Discourse analysis in journalism studies

Journalistica: The Methods Section

In this section, Journalistica puts a spotlight on research methods used in journalism studies and/or journalism practice.

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1. Description of the method

'Discourse analysis' is an umbrella term used to describe a series of overlapping theoretical and methodological schools that share an overarching commitment to examining how humans construct meaning, identity, and cultural change (Fairclough, 2003; Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002; Laclau, 2014; Unger et al., 2016). Rather than sharing a specific set of methods, discourse analysts share, what Jorgensen and Phillips (2002) describe as, "certain key premises about how entities such as 'language' and 'the subject' are to be understood. They also have in common the aim of carrying out *critical* research" (p. 2, original emphasis). This means not only describing the world, but also engaging in processes of social change.

In practice, discourse analysis typically begins with the compilation of an archive of texts (understood in a broad sense), which is then used to analyse the discursive construction of meaning, identities, power, antagonism, and social change (Fairclough et al., 2011; Torfing, 2005). This might involve interviews, news articles, ethnographic observations, academic studies, policy documents, speeches, or even survey responses (Hansen & Sørensen, 2005; Unger et al., 2016; Wodak & Meyer, 2016). Importantly, the aim of studying texts is never to do so in a vacuum, but rather to understand them as part of wider structural formations and historical shifts.

Two important schools of discourse analysis are Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), also known as Critical Discourse Studies (CDS), and Discourse Theory (DT), also known as the Essex School of Discourse Theory. While the former is associated with scholars such as Norman Fairclough (2003, 2013) and Ruth Wodak (2014), the latter is primarily associated with the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (2014).

CDA and DT originate from within different academic disciplines, namely linguistics (CDA) and political philosophy (DT). This has resulted in key distinctions, notably an emphasis within CDA on discourse as *language* and a focus within DT on discourse as *socio-political relations*. This is reflected in key definitions, with Fairclough (1995, p. 9) describing discourse as "the use of language seen as a form of social practice" and Laclau and Mouffe (2014, p, 91) defining it as "any practice establishing a relation among elements."

Despite differences, CDA and DT share many methodological and theoretical perspectives. As Torfing (2005) concludes: "when it comes to the actual analysis of social and political discourse, the differences between Fairclough and Laclau and Mouffe are small" (p. 9).

2. Example of use

CDA and DT have been used to study journalism and its role in shaping political agendas, cultural norms, social identities, and discursive formations for decades (Dahlberg & Phelan, 2011; Fairclough, 1995; Richardson, 2008, 2010). This includes research into journalistic coverage of wars (Nohrstedt et al., 2000), sports (Riggs et al., 1993), crime (Teo, 2000) national referendums (Zappettini & Krzyżanowski, 2019), and immigration (Baker et al., 2008). However, rather than being published in academic journals associated with journalism studies, these works have often featured in dedicated discourse analytical outlets, such as *Critical Discourse Studies* or *Discourse & Society*. This has led to discourse analysis largely residing at the margins of journalism studies as an academic discipline.

In recent years, however, interest in discourse analysis within journalism studies has grown, not least due to a rise in discursive perspectives on journalistic roles and boundaries. Scholars such as Carlson (2016, 2018) and Hanitzsch and Vos (2017) argue that journalism should fundamentally be understood as a discursively constituted field, the boundaries of which are continuously negotiated through discursive struggle. From this perspective,

"*discourse* is the principal vehicle through which journalists construct their professional norms and ideals" (2019, p. 397, original emphasis).

To study journalistic roles and boundaries, Carlson (2016) introduces the notion of *metajournalistic discourse*, encompassing a rhetorical "site in which actors publicly engage in processes of establishing definitions, setting boundaries, and rendering judgments about journalism's legitimacy" (p. 350). Through discursive practices – from official rulemaking to informal knowledge sharing – the limits around what journalism 'is' and ought to be are continuously (re-)drawn, not only by journalists, but also by "such diverse actors and sites as government officials, historians, entertainment media, and educators" (Carlson 2016, 356). By studying discursive practices – for example how journalists and other actors define key journalistic values – scholars can critically unpack both changing societal norms as well as shifting internal and external pressures of journalism.

Using the concept of metajournalistic discourse, scholars have in recent years analyzed the discursive construction of journalistic boundaries in relation to topics such as artificial intelligence (Moran & Shaikh, 2022), racism (Dindler & Blaagaard, 2021) and fake news (Carlson, 2018). In my own work – situated in a Danish context – I have studied how journalists, media experts, government officials, and social media company representatives reflect on journalism's role in combatting or potentially contributing to fake news and misinformation as a threat to democracy (Farkas, 2023a; 2023b).

3. Main advantages and challenges of using the method

When studying journalism, a key strength of both CDA and DT is their ability to bring questions of power, antagonism, and exclusion to the forefront. By emphasising the contingency of social relations, CDA and DT draw our attention to the complex ways in which power relations shape both journalism as a profession and news as a construct. This includes questions such as: Who has the authority to define the limits of 'good' journalism? Which voices and agendas are deemed 'newsworthy'? And who is defined as part of an 'us' in relation to an excluded 'other'?

A challenge of conducting discourse analysis – particularly drawing on DT – can be the lack of clear methodological guidelines for how to collect and analyse data. Some scholars have criticised discourse analysis on this point, arguing for clearer "rules for how empirical discourse analysis should or should not be carried out" (Marttila, 2016, p. 8). While this line of criticism certainly has merits,

it is important to remember that neither CDA nor DT aim to provide step-by-step methods. Rather, these schools seek to provide theoretical frameworks and conceptual vocabularies for critically unpacking the construction of socio-political relations.

4. Ethical considerations

Discourse analysis itself involves few research ethical considerations, though some forms of data in CDA and DT might. This includes interviews and participant-observations, which involve questions of informed consent and potentially also questions about sensitive personal data, for example around ethnicity, health information, or political opinions.

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