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Newspaper discourse

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4 Newspaper discourse

This chapter provides a theoretical account of newspaper discourse and its institutional setting in Western English speaking countries, focusing on the processes of production, transmission and consumption, and conventions connected with these processes. The concept of power in and behind newspaper discourse is discussed, which is followed by an outline of news values and their application to natural catastrophes.

4.1 Newspaper discourse as an instance of institutional discourse

This subchapter deals with the second and the third dimensions of a three-dimensional framework of critical discourse analysis as introduced by Fairclough (see subchapter 2.2), with a focus on the discussion of newspaper discourse as an instance of institutional discourse.

The institutional setting of newspaper discourse has a number of repercussions. It puts constraints on the processes of production, transmission and consumption of newspapers by imposing a particular set of conventions and norms. Apart from that, the institutional setting pre-inscribes participant roles, which in turn have an impact on the discursive identities of the participants. In other words, the discursive rights and obligations of the participants are to a certain degree pre-determined (Thornborrow 2002, 4). In comparison to other types of institutional discourse, the institutional setting of newspaper discourse restricts the discursive resources and identities of the recipients to the utmost degree. As Thompson (1990, 15) points out, “*mass communication institutes a fundamental break between the producer and the receiver*, in such a way that recipients have relatively little capacity to intervene in the communicative process and contribute to its course and content.” Although readers can write letters to the editor of the newspaper, the discursive identities between the producer and the receiver remain asymmetrical (Thompson 1990, 15).

The process of news production is constrained by a number of institutional routines concerning collecting, selecting, editing and transforming material (Fairclough 1995b). News production is a complex process, consisting of different steps, such as collecting press agency reports, transforming them into a draft, creating a headline and deciding where to place the article in the newspaper, and

involving a team of people – journalists, producers, editorial staff and technical staff (Fairclough 1992, 1995b). As Bell (1991, 46) points out, up to eight newsworkers may be involved in the production of a single news story, which may potentially undergo as many versions. Importantly, the processes of selection and transformation are determined by a set of criteria of newsworthiness, the so-called news values (see subchapter 4.3), which tend to operate more or less unconsciously in journalistic practice (Fowler 1991, 13). What follows is that events do not become news because they are intrinsically significant but rather because they can be represented according to a culturally-constructed set of criteria. In addition, other factors internal to journalists, such as ideologies and values held by them, shape news discourse (Lau 2004, 694). Consequently, newspapers are not neutral mediators of reality but provide a social construction of the event.

Apart from factors internal to journalistic practice, there are broader social, economic, political and technological conditions that shape the news-making process. First of all, the press is an industry and a business, the goal of which is to make a profit (Bell 1991; Fowler 1991). Moreover, the increasing role of advertising sponsorship contributes to the establishment of the audience as consumers and newspapers as a commodity that aims to sell (Tumber 1993; Fairclough 1995b). The commercial pressures get reflected in the way events are reported, with newspaper discourse purporting not only to inform but also to entertain (Fairclough 1995b, 10). It results in the tendency of newspaper discourse to sensationalize, dramatize and provide easy-to-cover trivial stories (Birchall 2007, 201). Nevertheless, notes McNair, although “competitive market pressures impose constraints on the content of mainstream media, [...] commercial considerations also determine that there is a market – a *counter-cultural marketplace* – for dissent” (2006, 90). The free market is further ensured by the trend towards deregulation as Western governments have attempted to remove legislation that restricts media, which has resulted in a loosening of government control over the press (Thompson 1990, 203).

A significant characteristic of the media industries in Western societies is their increasing concentration, i.e., the fact that newspapers are owned by a small number of large corporations (Thompson 1990, 193). This brings about drawbacks as, due to financial interests, newspapers often provide biased news on big businesses, portraying them in a positive light. Lee and Soromon (1990, 61) point out: “Corporate sponsors are unlikely to underwrite programs that engage in serious criticism of environmental pollution, occupational hazards or other problems attributable to corporate malfeasance.” Yet, there is also a positive side of the corporate ownership of newspapers: because of their financial stability, corporate-owned media promote autonomy, diversity, competition and expertise (Birchall 2007, 210).

Another constraint imposed on the process of news production is constituted by a limited set of sources that are relied on by journalists. Journalists mostly draw

upon legitimized and official sources, including government, law enforcement, trade unions, courts, local authority departments, and scientific and technical experts from universities (Fowler 1991; Fairclough 1995b). In contrast, ordinary people and organizations, which are not perceived as legitimate, rarely constitute news sources (Fairclough 1995b). There are two main reasons why newspapers draw upon official sources. The first one is that it saves time and effort (Fowler 1991, 21). As journalists are pressed by deadlines, they have to gather material for news reports quickly, which is ensured by the easy availability of official sources. The second reason is that “the relative authority and prestige of these sources helps to enhance credibility of the journalist’s account” (Allan 2010, 21). The lack of diversity in those who are cited in newspapers is heightened by the fact that newspapers tend to get material for their stories from the same news agencies, such as the Associated Press (Bell 1991).

The heavy reliance on official sources creates a close link between newspapers and those in power. This brings forward the danger of the press mainly reproducing the views, beliefs and values of the powerful, and thus speaking in a singular voice (see van Dijk 2008). Yet, newspaper discourse has the potential to report events independent of official sources. As Bennett, Lawrence, and Livingston (2007) point out, technological devices enable reporters to get fast to the scene of an event and cover almost instantly what they see. Thus, journalists are often the first to provide a representation of events and influence public opinion, including opinions of those in power (see also van Dijk 1996b).

Concerning the process of news consumption, reading a newspaper constitutes an active, creative process (Fowler 1991, 43). Readers do not just passively absorb the text but actively interpret it, drawing upon their own experience, values and beliefs. As Thompson points out (1990, 153), “the ways in which symbolic forms are understood, and the ways in which they are valued and appraised, may differ from one individual to another, depending on the positions which they occupy in socially structured fields or institutions.” Since newspaper articles do not have the same effect on all readers, it cannot be assumed that all recipients accept the viewpoints embedded in news stories. Rather, the possibility of some readers being critical of them should be acknowledged.

Although the text itself does not fully determine the interpretation process of readers, it constrains the range of potential interpretations (Fairclough 1995b; Richardson 1998). As Fairclough (1989, 78) points out, to make sense of a text, readers have to arrive at a coherent interpretation, where coherence stands for both the connections between parts of a text and the connections between a text and the world. Interpretation thus involves a development of a sort of symbiosis between textual cues and our background assumptions and expectations.

A significant role in the construction of coherent meaning is played by frames, which are “structured packages of knowledge or expectations that shape the ways

in which humans enact or interpret their experiences” (Fillmore 2008, 1; cf., Goffman 1986; Tannen 1993). Although frames are mainly constituted by ideas, they are carried by language (Lakoff 2004, 4). It is thus through discursive contents and structures that newspaper discourse frames events and guides recipients in the process of meaning constitution.

4.2 Power in/behind newspaper discourse

The capacity of newspapers to provide representations of reality, which are transmitted to hundreds of thousands of people, gives the press immense social power. Social power stands for a symbolic and persuasive power to control to a certain degree the minds of recipients (van Dijk 1996b, 10). By portraying social reality in a particular way and imposing world views, newspaper discourse has the power to shape the way readers understand and evaluate events and phenomena. Discursive structures and contents have impact on readers’ models, i.e., mental representations, of events, affecting also their knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, norms, values and ideologies, which may in the future indirectly influence their actions (van Dijk 2008). Apart from providing particular ways of representing the reality, newspaper discourse also has the power to construct social identities of the participants and social relations between them (Fairclough 1995b, 12).

Although Fairclough (1989, 51) points out that the media tends to reproduce perspectives of those in power and thus maintain dominant ideologies, it cannot be assumed *a priori* that this is the case for all newspaper discourse. Newspapers have the potential to challenge, criticize and subvert the world views of the dominant bloc.

Apart from power in newspaper discourse, there also exists power behind newspaper discourse (Fairclough 1989, 58). This mainly concerns the access to newspaper discourse, i.e., who is used as a news source, whose voices are heard and who gets quoted in the articles. As has been discussed, it is elite groups and institutions that tend to get a preferential access to newspaper discourse, by means of which they can exercise social power (van Dijk 1996b, 12).

4.3 Newsworthiness

As pointed out in subchapter 4.1, the processes of news selection and transformation are carried out according to a socially-constructed set of categories, the so-called news values. In other words, events are selected to become news not because they are intrinsically newsworthy but because they fulfill criteria of newsworthiness (Fowler 1991, 2). As Harcup and O’Neill (2001, 277) emphasize, these

criteria do not only determine the process of selection but influence the way events are covered.

According to a now traditional analysis of news values carried out by Johann Galtung and Mari Ruge (1965), twelve factors of newsworthiness can be distinguished:

1. frequency – single events are more likely to be selected than long-term trends
2. threshold – the greater the intensity of an event, the more newsworthy it is
3. unambiguity – the less ambiguous and the more clearly to be understood and interpreted an event is, the more likely it is to be selected
4. meaningfulness – the higher degree of cultural proximity and relevance of an event, the more newsworthy it is; this is based on the principle of ethnocentrism, according to which countries and societies perceived to be like our own are considered more significant
5. consonance – refers to events which people expect or want to happen
6. unexpectedness – if an event is unusual or happens unexpectedly, without a warning, its newsworthiness is increased
7. continuity – the tendency of newspapers to continue reporting on an event for some time because readers are already familiar with it and thus can interpret it more easily
8. composition – an event is considered more newsworthy if it fits the balance or composition of a newspaper
9. reference to elite nations – newspapers are occupied more with nations that are considered to be elite in that particular culture (universally, the United States is perceived to stand for an elite nation)
10. reference to elite people – elite people, such as those who are famous, are seen as more newsworthy than ordinary people
11. reference to persons – the tendency of newspapers for personalization, which evokes feelings of identification but also hides social, political and economic factors
12. reference to something negative – negative events are considered more newsworthy than positive events

As the natural catastrophes analyzed in this book satisfy several of the twelve criteria, they constitute significantly newsworthy issues. By representing single events of great intensity, they meet ‘frequency’ and ‘threshold’ factors. They also fulfill criteria of ‘unexpectedness’, ‘reference to something negative’, and ‘continuity’ as they unfold over a period of time. Concerning the factor of ‘meaningfulness,’ the four disasters differ in their degree of cultural proximity to Western societies; whether this is reflected in the way the disasters are covered is examined in the analytical part of the book.

Harcup and O’Neill (2001) revised Galtung and Ruge’s criteria of newsworthiness by conducting a content analysis of both domestic and foreign news. The re-

sults of the analysis suggest that the twelve criteria are insufficient. Other criteria to be included are the entertainment factor (many stories are selected not because their purpose is to inform recipients but rather because they serve to entertain), a reference to something positive, a reference to elite organizations and institutions, and a newspaper's own agenda.