



## Information for Social Change

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**Sexy Words, Iconic Phrases and slippery terms – it's all newspaper talk:  
a theoretical analysis of the language used by the newspaper industry to  
manifest and perpetuate discourse**

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**ABSTRACT** *This paper explores the range of discursive positions adopted by newspapers to perceive issues. Through the application of a theoretical analysis on the commentaries' language, this paper speculates on who profits from the underlying message that is deduced. This paper advocates the need to apply critical thought to apparatuses such as the media, because they seek to establish a particular public agenda. It is a chief aim of this paper to illuminate the notion that newspapers are ideological institutions engineered to serve specific ideological objectives. Exposing this knowledge is intended to propel an impetus that promotes the need to understand newspaper commentary in a wider context – which would provide a platform on which to challenge hegemonic truths implanted on society.*

*Richard Johnson, Stuart Hall and Michel Foucault have provided a theoretical basis for the key argument that newspapers are an important part of the production of discourse. Mainly by the application of Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony, a critique of discourse production is offered. It is argued that via the occupation of power, the means to ideological apparatuses is available to only a few in the upper echelons of society. Furthermore, the rhetoric here lies in the fact that the proprietors of news-producing institutions own the means to ensure that power is locked in a reciprocal paradigm to reproduce the status quo. The objective is to highlight the notion that any sort of challenge to the inequalities presented by the organisation of society, fundamentally requires an understanding of the mechanism that perpetuates it.*

The media are now responsible for providing groups and classes with images, information, knowledge concerning their own lives and the lives of other groups. They intervene in what appears to be the bewildering complexity of our modern lives, by classifying certain images, within certain preferred meanings and interpretations. This ceaseless ideological work of classifying permits consensus and consent to emerge out of apparent plurality.

(Docker, 1994, p61)

### **Introduction**

In Britain 67% of the population read a national newspaper (Newspaper Society, 2003, p1). This makes national newspapers a significant medium of communication that has the potential to have a far-reaching influence in society.

Newspapers serve powerful political, cultural and social functions in society. McNair (1994, p14) argues that newspapers are major sites where discourse is manifested and proliferated:

Newspapers come ahead of friends, family, politicians or other sources of information when it comes to influencing opinion.

For this reason, the position adopted by a particular newspaper becomes socially significant for its readership. According to Stevenson (1997), newspapers not only have the potential to shape public opinion by offering persuasive commentary, but also control public opinion by creating agendas. By simply reporting on an issue, newspapers make it a topical item on the public agenda. This then means that the way in which the journalist cultivates the argument, will have an affect on whether the issue is positively or negatively received.

Newspapers constitute a very powerful social institution capable of selling issues as intangible products to the readership in order to influence the public mood. Newspapers are messengers, and ultimately, the positive or negative connotation attached to the issue by the newspaper coverage may have an impact on the electoral vote.

It is significant that national newspapers in Britain are oligopolies - in the hands of the powerful few like Rupert Murdoch who himself controls more than 34% of the daily

press and more than 37% of the Sunday market (Pilger, 1999, p467). This means that, as well as attempting to normalise particular discourses, there is also a narrower range of discursive positions offered in newspapers (O'Neill, 1991). For this reason, opinions are nearly monolithic from newspaper to newspaper, and they are likely to serve the interests of the media moguls who own the largest proportion of the market share. The media is an enterprise of inequality, because media corporations have the capacity to suppress contestation and alternative views by exploiting their power to galvanise specific discourses.

Newspapers are very influential because they are an apparatus that provide a 'version of social reality' for their readers (Wetherall, 2001a, p17). Public perceptions are inevitably influenced by newspaper discourses because they offer a worldview and an experience of issues that are not tangible to the reader (*ibid*). Newspapers provide a window to a virtual reality or, in other words, newspapers bridge the gap between the actual and the virtual, the things that are not lived, but have an influence on the experience of living. Via the newspapers narrative, readers can indulge in 'perceptual judgement' to create a reality of the issue (Massumi, 2003a, p144). The meta-narrative contained in the newspaper is contextualized within the reader's actual existence and, through this connection, newspapers appear to advocate logical perceptions that are compatible with the reader's conditions of existence.

Newspapers provide readers with an interface to issues and events. By illuminating the relationship between the reader and the topic's wider implications, through the newspapers lens, readers can personalise the topic. The personalisation of text allows the reader to purchase the narrative in his/her own logical world. This is about capturing the reader's sensibilities, and locating the reader's own actual reality, which forms the reader's 'sensory perception'. By grabbing the readers 'sensory perception' (Massumi, 2003b, p[n.k]) through the construction of the narrative, the reader can engage with message in the text, and relate to the issue that he/she is affected by, but cannot tangibly and directly connect to.

The virtual experience in newspaper commentary become a substitute for something that is not lived and experienced, but perceived through the virtual by way of philosophical prehension. This envisaged reality, or 'bio-aesthetic' (Mullarkey, 2003, p2), of the intangible issue in newspapers, combined with the reader's own being and ontology, paves the way for readers to create a truth that is sensible in their own reality.

The use of language is pivotal in the way newspaper commentary is constructed. Wetherall (2001a, p17) comments:

Criticism is most effective when it looks as though it is coming from an unbiased and neutral source [that] is merely describing what is the case, or from a source [which] is otherwise positive about the person [or issue] criticised.

The message in newspaper articles work through politicised and culturally specific codes that have been 'profoundly naturalised' by the language in which it is contained (Hall, 1980, 132). The sensibility concealed in language allows the reader to feel aligned with the episteme of the journalist. The result of this comfort and security leaves the reader susceptible to connotations and deep-rooted messages encoded within the language, because he/she is led to believe by the language used, that the author is working in the same ideological code and sensibilities (Hall, 1994).

It is common for journalists to use selective language to slant article's commentary in favour of a particular disposition. The utilisation of selective language to distort argument is termed the 'technologization of discourse' by Fairclough (1992, p231). The use of language is an art, journalists can make commentary appear as though it is simply representing the issue, but really the pseudofactual language has a Janus face that is engineered to lead the reader to a *cul-de-sac* that contains a prominent message.

In factual terms the narrative represented in these instances is not incorrect, but neither is it representative of all sides of the truth. It is simply a case of skewing knowledge by providing a perspective that is given unconditional status; this is something that Socrates would describe as a 'noble lie' (Pappas, 1995, p71). The selective truth is 'noble because it resembles the truths' (*ibid*); only there are some omissions, but the truth that is evident is wholly moral and therefore honourable deception because the reader is not a total stranger to the truth.

One reason that newspapers use selective knowledge is because they are profit-making enterprises under pressure from commercial imperatives to maximise revenue. The newspaper's ideological position has to be aligned with the belief systems inherent in its popular readership in order for it to be consumable to its targeted audience. When newspapers fail to achieve this tandem, the readership is potentially unable to relate to the commentary and turn against the newspaper. Nowhere better than on Merseyside exemplifies this where the *Sun* newspaper was burned in the streets of Kirby and the 'rag', as it is affectionately now known, was boycotted after the newspaper printed some of most abhorrent lies about Scousers in the aftermath of the Hillsborough tragedy where 96 football fans died. Newspapers therefore have to maintain a balancing act of retaining their appeal to the targeted consumers, whilst at the same time negotiating the language of the commentary to embrace a particular message. Conboy, (*ibid*, p13) comments:

[T]he truly popular newspaper has always been based on a flexible and responsive relationship with its readership expressed in its mode of address and its rhetoric, combined with its ability to project this to a large audience.

As well as capturing the political zeitgeist of the targeted audience, journalists are also under pressure to convey messages that promote the ideological stance of the newspaper's proprietorship (Timms, 1986). Williams and Miller (1998, p162) distinguish this point about proprietorial influence by exemplifying the *Mirror* newspaper owner

Robert Maxwell's interest in the issue of AIDS: 'it meant doing more stories about AIDS and what it was and more stories about the National AIDS Trust and things like that'.

The journalist's job of considering the commercial implications of a story, and the duty of staying in line with the supremo's opinions is the equivalent to dancing on the head of a pin. It entails a slippery compromise, and on occasions the negotiation between the two aspects has resulted in tensions between the readers and the editorial, which have posed an ultimatum in 'the conflicting demands of propaganda and profit' (Curran, 2002, p199).

Journalists are the public face of the giant media empires whose proprietors enjoy relative opacity. Journalists are the puppets of the media moguls – the lobby fodder for their emperors, who utilise newspapers as a medium to communicate their ideology. This is the purest form of subterfuge, which means that newspaper journalists work on a three-edged spear wherein: they are under pressure from commercial imperatives, the media proprietor, and personal aspirations and ideological beliefs (Curran, 2002).

The newspaper media and politics often share a complicated relationship. This is reflected in Rupert Murdoch's decision to allow his giant media group *News Corporation*, which includes the enormously influential *Sun* newspaper, to back Tony Blair's New Labour in the 1997 general elections. This was a perplexing u-turn by Murdoch since his political aspirations are well known to be anchored with the Conservative Party (Williams and Miller, 1998).

It was only after New Labour's landslide victory in 1997, it emerged that Tony Blair and media mogul Rupert Murdoch had reached an agreement to serve each other interests (Curran, 2002). In repayment for supporting Blair's election campaign, Murdoch could expect the relaxing of media licensing regulations from New Labour. With these deregulation measures, Murdoch would be enabled to expand his media empire into television and radio. Rupert Murdoch is the king of these 'tactical partnerships' that show the way politics and the media can work interdependently to benefit a variety of political and commercial interests (Curran, 2002, p96).

Readers of newspapers are perhaps unaware that newspapers subscribe to certain agendas and have specific motives ingrained into commentary. It ought to be a concern that the social significance of newspapers is being manipulated to benefit the agenda of the newspaper, and readers may be reading newspapers at face value, divulging the authors 'preferred' message and ultimately voting with a false conscious (Hall, 1980, p134).

### **The complex paradigm of reading and writing**

Influential writer Stuart Hall (1994) believes the transmission of knowledge through language is a complex process because of the polysemous nature of language. Hall's (*ibid*) theory of encoding and decoding language focuses on the potential for readers to misread, or misunderstand the intended message because reading is an individualistic activity that does not always follow the path prescribed by the author. Hall (*ibid*, p135) articulates this point:

[T]here is no necessary correspondence between encoding and decoding, the former can attempt to “prefer” but cannot prescribe or guarantee the latter, which has its own condition of existence.

Journalists writing for newspapers will embed language with dominant connotation to lead readers to a ‘preferred meaning’ by attempting to encompass it in a common sense framework (Hall, 1980, p134). Hall (*ibid*) explains that journalists encode language with dominant:

[R]ules of competence and use, of logic-in-use – which seek[s] actively to *enforce* or *pre-fer* one semantic domain over another.

The language employed by journalists helps to promote the common sense in the discursive position. The journalist can use language to permeate ‘preferred meanings’ (Hall, 1980, p134) but the intention may not seep through to the reader. Hall (*ibid*) explains that the lack of coherence between the reader and author is an occurrence due to the reader’s autonomy in reading the article. When the reader’s system of decoding to make sense of the commentary is not compatible with the intentions of the author, the preferred meaning is missed (Hall, 1994).

Hall (1994) emphasised that encoding and decoding are independent moments, and their existence is not always interdependent. The individual moments of writing and reading can relate to one another to connect, and this is when the two moments can be separate with their own climate and existence, but still feed from one another in a common sense framework to lead to what Hall describes as the ‘preferred meaning’ (Hall, 1980, p134).

In order to understand how knowledge is transmitted from the journalist to the reader, it is useful to imagine a communication circuit encompassing individual spaces denoting how, and in what way, the author’s message is purchased (Hall, 1994).

The moments or pockets where the transaction of knowledge takes place are dimension on their own; they have localised conditions of existence disconnected from the circuit in which they reside in. It is possible to exemplify this by depicting a journalist writing from

the perspective of a property owner in a leafy Cotswold suburb in Gloucestershire, and the reader being an inner city London service sector worker. There are obvious differences in this generalisation, but the point is that both, the reader and author operate within the same society but have very different lives, and this is why within the communication circuit, each moment of encoding and decoding are distinctive from the other moments of knowledge transaction.

The communication circuit illuminates the dualisms involved in meaning making and the production of discourse. It places emphasis on the heterogeneous nature of language and localised conditions that readers and authors operate within, potentially leading to a disparity in preferred and actual realisation of the message. Hall (1994, p258) states 'language is an articulation of differences', meaning that encoding and decoding messages in texts do not work in totality.

Readers read texts differently, which means that 'decoding is not homogenous' (Hall, 1994, p257) and there is a danger of a double ordering of the narrative, because of the chameleon-like polysemous nature of language. As Hall (1980, p131) points out, this is problematic for the relationship between the intended and received meaning:

The codes of encoding and decoding may not be perfectly symmetrical. [The] degree of symmetry – that is, the degrees of 'understanding' and 'misunderstanding' in the communicative exchange – depend on the degrees of symmetry/asymmetry (relations of equivalence) established between the positions of the 'personifications', encoder-producer and decoder-receiver ... what are called the 'distortions' or 'misunderstandings' arise precisely from the *lack of equivalence* between the two sides in the communicative exchange.

It is possible to look at Pierre Bourdieu's theory of 'habitus' (Jenkins, 1992, p153) to have one explanation of Hall's idea of asymmetry in encoding and decoding texts. The cultural and social disposition of the reader makes up his/her reading environment. From this 'habitus' (*ibid*), the reader develops psychological and physical actions and reactions that shape his/her worldview, and this determines the ontology and meta-disposition that one will come from.

The localised climate from where the reader is coming influences the organisation of values, individual characteristics, and identities that affects the way in which one reads newspapers. This cultivating process means that individuals read the newspaper's commentary through an individual and personalised lens. Bourdieu advances this theory by stating:

Linguistic relations are always relations of power (*rappports de force*) and, consequently, cannot be elucidated within the compass of linguistic analysis alone. Even the simplest linguistic exchange brings into play a complex and ramifying web of historical power relations between the speaker, endowed with a specific social authority to varying degrees, as well as between the groups to which they respectively belong (Jenkins, 1992, p154).

Hall (1994) theorises the symbiotic relationship between the production and consumption of messages in newspapers. Hall (1994) attempts to press the notion that there is not, nor can there be fixed meanings to language, which in turn means that there cannot be only a single way of reading and interpreting texts. Hall (1994) explains this point by identifying three positions that readers will adopt when decoding newspapers to deduce a message from the commentary.

The instances where the reader of a newspaper decodes the message exactly as the journalist intended, are described by Hall (1994, p136) as the 'dominant-hegemonic position'. The 'dominant-hegemonic position' describes situations where the reader operates within the dominant code deployed by the journalist, and decodes the language to purchase the 'preferred meaning' (Hall, 1980, p134). To divulge the journalist's intended message, the reader's common senses correlate to those of the journalist. By operating within the dominant code, the reader has followed the path embedded in the language for a perfect communication monologue that Hall (1980, p135) describes as 'perfectly transparent communication'.

The second position in Hall's (1980, p137) theory is the 'negotiated code'. Readers from this position do not fully comprehend the message in the article, but do subscribe to the message to some extent. Readers from this perspective can relate to the 'preferred meaning' (Hall, 1980, p134), but make concessions for their culturally specific climate and conditions. The process of decoding the commentary in newspapers, and making it culturally and socially context specific, are 'determinant moments' in the way the narrative is purchased and realised (Hall, 1980, p129).

The 'negotiated' position to read articles is the most common and the most problematic position identified by Hall (1980, p137). The domineering discourse in society, and the locality that the reader is situated in may be uncompromising and therefore conflicting. This point is taken up by Fairclough (1989, p28) who states: 'the individual is able to act only in so far as there are social conventions to act within'.

The 'negotiated code' refers to instances where the reader decodes the commentary in an independent and personalised manner (Hall, 1980, p137). However, the institutionalised dominant code, or the dominant discourse of society in which this decoding takes place

overarches the reader's decoding of the text. It is a situation where the domineering discourse of society takes precedence and the negation is tilted in favour of the popular truths that society subscribes to (Docker, 1994); metaphorically, the reader is subserviently being swept by the tide of populism because of the social conventions established by society.

In the 'negotiated code' (Hall, 1980, p137), the reader is conscious of his/her own 'being' or 'habitus' (Jenkins, 1992, p153), but is paradoxically subordinating this by acting within institutional confines. The 'negotiated code' (*ibid*) is inadvertently facilitating the proliferation and amplification of a common discourse, thus, marginalizing everything that does not conform to this *status quo*. This can be described as the glocalisation of discourse – the grand narrative affecting localised ideology by creating an impulse to part of the populous, pulling the deviant discourses under the umbrella of the dominant discourse.

The final position in Hall's theory of decoding is the possibility for readers to operate within an 'oppositional code' (Hall, 1980, p138). Decoding texts from an oppositional position will deduce an opaque message. The message gleaned in texts from an 'oppositional code' will derive a message that is contradictory to the 'preferred' message (Hall, 1980, p134). The reader will not operate within the 'preferred code', and therefore inserts an alternative framework to the text, which will retotalize the message leading to a misreading of the intended meaning. Thus, adhering to a Bakhtinian perspective where society is made up of 'free people, capable of standing alongside their creator, capable of not agreeing with him [sic] and even [capable] of rebelling against him' [sic] (Docker, 1994, p170).

Although it has been a deliberate act to go to great lengths to explain that reading is a 'lonely' and individualistic activity, it is also important to realise that reading happens in a social arena that is bound by 'institutional expressions' (Hall, 1994, p270) that make it a polysemic rather than pluralistic activity. Reading cannot be, nor would it be desirable, for it to be absolutely pluralistic because the reader is reading in a society, and therefore operates within, and is governed by that society's framework.

**'Those he commands move only in command'<sup>1</sup>: Dominant discourse, cultural [re]production and the proliferation of the status quo**

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<sup>1</sup> Angus in Macbeth **Scene ii: Act V** The Country Near Dunsinane.

Hall's (1994) theory of the reader operating in an 'oppositional code' and unwittingly resisting the hegemonic message in texts, entertains the notion of hegemonic resistance advocated by Louis Althusser in his theory of the superstructure and the mode of production. Hall (1994) adopts Althusser's theory of cultural reproduction through ideological state apparatuses. It is therefore possible to categorise newspapers as a tool of the ruling class, used to retain the hegemonic organisation of society.

Hall (1994) differs from Althusser, in that he considers the media to be more influential in the process of perpetuating the *status quo* than education and the family (Docker, 1994). In either theoreticians perspective cultural reproduction is not a simple linear development; there will be pockets of antiestablishmentarianism, because individuality and independence are a part of human nature. A change to the order of society constitutes many complexities, and idealistic ideological modernisation by those in power is not a straightforward development. Cultural reproduction will not manifest, and the hegemonic order of society cannot be retained when people adopt a position that is 'counter-hegemonic' (Docker, 1994, p62). Docker (*ibid*, p 61) articulates this point:

[S]ocial formation is a set of complex practices, each with its own specificity, its own relative autonomy; neither the economic, the social, the political nor the ideological can be reduced or collapsed into each other.

The existence of individuality and autonomy means that society cannot be transformed as a totality. Changes to society's structure manifest quicker for some factions, and slower if at all for others. In this post-structural school of thought, society does not change as a whole entity, rather it takes time, and sometimes changes do not ever happen, creating marginalized counter-cultures or subcultures.

The establishment of norms manifested through discourses are conceptualised by Michel Foucault as the key element to proliferate social orders and organise society's structure. To apply Foucault's concept, newspapers are important institutional sites for the creation of meaning in society. This idea is extended by Johnson (1995) who diagrammatically illustrates this concept by disseminating the conceptual map that represents the genealogy of discourse.

Johnson's diagram offers a formula that shows how meaning is not, and cannot be singular, universal nor absolute because meaning happens in a continuous loop in the localised pockets of society. This notion can be exemplified by the word 'snow'. It is a word that signifies a white icy and fluffy substance that falls out of the sky for most of us. However, the same word is translated to twenty-two definitions in Inuit (Eskimo) language, and ice has twelve equivalents (Wayne, 2003, p165). This goes to show that linguistic relativism is a complex paradigm because a word can potentially signify very different worldviews, and therefore how the world is to be experienced.

Meaning making is an interdependent process that feeds from one moment to the next, and it does not routinely work within a fixed formula. To explain this vexed process further, it is worth thinking back to the example of the journalist writing from the perspective of a property owner in a leafy Cotswold suburb in Gloucestershire, and the reader being an inner city London service sector worker. This is an exemplar of how a production of meaning can be received very differently to the intention because of very different conditions of existence, and it entertains the Saussurean theory of linguistics where meaning is 'a socially derived convention rather than [a] natural fact' (Wayne, 2003, p157). The potential disparity between the intended and realised meaning of the commentary further exemplifies Johnson's (1995) loop of the meaning making process. The idea is that because discourses build upon each other, it occurs in a continuous loop of 'production-consumption-realisation, reproduction' (Hall, 1994, p255). Each moment in the loop feeds the next, and then that moment feeds the next and so on. Hall (1980, p129) states:

[T]he 'object' of these practices is meaning and messages in the form of signal vehicles of a specific kind organised, like any form of communication or language, through the operation of codes within the systematic chain of a discourse.

In sum, the production of meaning takes place in one specific modality, then it has to be purchased in another specific localised condition before it is realised, so the worldview of the journalist will affect his/her way of interpreting and issue and writing about it in the newspaper, then the reader will read the journalists interpretation and make sense of it in his/her own culturally specific climate, before this 'story' goes on to affect the production of the next discourse (Hall, 1980, p129). Hall (*ibid*) underlines that: 'the moments of 'encoding' and 'decoding' though only 'relatively autonomous' in relation to the communicative process as a whole, are *determinate* moments' in the production of discourse.

It is important here to heed Johnson's (1995) theory, which is resonant with Hall's (1994) encoding/decoding discussed earlier. Both theories are in agreement that discourses are produced in localised individual climates and conditions. However, if the creator of the discourse holds a powerful position, somebody like Rupert Murdoch, then the hierarchical organisation of society enables his or her influential status to overarch the less powerful in society to become a domineering discourse.

Karl Kraus illustrates the power of the media by analogising its lethality to a grenade (Timms, 1986). According to the 'powerful media theory' (Stone, 1987) Kraus's analogy is plausible. The theory suggests knowledge that is derived from newspapers is more influential than other medias, which tend to be more entertainment based in their content (*ibid*). These so-called 'entertainment' based medias according to the theory are more appealing to those in the lower strata of socio-economic status (*ibid*). This statement is substantiated by the National Readership Survey, which found that 87% of newspaper readerships were from upper class status (Tunstall, 1996, p9). Although there are

problems with Stone's class segmentation notion, it does suggest a division between level of information flow between the lower and upper stratum of the socio-economic hierarchy.

In the context of Foucault's theory of power and knowledge briefly discussed earlier, the 'powerful media theory' (Stone, 1987) effectively means that those positioned at the upper echelon of the social status ladder will become more powerful with the greater acquisition of knowledge. 'The assumption here is that as more information is carried in newspapers, those who read newspapers ... will surge ahead in knowledge' (*ibid*, p133).

Stone's (1987) theory is plausible because people who read newspapers will become more knowledgeable; conversely, there is also a danger of disempowerment through conforming to the status quo, therefore it is also essential that the readers of newspapers embrace critical thought and a degree of cynicism, because as discussed earlier, newspapers are written within the restraints of an agenda. Rabinow (1984, p6) states:

[T]he real political task in a society such as ours is to criticize [sic] the working of which appear to be both neutral and independent; to criticize them in such a manner that the political violence which has always exercised itself obscurely through them will be unmasked, so that one can fight them.

McNair (1994, p20) inserts newspapers in the 'deviancy amplification model' in which journalism is 'an active social institution, working alongside other institutions such as the legal system and judiciary to regulate and negotiate morality'. The insinuation here is that newspapers manufacture, and have a great deal of control over the construction of a public agenda, which means that newspapers can also regulate what is to be rendered inclusively 'normal' or 'deviant' and exclusive (*ibid*, p19).

The hijacking of the public agenda by newspapers means that not only can:

The media tell people what to think ..., but the media do tell audience members what to think about. Media content sets people's personal agenda of what is important' (Stone, 1987, p134).

Jasperson (1998, 205) expands up on this point by stating that the,

Media serve as the primary mechanism by which elite opinion is communicated to the public ... [the] media do not tell the audience what to think but, rather, what to think about. ... Agenda setting, then, explains why certain issues in the information environment are considered to be more important than others by the public.

The media can attach significance to an issue and problematize topics, which gain importance on the common agenda in the public domain. Giving an issue prominence, for example front page news, or by extensively covering the issue and making it appear

on the agenda frequently, puts it on a pedestal which is described by Stone (1987, p134) as ‘a process of flouridating the water’.

Mikhail Bakhtin’s philosophy of language focuses upon the way language is used to proliferate discourse (Fairclough, 2001). Bakhtin was a proponent of the idea that language could be deliberately constructed in a way to promote an ideal. Bakhtin (*ibid*) entertained the notion that every time language is used, it is an attempt to manifest, and/or retain ideology (*ibid*). This is a significant assertion in the context of this analysis. The idea that the language used in newspaper articles have an ideological value means that language is never at ‘degree zero’, and always serves an agenda (Hall, 1980, p132).

Bakhtin’s theory lays foundation to the notion that newspapers are ideological agents, designed to represent political aspirations or promote a particular school of thought. Wood and Kroger (2000, p4) echo the sentiments from this theory of language stating that:

Language is not simply a tool for description and a medium of communication (the conventional view), but a social practice, a way of doing things.

The production of discourse by newspapers means that newspapers also have the influence to normalise societal practices and beliefs, they can attach value on particular discourses, potentially having the affect of homogenisation. The process of normalising practices through discourse happens at the sites of interpretation of ‘argument, exchange, debate, consultation and speculation’ (Docker, 1994, p61). It is exactly at these moments that generate the plausibility of a particular discourse. The moments of interpretation are encoded with an ideology, and the language illuminates the rational and *truthful* nature of that discourse.

The idea that discourses are not axioms, and need language to provide support to their rationality, means that discourses are not watertight entities, rather they shift and change with modernity, which makes them harder to pinpoint and challenge. This point supports the rationale of this analysis: the idea that critical thought needs to be applied holistically, and an understanding of the context is the first step to challenge discourse and popular truths.

Following this trail of thought about dominant discourse production, the insinuation is that those who have the power to regulate discourse have the freedom to legitimise particular ideologies in society.

[W]e know quite well that we do have the right to say everything, that we cannot just speak of anything in any circumstances whatever, and that not everyone has the right to speak of anything whatever (Foucault 1970, p52).

Foucault (1970) comments on the power relations that exist in society, and who is allowed to set agendas and create discourses. It has already been mentioned that newspapers have the capacity to manifest discourses that are materialised in society

through the mass coverage that newspapers allocate. Alexander and Jacobs (1998, p26) comment on the popularisation of discourse through mass representation:

The media is critically important, not only as a forum of public information, but rather, for public influence, identity and solidarity.

The information contained in newspapers, and the influence it has, is far reaching. National newspapers as a form of mass communication affect masses of people (McQuail, 2000). This means that newspapers are responsible for the creation of certain perceptions and ideologies in society that become popular culture (*ibid*).

**Power to the [wealthy] people: Those in society who have it  
and those who do not**

The media can be central to the formation of process, Green (1994, p80) establishes this point by stating: 'surely the most remarkable feature of the modern cultural landscape is the overwhelming dominance of the mass media'. The point Green (1994) makes is about power, and essentially the distribution of it. Readers of newspapers are not on parity of power with journalists, thus, because journalists have the power to give prominence and place significance on issues they regard to be important by influencing the public agenda. This domination of the means of discourse production means that journalists, albeit constricted by the newspaper's ideological position, have a large degree of control of an apparatus that determines livelihoods, moral, principals and ethics.

It is useful to consider messages in newspapers as commodities for readers to purchase. Rather than a structured dialogue conversing about the rationale of the message in the article, the relationship between the reader and journalist is 'one sided' (McQuail, 2000, p40). The communication between the reader and journalist is a monologue and a single perspective. The journalist's message is often given a high degree of respect, and it is influential, because journalists occupy a status that is authoritative, prestigious or even expert. The potential net result here is that truths contained in newspapers often go unchallenged; the message becomes a discourse in society by infiltrating the public agenda through the mass exposure it receives in newspapers. Pilger (1999, p451) succinctly makes this point:

The infection is insidious. Even the *New York Times* will quote the *Star*. ... The *Star* may well have got the story from the *Sun* and around the Murdoch circuit it will go, and before you know it, some awful fiction becomes [the] received truth. ... This is the

Murdoch effect. ... spewing its poison across the whole journalistic landscape.

Foucault (1977, p195) comments on Bentham's Panoptical prison, and uses the idea of surveillance to illustrate the role of ideological apparatuses such as the media, which control the order of society in a big-brother type syndic mechanism. In such a framework, one can be 'seen, but he [sic] does not see; he [sic] is the object of information, never a subject in communication. ... And this invisibility is a guarantee of order' (*ibid*, p200).

Foucault (1977) in this profound statement highlights the way in which society is controlled by those in power. Although this concept is dated, it can still be contextualized in contemporary society. The ideological apparatus in this context is the newspaper, and this is regulated by the powerful media owners who are the dark actors behind the smoke screen of the editorial, but still manage the direction of the commentary. Pilger (1999, p449) comments on the power that Rupert Murdoch wields over the *Sun* newspaper's editorial:

Murdoch prides himself on his ability to choose the right people to edit his newspapers. He remains in close contact with all of them. Kelvin MacKenzie was his 'favourite editor'. ... Murdoch personally approved or approved of, much of MacKenzie's unscrupulous behaviour.

It is possible to see that Rupert Murdoch and other media owners stay behind the scenes but have an efficient arrangement to 'induce a state of consciousness of the ... [populous] ... and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power' relations Foucault (1977, p201). The efficiency of this mechanism lays in the fact that 'power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary; that this architectural apparatus should be a machine for creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it' (*ibid*).

Various accounts, notably those from Stuart Hall (Hall, 1977), Pierre Bourdieu (Jenks, 1993) and Antonio Gramsci (*ibid*), have paid scholarly attention to the notion of cultural reproduction and societal gentrification. Althusser adopted the Marxist notion that ideological apparatuses such as national newspapers are used by the bourgeois to maintain the hegemonic power structures in society in which they are the ruling class (Wayne, 2003).

In a Gramscian perspective, power is shared in cultural spaces such as the media (Docker, 1994). In these sites the wealthy capital owning class use the currency of power to bargain with those with less power. The result of these transactions is the formation of popular cultures, which become dominant discourses to serve the purpose of maintaining the circulation of the power paradigm in society.

Docker (1994, p60) explains the Gramscian critique of hegemonic power by stating that, 'the dominant classes strive to frame all competing definitions of reality, all sense of available alternatives, within their own horizon of thought'. This formation of society is described by Docker (1994, p60) as the 'liberal capitalist society'. By this, it is meant that society is not under any form of totalitarian regime, rather power is open to distribution, albeit in a limited way insofar as dominance will always remain with the ruling class because they have control over the ideological apparatuses. This point is succinctly substantiated by Bennett (1986, p19):

Such processes neither erase the cultures of subordinate groups, nor do they rob 'the people' of their 'true culture': what they do is reshuffle those cultures to an ideological and cultural terrain in which they can be disconnected from whatever radical impulses which may (but need not) have fuelled them and be connected to more conservative or, often, downright reactionary cultural and ideological tendencies.

Despite being regulated by the ruling class, Conboy (2002, p3) argues that newspapers are successful social institutions because they are inclusive of 'ordinary people'. Newspapers appear to acknowledge and sympathise with the struggles of every folk in society, it is precisely this Janus face that popularises newspapers (*ibid*). Smith (1994, p37) substantiates this point:

A hegemonic project does not dominate its political subjects to pure obedience and it does not even require their unequivocal support for its specific demands. It pursues a far more subtle goal, namely the vision of the social order itself.

Newspapers are very astute at guising and re-guising to align themselves with the changing contexts of society, to appear as though they are voicing the struggles of the voiceless. Newspapers create agendas that are tactically manufactured to reach out to those who are disenfranchised or marginalized, creating an alliance that appears to be all-inclusive and representational.

Acting as though they are subscribing to the liberation theory - providing a voice to the voiceless, newspapers can advance their ideological position, whilst appearing to be representing those who are dispossessed near the bottom of the power hierarchal structure in society (*ibid*). This is most recently exemplified by the right-wing redtop newspapers fascination with asylum seekers who come 'here' to 'sponge' and pillage from the taxpayer. In sum, the liberation theory works very well as an altruistic pretence for newspapers to infiltrate a perspective on the public landscape.

Following the same line of thought, the 'hegemonic alliance' (Apple, 2003) that newspapers create by representing the less powerful, is a method by which newspapers strategically infiltrate their ideology into the populous. Kraus takes a more radical stance and says that this proxy is a 'corruption of the conscience' (Timms, 1986, p276). It is a way that subaltern classes support the narrative in newspapers with false conscious and 'bad sense' (Apple, 2003, p49), and unwittingly subscribe to the agenda[s] making them popular culture. This is how popular culture and common practices are established and institutionalised through the popular media, it can be described as the self-serving *status quo*.

Karl Kraus substantiates the point that readers of newspapers absorb the legitimacy of the message contained in the articles:

Through the decades of practice the newspaper reporter has brought us to that degree of impoverishment of the imagination which makes it possible for us to fight a war of annihilation against ourselves. ... [A]nd his [sic] abuse of language embellishes the abuse of life (Timms, 1986, p276).

Rather than allow the reader to indulge in an objective truth, Kraus is commenting on newspapers use of rhetorical language to fashion perspectives into legitimate and absolute truths. Effectively, the reader is experiencing the world through the epistemological lens of the journalist, Kraus exemplifies this notion by stating: 'the closer the look one takes at a word, the greater the distance from which it looks back'. This 'production of the conscience', as Kraus describes it, is what conceives the manufacturing of popular beliefs through the framing of ones perspective, which in turn manifests a *status quo* (Timms, 1986, p276).

Popular culture is encompassed in the paradigm of discourse, it establishes guidelines for what ought to be the norm in society (Conboy, 2002). Conboy (2002, p8) states:

[V]iewing popular culture as a set of discourses which define and set limitations on the concept and content of a culture claiming to represent the people therefore allows us to identify the definitions of popular culture as a part of the discourse itself.

However, there are disparities between the definition of popular culture, there appears to be a lack of a tight meaning, this allows newspapers to stretch their definition of popular culture to legitimately lay claim to be representing people's popular views. This rhetorical appeal means that the notion of popular culture is in reality fiction, because

popular culture is actually established by newspaper journalists who themselves are under a degree of obligation to represent the views of their bourgeois employers.

In sum then, the idea that popular culture is representational of ordinary people is flawed, because the establishment of normative discourses is reflective of the power relations in society (Conboy, 2002). This means that popular culture is the result of enterprise instigated by the media, a process that Kraus describes as the 'corrupting influence on culture by the press as an institution' (Timms, 1986, p41).

This section has considered the views of Karl Kraus and other scholarly tenets that have written about power, and the positions of it in society. It has been acknowledged that more contemporary theories have emerged, those from Abercrombie (1994) and (Apple, 2003) for example, who have laid claim to the idea that subordinated classes are dominated because they are subscribing to the hegemonic rules of the higher classes, not because they are blinded by a notional false conscience, but because by doing this they are maximising their place in society.

There is clearly a need to explore these ideas further in relation to what has been written here, however due to the limited scope of this analysis, this is an opening for a future study to expand upon.

### **The significance of language use, and discourse analysis**

Newspapers deliberately use phrases and terms that touch the reader. By way of example the use of the word 'taxpayer' in newspapers is common because it is instantly recognised by the reader as a connectable issue because he/she is a taxpayer. To further illustrate this concept of socio-linguistics, it is worth considering the negative representations for the word 'terrorism' in the media. However, it is conveniently forgotten that one persons perception of a terrorist is another persons freedom fighter.

It is plausible to consider Volosinov's (1973, p.9) much acclaimed philosophy that 'everything ideological possesses meaning: it represents, depicts, or stands for something lying outside itself'. Volosinov's (1973) conception leads to the notion that the semiotics contained in language sponsor ideologies that are not immediately apparent on the face of the text. Volosinov (1973, p14) terms this a process of 'ideological creativity'; essentially this means that language is a virtual entity never absolutely subjective nor totally objective. Language intrinsically is value-free, but the very act of constructing and assembling sentences by selecting specific language is an act that is determined by the author's ideological position, therefore it is a value statement. This then means that the process that underpins the construction of an argument is ideological, and the use of

language is a process whereby the argument is laden with an ideological primer to insert connotations in the meaning.

Continuing on a similar logic, Brown and Dowling have devised the ‘epistemological paradox’ theory (Brown and Dowling, 1998, p8). The ‘epistemological paradox’ (*ibid*) is one of the contemporary theories that suggest all meaning is invented or produced and not discovered in a pure form. Meaning from language is perceived rather than purchased, meaning that language is a mechanism that influences a reaction within the context of a situation. This inward flexion, and ‘inter-objectivity’ as termed by Massumi (2003b, p[n.k]), illustrates Brown and Dowling’s (1998) essential point that language as a single entity does not hold any value or meaning, and meaning from language can only be unearthed by contextualising it in the users ontology. In sum, it is impossible to divulge knowledge from language itself, but language provides a framework to make things logical in the reader’s own sensibilities (Wayne, 2003).

However, this process of meaning making is problematic because the translation to embody the message in the receiver’s epistemology and common senses which safeguards a particular worldview, might change the value of the commentary and potentially transform the meaning it into something different to what was intended by the author. The ‘epistemological paradox’ is underpinned by the idea that the journalist’s epistemological outlook may be different from the reader’s. This means the very process of reception and interpretation to make sense of the language, may lead to an invention rather than the discovery of its intended meaning (Brown and Dowling, 1998, p8), thus, returning to Stuart Hall’s ‘encoding and decoding’ theory discussed earlier.

It is important here to recognise that the media is not the only apparatus that influences discourse and social practices. Discourse production is a result of ‘multicausality’ (Wayne, 2003, p138), a variety of influences rather than a single cause. Therefore, the media by itself cannot be the exclusive agent in defining social norms and perceptions.

### **Summary**

The *raison d’être* of this critique of newspapers is to empower readers of newspapers with knowledge about how newspapers contain agendas that are linked to politics and ideology. In sum, this paper illuminates the notion that newspapers are institutions that contribute to, and govern the production of discourse. The objective of this study was to expose the idea that there is not a single truth, and what is often given the status of unconditional truth in newspapers, is actually a *facade* of the hidden agenda contained in the newspaper’s commentary.

The introduction to this paper is concerned with the ways in which all media communication plays a vital role in the living of everyday life. The significant influence of the media is discussed by exemplifying the how newspapers can be powerful agents of social practice. The wider issues of the way in which newspapers work, and how

newspapers are intermeshed in a paradigm of politics, people and profitability is illuminated here.

In the examination of language, Stuart Hall's popular theory of encoding and decoding texts served as a point of departure. The intention was to dispel the false notion that language is an absolute entity; rather its malleability lays in its polysemous nature. The purpose of this section was to expose the fact that reading is to a larger extent an individual activity, and meanings are always in the eye of the beholder. Combining this notion with the thought that language does not have a universal meaning, journalists can encode connotations to arguments, which are designed to deduce preferred meanings. Thus, the argument is that the existence of truth is localised, and susceptible to the influencing *facades* of language. In addition to this, it was emphasized that although reading is an isolated and individual activity, it is affected by influences outside the text, because the moment of decoding takes place within the structures of society.

The next sections revolved around the discussion of power and the uses of it. It is considered how the processes of cultural [re]production, popular culture and the formation of discourse is inextricably related to the ownership of power. Power is contextualized within the apparatus of the media, and it is explained how it is at these ideological sites that a process of normalisation occurs, in essence regulating how one ought to live life.

This paper exposes the notion that newspapers provide a version of the issue in accordance to the agenda that they subscribe to. The upshot of this is that there is not a single truth because there is no such thing as absolute objectivity. For example, the *Independent* newspaper claims to be divorced from a subscription to political ideology is fundamentally flawed, because the very decision to pursue a particular story instead of another is a value statement, or in other words a judgement based on the morals and desires of the journalist or editor, therefore evidencing an impossibility of subject objectivity.

Following this line of logic, truth is only an account of one's worldview through their ontological being. Truth cannot be a universal reality, merely a situational piece of knowledge that has to be understood in the grand narrative that frames it. This is a fundamental feature to acknowledge and understand in order to start the momentum of a sustainable movement of counter-hegemony, and address the inequalities impinged by the order of society.

It is hoped that this paper has gone some way to show that the newspaper industry is rather more culturally, socially and politically important than Rupert Murdoch's analysis: '[a]fter all, we are in the entertainment business' (Pilger, 1999, p450).

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