

**On Discourse and Representation:
Reflections on Michel Foucault's Contribution to the Study
of the Mass Media**

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Annual Conference of the Australian Sociological Association
University of Melbourne
December 2008

Word Count: 3175 (excluding abstract and references)

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Abstract

Although it is now more than 20 years since his death, Michel Foucault continues to stand as an intellectual giant on the field of social and cultural inquiry. Like other intellectual icons of the postmodern pantheon, Foucault's extensive *oeuvre* has forced scholars within the social sciences to reflect on the assumptions that underpin their empirical endeavours, to pay acute attention to matters of epistemology and ontology. Since his passing, much has been written on Foucault's contribution to the 'human sciences', with many excellent books dedicated to exploring both his biography and the implications posed by his theories. Far from 'forgetting Foucault', as was deemed necessary by another famous postmodern icon (the late, Jean Baudrillard, 1987), scholars from a variety of disciplines continue to employ a 'Foucauldian paradigm' to different social settings. Yet, despite his far-reaching influence, Foucault's work has had little impact on the field of media related inquiry, with comparatively few sociologists seeking to apply his concepts of 'discourse' and 'knowledge/power' to this pervasive sociocultural institution. Accordingly, this paper seeks to make a modest contribution to the academy's collective, posthumous, Foucauldian-exegesis by reflecting on the relevance of these concepts for use in researching and understanding the mass media.

Keywords: Foucault, discourse, representation, structuralism, power, mass media

Introduction

Despite claiming that he did not understand ‘what was meant by the terms “postmodern or “poststructuralist”’, Michel Foucault is now widely considered to be one of the luminaries of the postmodern ‘school’ (see Hoy, 1988:37-38; Smart, 2000:452). Yet in the ontological rupture between the modern and the postmodern, the work of Foucault occupies a place of comparative stability, especially when compared with the work of other (more controversial) postmodern icons such as Jacques Derrida’s (1976) theories of ‘deconstruction’ or Jean Baudrillard’s (1983; 1996) contentions of ‘hyperreality’ (see Mirchandani, 2005). Indeed, insofar as the central principles of postmodernism undermine ‘structuralist notions’ of ‘patterned relationships’ (be they stemming from the camp of functionalism or Marxism—see Agger, 1991:116), Foucault’s ideas are said to offer both radical epistemological ‘decenterings’ of knowledge and truth (Harrison, 1992:84), while offering a *somewhat* structuralist account of the effects of discourse, knowledge, and power on society and the subject (an idea discussed in greater detail below).

Foucault’s work is, thus, neither truly structuralist or post-structuralist (at least according to the most common definitions of these terms), nor is it phenomenological, but rather seeks to transcend these approaches (see Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1983), offering what has been labelled a ‘culturalist reading of modernity’ (Harrison, 1992:84); one which is ‘historically grounded’ and supported by empirical—archival—inquiry (Hall, 1997:43). Foucault’s research was not, of course, focussed on the mass media, nor was he a sociologist. Yet his concern for discourses and discursive formations (concepts defined below) helped to link ‘culture’ to

‘representation’, and thus culture (and its hierarchies and relations of power) to the media texts which represent the world in the ‘information age’ (Castells, 2000[1996]). Due to the scope of this paper and space restrictions, what follows is not a comprehensive critical engagement with Foucault’s extensive *oeuvre*, but is rather an exegesis of his central concepts (or rather ‘techniques’) for understanding representations, and the intersections of discourse, power, and the subject, there within.

The *Oeuvre* of Michel Foucault

In general, ‘Foucauldians’ (and others) split the writings of the French iconoclast into three periods: (1) that concerned with discourse, (2) that concerned with knowledge and power, (3) and that concerned with the subject (see Hall, 1997). Yet this classification is somewhat unnecessary. Throughout his work, from what is considered his first major book, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (1967 [1961]) to his unfinished volumes on the history of sexuality (1979[1976]; 1987[1984]; 1988[1984]), Foucault maintained many important theoretical and intellectual continuities (see O’Farrell, 2005; Smart, 2002). This is not to say that his work was static, unaffected by the debates of the 1960s and the 1970s concerning the structuralist thinking embedded in large parts of anthropology, linguistics and sociology. On the contrary, as his focus shifted from the ‘archaeology’ of knowledge and discourse to the ‘genealogy’ of knowledge and power, Foucault revisited and revised his work, shifting the emphasis of some of his arguments ‘in order to reconcile them with present preoccupations and formulations’ (Smart, 2002:19).

Yet, despite Foucault's often cited protests against being labelled 'a structuralist', his early books—such as *Madness and Civilisation* (1967 [1961]), *The Order of Things* (1973[1966]), and *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972[1969])—are works of a 'type' of structuralism, provided one speaks of structuralism as:

[A] movement focused on the examination of the relations between things and their structures at every level of culture and knowledge ... rather than the ahistorical formulism often adopted by those espousing the structuralist method (O'Farrell, 2005:28-29).

Likewise, Foucault's later books—including *Discipline and Punishment* (1977[1975]) and *The History of Sexuality* (Volumes I, II, and III)—are still concerned with social structures, despite his turn away from the study of 'discursive formations' in favour of a greater focus on the subject. Notwithstanding the thematic continuities that pervade his later work, in terms of the study of representation (within the context of understanding the mass media) it is Foucault's earlier works—in particular, *The Order of Things* and *The Archaeology of Knowledge*—that are the most relevant to scholars of media-cultural; indeed, it is their discussion of discourse that bares the most relevance for understanding media content.

As the title suggest, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, explores the history and the historic roots of the 'human sciences', taking a particular interest in linguistics, biology and economics, with a closing chapter on 'history, sociology, psychoanalysis and ethnology' (O'Farrell, 2005:39). According to Clare O'Farrell (2005:40), the book caused considerable controversy upon its initial

publication, with Foucault attacking the philosophical essence of ‘humanism, Marxism, phenomenology, existentialism and scientific rationalism’. Indeed, the central argument running throughout the book is that different periods of history have constituted different systems of thought, or rather epistemological fields (what Foucault labelled ‘epistemes’), which are in turn applied as formal systems of knowledge (Foucault, 1972[1969]; 1973[1966]). Foucault was not, of course, conceptualising this movement from period to period as a type of evolutionary progress towards a ‘better’ knowledge system; in some respects, he shared the concerns held by Max Weber and the Frankfurt School for the unleashed power of rationality (Smart, 2002:33). Rather, Foucault was interested in the shifts in the configuration of knowledge, or what a society considers and values to be knowledge, from episteme to episteme.

As his research for *Madness and Civilisation* had aptly demonstrated, narratives of progress, of scientific/medical advancement, can be used to hide the detrimental consequences of new systems of thought, such as the institutionalisation/incarceration of the ‘deranged’, the ‘mad’, the ‘deviant’, and others who failed to fit the Age of Reason’s mould of the enlightened, rational individual. As Stuart Hall (1997:42) notes, Foucault was interested in issues of representation, yet in a different sense to the adherents of semiology and semiotics, who were at that time busily exploring the communicative properties of language and other signs (such as is exemplified in the early work of Roland Barthes, 1964, 1973). Indeed, more so than the meaning of representations, Foucault’s was concerned with the representation of knowledge, and the context in which such representations are given form, meaning, and, ultimately, applied (see Hall, 1997:42).

Central, of course, to Foucault's notion of epistemes and the representation of knowledge are his concepts of 'discourse', 'discursive formations' and 'discursive practices'; concepts discussed at length in his next major work *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. Written as a type of 'methodological postscript' to Foucault's earlier books (Smart, 2002:38), *The Archaeology of Knowledge* sets out to elaborate on the rules (or the regularities) that constitute 'discourse' (Harrison, 1992:86). Foucault (cited by Hall, 1997:44) defines 'discourse' as:

[A] group of statements which provide a language for talking about – a way of representing the knowledge about – a particular topic at a particular historical moment. ...Discourse is about the production of knowledge through language. But... since all social practices entail *meaning*, and meanings shape and influence what we do – our conduct – all practices have a discursive aspect.

As Stuart Hall (1997:44) points out, it is important to remember that Foucault offers a very different definition of discourse than that ordinarily used by linguists, in the sense that Foucault's definition is as much about ways of thinking and practices as it is about language. Indeed, according to Foucault, meaning and, thus, meaningful action are only made meaningful within the constitutive abstract space of *a* discourse.

It is, then, discourses which distinguish episteme from episteme, framing ways of thinking about certain topics, things and objects. When a discourse—which in a sense helps to both characterise and classify particular epistemes—is manifested and found in a number of areas, such as language, institutions, and practices, than that discourse is said by Foucault (1972[1969]) to be evident of a 'discursive formation'. It is the

study of these discursive formations—as identified in historical records, statements, and other empirical sources—which gives Foucault’s ‘archaeology’ the ability to reflect on the actions and the practices of historic actors, as well as the meanings such actors ascribe to their undertakings during particular historic periods. Although focussed on history (in order to better understand the present), Foucault’s theories clearly pose numerous implications for scholars of the mass media and, indeed, those concerned with the study of the wider social world.

Foucault and Media Inquiry

The first major implication of Foucault’s *oeuvre* stems from his argument that it is discourse that produce the meanings of objects and practices; an idea that when taken literally, and to its logical (if extreme) conclusion, makes the somewhat nihilistic proposition that nothing can exist outside discourse (see Danaher et al., 2000:30-32). This idea is perhaps part of the reason why Foucault is considered to be an intellectual icon of the ‘postmodern’, with this argument similar to some of the deliberately polemical and provocative statements made by other ‘postmodernists’, such as Derrida’s statement that ‘there is nothing “*beyond* the text”’ (cited in Smart, 2000:453), and Baudrillard’s (1996) argument that ‘the Gulf War did not take place’. Yet Foucault’s point here is perhaps less metaphysically idealist than is believed by his critics. Indeed, the constitutive power of a discourse is not dissimilar to the argument made by linguists and anthropologists regarding the power of language (or more, specifically, the power of different linguistic meanings) to define how the physical world is conceptualised and categorised, through establishing the parameters that constitute and contain all thought.

Such a position is not denying the existence of the physical world, but is rather arguing that meaning is never intrinsic, as it is people who ascribe meaning to things. This point leads to the second major implication of Foucault's argument, namely that the mass media are infused with discourse (or 'discourses'), which define the meaning of media representations. Similar to the notion of ideology employed by Marxists, the Foucauldian concept of discourse complicates the popular image of the media as a transparent window unto reality. Yet, whereas Foucault believed that the traditional Marxist notion of ideology was too reductive—in that it reduced the complicated relationship between knowledge and power to merely a matter of class interests (see Hall, 1997:48)—the concept of discourses, on the other hand, resists this reductionism by remaining open to the possibility of other social forces beyond the clash of class interests. Furthermore, whereas Marxist analyses purport to expose the lies of 'bourgeois knowledge', Foucault's notion of discourse refutes that there is an 'absolute truth' (Hall, 1997:48). Indeed, 'Marxism' is reduced to merely another discourse, 'caught up in the interplay of knowledge and power' (Hall, 1997:48).

After the publication of *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault became increasingly interested in the relationship between knowledge and power, and how this relationship can lead to the production of particular 'truths' about the human 'subject' (McHoul & Grace, 1993:57-58). Asking more than merely questions of epistemology, Foucault was concerned with the 'discursive practices' of particular epistemes; in other words, those actions taken as part of the 'real-world' application of a discourse (see for instance Foucault, 1977[1975], 1979[1976]). In essence, he agreed with the adage that 'knowledge is power' (condensing this principle to 'power/knowledge'), arguing that power is implicated in the manner in which certain

knowledge is applied (Hall, 1997:48). Accordingly, Foucault's later work explored the manner by which a discourse is applied to the social world, focussing on the institutional apparatuses and their technologies (or techniques), such as the systems of thought, the rules, the institutions, and the things, which together comprise particular 'discursive formations'.

Thus Foucault did not speak of truth as a journalist might, but rather spoke of 'regimes of truth', supported by discursive formations, that are *made true* through 'discursive practices'. As Foucault (cited in Hall, 1997:49) notes in relation to discourse and the 'production' of the human and social sciences:

Truth isn't outside power. ... Truth is a thing of this world; it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth; that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true, the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned ... the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true.

Here, Foucault is challenging the validity of the (absolute) truth claims of the 'human sciences' (those disciplines concerned with the study of humanity), which are articulated within the confines of a particular discourse and regime of truth (this argument does not, of course, stretch to the hard sciences, such as mathematics and physics—see McHoul and Grace, 1993:58). This is not to say that Foucault believed the human and social sciences to be 'pseudo-sciences' or intellectual 'fantasies'. As

Barry Smart (2002:37) notes, Foucault did not believe such disciplines constitute mere ideology, but were in fact 'positive configurations of knowledge which have had significant if at times unintended effects within modern societies'. Rather Foucault's point was that regimes of truth, such as those of the human sciences, are infused with relations of power and, thus, ways-of-seeing (like all knowledge formations) that impact on the object of inquiry, which, in this case, is the human subject.

Once again, this Foucauldian critique presents a number of implications for scholars of the mass media. For instance, although Foucault's analysis of truth regimes, discourse and the human subject focused on institutional settings such as the hospital, the asylum and the prison, his theories apply equally to other institutional and discursive contexts, such as the media organisation and the news room. Much like the human sciences and their practitioners, journalists profess to impart social truths, operating within the context of a professional code that values 'objectivity', 'balance' and the 'public interest'. Such a code is, of course, a discourse, which influences the manner in which events, objects and things are represented by the media text. Other discourses will also shape the textual form a particular 'news event' will take, with the journalist interpreting the 'truth' of a news event through a particular discursive way-of-seeing.

Thus media texts are replete with the discourses that surround and define the events being represented, and they are the material/symbolic results of a discursive practice. As such, media texts, despite the professional code of the journalist, can make only a tentative claim to truth (in the absolute sense), as truth can never be captured and represented in its pure, multi-dimensional form by the limited symbolic constraints of

discourse and the limited physical constraints of the medium. As Stuart Hall notes of Foucault's implications for understanding representation:

It is discourse, not the subject who speak it, which produces knowledge. Subjects may produce particular texts, but they are operating within the limits of the *episteme*, the *discursive formation*, the *regime of truth*, of a particular period and culture. Indeed, this is one of Foucault's most radical propositions: the 'subject' is *produced* within discourse. This subject *of* discourse cannot be outside discourse, because it must be *subjected* to discourse. It must submit to its rules and conventions, to its dispositions of power/knowledge. The subject can become the bearer of the kind of knowledge which discourse produces. It can become the object through which power is relayed. But it cannot stand outside power/knowledge as its source and author.

Accordingly, 'the journalist', like the 'the subject', is created by discourse and operates within its conceptual parameters. Yet, to be a journalist, or other news producer, is to be powerful, with the institutional apparatuses and techniques of the media intimately intertwined in the complicated embrace of power/knowledge. Indeed, more so than the human sciences, it is the discursive practices of the journalist which have the power to 'make true' particular regimes of truth, that see the journalist participating (although perhaps unwittingly) in the 'government' of modern society.

Conclusion

Despite the sympathetic tone of this exegesis, it must be noted that Foucault's arguments are not entirely without problems. For instance, when taken too literally

(see Hughes, 1993), clearly Foucault's *oeuvre* gives too much power to the concept of discourse. Indeed, Foucault's 'discourse' is—at least in the first instance—conceptually analogous to a 'black hole', with it absorbing too much of the-essence-of-everything into its gravitational pull. In terms of the tensions between structure and agency (which has divided the social sciences for over a hundred years), Foucault can be read as articulating a form of structuralism (particularly if one focuses on his pre-1968 work), with his conceptual 'ideal types' of discourse and discursive practices robbing the subject (and the journalist) of agency and consciousness. Indeed, Foucault took from structuralism the idea of 'the death of the subject', the argument 'that people are not really free to think and act, because they—and their ideas and activities—are produced by the structures (social, political, cultural) in which they live' (Danaher et al., 2000:8).

Thus, although Foucault sought to historicise his fields of inquiry and believed that the structuralist paradigm was overall too rigid and too limited in its scope, his analysis, nevertheless, had some of the same reductive/deterministic features that characterised the structuralist thinking embedded in mid-twentieth century Marxism, semiotics, and functionalism. Foucault's concept of discourse simultaneously vitiates these other structural paradigms (undermining their 'truth claims') while positioning itself as the only feasible conceptual framework. Although Foucault's theories are insightful—particularly his work on discourse and power/knowledge—their totalising, omnipotent, metaphysical position places almost too much stress on the Foucauldian paradigm to account for everything, while (concurrently) rendering notions of 'truth' problematic. In doing so, the Foucault's focus on discourses can ignore the material, economic and other structural factors involved in the distribution of

knowledge/power, while exposing his argument of discursive 'regimes of truth' 'to the charge of relativism' (Hall, 1997:51).

Yet one need not take Foucault's arguments to their conceptual extremes to make use of his insights regarding the power of language and representation. Indeed, in his later work, Foucault (1977[1975]; 1979[1976]) moved towards returning a modest level of reflexive awareness to the subject (emphasising the ability of the subject to resist a discursive formation), while remaining concerned with the structures and relations of power that 'govern' the lives of those who live in the modern world (Danaher et al., 2000:44-45). Foucault's critique, which in his later work become known as a concern for 'governmentality' (or the rationalities, mentalities, and techniques which organise the experiences of the subject), is useful for exposing the power of systems of thought to regulate and control society, those that *make true* discursive formations which might have very little actual validity. Such a concern is of relevance for scholars seeking to understand the power of the mass media, and offers a different perspective to the 'media effects' models that characterise the field of media related inquiry. Foucault's (indirect) contribution to the study of the media and culture is, then, a concern for the power of discourse (to shape the work of the journalist) and the ramifications of discursive practices (through framing the perceptions of the audience). He offers an important reminder regarding the power of language for producing particular ways of thinking and seeing: that the symbolic has *real* repercussions.

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