# University of Limerick Department of Sociology Working Paper Series

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## *Hegemony Disguised:*

## *How Discourse Analysis is Inadequate in the Disclosure of the Real Locus of Social Control*

Hegemony Disguised: How Discourse Analysis is Inadequate in the Disclosure of the Real Locus of Social Control.

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## Introduction

The post-modern world is often characterised as being fragmented in a variety of ways. It is clearly a divided and unequal world. It is divided in ideological terms. It is divided in regional terms. It is divided in terms of those who have power and those who have little or no power. Unequal power relationships in terms of class, ethnicity/race and gender, to name but three examples, continue to persist, usually in combination. In postmodernity, the media continue to have a hugely significant role in manufacturing and disseminating dominant and other forms of ideology. Indeed, a critical political economy perspective would suggest that the ongoing processes of conglomeration in terms of media ownership and control have resulted in a narrowing, in ideological terms, of the range of voices and opinions heard and seen in a media setting. Against this point of view is a perspective that celebrates the power of audiences to resist and subvert the ideological content of media texts. Nevertheless, it is the trans-national capitalist class that are largely responsible for the explosion in media terms in people's everyday lives.

In this paper we wish to re-assert the importance of the concept of ideology in undertaking media analysis in the twenty first century. As neo-marxists we recognise that the application of post-modern critiques and research methodologies to mass media conglomerates and content - especially in the shape of discourse analysis - has failed utterly to address the underlying reality of hegemony, through which the dominant capitalist class continue to exercise enormous control over ordinary citizens in late capitalist society. Specifically, the denial of ideology as a useful concept in media analysis has robbed such analysis of much of its potential and explanatory power, while at the same time denying sociologists and others the necessary tools to evaluate contemporary media content and its influence on public beliefs and attitudes. We argue, in this paper, that a marriage between the concepts of discourse and ideology represents a useful way forward in terms of understanding the media in postmodernity. Following Thompson (1990) we make the case for a tri-partite model of media analysis that gives equal recognition to the *production*, *content* and *reception* of media texts.

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Our paper is divided into four main parts. We begin by briefly examining the usual criticisms that have been made of the concept of ideology and make the case for its retention. We then examine Thompson's (1990) three-part model of media analysis, which asserts that in order to investigate how the mass media assist in the perpetuation of unequal or asymmetrical relationships of power, we need to examine the production, construction and reception of media texts. His important model of media analysis calls for an investigation into media organisations, the discursive aspects of media content and the hermeneutic dimensions of media texts. As we discussed in our earlier paper[2] we are adopting Thompson's (1990) model in a major study of inward migration into the Republic of Ireland.[3] We then outline the strengths and shortcomings of the concept of discourse in undertaking research on the asymmetrical relationships of power that are manifest in post-modern societies. The penultimate section of the paper draws upon one example from our research on immigrants and demonstrates how we can apply a model that makes use of a combination of both dominant ideology and discourse in undertaking media analysis. Our paper concludes by suggesting a number of ways forward in terms of undertaking ideological/discursive analysis.

## "No Future"

The collapse of communism and the decline in structuralist sociology in the 1990s had significant implications for the concept of ideology. We think that it is with some irony that at a time when the right is in resurgence, when the social world is being increasingly privatised, when citizenship is being downplayed in the context of a new found emphasis on the market and consumption, and when fundamentalism - both Christian and Islamic – are re-emergent, the death knell of ideology is being heralded by many. (See Corner, 2001 for an elaboration) Such pronouncements are, to our minds, premature.

Devereux[4] (1998 and 2003) examines the chequered history of the concept within both social theory generally and

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[2]  *A Cosy Consensus on Deviant Discourse: How the refugee and asylum seeker meta-narrative has endorsed an interpretive crisis in relation to the trans-national politics of the world's displaced persons.*

[3] Entitled *Conflation, Construction and Content* it involves a detailed tri-partite analysis of media coverage of asylum seekers and refugees in the Irish print and broadcast media. Using a methodological approach that combines analyses of production, content and reception, the study examines media coverage from January 2000 to December 2004 - a total of five years of media content. In considering how the Irish media industry have responded to the arrival of asylum seekers and refugees, the project is focused on analyzing the dominant discourses within media content, the perspectives of media professionals, and the beliefs of audience members. The project is examining news coverage from one national broadsheet, one national tabloid, and one local/regional newspaper as well as content from RTE and TV3 and one local radio station. In combining as it does production, content and reception analysis, it is the first study of its kind to be undertaken within the field of Irish media and communications studies.

[4]  For a more detailed account see Devereux (1998) *Devils and Angels: Television, Ideology and The Coverage of Poverty*. Luton: John Libbey Media. Chapter 2 and Devereux (2003) *Understanding The Media*. London: Sage. Chapter 5.

media analysis in particular. He shows how post-structuralism and postmodernism cast severe doubt on the very usefulness (and future) of ideology as a concept within social theory. Within media studies, more particularly, the rise of the reception model of analysis, much of which overstates audience power, with its new-found emphasis on *discourse*, also meant that by the 1990s many had come to reject the concept of ideology altogether. Several key thinkers within social theory and media analysis have warned against such a blanket rejection. (See for example, Dahlgren, 1987, 1992; Eagleton, 1991; Giddens, 1979 and Zizek, 1994; Corner, 1995; Gitlin, 1980.) Critics of the concept of ideology have railed against its supposed ambiguity; they have accused its proponents of being guilty of the 'sin of inference' in terms of how media analysis is undertaken; and they have also suggested that researchers who favour the concept of ideology have engaged in simplistic analysis of media and other texts. (See for example, Frazer, 1992) Ideological analysis is also accused of downplaying the prospect of audience agency in the face of dominant and other forms of ideology. As media sociologists we do not readily accept that an interpretative 'free-for-all' exists amongst audience members. (See Fenton, 1999) Audiences do have agency; they can resist, reconstruct and reject ideological content in a media setting but such practices only serves to confirm the existence of dominant ideological content in the first place: gay men may have appropriated the term 'Queer' but have done so only after a hegemonic homophobic ideology defined them as such.

## A 'Relaxed' Definition of Ideology

In our research we favour the use of a 'relaxed' definition of ideology. We place a particular – though not exclusive – emphasis upon examining the role of the post-modern media in the dissemination of dominant or hegemonic ideology. We are also interested in the workings of submerged and counter-hegemonic ideology within the mainstream and alternative media. From our perspective, ideology refers to *the ideas that legitimise the power of a dominant social group or class*. (See Devereux, 1998, 19-23 and van Dijk, 1998 for an elaboration). The dominant group or class in question may be, for example, the establishment class, a dominant political group or a trans-national corporation. Examples of dominant or hegemonic ideologies might be global or free market capitalism, state socialism, patriarchy, or heterosexism. Counter-hegemonic ideologies refer to those ideologies that question or reject the *status quo*; feminism and eco-terrorism being the two most obvious examples.

## Implications of Adopting a Relaxed Definition

The adoption of a relaxed as opposed to a closed materialist definition of ideology within media analysis carries with it a number of important implications that are worth noting at this juncture. A relaxed or open definition of ideology recognises that (a) as Gramsci reminds us, hegemony is never total or complete; (b) dominant ideologies exist; (c)

counter-hegemonic ideologies exist; (d) audiences have the *capacity* to, in that much repeated phrase, to 'read against the grain' of hegemonic or dominant ideologies. The capacity of audiences to engage in this kind of action or agency does not obviate the existence of dominant or other ideologies in the first place within a media text (see Tester, 1994). Some researchers have quite rightly questioned the uncritical way in which audience readings of texts are understood (see Kitzinger, 1999); (e) media texts may contain a number of competing ideologies; (f) significant differences exist between media genres, and between media that are aimed at the mass market and the alternative media.[5]

## "Fuck EMI"

In certain media settings, counter-hegemonic ideology may be found side by side with dominant ideology. Many post-modern media conglomerates are happy enough to incorporate and sell media products (e.g. hard-core punk rock, rap etc), which contain ideas, that run counter to the *status quo*. Virgin (part of the Bertellsmann conglomerate) records sells thousands of copies of the Sex Pistols singing about anarchy. Morrissey ( then distributed by a company controlled by AOL-Time Warner) sings of his dream of *Margaret On The Guillotine*.[6] The anarchist group Chumbawawa contributed to a compilation record entitled *Fuck EMI* in 1989. In response to Live-Aid they released a record entitled *Pictures of Starving Children Sell Records* (1986). Yet major record label EMI signed them in 1997 and the band had a major chart hit with the song *Tubthumping*One further telling example of how media conglomerates manage to reconcile their desire to make profit with distributing media products that contain ideas that may be critical of the establishment was seen in the News Corporation -controlled Harper Collins' decision to (finally) distribute Michael Moore's polemical book *Stupid White Men*. (2001)[7] On the other hand, factual media genres like news and current affairs tend to privilege the views of the powerful and regularly resort to using dominant ideological frames. This is hardly surprising given the focus and dependency on elite groups that news media have.

The post-modern media present us with an increasingly complex media-scape. In recognising these complexities, Devereux (2003: 109) asserts that:

> "A sophisticated ideological analysis of the media should pay particular attention to the range of ideological
> positions among the media professionals involved, the kinds of discourses (dominant and otherwise) used in

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[5]    An excellent example of recent ideological analysis of North American fictional television is to be found in Todd Gitlin (1994) <u>Inside Prime Time</u>. London: Routledge.

[6]    In reference to former UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher.

[7]    In the introduction to the 2002 Penguin published edition of *Stupid White Men*, Moore writes of the many difficulties he encountered with his then publisher Harper Collins after 9/11. His publishers initially wished him to re-write certain sections of the book and they wanted to destroy the first 50,000 copies that they had printed. Following a campaign by some librarians (who presumably have some purchasing power) the book sold out in one day by selling it through Amazon. It shot to No. 1 in the *New York Times* bestsellers list and had at least 25 re-printings. Moore faced similar difficulties with the distribution of his 2004 film Fahrenheit 9/11.

the text and the range of possible readings that audiences may place upon the text Added to this should be a realization that certain kinds of media genres such as television news, tabloid newspapers and magazines are more amenable than others to the reproduction of ideologies that sustain unequal relations of power. A balance needs to be struck between the capacity of audience members to reject or reconstruct dominant ideology and the fact that media organizations and media content have been shown to possess significant power in constructing and shaping the ideological effect in the short, medium and long term."

Mindful of this we turn now to outlining Thompson's (1990) tripartite model of media analysis, which we feel, helps significantly in rescuing the concept from its many detractors.

**Thompson's Tripartite Model**

We regard Thompson's (1990) *Ideology and Modern Culture* to be a seminal text. It offers a rigourous and systematic model for media analysis focused on ideology.  Thompson (1990) suggests that in undertaking ideological analysis we need to focus upon all three elements in the communicative exchange.  Ideological content cannot just be 'read off' a media text. Our task is to understand the initial encoding by media professionals, the structure of the text in question and what audiences make of and do with the text.

| Stage 1 | Stage 2 | Stage 3 |
|---|---|---|
| The production and diffusion of symbolic forms. | The construction of the media message – especially its discursive dimension. | The reception and appropriation of media messages. |
| Focus on media organisations and media professionals. | Focus on the content of the message or text. | Focus on the hermeneutic dimension. |

**Figure (a) Thompson's Tripartite Model  (Adapted from Thompson, 1990 & Devereux, 2003).**

Researchers need to understand the 'initial' making of media texts by investigating their production context. Here, the production research tradition within media sociology is to the fore. Print media journalists, photographers, sub-editors and editors, for example, might be the focus for a research project that is examining how these categories of media professional understand issues pertaining to asylum seekers in society.  The second element in Thompson's (1990) model is on the content and construction of the media text. How does it work at a discursive level?

What elements are used to convey meaning to audiences about illegal immigrants, refugees, or asylum seekers? How is a text structured? What frames does it use? How does it work at a semiotic level? What images are used in addition to written text? The third and crucial element in Thompson's model is centred on the relationship between audiences and texts. It focuses on how media texts are received and appropriated by audience members. The ideological importance of media content has to be examined in terms of its ability to shape public discourse. How does one kind of framing as opposed to another perpetuate or critique the hegemonic position of the ruling or elite group?

**Ideological Twists and Discursive Turns: One Example**

In our earlier paper [8] we discussed the range of frames used to inform the Irish public about recent immigration. Immigrants are constructed as a problem. Within much media discourse, they variously represent an exotic 'otherness'; are criminalized; are portrayed as a threat to already scarce resources; are accused of being illegitimate. They (them) are represented as a threat to an assumed national cohesiveness (us). In other contexts – in North America and the UK for example - this discourse goes further and makes a link between immigrant and terrorist. Figure (b) contains a synopsis of one recent example of the problematising of immigrants from the Irish print media. Having presented a synopsis of the representation of immigrant as deviant and criminal we outline how Thompson's model might be applied to understand the making, structure and interpretation of such a media text.[9]

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"**Light-Fingered Immigrants**"

In September 2003 an Irish tabloid newspaper warned its readership (us) about bringing gifts to new mothers (us) in a Dublin maternity hospital. "Don't bring gifts for new mothers" ran the headline and its corresponding strap stated "Stark warning to hospital visitors after thefts blamed on refugees" (them). Immigrants are termed "light-fingered." They are accused of being engaged in "petty theft" and of "helping themselves to other patients' goods." Those to blame

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[8] '*A Cosy Consensus on Deviant Discourse: How the refugee and asylum seeker meta-narrative has endorsed an interpretive crisis in relation to the trans-national politics of the world's displaced persons*'.

[9]    See D. Deacon, N. Fenton and A. Bryman (1999) 'From inception to reception: the natural history of a news

are also referred to as "coloured people", "non-nationals" and "asylum seekers". The article in question uses these terms interchangeably and un-problematically to refer to immigrants. The hospital in question is said to be based in "Little Africa" in Dublin city owing to the number of "...refugees from Africa and other West African countries." An asylum seeker from Nigeria is specifically mentioned as being a person who has stolen a gift belonging to another mother and child. Thefts at the hospital are said to have reached "crazy proportions." In addition, concerns are raised in the article about the lack of resources in the maternity hospital sector (for which immigrants are blamed – how?) and the fact that security has increased in the hospital owing to immigrants "abusing the visiting rules." Immigrant families are accused of "using the hospital like some sort of day-care centre."

In spite of the article's headline that would seem to suggest that a formal warning had been issued, we learn from the body of the text that the hospital authorities denied that any such warning had been given. The master of the hospital also made it quite clear that there was not a spate of thefts in the maternity units. The sources used to counter the official denial were one expectant mother, one nurse and one hospital worker. All were unnamed.

**Figure (b) Light Fingered Immigrants**

**Analysing The Text**

Three key methodological approaches may be used to understand the ideological importance of the above text. An obvious starting point would be to firstly consider the *a-priori* existence of racist ideologies within Irish Society. An application of Thompson's (1990) model would mean gaining some insights into the making of the text, the structure and content of the text as well as examining how the text is received by audience members. This means that (a) we could focus on the initial 'making' of the text by interviewing all of those involved in the production process i.e. the journalist, the sub-editor, the photographer and the editor. A further strategy might involve speaking to those either interviewed in the piece or the other interested parties referred to in the text. A particular focus here would involve examining the intentions of the media professionals involved and their understanding of immigration and asylum seeking in particular; a concentration on production would also involve an explication of the ownership of the paper, its

item' Media, Culture and Society 21: 5-31 for an excellent (and rare) example of how we might examine the production, content and reception of a media text.

stated ideological position, its target audience and its previous history in covering immigration issues; (b) the structure and content of the text in question would be examined in terms of the frames used in constructing the 'story' about immigrants as deviant and criminal. How does the text work at a discursive level? Does it contain one or more ideological positions? What pre-existing frames does it use in order to inform its audience about immigrants? How is its audience (us) discursively addressed about 'them'? (c) The third and crucial element would involve examining the reception of such a text by audience members. Using semi-structured interviewing and/or focus groups we would draw upon Hall's encoding/decoding model to examine, which codes (and why) audiences use in reading a media text of this kind. Do readings vary and can such variation be explained in terms of class, gender, ethnicity and generation? What alternative media sources (if any) have our audience members access to? What is the nature of their underlying beliefs about out-groups such as immigrants?

**Discourse**

> "…the concepts of ideology and discourse play complementary roles in furthering our understanding of the media's role in reproduction of unequal power relationships in society. A critical discourse analysis has the potential to deepen our understanding of the media's ideological role. It can be used to examine how media texts are structured and how they *may* ultimately function at an ideological level. It can also be used to analyse the discourses employed by both media professionals and media audiences in the production and reception of media texts." Devereux (2003, 107)


Discourse like ideology is at once both problematic and full of potential as an explanatory tool in media analysis. Like its predecessor the concept has been overused and suffers from the often ambiguous way in which it is applied. There is a strong overlap the concepts of ideology and discourse. Earlier we noted that ideology refers to 'ideas that help sustain unequal relationships of power', a discourse according to Foucault is "…at once singularly authoritative and deployed in the interests of existing structures of authority and power." (Deacon et al., 1999: 147) While the concept of discourse is immensely popular with post-modernists in terms of how they undertake media analysis, the postmodern perspective has proven itself to be blinkered in terms of examining the increasingly concentrated nature of media ownership and how elite groups

continue to influence and shape media content.

Discourse analysis has however much to say about media production, media content and reception. It can give us insights into how (unequal) power relationships are understood by media professionals, how they are represented within media texts and how audiences understand these asymmetrical relationships.  With its focus on text and talk, discourse analysis can further our understanding of how language helps to perpetuate unequal relationships of power.  As Deacon *et al*  state:

> Discourse Analysis can show these processes at work in the realm of natural language by pointing to attempts to close meaning down, to fix it in relation to a given position, to make certain conventions self-evidently correct, to do creative repair work when something becomes problematic, and to make the subject positions of discourse transparently obvious without any visible alternatives. (1999: 154).

Devereux (2003) argues for a marriage between the concepts of ideology and discourse in that the latter allows for micro-level analysis of both text and talk. He says:

> "By examining media texts at this micro-level in a detailed and systematic way we can begin to appreciate how texts are structured as discourses and ask whether or not these discourses support or challenge dominant ideologies. A critical understanding of media discourses is necessary if we want to ask about the production and reception of media texts that we consider to be ideological in orientation." (2003: 108)

This is in agreement with van Dijk (1998) who argues that we need to adopt a rigorous and comprehensive model of analysis if we wish to truly understand the construction, circulation and interpretation of discourses that help perpetuate dominant ideologies.

**Conclusions:**

The post-modern mediascape presents (some) audiences with an ever-bewildering array of choices. In the midst of these tantalizing choices, the presence of hegemonic ideologies still looms large. The ownership and control of much of the growing mediascape rests in the hands

of a few powerful trans-national corporations.  The post-modern, post-colonial, post 9/11 world is a world where the interests of global capitalism reign supreme.  Yet the interests of the global capitalist class are also contested by many. Globalization has led to an intensification of local, national and ethnic identities. It has also resulted in environmental destruction and the mass movement of people. In order to feed consumer demand in the West it has increased levels of exploitation in the Third World. It is in this context that we are interested in the continued use of the concept of ideology and specifically how it is deployed in a media context.

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