

## Critical discourse analysis and media studies

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There are two ways to set up a discussion of critical discourse analysis and media studies. First, we would privilege something called Critical Discourse Analysis, the capitalized identity embodied in the acronym “CDA”. This approach has some obvious advantages. It gives an immediate focus and coherence to the discussion. It suggests reflection on a particular research tradition now well-known across the social sciences.

The second approach would be wary of an institutionalized CDA identity. This impulse is sometimes discernible in CDA scholarship itself - in looser descriptions of CDA as a research “network” (Fairclough cited in Rogers, 2004), “movement” or “attitude” (van Dijk 2015), or, as this collection illustrates, in the embrace of Critical Discourse Studies (CDS) as an alternative master category that seeks to signify greater theoretical and methodological openness than the CDA label. Instead of positioning media studies and critical discourse analysis as discrete fields, this perspective highlights the importance of the concept of discourse to the emergence of media studies in the 1970s and 1980s. It encourages us to see interdisciplinary affinities in a genealogical way; reframed as a lower-case category, we might say media scholars were already doing a kind of critical discourse analysis before “CDA” became an established identity. It also invites consideration of other discourse analytical traditions that depart from the linguistic underpinnings of CDA. For all its

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genuine enthusiasm about interdisciplinarity, CDA is still primarily defined as *linguistic* analysis. Some would even suggest that discourse analysis which is not grounded in close linguistic analysis of texts is not really discourse analysis at all, but merely speculative theorizing and commentary.

This chapter straddles a line between these two approaches. My own recent work is aligned with the second approach, because of its debt to Laclau/Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory (see Carpentier, this volume; Dahlberg & Phelan 2011). Accordingly, I normally avoid using the label CDA, because of a concern that it can sound like a built-in "approach" that does things of its own accord, independently of its contextual application (Billig 2013). At the same time, it would be idiosyncratic to write this chapter and pretend that CDA did not exist as an institutionalized approach with its own particular histories and conventions, especially since it colours many media scholars' perceptions about what discourse analysis is. This chapter therefore focuses on CDA, but embeds the discussion in some general reflections on the place of the concept of discourse in media studies.

Preliminary caveats can also be attached to the category of media studies; for starters, depending on one's institutional location, it might come under the guise of mass communication, communications or communication studies. On the one hand, the field has an obvious referent: media studies examines the political, social, economic and cultural implications of individual media like newspapers, television, and radio, and their combined power and authority as "the media". Yet, on the other hand, the boundaries and location of media studies is not so straightforward; consider, for instance, how different nominal entities – politics, economy, identity and so on – are increasingly conceptualised as "mediated" or "mediatized" objects

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(Livingstone 2008). The qualified definition raises questions about the ontological status of media and mediation that go beyond the focus of this chapter. The salient point here – one at the heart of the relationship between critical discourse analysis and media studies – is that we cannot understand the discursive constitution of society independently of the structural, and structuring, dynamics of large-scale and micro-scale media.

The rest of the chapter is organised into four sections. I first reflect on the emergence of CDA as a distinct approach in the 1980s and 1990s, especially as it resonated with the theoretical division between political economy and cultural studies in media studies.<sup>ii</sup> I then consider how CDA has been applied and critiqued in media research. Section 3 considers possible future iterations of media discourse studies, in ways that go beyond the notion of a prescriptive CDA paradigm. I end with an empirical illustration that, informed by my own work on neoliberalism (Phelan 2014), explores how we might reimagine ideology critique of media discourses.

### **Media studies and the historical emergence of CDA**

CDA – like its antecedent identity “critical linguistics” (Fowler 1991) - had its origins in the desire of linguists from different academic milieux to develop forms of textual analysis that could illuminate questions of power beyond the limitations of traditional linguistics (Fairclough 1989; Fairclough & Wodak 1997; van Dijk 1991). These scholars engaged with a wider body of critical theory, in which concepts like discourse, representation and ideology had become increasingly prominent in the 1970s and 1980s. The coupling of grounded linguistic analysis and social theory

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embodied an analytical ideal – an antidote to a theoreticism that, however suggestive, was inclined to invoke the concept of discourse in abstract, sometimes nebulous ways.

CDA represented an intervention in a theoretical debate where the status of discourse had energised polemical exchanges between poststructuralists, Marxists and others in different fields (see Laclau & Mouffe 1990). CDA scholars lamented how the constitutive role of discourse and language had been historically neglected in the social sciences. Yet, they simultaneously distanced themselves from the notion that social analysis was reducible to the category of discourse, by emphasising the “dialectical” relationship between discursive (i.e. meaning-making) practices and other social practices. On its own terms, therefore, CDA signalled the arrival of a theoretical middle ground - between stylized post-structuralist claims about the discursive nature of society and a Marxist analytic that stressed the materiality of the social independently of discourse.

This in-between identity was best captured by Norman Fairclough, who sought to bridge the gap between different critical theory traditions and linguistic analysis. Instead of reinscribing a division between the “Marxist” concept of ideology and the “Foucauldian” concept of discourse, he brought both concepts together (as others did) to highlight the ideological significance of discursive practices (Fairclough 1989; Fairclough 1992). This approach was refined in his 1999 book with Lillie Chouliaraki, which emphasized the importance of “critical realism” to CDA’s social ontology (Chouliaraki & Fairclough 1999). Critical realists like Roy Bhaskar were likewise committed to forging a theoretical middle ground, between social constructivist theories that stressed the importance of human meaning and agency, and objectivist

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approaches that highlighted structural conditions beyond the immediate purview and control of human agents (see Glynos & Howarth 2007).

How might we situate the founding rationale of CDA, especially in Fairclough's work, when evaluated from the perspective of similar debates in media and communication studies? We might recast it as an attempt to bridge the division between Marxist political economy theories that emphasised the determining power of economic structures, and cultural studies approaches that stressed the importance of discourse and human subjectivity. Early CDA work on media recognized its debt to previous research, both inside and outside linguistics (Fairclough 1995; van Dijk 1991; see Kelsey, this volume). The Frankfurt School, Birmingham School of cultural studies, and the Glasgow University media group were all cited as important antecedents. These reference points transcended any notional division between political economy and cultural studies, though the work of Stuart Hall – cultural studies' figurehead – was especially important in anticipating Fairclough's theoretical position. Both interrogated a Marxist theoretical reflex that regarded the analysis of ideology and discourse as relatively superficial matters. At the same time, both looked to different structuralist and poststructuralist sources to formulate approaches that remained embedded in a broadly Marxist analysis of capitalism.

Fairclough (1995) framed his approach to media discourse as a development of the semiotic methods of cultural studies scholars. The influence of cultural studies is discernible more generally in CDA research – in affirmations of the importance of critical media literacy, the politics of knowledge, and the concepts of hegemony and ideology, and in the desire to critically intervene beyond the academy.

Yet, with some exceptions (see, for example, Allan 1998), the links to cultural studies have not been especially prominent in CDA and, sociologically, “cultural studies” and “CDA” exist as quite separate scholarly universes. This divergence of traditions can, in one sense, be prosaically explained. CDA emerged through the work of linguists based at linguistics department, who, whatever their interdisciplinary ambitions, still needed to publish their work in journals with credibility among linguists. Their scholarly habitus was attuned primarily to the theoretical and analytical concerns of their home discipline.

However, the demarcation of CDA and cultural studies invites a more speculative explanation, especially if we privilege a media studies assessment of CDA. Fairclough’s desire to combine poststructuralist and Marxist political economy insights necessitated constructing a theoretical identity that had to avoid seeming too close to either. In addition, CDA scholars might have had good reasons for wanting to distinguish themselves from cultural studies analyses of media, because of the periodic disparaging of the latter for making inflationary claims about discourse (Philo & Miller 2000). Another differentiating factor was CDA scholars’ comparative attention to questions of method. The charge of methodological dilettantism sometimes made against cultural studies could not be made as easily against CDA. Indeed, one plausible reason for the popularity of CDA among media scholars in the 2000s was its currency as an “analytical toolkit” that promised neophytes (this author included) an immediate answer to the question of “what method or methodology are you using?”.

Conversely, given the negative stereotypes associated with the concept of discourse, we might say CDA researchers needed to proactively establish credibility among political economy researchers. Cultural studies scholars would have needed little convincing about the importance of discourse. However, political economy scholars represented a more sceptical audience. Fairclough's valorization of the Marxist concept of "the dialectic" was therefore rhetorically significant, because it signalled a desire to avoid the charge of discursive reductionism. His subsequent embrace of the term "cultural political economy" (Fairclough 2006) was similarly telling. Those who avow the term in media studies tend to be political economy scholars and, in some cases, proponents of a "critical realist" approach (Deacon et al 2007). The work of media researchers like Richardson (2007) (see also Berglez 2006; Graham 2002) was also important in giving Fairclough's (2002) "language of new capitalism" research programme a stronger "materialist" identity. By underscoring the dangers of an "idealist" analysis of media discourse, Richardson articulated a version of CDA more palatable to political economy scholars, because it anticipated their basic anxieties about discourse approaches and terminologies.

The point of the foregoing discussion has *not* been to reinscribe a theoretical division between cultural studies and political economy, a debate that sometimes did little to satisfactorily clarify the relationship between discourse and materiality. Rather, I am suggesting that we cannot properly understand CDA's founding rationale independently of its proponents' wish to formulate an analysis of language and social life that went beyond the controversies about the status of discourse in different fields. However, as we will now see, we also cannot clearly grasp how CDA has been critically interrogated in media studies independently of earlier

antagonisms, and the suspicions that are still projected onto the concept of discourse.

### **Articulating CDA in media studies**

We can identify two distinct kinds of researchers in the interdisciplinary space between CDA and media studies: linguists who analyse media and, of most interest here, media scholars who apply CDA theories and methods. These differ in their choice of concepts and methods; we are less likely to see a discussion of systemic functional linguistics in a media journal. But perhaps they differ more in the expectations that come from operating in different disciplinary universes. Scholars writing primarily for linguistic audiences will be expected to show a level of technical proficiency - as linguists - that will be less salient in media studies. Conversely, media researchers might be expected to discuss the general status and legitimacy of textual analysis. The cumulative effect is to normalize a situation where “doing CDA” can mean quite different things in different academic contexts.

CDA has usually been deployed to analyse discrete media texts and the intertextual relationship between thematically linked media content. Since the early media-based work of van Dijk (1991), Fairclough (1995) and others (see Bell 1991; Fowler 1991), CDA scholars have developed an extensive set of concepts for analysing media. We can identify at least three levels of analysis that often come together in the same research project. One strand of research – the one closest to linguistics – highlights the structural conventions of media texts and language (see, for example, Banda & Mawadza 2015; Teo 2000) Researchers explicate the semantic and grammatical properties of different media genres (reportage, editorials, interviews



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etc.) and the ideological function of particular text types such as headlines and leads.

A second strand concentrates on the interdiscursive and intertextual character of media discourses (see, for example, Craig 2013; Kelsey 2013). Scholars explore how certain ways of representing the world, performing identity, and constructing social belonging are normalized in media spaces; questions of who gets to speak, what discourses are privileged, and what discourses are absent are foregrounded. A third strand focuses on the sociological implications of media discourses (see, for example, Mendes 2012; Olausson 2014). Analysts examine how media representations inflect the discursive constitution of different social phenomena: for example, capitalism, neoliberalism, racism, climate change, and feminism.

While CDA has been used to analyse different media, the literature has primarily focused on written journalism. The bias towards news and current affairs media established in early CDA scholarship was later consolidated by work aligned with the emerging field of journalism studies (Richardson 2007; Carvalho 2008). The research appeal of journalistic texts has arguably increased in the digital ecology, because of easier access to newspapers' historical archives. The low financial and temporal costs of converting written journalism into research data enable a relatively easy uptake of CDA methods, especially for students and researchers without large research budgets. Digitization has also allowed scholars to integrate CDA into the analysis of large corpora of media texts (Gabrielatos & Baker 2008), as a supplement or alternative to analyses of small samples.

Some of the most innovative recent research has focused on the different modalities of media discourse (Machin 2013). Researchers have analysed semiotic forms that

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were relatively marginalized – if not invisible – in linguistically-based analysis, such as the visual design and branding of texts (Machin and Niblock 2008), the interplay of audio and visual communication (Eriksson 2015), and the discursive relationships between human and non-human actors (Roderick 2013). Scholars have also examined the different forms of individual and collective identity enabled in internet-based media (Chiluwa 2012). As the mediums of print, radio and television become elements within a convergent digital ecology, the future vibrancy of CDA media research will partly depend on researchers' ability to get to grips with discursive universes where, as Bouvier (2015) suggests, “algorithms themselves become realisers of discourse” (p. 153)

CDA researchers continually emphasize the dialectical relationship between text and social context; we might call it the governing theoretical assumption of the paradigm. Yet, media sociologists have criticized CDA for its narrow textual focus, in a fashion that recalls political economy critiques of cultural studies. For instance, Philo (2007) suggests Fairclough and van Dijk produce “text only” analysis of media (p. 185), without offering a satisfactory “account of the social and political structures which underpin the content of texts” (p. 186). He unfavourably compares CDA approaches to the methods he and others developed at the Glasgow Media School, which examine how “meanings [are] circulated through the key dimensions of production, content and reception” (p. 194).

Philo voices a criticism that, in its most benign form, is implicit in the media researcher's decision to combine CDA and political economy. The methodology

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suggests an obvious division of labour: CDA will be used to analyse media texts, while political economy will be used to explain their structural production and circulation. Philo's argument recalls Blommaert's (2005) critique of CDA for its "linguistic bias". Blommaert argues CDA is oriented towards an excessive problematization of "discourse which is there" (p. 35) in the text to the neglect of a dynamic social account of the power struggles in which the text is embedded.

Philo and Blommaert's critiques seemingly converge. Yet, the differences between them are important because of how they illuminate some of the general confusion about the status of discourse and textual analysis in media studies (Fürsich 2009). Philo presupposes a relatively straightforward distinction between the discursivity and materiality of media practices. Textual analysis of media is useful, but it needs to be connected to contextual analysis of how media texts are materially produced and circulated. Philo effectively situates the analysis of media (re)presentations on a different analytical level to the analysis of media production and reception. Any distinction between "textual analysis" and "discourse analysis" is collapsed, since both are exclusively tied to an analysis of media content.

In contrast, Blommaert interrogates CDA's textualist bias from a perspective that emphasises the discursivity of *both* text and context. He therefore allows us to recast the other two dimensions of Philo's totality – media production and reception – as equally important analytical horizons to the discourse analyst. A decade on from Blommaert's critique, we can make the same point by highlighting how CDA is increasingly applied in ethnographic studies that transcend a narrow textual focus (see, for example, Krzyżanowski, this volume; Macgilchrist & Van Hout 2011; Wodak 2009).

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Read defensively, Blommaert (2005) merely restated points already recognised by CDA scholars. However, that he needed to make the argument at all is symptomatic of how CDA research has sometimes been formulaically applied. We know what such analysis looks like in media research. Some contextual discussion of social and media structures at the front end of the article, and maybe some more in the conclusion. And centring everything, as the privileged object of analysis, is a sample of media texts. Done well, such analysis produces rich insights, and illuminates the dynamic relationship between text and context. Done badly, it can seem tautologous, and amount to little more than an illustrative technical display – by non-linguists! – of different CDA concepts.

The next section explores how the relationship between (a lower case) critical discourse studies and media studies might develop in the future. The challenge invites a particular framing for media researchers: in an interdisciplinary space dominated by linguistic approaches, how might media scholars formulate ways of doing critical discourse studies that better address the concerns of our own field?

### **Future possibilities**

I have four broad suggestions. Some of the ideas sketched below are already being done by researchers. Some have likely been done in work I am unfamiliar with. Taken together, they suggest ways of doing media-based discourse analysis that go beyond the notion of a prescriptive CDA method or paradigm.

First, critical discourse studies needs to clearly position itself as a field that addresses all four analytical tiers of the media studies totality of production, representation,

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distribution and reception, which extends its analysis to entertainment media and popular culture (see, for example, Edwards 2016, Eriksson 2015; Schröter 2015; Wodak 2009). One way of broadening the scope of the field would be through greater engagement with other discourse theoretical traditions, including those based on a social ontology that would question CDA's founding distinction between discursive and extra-discursive practices (see Carpentier this volume; Dahlberg & Phelan 2011). For practical reasons, most research will still likely focus on analysing given media texts; it is simply easier to analyse ten news stories about the "refugee crisis" than interview the ten journalists who wrote them, never mind construct ethnographic studies of how the articles were produced. Nonetheless, even within the limits of conventional textual analysis, there is the potential for more studies that go beyond a one-dimensional focus on "the media", and which systematically compare journalists' source material (including press releases) with published media stories. For those with the resources to carry out ethnographic or interview-based studies of media production, the research possibilities are more open-ended. Such work would highlight what social and institutional agents *do* with texts and discourses (see, for example, Erjavec & Kovačič 2013), as a supplement or alternative to relatively static analyses of media texts. Conversely, it would also illuminate what discursive regimes do to social agents, in moulding the subjectivities and affective dispositions they bring to the production of media.

A similar argument can be extended to media audiences. Fairclough (1995) recognised the importance of audience interpretations in his book on media discourse. Yet, audience analysis has been relatively invisible in CDA research (an

exception is Edwards 2016), no doubt partly for similar practical reasons that have hindered the analysis of media production. As a thought experiment, perhaps we can imagine the emergence of audience-based discourse studies where, instead of starting with given media texts, researchers begin with an analysis of how media audiences have been discursively constituted. This approach would displace the analytical centrality of the text, and call into question the residual behaviourism embedded in the image of individual media texts having “effects” on audiences. This work could build on insights in the existing audience/reception analysis literature, and reinvigorate the dialectical intuitions of Hall’s (1980) encoding/decoding model. It could also develop a sharper sociological focus by highlighting the discursive affinities between the ways of acting, representing and being (Fairclough 2003) normalized in “centring media” (Couldry 2003) and the dispositional tendencies normalized and enabled elsewhere. Such work would be particularly well suited to illuminating the dynamics of digital media cultures, where audiences are simultaneously consumers, distributors and producers of texts.

Second, media discourse studies could challenge existing divisions between quantitative and qualitative methods, and trouble the default positioning of discourse analysis as a qualitative approach. The emergence of frameworks that apply CDA insights on a corpus-based scale offer one template for such work (Subtirelu & Baker, this volume; Gabrielato & Baker 2008); pragmatic combinations of CDA and content analysis offer another (Mendes 2012). Such hybrid methodologies mitigate the criticism that critical discourse research is based on “unrepresentative”, “self-serving” samples. They also potentially enrich our understanding of media power, by enabling large-scale analyses of how media ways

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of naming the social world are disseminated and naturalized, and internalized or resisted by agents in other social fields (Couldry 2008). This work could develop the diachronic impulses of “discourse-historical” CDA (Wodak 2009), and exploit the research opportunities that come from the digitization of media archives. It could also address the increasing fixation with “big data”; indeed, the interpretative strengths of critical discourse studies offer an important analytical foil to tendencies that read large-scale data assemblages as objective representations of the social, without any critical evaluation of their conditions of possibility.

Third, media researchers need to develop forms of critical discourse studies that fret less about applying the codified protocol of linguistic analysis. This, I should hasten to add, is *not* to advocate for a dilettante approach that does not take discourse seriously. Rather, I am suggesting that a methodologically correct focus on linguistic detail can inculcate a kind of “aspect blindness” (Wittgenstein 1973, p. 213), which obscures how the most politically convincing and illuminating answers to our research questions are sometimes “not to be found in the text” (Molina, 2009 p. 186; see also Carvalho 2008). Price’s (2010) work offers one exemplar of such an approach. Different linguistic concepts are applied, but in a relatively unobtrusive way; what centres the analysis is a sophisticated study of the power dynamics and political motivations that shape what appears in the media. Another exemplar is the media research of Chouliaraki (2012), Fairclough’s former collaborator. The phrases “critical discourse analysis” and “critical discourse studies” are noticeably absent from her most recent book, and the analysis is without the kind of methodological protocol prescribed in CDA handbooks. For all that, we should not conclude that Chouliaraki is no longer doing critical discourse analysis; on the contrary, her analysis

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of the role of mediated dynamics in the historical constitution of humanitarian discourses is clearly informed by the concerns of her nominally CDA work.

Fourth, media discourse researchers need to reinvigorate our commitment to ideology critique by reengaging with the concept of ideology in media studies (Phelan 2016) and the status of the “critical” in critical discourse studies (van Dijk 2015). CDA analyses of media have typically been governed by what Scannell (1998), drawing on Ricoeur, calls a “hermeneutics of suspicion” (p. 256). Media discourses are regarded suspiciously because they ideologically misrepresent the social order and conceal structural inequalities. This perspective is, as we know from CDA research and elsewhere, often justified. Media universalize particular understandings of the social world that are contestable, but which conceal or belittle their contestability behind the impression of a naturalized, common-sense order. However, Scannell argues that a mode of default suspicion can foreclose interpretative engagement with the sedimented condition of the social world, and subordinate the phenomenological richness of mediated interactions (Scannell 2013) to the “being in the head” of ideology critique (Scannell 1998, p. 261). He does not suggest that media researchers should replace a “principled suspicion” with a default “hermeneutics of trust”, because “to do so would be to replace one absurdity (the denial of world) by another (the denial of self-reflecting reason)” (p. 267). Instead, he highlights the analytical limitations of ideology critiques that are too quick to juxtapose the falseness of media representations with a relatively unproblematic notion of “truth” directly accessible to the analyst (p. 264).

**Journalism, ideology and neoliberalism**



I want to end this chapter with an empirical illustration that considers the practical implications of Scannell's argument as it informs my own work on neoliberalism and media (Phelan 2014). In a September 2013 opinion piece for *The Irish Times*, the paper's then economics editor, Dan O'Brien, criticized a speech given by Irish President Michael D. Higgins on the need for an ethical economy. O'Brien denounced the speech as "highly ideological and one-sided", because of what he saw as Higgins' exclusive citation of left-wing thinkers (among them, Michel Foucault, David Harvey, Ruth Levitas, Philip Mirowski, and Jamie Peck). Not only did Higgins's speech disparage the "non-leftists" it mentioned, "worst of all, it excluded the majority who occupy the middle ground and who carry little or no ideological baggage".

O'Brien argued that the speech contravened Higgins' role as Irish President, which has traditionally been regarded as a largely ceremonial office above politics. Higgins' "increasingly political and partisan" interventions threatened the constitutional convention that the presidency should not be used "as a platform to advance a political agenda". "The president is moving into dangerous territory", O'Brien warned, by usurping the neutral and apolitical comportment of the office with speeches that exalt "some quite extreme figures" on the intellectual left.

O'Brien's sharpest remarks were directed against Higgins's use of the word "neoliberal", the "favourite term of abuse" of "the reactionary left". The term "makes dialogue impossible", O'Brien suggested, "because nobody anywhere defines himself/herself as 'neoliberal'". The "conscious ideological project" attributed to neoliberals by Higgins and others is nothing other than a left-wing

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“conspiracy myth”. Left polemics against neoliberalism are grounded in reductive binaries that bear no relation to current political realities in Ireland and elsewhere:

The setting up of an us-versus-neoliberals contest is not only divisive, it is grossly reductionist. Most people support both competitive markets and state-organised redistribution. The choice is not binary. To the chagrin of hardline ideologues on both the left and free market right, Ireland and peer countries have a mix of market and state in economic life.

So, what to make of this text in light of my earlier reflections on ideology? First, we can see how it might be interrogated in terms already familiar to us from media and journalism studies. O’Brien offers a perfect illustration of the ideological work done by journalists when they invoke the notion of “balance” (Hall et al. 2013), as a kind of policing mechanism regulating what can and cannot be “reasonably” said in the public sphere. O’Brien primarily reproaches Higgins not simply for commending left-wing thinkers, but because he only cited figures on the left to the detriment of a balanced discussion. O’Brien aligns his own position with that of “most people”, in opposition to the “hardline ideologues on both the left and free market right”. His stance exemplifies journalism’s alignment with the imaginary of the “sensible centre” (Louw 2005, p. 76), because of the assumption that those on “the middle ground... carry little or no ideological baggage” (O’Brien 2013).

This critique illuminates some crucial features of our text. It shows how journalists often do their most important ideological work when they disavow ideology. As a supplement, we might also imagine a critical political economy analysis of O’Brien

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and *The Irish Times*, which highlights how the paper has internalized the logic of neoliberal capitalism and is structurally primed to interrogate Higgins' speech.

Nonetheless, I want to reformulate Scannell's (1998) argument as a challenge: how might we develop a form of ideology critique attuned to an "ontology of being in the world" (p. 261), as a supplement to the traditional emphasis on ideological media representations that mask social reality?

Glynos and Howarth's (2007) discussion of the role of self-interpretations in critical social analysis is a useful resource for sharpening a political reading of Scannell. They describe the "passage through self-interpretations [as...] a necessary starting point for any social science investigation" (p. 157). As with Scannell's critique of a default hermeneutics of suspicion, Glynos and Howarth's target is forms of theoretical explanation that appeal to causal structures over and above agents' own self-interpretations of their practices. For example, let's imagine a critique of O'Brien's journalism that reads it as symptomatic of neoliberalism, *irrespective* of anything he says about neoliberalism.

At the same time, Glynos and Howarth (2007) argue that our "understanding and explanations" of social practices cannot simply stop at describing "contextualized self-interpretations" (p. 157), as if we have no other methodological option but to take agents at their word, and simply catalogue different representations of the world. Rather, they suggest we need to illuminate the (onto-political) conditions of possibility that enable such interpretations to "be" in the first place.

Glynos and Howarth capture a set of analytical intuitions broadly aligned with Scannell's (2013) focus on sedimented social and media practices - what he calls, following Boltanski, the media's phenomenological entanglement in the "politics of

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the present” (p. 221). Both point to the importance of formulating a mode of critical analysis that passes through agents’ own self-interpretations. And both capture a pragmatic impulse to understand discursive practices that, in a default suspicious mode, we might be inclined to dismiss as nothing other than self-serving ideology.

What are the practical implications of these reflections for our analysis of O’Brien’s article? A mode of ideology critique attuned to an ontology of being in the world would focus on the political and discursive work done by O’Brien when he invokes the signifier “ideology” to censure Higgins. This simple shift in perspective reverses the normal comportment of ideology critique. Instead of treating ideology as a conceptual name for the “deep structure” that explains the distortions of the media “surface” (Scannell 1998), attention is focused on its use as a category for ridiculing political identities that talk of something called “neoliberalism”.

This approach recasts O’Brien’s text as an exemplar of some of the paradoxical features of “actually existing neoliberalism” (Brenner & Theodore 2002, p. 349), – namely, that despite the critical use of neoliberalism as the name for the dominant ideology, the term ideology is perhaps still most commonly attributed – in media discourse – to those who challenge neoliberal orthodoxies. Decades on from what critics would see as the institutionalization of neoliberalism, it is neoliberalism’s antagonists who are still represented as the ideological ones. Ideology is the exclusive property of those on the margins, against those who occupy the ideology-free “middle ground”.

Yet, there is more going on in O’Brien’s text, for in his schema, ideology is not simply the property of the “reactionary left”. He also distances himself from “hardline ideologues...on the free market right”. In effect, he both disparages the concept of

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neoliberalism, while also paradoxically othering a nominal “free market” identity that many would see as a shorthand *for* neoliberalism.

O’Brien’s anti-ideology identity is not only animated by a journalistic habitus that is self-construed as objective and balanced. It is also mediated by a particular understanding of neoliberalism. On the one hand, he questions the coherence of the concept. Yet, on the other, he implicitly attributes a particular definition of neoliberalism to left critics - of a “free market” project opposed to the state. His own attribution of a “free market” identity to the “hardline ideologues of the...right” therefore seeks to undercut left wing claims about the universalism of neoliberalism, because of his assumption that mainstream political economy is governed by a pragmatic “mix of market and state”.

O’Brien is certainly not the first to define neoliberalism as a “free-market” project. Yet, as many of the thinkers cited in Higgins’ speech have argued, the notion that neoliberalism can be satisfactorily conceptualized through the image of a market/state dichotomy is itself deeply reductionist. Foucault (2008) could already see in 1978 that neoliberals were driven by a desire to reconstitute the state as an agent of market rationality, in contrast to a philosophy of laissez-faire liberalism. Peck (2010) makes a similar point: “neoliberals too are statist (just different kinds of statist)” (p. 277). O’Brien rearticulates the same discursive logic that enabled an elite political and media construction of Celtic Tiger Ireland as a non-ideological formation, however incoherent that description might seem to critics of the Irish case (Phelan 2014).

The discursive logics underpinning O’Brien’s stance are obviously contestable, and have been increasingly challenged in Ireland and elsewhere since the 2007-2008

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global financial crisis. One manifestation of this – as the article itself illustrates - has been the increasing media visibility of the term “neoliberalism” as a name for the dominant ideology. Another has been an arguably growing popular recognition (on both left and right) of the ideologically complicit nature of media discourses, which has been partly enabled by the feedback mechanisms of social media. Both of these counter-hegemonic impulses were evident in how O’Brien’s article was interrogated in the comment section directly underneath (and also in letters to the editor, and alternative media). One commenter suggested - echoing my analysis here - that “the assumption that the majority who occupy the middle ground are not in the grip of an ideology is exactly what makes you yourself a 'reactionary' and an 'ideologue', Dan”. A second observed it’s “hilarious to read a neoliberal denying the existence of neoliberalism”. And a third argued that O’Brien “should take a good hard look in the mirror” for obscuring “the crucial point” of Higgins’ speech: “that what appears to us as mere pragmatism is in fact the product of a deep ideological commitment”.

Unsurprisingly, some who commented on O’Brien’s article affirmed its characterization of Higgins. However, the critical responses capture the bigger point: that contestation over what is and isn’t “ideological”, what is and isn’t “neoliberal”, and what is and isn’t “political” are all part of a mediatized “politics of the present”. Higgins’ speech, O’Brien’s critique, and the criticisms of O’Brien evoke a wider political and discursive struggle between those who cannot see beyond the restoration of a social and economic order institutionalized in the 1970s and 1980s and those who want to disclose the conditions for a radically different kind of society.

Let me end by briefly clarifying the implications of the approach signposted here. I have suggested it might be productive for critical media discourse researchers to examine what social actors *do* with the term “ideology”, and other signifiers of ideological commitment, in media spaces. Attention is focused on how popular subjectivities are discursively positioned through the mediatized naming and non-naming of identities as “ideological”, “neoliberal”, “political”, and so on. In one sense, this approach is consistent with what researchers have been doing all along; CDA scholars are hardly indifferent to the ideological potency of labels. However, when mediated by an analytical perspective that is less concerned with documenting the semantic organisation of individual texts, it offers an empirical route into critically understanding the ideological and political comportment of neoliberalized regimes that are articulated as post-ideological. As with traditional ideology critique, this approach is attentive to the ideologically distorting effects of media representations. Yet, it also recasts ideology as “a property of politics, not a malfunction” (Finlayson 2012, p. 753). It questions its historical status as a pejorative category of critical analysis.

Our example is again illustrative, because, for all their differences, Higgins, O’Brien and O’Brien’s critics agree on one fundamental point - that ideology is a bad thing. At the same time, their own discursive identities are made possible by how they attribute the term to others. Ideology can certainly be a bad thing and, contra O’Brien, we have lots of good reasons for critiquing the pernicious effects of neoliberal ideology. Nonetheless, as critical analysts of media discourse, perhaps we need to do more than simply reinforce a pejorative view of the concept. Perhaps we

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also need to illuminate its status as a discursive category of political life – one equally pertinent to the media politics of bringing a new social order into being as it is to critiquing the existing order.

### **Further reading**

Bell, A & P. Garrett (1998). *Approaches to Media Discourse* Oxford: Blackwell

This anthology is still one of the best introductions to media discourse analysis. It includes chapters from Norman Fairclough, Teun van Dijk, Stuart Allan, Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, and Paddy Scannell's "two hermeneutics" essay referenced earlier.

Dahlberg, L. & Phelan, S. (2011). *Discourse theory and critical media politics*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

This edited volume examines the implications of Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory for critical media and communication studies. Briefly comparing discourse theory to CDA in the introduction, the book offers a perspective on media and discourse that has been less prominent, if gaining traction, in the critical discourse studies literature.

Fairclough, N. (1995). *Media discourse*. London: Arnold.

This book offers a good introduction to Fairclough's work, and is grounded in analysis of different media genres, including current affairs broadcasting, documentary and reportage.



Published in Flowerdew, John & Richardson, John E. (2017). *The Routledge Handbook of Critical Discourse Studies*. London: Routledge

Machin, D. & van Leeuwen, T. (2007). *Global Media Discourse: A Critical Introduction*. London: Routledge

This book highlights the multimodal character of media discourse, and includes illustrations from different national contexts and different lifestyle and entertainment media. It also sensitive to wider media studies debates about the political economy of media globalization.

Richardson, J. E. (2007). *Analysing newspapers: An approach from critical discourse analysis*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan

John Richardson's book offers a good introduction to the value of CDA approaches in journalism studies, while also interrogating the narrow textualist tendencies of some CDA research. It transcends its explicit focus on newspapers, and is an equally useful reference for students and researchers examining today's news ecology.

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<sup>ii</sup> Put simply, the political economy/cultural studies debate involved a disagreement about the relative role of economic processes, versus culture and discourse, in the constitution of social and media structures (see Berglez, 2006; Fenton 2006). Political economy scholars affirmed the centrality of a

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Marxist analysis of capitalism, while cultural studies scholars embraced (then novel) post-structuralist and post-modernist theories.