'BRAKING' NEWS BREAKS SPIRITS. A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE ON MEDIA DISCOURSE WHILE TAKING AN ETHICAL APPROACH

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Abstract: Nowadays, media discourse functions as a confusing source of information, as an independent creator of stories. People no longer trust what they see, they no longer trust what they hear. We deal with myths, legends, stories. Do we still deal with facts? The present paper aims at making sense out of a process (the media process) that resembles more and more, with each day that passes, the eternal fight between good and evil, a process in which we are not sure anymore whether it is 'good' that is being promoted or 'evil'. By taking a critical stand and embarking on a critical discourse analysis of the media discourse, we shall also draw upon our understanding of some ethical concepts in an attempt to come to a more thorough interpretation of the media process, its development and its future directions.

Keywords: media discourse, news, critical discourse analysis, ethical approach

Analysing newspapers, analysing news, stories, programmes shown on national and international television channels, analysing radio broadcasts of news bulletins, analysing special news editions, in a word, analysing media discourse is an endeavour which sociologists, linguists, socio-linguists, psychologists, political, social or cultural analysts, theorists or activists, philosophers, have embarked upon and have been carrying on for quite some time now. However, the topic is not in the least worn out, and this is due to its inherent characteristic of constantly renewing itself.

We consider taking a stand against what is happening in the media nowadays to be important because, in our opinion, the discourse of the media has a crucial role in triggering social changes, in creating social movements, in shaping or reshaping social practices. Paradoxically enough, the discourse of the media is triggered by social practices and, in return, triggers social changes. This type of dialectical relationship between language and social changes has first been theorised and dealt with by Norman Fairclough, in his work *Discourse and Social Change*[1]. In a later work, he returns to the subject and brings further emphasis on how news reports rely on the recontextualisation of communicative events and social practices, which are determined by the 'goals, values and priorities of communication in which they are recontextualised' (Fairclough 1995: 41). Analysing media discourse implies the analysis of the use of certain words, the analysis of certain social, cultural and political patterns that characterise a society at a certain point in time, it implies the analysis of the respective society's cultural mentality and identity, its historical context, its background of events.

What is disturbing for a certain class of viewers/listeners/readers nowadays is the impossibility of correctly deciphering a piece of information they come into contact with. This impossibility comes from the fact that the conveyor of the respective piece of

[1] Norman Fairclough, *Discourse and Social Change*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992

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information does not represent a reliable source, whether we talk about a certain newspaper, a TV channel, a radio station, a profile magazine, or other media of transmitting the information. According to whether the newspaper, the TV channel, the radio station is being controlled by a certain (leftist or rightist) political party or not, the information we receive shall be presented in such manner as to influence the reader's/viewer's/listener's opinion in respect to a certain matter or another. We may agree that manipulation has always been part of the ways and means of the mass media. Nevertheless, what we seem to be lacking more and more is the tools we need in deciphering those manipulative ways and means. We have no critical understanding of events, we lack the critical stand in respect to the 'stories' we are presented with. An inclination towards sensationalism seems to characterise a whole world and the media makes no exception.

In order to be able to come to a more thorough understanding of what is happening around us, we need to regain our abilities to counteract a possible deceit. And we can do that by redeveloping a critical thinking, a susceptible attitude, a non-gullible stance. The discussion does not set itself as a purpose to induce a feeling of total disbelief, nor does it promote extreme or conspirational theories. The goal is not to 'induce' anything; on the contrary, the article's aim is to try to promote a sort of 'freedom of thought', a freedom from the various types of constraints that are naturally part of the social landscape. The object of this paper is to merely come up with some solutions to a problem that societies are faced with, namely that of not being sure whether the choices we make are our own and if we are, indeed, free to make those choices. Even though it may be commonly agreed that we have not been free from quite some time now to make any kind of choices, it is worth, however, to try to see where the root of the problem actually resides and if there is something that can be done.

Our analysis could only have been undertaken from a CDA (Critical Discourse Analysis) perspective, should we consider that, as Richardson states in his book on *Analysing Newspapers*, CDA starts by identifying a social problem, then takes the side of those who suffer most and critically analyses 'those in power, those who are responsible and those who have the means and the opportunity to solve such problems' (van Dijk 1996: 85), and because 'in response to social inequality and the abuse of power, CDA demands 'politically involved research with an emancipatory requirement' (Tischer et al., 2000, cited in Richardson 2007: 2). In Richardson's opinion, news are in close connection to the actions and opinions of powerful social groups and, while it is evident that they have to be understood in connection to the target and intended audiences, it is wrong to consider that important issues such as 'contemporary democratic politics, social values and the continuing existence of prejudice and social inequalities' should be looked into outside the influence of journalism. They are key themes that are also the result of the 'structures, functions and power of journalism' (2007: 1)

Richardson's 'five fundamental assumptions about language', namely that: 'language is *social*', 'language use enacts *identity*', 'language use is always *active*', 'language use has *power*', and, finally, that 'language is *political*', are assumptions that we can clearly identify with when we think of how language is used in the process of transmitting the information. The statement that language is social comes to reinforce the above mentioned arguments about the dialectical relationship between language and social change, as theorised and best explained by Fairclough. That 'language use enacts identity' might seem self-evident if we think that we project a certain image of ourselves by the mere things we say and the ideas we

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identify with. By arguing that 'language is active', we argue that things are being done through language, a statement which is founded on the idea that progress is impossible without communication through language. At the same time, however, whoever holds the key to communication, holds the key of power and language proves to be the engine that produces power. Finally, that 'language is political' is probably the conclusion analysts and linguists have reached once they realised that everything that is being transmitted through language is based on a certain agenda.

Discourse is language in all of the above situations. Discourse is 'language in use'. What critical discourse analysts do is to go further than accepting this and to promote the 'aim of linking linguistic analysis to social analysis' (Woods and Kroger, 2000: 206). Responding to the idea that discourse must play a part in producing and reproducing social inequalities (as a result of accepting that language use contributes to the (re)production of social life), CDA 'seeks to have an effect on social practice and social relationships' (Tischer *et al*., 2000: 147) – of disempowerment, dominance, prejudice and/or discrimination – and that such critical analysis may take place 'at different levels of abstraction from the particular event: it may involve its more immediate situational context, the wider context of institutional practices the event is embedded within, or the yet wider frame of the society and the culture' (Fairclough, 1995b: 62). Out of the general principles of CDA established by Wodak (1996) and cited by Richardson, there are four key themes that require more profound discussion as they also apply to media (newspapers) discourse: 'the constituted and (re)creative character of discourse; power and social relations in discourse; ideology; and hegemony.' (Richardson 2007: 27) All these key themes relate to the role and influence of the media discourse. The (re)creative character of the media discourse is to be reflected in newspaper articles, TV shows, news coverages, social campaigns done by the media representatives, promoting social or cultural events, etc. Power and social relations are displayed in the media discourse whenever a certain social or political event, which is of crucial importance in the evolution of events at a certain point in the development of a nation, is made public, is presented to the people. The way in which the event is made public and presented will trigger certain social or political changes and will have an influence on the future development of events. Media discourse is characterised by a certain type of ideology, in the sense that it preserves a sense of 'how things should be done'. If we think of a type of ideological discourse, we think that it must lead to something. Media discourse always leads to something, or claims to do so, or sets itself as a goal to do so. Hence, its hegemonic feature, its struggle to remain on top of the list of communication means.

Richardson was arguing that the investigation of certain words is an important step in doing discourse analysis (Richardson 2007: 47). It is a well known fact that the media discourse is characterised by the use of certain words, that there are so-called clichés that we are already familiar with. In today's discourse of many journalists, reporters, editorialists, columnists, etc., there is however a tendency towards using terms that do not really mean anything in themselves, but are merely meant to create an atmosphere of 'breaking' news. Words like 'sensational', 'really', 'actually', 'extraordinarily', 'extremely', 'practically', 'phenomenal', 'formidable', 'stunning', 'terribly', 'incredible', 'unbelievable', 'shocking' and the list may go on, are, most of the times, used excessively, sometimes without there being the need to use them, mainly they are used to get the viewer's/listener's/reader's attention or to

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make the story sound as the story of the moment. The redundancy of such words tends to bore or even annoy at a certain moment. The problem arises when some people actually relate to these words in the sense that they come to perceive any story or event as a 'sensational', as a unique happening in *their* own life, in the sense that they seem to sometimes identify with the stories, they crave to know the 'sequel', what happens next, they cannot go on with their own daily lives unless they have the knowledge of what happens next in the life of a certain person involved in a certain 'sensational' story whose development they have watched eagerly, or in the life, for instance, of certain public figures whose lives are publicised in the media or who are part of certain reality shows. Nothing beats the 'sensational' anymore, nothing beats the 'shocking' news.

Van Dijk (1998) was talking of 'cognitive constraints', also known as frames and scripts, which may be seen as the representation of social, economic and ideological values in which the recontextualisation processes are reflected. Through recontextualisation, we understand elements of one social practice appropriated within another, often dominant, context or text for some strategic purpose (Chilton and Schäffner 2002: 17). In his article on 'Representation of Foreign Justice in the Media: The Amanda Knox Case', Michael S. Boyd argues, by making a reference to Fairclough, that recontextualisation texts are transformed in various ways through a process which is 'contingent upon the nature of the events and texts that mediated meanings move into' (Fairclough cited in Boyd 2010: 73). It is in this sense that Richardson gives the example of journalists (and editors) who 'help to legitimate the existing power structure and the existing ways of seeing and doing things' (Dunlevy 1998 in Richardson 2007: 89). He further notes that news producers play an important role in determining social practices:

> through its power to shape issue agendas and public discourse, it can reinforce beliefs; it can shape people's opinions not only of the world but also of their *place* and *role* in the world; or, if not shape your opinions on a particular matter, it can at the very least influence *what* you have opinions on; in sum, it can help shape social reality by shaping our *views* of social reality (Richardson 2007: 13)

Boyd adds, while citing Bell (1991), that another important aspect of news production is its 'layered' or 'embedded' nature, so that 'at each stage in the production of the story, earlier versions are transformed and recontextualised in ways which correspond to the concerns, priorities and goals of the current stage […]' (Fairclough 1995: 48). He then goes on to emphasise that it is not just previous versions that are recontextualised, but also the source texts upon which the stories are originally based, such as interviews, foreign news reports, court documents, etc. The level of complexity increases when the media reports are subject to translation.

At this point one wonders what the bases are for the values propagated in the media. If we consider along with Fowler (1991: 19) that news values are regulated by the 'mental categories which are present in readers' and which the media builds upon, then we agree with van Dijk's assertion that 'cognitive constraints' influence news values and are a reflection of social, economic and ideological values. At the same time, Richardson sees value judgements as operating at all phases of development during the news making process, in a process of

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what we may call on-going recontextualisation. (Richardson 2007: 86). Sometimes, the use and recontextualisation of certain terms may lead to an erroneous interpretation and retelling of the events and facts. (Boyd in CADAAD 2013: 47). The cognitive constraints also play an important role in the sense that people use their own background knowledge and presuppositions about what is right and wrong in the form of stored frames and scripts.

If we go back to CDA as a theoretical approach, we may argue that this methodology proves helpful in our endeavour precisely because it embarks upon discourse analysis with a social agenda in mind. However, Richardson argues that there is a tendency in CDA to regard discourse independently, 'as a thing that *in itself* can include or exclude, reproduce social inequalities or effect social change'. 'Discourse is a practice not just of representing the world, but of signifying the world, constituting and constructing the world in meaning.' (Fairclough 1992: 64)

The fact that questions of power are of central interest to CDA may be interpreted in two different ways: on the one hand, critical analysts interpret a piece of text or talk looking at the relations of power that are given by the *context* in which the text or talk occurs: either *local* (setting, time, participants) or *global* (as part of organizational, institutional actions) (see van Dijk, 1996); and on the other hand, the piece of text or talk is regarded as empowering language use, that is, discourse that contributes, by content, context, purpose, rhetoric, to social change. (see Fairclough, 1992) It is commonly agreed upon that power bears upon the production, consumption as well as the understanding of discourse. Admitting that CDA 'engages with, analyses and critiques social power and how this is represented and, both explicitly and implicitly, reproduces in the news', Richardson formulates the question 'what *is* social power?'. Although power is 'another incredibly slippery concept', one that has been endlessly dealt with in academic discussion about what it *is* or what it *means*, Richardson chooses to take one more perspective and expand it, that of Steven Lukes (1974) who distinguishes three *faces* of power: 'the view of the pluralist' (that Richardson calls the 'one-dimensional view'), the view of their critics (which he calls the two-dimensional view) and a third one which he will call the three-dimensional view of power. According to Richardson, the one-dimensional view 'focuses on behaviour, on outcomes and in the making of decisions on which there is observable conflict. This one-dimensional view of power is simplistic because it emphasises the importance of *conscious* initiation and explicit decision-making. It therefore takes 'no account of the fact that power may be, and often is, exercised by confining the scope of decision-making to relatively“safe” issues' (Bachrach and Baratz, 1970 cited in Richardson, 2007: 30).

The second 'face' power 'brings in the notion of the 'mobilisation of bias' into the definition of power, and critiques those who benefit from the 'rules of the game' 'are placed in a preferred position to defend and promote their vested interests' (Bachrach and Baratz, 1970 cited in Richardson, 2007: 31). This is important, in his opinion, if we want to understand how journalists and the news media 'are *used* by social groups with power' and how 'power is instrumental in making 'non-decisions'': for instance, releasing *certain* stories or foregrounding certain policy decisions over others, thus challenging the values and interests of the decision-maker. (2007: 31) As a conclusion, the 'two-dimensional view of power retains the behaviourist focus of the one-dimensional view, but expands its analysis to allow 'considerations of the ways in which decisions are prevented from being taken on potential

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issues over which there is an observable conflict of (subjective) interests' (Lukes, 1974, cited in Richardson 2007:31).

The third view of power suggests that 'power should be viewed as a more *systemic* phenomenon.', because the second 'face' of power makes it possible for groups and institutions to succeed in 'excluding potential issues from the political process', allowing individuals and groups to gain power 'from their social relations to others and their position in a hierarchical social system.' To 'logically' better explain it, he cites Lukes: the structural biases of the system are 'not sustained simply by a series of individually chosen acts, but also, most importantly, by the socially structured and culturally patterned behaviour of groups and practices of institutions'.

> A may exercise power over B by getting him to do what he does not want to do, but he also exercises power over him by influencing, shaping or determining his attitudes, beliefs, and very wants. (Lukes cited in Richardson, 2007:31)

As a conclusion, Richardson suggests that all this 'occurs *through discourse* and, specifically, in the ability of language to act ideologically.' (2007: 32, emphasis added).

It is probably fair to say that the way in which news and events are presented by the media influences not only our perception of things or our understanding of what happens in the world, it also influences the way we behave in relation to other people, our attitude and our beliefs. It may, in fact, change our lives for ever if we are subject to images and words that have a deep psychological impact. This, in our opinion, is a major responsibility, one which every journalist or reporter should be aware of whenever they cover or report on a certain piece of information or a certain event. They should also be aware of their responsibility of how they might influence people's actions through the way they present news. A very important example that falls into this category is probably the way in which the events of 9/11 were covered by the media at the time they happened and subsequently.

Žižek makes in *Welcome to the Desert of the Real!*[2] a critique of the way in which America, and other states along with it, chose to interpret the 9/11 attacks and to start the 'war on terror', of the way in which the population was manipulated, in his opinion, into thinking that no other choice other than war was a possible response to the WTC attacks and thus actions and measures were taken that were going to cost other lives and that were not always sticking to the democratic values in the name of which America and its allies claimed to fight the war. He disagrees right from the introduction of his book on the opposition 'democracy' – 'fundamentalism' which he considers to be a false choice, as the states proclaiming democracy as the only possible answer to the fundamentalists' attacks were offering, in fact, the only expected answer simply because it was desired to be like that: 'And is it not the same today with the choice 'democracy or fundamentalism'? Is it not that, within the terms of this choice, it is simply not possible to choose 'fundamentalism'? What is problematic in the way the ruling ideology imposes this choice on us is not 'fundamentalism' but, rather, *democracy itself*: as if the only alternative to 'fundamentalism' is the political system of liberal parliamentary democracy.' (Žižek, 2002: 3)

[2] Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real! Five Essays on September 11 and Related Dates*, London: Verso, 2002

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Not to mention the way the media coverage of events influenced the perception of the Muslim community not just in America, but in various parts of the world. The situation created within the Muslim communities around the world (especially in the US and the UK) was, most likely, one that could not have been avoided. What is necessary to be done in times and at moments like that is to keep close to the ethical perspective that does not allow one to generalise, that keeps one from turning into revengeful tools. In times of war, one party usually tends to go after not only the main adversary, but also after 'ones' rival partners', and what looks like "fratricidal" acts of violence might sometimes prove just as extreme as those between the main groups involved in the war. (Derrida, 2003). Consequently, it is important not to let certain currents, like that of fanaticism, take over 'to an obscurantism armed to the teeth with modern techno-science, to the violation of every juridico-political principle, to the cruel disregard for human rights and democracy, to a non-respect for life.' (Derrida in Borradori, 2003: 113)

> We must help what is called Islam and what is called "Arab" to free themselves from such violent dogmatism. We must help those who are fighting heroically in this direction *on the inside*, whether we are talking about politics in the narrow sense of the term or else about an interpretation of the Koran. When I say that we must do this for what is called Islam and what is called "Arab", I obviously mean that we must not do any less when it comes to Europe, the Americas, Africa, and Asia! (ibid: 113)

Nevertheless, Derrida thinks that everything the United States does as not to identify the enemy as the religious foreigner, the Muslim, is just a strategy and that he has his doubts about the discourse of 'tolerance', in this case:

> It is said over and over: "We are not fighting Islam; the three monotheistic religions have always taught tolerance." We know, of course, that this is largely inaccurate, but little matter, it's certainly better than the contrary. These official declarations of tolerance also obey a strategy: there are many, indeed more and more, Muslims in America and in Europe; it is thus necessary to reassure them, to gain assurance of their support, to dissociate them from 'terrorism', to divide the enemy camp. Fair enough, that's part of fighting the good fight. Though I clearly prefer shows of tolerance to shows of intolerance, I nonetheless still have certain reservations about the word 'tolerance' and he discourse it organizes. It is a discourse with religious roots; it is most often used on the side of those with power, always as a kind of condescending concession... (Derrida, 2003: 127)

The above mentioned philosophers also chose to speak, in this case, of the way the events were covered by the media and what they represented in the 'mental readings', the 'mental frames' of the population. Slavoj Žižek, in *Welcome to the Desert of the Real! Five Essays on September 11 and Related Dates* makes a keen passage from the concept of 'Virtual Reality' to the scene of the attacks and thus emphasises the 'spectacular' side of the way in which the events were presented. First, when he refers to 'virtual reality', what he has in mind is the idea of accepting a 'lesser' variant of *something* (a thing, a product, an abstract concept) for the 'original' *something*, without taking into consideration that what that particular *something* lacks is its exact essence. For instance, the coffee without caffeine, the cream

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without fat, the beer without alcohol is a list of 'products deprived of their malignant properties':

> And the list goes on: what about virtual sex as sex without sex, the Colin Powell doctrine of warfare with no casualties (on our side, of course) as warfare without warfare, the contemporary redefinition of politics as the art of expert administration, that is, as politics without politics, up to today's tolerant liberal multiculturalism as an experience of the Other deprived of its Otherness (the idealized Other who dances fascinating dances and has an ecologically sound holistic approach to reality, while practices like wife beating remain out of sight …)? Virtual Reality simply generalizes this procedure of offering a product deprived of its substance, of the hard resistant kernel of the Real – just like decaffeinated coffee smells and tastes like real coffee without being real coffee, Virtual Reality is experienced as reality without being so. What happens at the end of this process of virtualization, however, is that we begin to experience 'real reality' itself as a virtual entity. (Žižek 2002: 10-11)

Žižek's purpose behind this interesting account of 'Virtual Reality' is to make a reference to the 'framing' of the event, to the way it was all perceived by those who watched it as depicted by the media: 'For the great majority of the public, the WTC explosions were events on the TV screen, and when we watched the oft-repeated shot of frightened people running towards the camera ahead of the giant cloud of dust from the collapsing tower, was not the framing of the shot itself reminiscent of spectacular shots in catastrophe movies, a special effect which outdid all others, since – as Jeremy Bentham knew – reality is the best appearance of itself?' (2002: 11) Remember that Habermas makes a similar reference to Hollywood scenes, that Žižek undertakes only in a different manner, one that combines a sense of irony with a bitterness of the realization that the desire for the 'spectacular' sometimes goes as far as turning a tragic, bitter reality into a 'spectacle of the Real':

> And was not the attack on the World Trade Center with regard to Hollywood catastrophe movies like snuff pornography versus ordinary sado-masochistic porno movies? This is the element of truth in Karl-Heinz Stockhausen's provocative statement that the planes hitting the WTC towers was the ultimate work of art: we can perceive the collapse of the WTC towers as the climactic conclusion of twentieth-century art's 'passion for the Real' – the 'terrorist' themselves did not do it primarily to provoke real material damage, but *for the spectacular effect of it*. When, days after September 11 2001, our gaze was transfixed by the images of the plane hitting one of the WTC towers, we were all forced to experience what the 'compulsion to repeat' and *jouissance* beyond the pleasure principle are: we wanted to see it again and again; the same shots were repeated *ad nauseam*, and the uncanny satisfaction we got from it was *jouissance* at its purest. It was when we watched the two WTC towers collapsing on the TV screen, that it became possible to experience the falsity of 'reality TV shows': even if these shows are 'for real', people still act in them – they simply play themselves. The standard disclaimer in a novel ('Characters in the text are fictional, any resemblance to real-life characters is purely accidental') also holds for participants

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in reality soaps:what we see there are fictional characters, even if they play themselves for real.

Baudrillard also makes reference in *The Spirit of Terrorism* (2002) to the role and power of images and media transmissions of the events. According to him, what one always retains is the impact of images and their fascination, since they are the primal scene, and he says about 9/11 that it has resuscitated both images and events. But what the image does is to consume the event, in the sense that it 'absorbs it and offer it for consumption. Admittedly, it gives it unprecendeted impact, but impact as image-event.' So, he asks himself: 'How do things stand with the real event, then, if reality is everywhere infiltrated by images, virtuality and fiction?' (2002: 27) (see Žižek)

We are not far from the truth if we conclude that, given a situation in which the media seems to lack the kind of responsibility we were talking about, one needs to come up with something to counteract this lack. And the only thing to come up with is a more critical perception, a more critical attitude, a less gullible instinct during all this transfer process. Because we deal, indeed, with a transfer (a piece of information is being transferred from a type of source to a type of receiver) and if this transfer is corrupted from the very beginning, meaning from the moment the information leaves the source, then the damage is done and, in some situations, it can be so great that it might lead to certain inauspicious social changes and, from that point on, all might become irretrievable. One must keep an open mind, free from corruption, constraints, frames and scripts, free from prejudices, from pre-approved patterns, a mind inclined towards critical thinking, not in the bad, destructive, negative or conspirational sense, but in a very constructive one. A critical thinking that helps one get a clearer image, a clearer understanding of what we are shown. Since what we are shown is not a reality, it is a built reality, it is someone's reality, but one which might not coincide with our own or with anyone else's, for that matter.

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