result feels a greater sense of alienation from their labour. These material differences have significant effects on class subjectivities – that is, middle- and working-class perceptions of capitalism and their social position within a capitalist system. In short, the middle-class journalist may have a more positive view of capitalism because he or she is better insulated from the more obvious injuries of class experienced by the working classes.

Defenders of capitalism often claim that the exchange of labour for a wage is acceptable since both parties enter into the contract freely: both the worker and the owner are free to withdraw from the exchange, both gain from the contract (in the form of a wage or profit) and hence the system is acceptable. McNair (2005: 155), for instance, defends capitalism by arguing that inequality is no longer a factor in advanced capitalist societies, 'where living standards for the great majority have improved steadily since the Second World War'. However, workers and owners do not benefit equally from the system, in terms of wealth, health or 'free time' (i.e. time spent getting ready to go to work, returning from work or recovering from work). The 'trickle down theory' of McNair's argument, in which inequality is taken to be tempered because the wealth of the richest is imagined to permeate down and enrich the poorest, belies a more significant truth: that in a capitalist system, as the wealth of the worker increases, the wealth of the owner increases *exponentially*. This is an economic reality that even the *Washington Post* has recently

acknowledged. An editorial from this paper, published 12 March 2006, read:

> In the 25 years from 1980 to 2004, a period during which U.S. gross domestic product per person grew by almost two-thirds, the wages of the typical worker actually fell slightly after accounting for inflation. [. . .] Between 1980 and 2003, total after-tax income for the bottom fifth of households rose 8 percent, and the second-bottom fifth gained 17 percent; in other words, all boats did rise, albeit by less than 1 percent per year. But it's hard to celebrate such modest gains when the top fifth advanced 59 percent over the 24-year period. [. . .] after a quarter-century of disappointment, the struggles of Americans in the bottom half of the income distribution cannot be viewed as temporary.[2]

Unfortunately, the editorial drew back from the necessary conclusion that systemic change is required, not piecemeal measures. Indeed the newspaper's misunderstanding of capitalism was revealed by its stated desire for a policy on class poverty that 'would reduce inequality without damaging growth'. Under a capitalist system, as profits and the wealth of the owners (or shareholders) increase, the *comparative* wealth of the workers must necessarily *decrease*, because the wealth of the bourgeoisie is taken directly from the labour of the proletariat. This relation is true as much of national labour markets as it is of international trade and labour markets (see Hubbard and Miller, 2005). What this therefore means is that *capitalism is inherently exploitative*.

However, this system is neither permanent nor, as some have claimed, the best and final method of organising and administering society (Fukayama, 1992). In fact, *capitalism is inherently unstable*. People do not appreciate being exploited and hence there is always the potential that the working classes will become conscious of the nature of their relation to the means of production and revolt. Therefore, the capitalist class who benefit from *their* relation to the means of production have to fight to conceal the true nature of capitalism from the workers that they exploit. As Chomsky (2005: 19) puts it, the concentrated power centres of capital

> [. . .] realise that the system of domination is fragile, that it relies on disciplining the population by one or another means. There is a desperate search for such means: in recent years, Communism, crime, drugs, terrorism, and others. Pretexts change, policies remain rather stable.

The methods of 'disciplining' the working classes are many and varied, but essentially they fit into one of two inter-related techniques: *misguiding* the proletariat into accepting current social relations as natural, necessary or even enjoyable and *marginalising* and subduing dissent. While material in focus and effect, each of these techniques may be conceptualised as a discourse process achieved communicatively. The language used in newspapers is one key site in this naturalisation of inequality and neutralisation of dissent.

As stated above, CDA is an approach to language use that aims to *explore* and *expose* the roles that discourse plays in reproducing (or resisting) social inequalities. Given this objective, and the fact that 'class remains a fundamental structuring principle of every aspect of life in late capitalism' (Murdock, 2000: 7–8), it is strange that the discursive reproduction of class inequalities remains an under-developed issue for CDA. While previous CDA has examined 'marketising' economic discourse (Fairclough, 1995b) and globalisation (Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 1999), it has yet to analyse the role that newspaper discourse plays in indexing and (re)producing class inequality. This book aims to tackle this deficiency, discussing such issues at greater length in Chapter 2 and especially Chapter 5.

This book's view of journalism

The following question lies at the heart of all analysis and critique of journalism: *What is journalism for*? How we answer this will, in turn, shape the kind of additional questions we ask of journalism, and specifically the ways that we test journalism to see if it is 'measuring up' to the roles we think it ought to be fulfilling. Some may feel that journalism exists to entertain us – indeed that it is simply part of the 'entertainment industry'. Such a view is highly simplistic. While journalism displays features common to many forms of entertainment – comedy, novels and popular music to name but three – it is different to all of them. If journalism were comparable to these 'other' forms of entertainment, then why do governments and other powerful sections of society place so much stock in trying to control the work of journalists? Why are journalists manipulated, bullied and killed simply for attempting to do their job?

Alternatively, some have argued that journalism exists to disseminate – literally to broadcast and propagate – the views of the powerful. Again, I disagree. The circulation and promotion of the views of the powerful is better described as propaganda, and while

journalism is often shaped by the agenda of such propagandists, it remains distinct and separate from them. Indeed, there is sometimes considerable resistance to the work of PR within journalism. That such resistance is not always successful is an unfortunate outcome of this 'dance' between journalism and its sources, not a foregone conclusion. Third, many have argued that journalism is a business, that newspapers exist purely to make profit and this single observation explains their contents. Of course this is true up to a point – newspapers are businesses that must make money in order to continue to exist. But what does this observation actually solve? The film industry must also 'make money in order to continue to exist', but it is clearly different (in focus and scope) to journalism. Does concluding that 'newspapers need to make money' get to the bottom of the differences between journalistic genres (or between, say, *The Times* and the *Guardian*) or of the structure of news or, indeed, the influence of journalism? In the words of Murdock and Golding (1977: 18):

> It is not sufficient simply to assert that the capitalistic base of the 'culture industry' necessarily results in the production of cultural forms which are consonant with the dominant ideology. It is also necessary to demonstrate how this process of reproduction actually works by showing in detail how economic relations structure both the overall strategies of the cultural entrepreneurs and the concrete activities of the people who actually make the products the 'culture industry' sells.

In short, detecting that newspapers are businesses should only ever be the starting point of analysis, not the conclusion.

Each of these critiques of journalism, I think, misses the bigger picture. This book is founded on the assumption that *journalism exists to enable citizens to better understand their lives and their position(s) in the world*. Journalism's success or failure – in other words, the degree to which it is doing what it should or is letting us down – rests on the extent to which it achieves this fiduciary role: does journalism help you to better understand the world and your position within it? At this point we can reintroduce the three different approaches to journalism listed above: journalism as entertainment, as a loudhailer for the powerful and privileged and as a commodity produced by profit-seeking businesses. It is evident to all that journalism is often entertaining, it regularly reproduces the opinions of the powerful and (with the exception of a handful of outlets) is a saleable commodity.

In fact, one could argue that each of these three functions – reporting the actions and activities of the powerful and doing so in a form that is entertaining and readily consumable – are necessary to fulfilling the informational needs of the citizen. But when the work of journalists emphasises entertainment, or the activities and opinions of the powerful, or the pursuit of profit *in themselves* or *above* the primary function of journalism – to help citizens to understand the world and their positions within it – *it stops being journalism*.

Of course, this argument is still partial. Other genres of communication, for instance the novel, music, feature films, can also help us to understand the world (though I recognise that they are predominantly fictional and therefore do so in a completely different way to the predominantly factual stories of journalism). In addition to questioning the *function* of journalism, we also need to ask questions about the *form* and *content* of the messages that journalism conveys, and the discourse processes through which such messages are produced and consumed. Most of us can identify the meanings of texts, the meaning of a news report or what the journalist may be trying to make us think. But identifying exactly *how* this occurs is a little more difficult. If we take a relatively straightforward example: how do you tell the difference between different forms of writing? It is immediately obvious that there are certain differences: 'Sports commentary, for example, will predictably be different from the language used in an interview, and the language of advertising will be different from the language of [news reporting]. This much is obvious. Given this observation, however, it is not always easy to [. . .] pin down what makes a text of a particular type identifiable as such', nor is it always easy to pin down exactly 'how it achieves its purpose' (Delin, 2000: 2).

If we take a rather complex example – the issue of bias. Most of us think we can identify biases in news, or those instances when the journalist seems to have an agenda that they're pushing. It is much harder to be able to identify exactly *why* you come to this conclusion; *why* you think that a particular article is biased. Take this excerpt from an interview, for example, which analysed interviews with television viewers about the way in which they deconstructed TV news broadcasts:

> *Barb*: . . . there was that story about the Muslims and about how they were holding neighbourhood watches or something . . . and people do that all the time and they're telling about how these people, they turn violent, but they're really stressing that these