

# The Challenge of Social Media and the Transformation of Critical Discourse Analysis: A Study on News Transmission Cases

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## ABSTRACT

As the primary medium of mass communication, social media is increasingly incorporating news dissemination. The dominance of text in social media is gradually being replaced by non-textual expressions. The communication way of social media obscures the significance of ideology in the communication process. Its strong commercial characteristics have converted the news transmission area into a space for commercial promotion. The echo chamber phenomenon has emerged in news communication, signaling a more complex power structure in the operation of journalism. All these create challenges for critical discourse analysis, which must adapt to the new communication environment created by social media. By analyzing the news of the 2016 Trump anti-China coverage, Black Lives Matter (BLM) reports, and the news echo chamber phenomenon in the 2016 presidential election, this article explores the non-textual expressions, confusing ideologies, and commercialized spaces that social media provides for critical discourse analysis. The shift in van Dijk's news discourse critical framework, multimodal critical discourse research, and multilevel contextual analysis is proposed and analyzed to meet the current issues. While the emergence of social media presents challenges for the study of critical discourse, it also harbors opportunities for change, enhancing the framework's ability to reveal and emancipate reality.

**Keywords:** *Critical discourse analysis, Social media, News communication, Ideology, Multilevel contextual analysis, Multimodal critical discourse studies.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) has been regarded as one of the most influential studies in discourse and communication since the 1990s (Sari et al., 2018). Emerged from critical linguistics and was influenced by systemic functional linguistics and ideology, CDA aims to uncover the social meanings expressed in discourse by analyzing linguistic structures according to their interests and broader social context (Jahedi et al., 2014; Corsaro et al., 1981). It is important to constantly consider the social context of texts, language, and communication. Texts do not passively respond to the environment; instead, they imbue it with meaning, mold viewpoints, and offer ideas (Oprea, 2019).

The objective of CDA is to explain, analyze, and promote change and emancipation. The emphasis is on the connection between power and dominance (Wu & Sun, 2020). Discourse is not a broad area of thinking in CDA; instead, it is related to tangible behaviors inscribed in social structures (van Dijk, 1997).

Nonetheless, the CDA method is essential because it requires the researcher to separate themselves from the data, embed the data in society, highlight political perspectives, and focus on self-reflection (Martin & Wodak, 2003). This has endowed CDA with strong emancipatory energy and inventiveness. Today, CDA is viewed as a perspective that encompasses a variety of methodologies, as opposed to only a school of

thought. However, this does not imply that CDA is incoherent. There are a handful of issues that CDA experts usually agree upon: that language and society are mutually constitutive, that language has a dialectical relationship with economics and politics, that discourse is a signifier of social activities, and that texts are the concrete expressions of discourse (Baker, 2012).

Van Dijk, Ruth Wodak, and Norman Fairclough are the most influential scholars in the development of CDA theory (Sahmeni & Afifah, 2019). They have provided unique approaches and hypotheses using distinct frameworks and methodologies for discourse analysis.

This article will concentrate primarily on van Dijk's CDA theoretical framework. He is one of the most frequently cited researchers in critical studies of media discourse because his framework of critical discourse is the most comprehensive compared to others in the field. His theory is frequently used in various media to analyze how news texts are produced, including the relationship between journalists and the public (Smith & Sheyholislami, 2022).

## **2. VAN DIJK'S CRITICAL DISCOURSE THEORY AND FRAMEWORK**

Van Dijk has used his theory of discourse analysis in media texts since the 1980s, mainly concentrating on the depiction of ethnic groups and minorities in Europe. In his journalistic studies, he has applied his theory of general discourse to examine discourses that are present in the news and examples of national and international news coverage (Smith & Sheyholislami, 2022).

Compared to previous CDA frameworks, van Dijk's critical framework for news discourse calls for a comprehensive examination of the textual and structural components of media discourse. A multilevel analysis enables the identification of a more significant number of stakeholders in the communication process who engage in various behavioral actions.

Additionally, he proposes that there are three steps in making news: the structure, creation and comprehension of news (van Dijk, 2009). Van Dijk proposes an analysis of the structure of individual levels of description, including grammatical, phonological, morphological, and semantic levels. He also includes "higher-level attributes" like coherence, the overall theme, the topic of the news

story, and the overall schematic and rhetorical level of the text (van Dijk, 2013). In addition, he believes that CDA should incorporate another level of study, namely the news reception process. This involves the examination of news information absorption, memorization, and replication (van Dijk, 2013). It is also essential to evaluate the advantages and drawbacks provided to the communicator. Occasionally, news tends to be excessive or has an implicit aspect that demands extensive discussion. Although these are often undetected by the reader, they have a tremendous influence.

According to van Dijk (2001), discourse analysis is fundamentally ideological. Ideological theory may be multilayered and typically governs group thinking based on the group's identity, norms, objectives, and viewpoints (Widuna, 2018). The presentation of "we" and "them" influences positive and negative attributions. Social cognition occurs within the socio-cultural knowledge system of the specific group, culture, and society. The purpose of cognition is to regulate social group attitudes, organization, and surveillance (Widuna, 2018). Therefore, discursive meanings must be understood at three context levels: micro, meso, and macro.

The macro level reveals the dominating, leading, and significant influences in mass media themes, where the observed element may be a theme or a subject (Sahmeni & Afifah, 2019). In terms of the message to be communicated, mass media develops themes that raise the reader's appetite for the message being proclaimed. In terms of topics, these can be observed when journalists bring public opinion into their work.

The meso level, on the other hand, focuses mainly on journalistic tactics for structuring the news composition by prioritizing the omission of essential elements to fulfill the aim of the news (Sahmeni & Afifah, 2019). This objective is molded and expressed by several social circumstances. Semantics, syntax, stylistics, and rhetoric all constitute a more complex microstructure. The context in which a document or news is generated also influences semantics. The purpose of reporting may be to provide context. Consequently, context-based analysis facilitates the extraction of meaning or intent. In this way, van Dijk's framework merges two established media studies techniques, text-based interpretative and context-based sociological traditions, into a single analytical framework for analyzing news discourse (Smith & Sheyholislami, 2022).

To sum up, van Dijk's framework for CDA is dynamic and focuses on the numerous ways discourse operates in the process of news transmission. However, the rise of social media has damaged the critical capacity of the discourse analysis framework. According to Bouvier and Machin (2018), in a socially mediated news-transmission setting, the power holders, notably the state or those who control the mass media, manage the system in a more confidential manner, such as fabricating false news or manipulating a topic's popularity. These processes contribute to establishing or maintaining power imbalances and representations of social groupings that look common sense, regular, and natural. In contrast, innate prejudice, injustice, and social inequity exist in the actual world.

Social power holders and pursuers can establish their agendas in mass media by utilizing social media and respectable language (Chiluwa, 2012). Concerns regarding persistent, more enormous systemic challenges to class, gender, age, and culture appear minor or irrelevant when our permission is manufactured, and we are generally deceived.

Thus, by evaluating the uniqueness of socially mediated news and discussing the issues posed by this particularity for standard CDA, this paper aims to shed light on the distinctiveness of socially mediated news. In order to demystify power, an attempt will be made to rebuild the underlying beliefs of the news.

### **3. THE CHALLENGES POSED BY SOCIAL MEDIA**

It is evident that discourse is rooted in social, political, and ideological structures (Castro, 2021) and that CDA strives to make the connections between discursive practices, social practices, and social structures more apparent. It focuses on texts generated by elites and powerful institutions, such as political speeches and the press, to expose the discourses employed to retain power and sustain existing social relations. However, social media has significantly altered the dissemination of news. As forums for discussing social and political concerns, social media has become a part of the operations of mainstream media and organizations. Unlike past "elite" writings, which looked to provide more accessible avenues for tracing dominant ideology, social media contains many voices and communication genres, with a dynamic mix of interactions inside and between platforms that

frequently feed more traditional forms of media. This transition has generated an abundance of non-textual manifestations that obscure the visibility of ideas. Consequently, texts are no longer static; and its ways of production and reception are quite differed. The social media-oriented distribution of news produces complicated group connections and profit operation, concealing the neoliberal manipulation.

#### **3.1 Non-textual Illustration**

The primary difficulty facing CDA is that it can no longer begin the analysis with the text. Two significant parts of the media and its institutional processes are the creation and consumption of news texts. Production entails several institutional procedures, including news collection, selection, writing, and editing (van Dijk, 2013). Consumption broadly relates to how readers receive, read, and comprehend written materials. Writing is one of many methods for producing and consuming news on social media sites. Images, videos, and even retweets may serve as news signals on social media. This new dynamic of digital communication transcends traditional paradigms of mass and interpersonal communication and compels a thorough reevaluation of the assumed dynamics of the news media and society (KhosraviNik, 2022). Therefore, discourses must be positioned according to user context modifications (Bouvier & Machin, 2018).

For instance, when reporting on Trump's anti-China rhetoric, several news sources utilized online materials from the Chinese social media platform Weibo. Different newspapers present their views through various images or videos created by different Weibo users. The content often responds to Trump's "China virus" and hostile attitudes towards China by users who spoof the videos or create satirical images. On closer inspection, the discourse in these non-textual expressions is as populist, superficial, and polarising as Trump's initial tweets. To rally against the United States, they, like Trump, employ symbols, insults, conspiracy theories, and a sense of "we" versus "them" (Bouvier & Way, 2021). There is no doubt that in the process of selecting non-textual content for coverage, different news organizations have expressed their ideologies rather than simply sorting the social media for content. For news organizations outlets that disseminate content that is radically populist, this choice underlines their populist political stance.

Critical discourse analysis must understand both the uses of the original tweets and the uses of the journalist or news agency. This is the only way to comprehend how the final news text conveys a particular discourse and expresses a specific sociopolitical interest. Here, social media should not be seen as ordinary words but as placed behaviors that are employed to achieve a specific aim (Bouvier & Machin, 2018).

### 3.2 *Ambiguous Ideology*

When mapping the dominance of ideology, news texts are a crucial source of information for CDA. Currently, social media platforms are the primary entry point for news material. Journalists operate in a milieu where the distinctions between citizen journalists, bloggers, and other communication jobs are hazy (Bouvier & Machin, 2018). They may gather firsthand knowledge from social media hotspots or seek local community groups on social media for story ideas. This is a strategy for attracting listeners when interest in conventional news has fallen substantially.

Socially mediated news delivery necessitates continuous updating and competitiveness for mass clicks. In pursuit of the hot button, the news needs help to extract critical dialogue from complicated online material. Journalists attempt to compile a more exhaustive collection of numerous anonymous internet comments, making it harder to identify the ideology that may be disclosed (Bond & Messing, 2015). These variables indicate a new connection between author and reader, which has ramifications for how we assign discourses and ideologies in texts.

Moreover, this “news”, which appears to be made by individuals, undermines the authority of the old mainstream media. In a way, all users may now create, distribute, and consume news material. One reason for this is that technology is becoming increasingly democratic since it can provide new opportunities for different viewpoints or challenges to social structures and authority (Patterson, 2016). The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, for example, relies heavily on social media as a communication medium. The movement was created in 2013 as a civil rights organization that aimed to resist violence and institutional prejudice against African Americans. Racial occurrences, such as the June 2015 massacre at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, which resulted in the terrible deaths of nine African American parishioners, triggered a

deluge of race-related social media messages. The day following the Charleston tragedy, there were 4.3 million tweets about race (Ince et al., 2017).

The BLM movement reached a more significant population through social media and encouraged individuals to express their ideas of resistance. Especially in social media, there is no gatekeeper, so anyone's views are open to being discovered by other users. Meanwhile, the content of news stories about BLM does not come from the judgment of the mainstream news media but from social media. In the process of news promotion, it is mainly demonstrated by the fact that BLM activists and their organizations use social media to amplify their preferred messages to get opinion leaders and the public to accept their views (Dunivin et al., 2022). Campaign organizations attempt to reframe issues by promoting new policies, introducing new terminology, and drawing attention to black rights issues.

In this sense, social media can empower individuals and provide a platform for non-mainstream viewpoints. By transmitting information between and among groups, social media plays an essential role in building systemic knowledge about the oppression of diverse populations, thereby allowing groups facing the marginalization of common institutions to connect and potentially collaborate to combat systemic injustice.

On the surface, the news appears less political than it was previously. However, the extent to which this bottom-up feedback undermines the mainstream media's philosophy is worrisome. Social media are discursive places, but they are sometimes conversational. Most commentators do not participate in genuine dialogue (Cizek & Logan, 2018). Most user-generated information is merely absorbed by the journalistic principles and frameworks that are utilized by the mainstream media. For instance, news websites often use images from the BLM movement as part of the standard news frameworks for regional disputes rather than providing context-specific information or alternate views. Even in most mainstream media coverage articles, the riot framework was used, detailing any destruction caused or occurring due to the protests and using vivid descriptions to portray scenes of chaos and danger (Leopold & Bell, 2017). An article in the Los Angeles Times titled "As Ferguson anger simmers, protests in other cities are more peaceful" is a case in point. The article then set the tone for the entire article with a strikingly

negative beginning, "Protests unfolded in major cities across the country Tuesday night as more than 2,000 National Guard soldiers and hundreds of police officers gathered in the St. Louis area to prevent the vandalism, arson and looting that erupted the night before in a Ferguson suburb" (Muskal & Queally, 2014). It contains descriptions of scenes of rioting without mentioning the demands of the black masses and the real reasons for the movement's formation.

This gives the news media the misleading idea that they are expressing the citizens' opinions or that the democratization process is providing new life to an antiquated model. In actuality, people's voices are being utilized to further legitimize top-down elite discourses, not to oppose them (Bouvier & Machin, 2018). However, the difficulty for CDA is investigating the social practice discourses and ideologies contained in this content, regardless of how democratic or alternative they may appear.

### **3.3 Commercialization Potential**

Social media is an internet-based channel that enables people to interact opportunistically and selectively self-present. Whether real time or asynchronous, users expect to receive various values and a portion of an audience through user-generated material and interaction with others (Hinck & Carr, 2020). Within social media, the dissemination of news has undergone a radical shift.

The commercial character of social media has affected the dissemination of news. The old vertical sharing strategy of mass communication has been replaced by a parallel sharing approach. As some of the primary locations for readers to obtain news, social networking sites have altered the way traditional media, such as news organizations, distribute texts to their viewers, with information frequently personalized to each audience member's specific requirements. In the social media landscape, news organizations continuously analyze traffic through web analytics to give their clients algorithm-driven news. Gradually, an internet "echo chamber" emerges, which supports the existing beliefs and attitudes of its members (Guo et al., 2018). The 2016 presidential election in the United States is a prime example of this phenomenon. Twitter played the most significant role among all the media channels in this election. Twitter is an accessible social networking site where users may pick whom to follow and with whom to communicate. This creates an ideal environment for selective exposure. To prevent cognitive dissonance,

individuals will consciously pick the media outlets and stories that most closely align with their political ideas — a technique known as selective exposure (Guo et al., 2018). News feeds are personalized to each user's profile by predicting their views and interests based on past preferences and linking them to regular consumer habits. This fundamentally differs from the reasoning underlying news delivery based on citizen interests (KhosraviNik, 2022). This may suggest that social media tends to confine us to our chosen ideas, producing an online echo chamber over time. Users are surrounded by news from the same perspective, continually reinforcing their beliefs and influencing their political decisions. In the 2016 U.S. presidential election, the selection news preference amplified political bias among voters, made voters identify more with Trump's radical rhetoric, and ultimately helped Trump's electoral success.

The emergence of an online echo chamber runs counter to the CDA framework's critique of the collective governance of individuals. Thus, the intrinsic macro, meso, and micro-layers of news ideology analysis are deconstructed. The manipulation of public opinion by the mainstream media has little effect on users, and user consciousness progressively takes control. With their technical neutrality, algorithms control how consumers absorb the news. This does not imply, however, that there is no authoritative ideological influence through social media.

While social media may provide the impression that conventional media discourse has been weakened, the conceptions of macropolitical power, neoliberal industry, and local discourse buried behind algorithms are still in play. While there may be room for various thought communities, the dominant social constructions of identity and causation still need to gain influence (Bouvier & Machin, 2018). Social media may be a venue for more open manifestations of identity, but it also promotes a dominant neoliberal narrative.

Social media emphasizes greater consumption, and user participation, whether viewed, connected, contributed, uploaded, or shared, is exploited for commercial goals related to targeted advertising (Bodó 2019). Users may have avoided the top-down, faraway elitist voices of newsreaders announcing national television programming at predetermined times. However, these social media platforms and communication networks aim to increase consumption. Content, such as news, must also be viewed as organized and produced by

opinion groups based on marketization and commodification rather than as places for civic public discourse dominated by the elite. In the space of varied opinion groups, the gravity of the news is weakened, and any content that tackles a social issue becomes consumer traffic, which results in a vast phenomenon of false news.

Examining the various discourses and ideologies within these opinion groups, which are frequently highly correlated with the drivers that draw users into the consumption loop, and gaining a deeper understanding of what this implies for shaping and disseminating dominant discourses presents a challenge for CDA. First, these societal and political shifts necessitate analyses based on CDA to move their focus from elite literature to popular and secular forms of entertainment and communication (Bouvier & Machin, 2018). This indicates that we must move away from elite, monolithic concepts of text (KhosraviNik, 2022).

In conclusion, introducing new social media communication presents a formidable task for CDA. To focus on the ambiguous ideologies and complicated power dynamics in socially mediated news, CDA must be modified to account for the distinctive discursive environment of social media.

#### **4. MODIFICATIONS TO DISCOURSE ANALYSIS**

##### ***4.1 The Shift in Van Dijk's News Discourse Critical Framework***

This article will first examine how the basic critical framework of news discourse might be adapted to address the problems posed by social media. Notably, based on the evidence previously presented, the greatest issue for CDA recognizes the ideology of the social media discourses that comprise the news. Typically, journalists engage in a discursive reconstruction of reality. Infrequently, they observe events or comprehend reality without the mediation of others (Carvalho, 2008). While it is evident that media depictions are greatly influenced by the tastes and decisions of media professionals, they are also inevitably constructed by social media users through their different discourses. Consequently, the CDA framework must account for these two levels of discursive interventions in a particular story: that of the source or social media users and that of the journalists.

The CDA framework should also contain other discursive techniques. Discursive tactics are

techniques of reality manipulation that are adopted by social actors, such as journalists. In this instance, manipulation does not mean modifying a given reality without sufficient care, as is often thought. Rather, it simply indicates an intervention in that reality to attain an inevitable result or objective (Carvalho, 2008). This intervention and the desired outcome may be more or less deliberate.

As a reaction to the unique nature of social media, the CDA framework should incorporate consideration of discursive positioning. Positioning is a discursive tactic that involves the formation of social actors in a particular connection to others. Positioning may also be viewed as the discourse-based construction of a subject's identity (Newman, 2020). Positioning is capable of seeing how discourses are legitimated, including the justification and support of action or authority based on normative or other grounds. Positioning might also sense the politicization of language by attaching a political aspect or status to an unavoidable reality. Positioning in social media may be used to determine which players employ specific discursive techniques. How do various players engage in the discursive strategies of others? How do the connections between actors and discursive tactics contribute to investigating agentic action in discourse? These questions pierce the mask of social media's purportedly democratic and impartial algorithms, and the answers lead to the ultimate power structure. As stated previously, only some of the available frameworks for CDA satisfactorily answer these problems.

##### ***4.2 Multimodal Critical Discourse Studies***

As an extension of classical critical discourse, multimodal critical discourse studies (MCDS) are ideal for use in socially mediated situations (Bouvier & Machin, 2018). Two transcendental characteristics distinguish MCDS. First, MCDS focuses on text and how visual aspects and components, such as pictures, colors, page layout, and even platforms and institutions, produce meaning (Machin, 2013). This critical approach is more adapted to the various and fragmented news transmissions on social media. In social media, communication has become aestheticized, necessitating an examination of the function of design and layout in communicative discourse (Ledin & Machin, 2015). Social media channels are saturated with promotional content ranging from product marketing to the use of beautiful individuals, surroundings, and an overall appealing

design. Traditional media has integrated social media to provide its material in new aesthetic ways and forms, employing design elements to interact with its viewers and engage with them. For example, substantial effort and resources are spent on the display of news so that it merges with other forms of material. This multimodal communication should not be viewed as only ornamental or aesthetic but rather as part of an ideology and discourse in which MCDS must be included.

The second essential characteristic of MCDS is its emphasis on how communication is aided, in part, by new technology. Change from a single isolated modality to a multimodality occurs (Machin, 2013). In socially mediated communication, greater integration of modalities and visual components designed to convey complex concepts and attitudes can be observed. Multimodal critical discourse studies can successfully cope with non-linear texts using various platforms. There may be less text and more photographs, lists, and graphics on news websites and social media platforms. While CDA can handle depictions of reproduction and causation, in such non-linear texts, meaning is communicated symbolically through the arrangement of visual components and tables. Even in mainstream media, text can be accompanied by graphics and emoticons. Multimodal critical discourse studies share a similar goal of demystifying ideology and power through the methodical and traceable analysis of semiotic data. The long-term objective of this form of mediation is to make individuals who are impacted and controlled by these ideologically reinforced disparities more conscious of them and better equipped to respond critically to them (Roderick, 2017).

#### **4.3 Multilevel Contextual Analysis**

Although contextual analysis is part of the framework of van Dijk's critical discourse on journalism, this contextual analysis is confined to the context of the discourse. Each piece of material in socially mediated news transmission does not exist independently. They exist as labels or components of a particular subject, constituting a link in the content distribution chain. This keeps CDA from revealing its authenticity and reduces the emancipatory difficulties of framing to influence social activities and relationships (Graham, 2018). In critical discourse research, the historical context must be considered in addition to

the background of content synchronicity (Carvalho, 2008).

The researcher must compare a news article with other relevant news articles. Comparing credible news stories results in an attempt to recreate the original event (discursive or non-discursive). By cross-referencing and, in certain situations, comparing it to the actual document (to which it is compared), the researcher can construct a vision of reality that is, ideally, more accurate or comprehensive than any one news article. This is significant because it enables a more accurate evaluation of the engagement of journalists (or other participants) in that reality and their critical interpretation of the discursive techniques of social actors.

The non-linear examination of history occurs on two levels. At the first level, the temporal evolution of discourses is considered. They examine the sequence of discursive constructions in a news report and evaluate its meaning. How have depictions of reality inspired subsequent depictions? How have they been duplicated or contested? The second level of the historical method is understanding historical processes, that is, the importance of events and their larger political, social, and economic contexts.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

This article has studied the limitations of social media for CDA based on news transmission and evaluated three alternative routes of change. The socially mediated character of news communication signifies a radical change in socio-political culture, the death of conventional media authority, and the development of neoliberalism. Consequently, we should consider how these environments continue to generate power relations, such as class, racism, and gender (Bouvier & Machin, 2018). The methods and rules underlying social media platforms, as well as who regulates them and for what purpose, are significant, but there are other driving forces behind the research. Critical discourse analysis is fundamentally ethical; it seeks to alter behaviors and attitudes so that social settings become more egalitarian, democratic, and victim-free (Graham, 2018). Critical discourse analysis focuses on the disaggregated discourses — how they describe social activities and whose concepts, values, and identities they prioritize. The merging of conventional and social media presents issues for CDA, as texts are no longer the primary subject of study and ideologies, and the

commercialization of mediated spaces have become more ambiguous. Nonetheless, shifting from the original framework, multimodal CDA and multilevel contextual analysis can successfully handle this difficulty as viable change paths. This transformation encompasses more accountability, a higher degree of critique, and critical self-awareness.

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