

# Mediatised Politics: Political Discourses and the Media in Contemporary Danish Democracy

*A Project Outline*<sup>1,2</sup>

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We (...) look for the political in the wrong place, on the wrong floors and on the wrong pages of the newspapers. Those decision-making areas which had been protected by the political in industrial capitalism – the private sector, business, science, towns, everyday life and so on – are caught in the storms of political conflicts in reflexive modernity. (Beck 1994:18)

We have been brought up with a clear picture of what to understand by ‘the political’ in the kind of liberal democracy that has characterised Danish society for most of this century. Not that the structural role of the political sphere has been a static one for all these decades, but for most researchers and commentators it has continued to be understood in terms of the Habermasian model of the role of the public sphere in bourgeois society (Habermas 1962; Mortensen 1977).

In this notion the political sphere has been the only legitimate site of social power, as the private interests of individuals and organisations become synthesised through parliamentary negotiation and legislation into the ‘common good’, the ‘public interest’ of the whole of society.

The role of the media in the political order has been an equally well-defined one within this Habermasian framework, which sees the media (for a

large part of this century almost synonymous with the printed press) as a crucial vehicle of information and debate, a vital link between the electorate and the elected representatives. It is the media which ensure that social power is exercised in the parliamentary assemblies in accordance with the collective reason of the citizens, and that those appointed to office do not abuse it their power.

This conceptualisation of ‘politics’ and the media, suggest some sociological thinkers, is no longer adequate as we are moving into a new kind of social order variously labelled as “reflexive modernity”, “late modernity”, “post-traditional society”, etc. (Beck 1992, 1997; Beck et al. 1994; Giddens 1990, 1991; Hjarvard 1999). Under these new conditions the social practices that generate social change are no longer to be located strictly within the framework of parliamentary politics, but are increasingly shifting to the arena of subpolitics – a new domain of the political involving collective and individual agents outside the political or corporatist system – or to the field of tension between politics and subpolitics. And the media are no longer merely social institutions alongside, or subservient to, political institutions, but may themselves be becoming the main political institution, i.e. a forum where the decisive discursive processes that engender consent about the public interest occur, crystallising a public opinion or public will, merely to be affirmed by the parliamentary assembly.

The media can be said to have become the main form of publicness as more and more events are made public through the mass media rather than in face-to-face social interaction (Thompson 1995).

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'Mediated publicness' involves a radical restructuring of the boundary between public and private social life whereby the difference between the public and the private has been blurred, and a hybrid form of political life has emerged which is, at least to some extent, shaped by the discursive practices of the media (Kellner 1995, Meyrowitz 1985). The politics of everyday life is based on a "mix of mass-mediated public information (and public entertainment) and mass participation in the consumption of images, objects and ideas" (Silverstone 1994:69).

It follows from these considerations that a research project designed to explore political discourses and/in the media at this millennial moment cannot take for granted either the meaning of 'politics' or the meaning of 'the media', but has to start out by reflecting on politics and the media and their interrelationship in order to find a pertinent theoretical framework for understanding these entities at this historical point in time.

In the following we shall 1. present some of the theoretical considerations, which may help us, narrow down the more specific objectives of our research, and 2. provide an outline of the methods we intend to employ in order to understand the role of political/media discourses in the contemporary Danish democracy.

### **Where to Look for Political Discourses: Politics and Subpolitics**

Without necessarily subscribing to Ulrich Beck's theories of 'risk society' and 'reflexive modernisation' in their entirety (Beck 1992; 1994) we believe that his theoretical conceptualisation of political processes in late modern societies at the turn of the century holds great explanatory power for our attempt to understand the properties and functions of contemporary political discourse in/and the media, as it supplements and adds sociological depth to our previous work on other aspects of media discourses and audience signifying processes some of which has been explicitly concerned with 'politics' and the media (Phillips 1996, 1998, 2000; Schroder 1995).

We agree with Beck et al. (1994) that political discourses at this time in history cannot be equated with the discourses of the parliamentary system even in the broadest sense of including the institutional and individual discourses of democratically elected assemblies at the local, regional, national and supra-national levels, and their mediation by the media:

Many of the changes or policy-making decisions most influential upon our lives today do not derive from the orthodox sphere of decision-making: the formal political system. Instead they shape and help redefine the character of the orthodox political order. (Beck et al. 1994:vii)

The momentous epochal change that Beck labels 'reflexive modernisation' is one that happens 'unpolitically' as it were, not deliberated or decided by any political institution, but brought about by a kind of agency that baffles sociologists and citizens alike:

The idea that the transition from one social epoch to another could take place unintended and unpolitically, bypassing all the forums for political decisions, the lines of conflict and the partisan controversies, contradicts the democratic self-understanding of this society just as much as it does the fundamental convictions of its sociology. (Beck 1994:3)

On the one hand this process of change is caused, intangibly, on the macro-social level, by the self-confrontation of the modernisation process itself – in a kind of process reminiscent of the Marxian irreconcilable conflict between the productive forces and the productive relations of the capitalist order, between the civilisational and the destructive forces of capitalism, in Beck's words a "confrontation of the bases of modernisation with the consequences of modernisation", a structure-driven "*autonomised* modernisation process" (ibid. 6, emphasis added).

On the other hand the process of change is also driven by reflecting citizens, who are alarmed by the multiple hazards that face individuals, societies and civilisation as such in the risk society, and who are intellectually equipped, or even empowered, by the educational armament necessitated by the transition into a post-Fordist information society (Lash 1994a:119ff) to reflect on the continued adequacy of current social arrangements. As Beck puts it, "(...) risk society is by tendency also a self-critical society. (...) Experts are undercut or deposed by opposing experts. Politicians encounter the resistance of citizens' groups, and industrial management encounters morally and politically motivated organised consumer boycotts" (Beck 1994:11).

From one point of view it may seem that politics is being overtaken by subpolitics where "agents outside the political or corporatist system are allowed

to appear on the stage of social design” (ibid. 22) in a process that changes society from below. According to Beck (1997), ‘subpolitics’ represents a new domain of politics in which individuals and groups outside the formal political system engage in action on moral issues relating, for example, to ecology, the family, gender and ethnicity. Beck argues that citizen groups have taken power politically, placing such issues on the agenda in the face of the resistance of the established parties. While people have become disengaged from traditional forms of politics, they are increasingly involved in subpolitics.

It may even seem that “the political constellation of industrial society is becoming unpolitical, while what was unpolitical in industrialism is becoming political” (ibid. 18).

The reasons for the increasing impotence of the parliamentary political system are no doubt many, e.g. the fetters of traditional political institutions such as ‘left-’ or ‘right-’ organised political parties may prevent politicians from adequately tackling the complex issues in many political areas, notably the environment, while entrenched positions on questions of welfare and health policy may prevent politicians from addressing the challenge of a possible ‘third way’ forward into the future.

Although this account may appear overly harsh on parliamentarians and overly congratulatory towards the grassroots groups, Beck also stresses that the traditional framework of politics does remain in place, with no real alternative, as the only site of legitimate social decision-making. The challenge is therefore for political individuals to walk on two feet, to both play by the rules and to challenge the rules of political power:

The game of classical industrial society, the antagonisms of labour and capital, of left and right, the conflicting interests of the groups and the political parties, continues. At the same time, many demand, and actually begin, to turn the rule system inside out (...). Rule-directed and rule-altering politics overlap, mingle and interfere with one another. There are periods when one side dominates and then again periods when the other does so. (Beck 1994:36)

The last aspect of reflexive modernisation to be dealt with here concerns what we may call the individual’s point of entry into the political domain. Many observers see the contemporary society as one characterised by extreme individualisation where narrow-minded career-oriented individuals only care about themselves.

While disagreeing with this view, which usually assumes that individualisation necessarily entails *depoliticisation*, Beck believes that the current age is characterised by the *individualisation of politics*. Subpolitics is, according to Beck, a product of a process of individualisation whereby traditional social constraints on individual agency are loosened and areas of life which previously were viewed as inevitable and fixed are treated as objects of choice and responsibility.

Subpolitics can be compared here to Giddens’ concept of ‘life politics’. According to both concepts, the individual’s political motivation no longer ambitiously and altruistically wishes to change the world according to a coherent, utopian vision of the future. Rather political involvement takes its point of departure in the individual’s lifeworld: ‘Emancipative politics’ is transformed into ‘life politics’ in which political processes are based on a principle of self-actualisation and “the microcosm of personal life conduct is interconnected with the macrocosm of terribly insoluble global problems” (Beck 1994: 44ff).

In other words, in the risk society political practice is the outcome of the individual’s existential project, a survival strategy for oneself and fellow human beings alike. The stress is on individual responsibility for problems like global ecological risks. A type of political action which can be understood as an expression of life politics is consumption behaviour which includes selecting or boycotting goods on the basis of political principles (see Nava 1991).

Life politics introduces a new moral agenda based on questions about how we should live our lives under conditions in which we are forced to make many choices (Giddens 1991). The processes of self-actualisation are shaped by an interplay between the local and the global in everyday life. Life politics is based on recognition of that interplay: “Ecological problems highlight the new and accelerating interdependence of global systems and bring home to everyone the depth of the connections between personal activity and planetary problems” (Giddens 1991:221). The overall aim is the creation of morally justifiable forms of global interdependence. Beck and Giddens ascribe a central role to the media in the individualisation of politics, as outlined later.

The main lesson to be learnt from this theoretical argument for a project like ours (which is described in greater detail below) is that it would be a grave misjudgement to conceive of political discourse in contemporary Denmark as simply the discourse of

party politicians within the parliamentary political sphere, and to confine our investigation of mediated political discourse to the media's coverage of such parliamentary and party political discourses. As we indicate in the epigrammatic quotation at the beginning of this paper we should not look for the political on the "wrong pages of the newspapers"!<sup>3</sup>

The traditional political discourses clearly do deserve a – prominent – place in the analysis, but they should be supplemented with a consideration of the lay, or grassroots, political discourses that spring from motivations within a context of 'life politics' and which find expression in what Lash terms "emergent and decentralised effective mini-public spheres" (Lash 1994b:198), organised around policy areas (and issue-oriented sub-areas within them) like the environment, social health, education, etc.

Moreover, when we go on to explore the reception of the media's political discourses among citizens selected from various social groups we must first take our point of departure in what *they* categorise as the important political discourses of the media, instead of merely seeking their responses to our pre-selected examples of political discourses of the media. However, it is also necessary to look at how individuals relate to political discourses as conventionally defined.

In other words, in accordance with the discussion above of the linked importance of traditional politics and 'life politics', we shall try to do analytical justice to both, in the analysis of media discourses and audience discourses alike.

### **The Politics/Media Nexus: Discursive Implications of an Institutional Relationship**

The media are clearly centrally implicated in the sociopolitical transformations described in the preceding section. As mentioned above, both Beck and Giddens ascribe a central role to the new media in new forms of politics related to processes of individualisation. Giddens argues, for example, that, through mediated experience (1991:243), distant events and objects are now integrated into frameworks of personal experience, creating a sense of global belonging necessary for engagement in life politics. Beck (1992) claims that the awareness of global problems – including ecological risks – that the individual gains through mass communication fosters a sense of personal responsibility for solving the problems; this sense of responsibility is a prerequisite for the moral engagement at the heart of subpolitics.

Beck also recognises the central role of the media in the social construction and contestation of risks. He points out that the spread of risks increases our dependence on mediated scientific knowledge, but at the same time our faith in science has diminished and scientific rationality is increasingly being challenged by social rationality which draws its arguments from everyday life. The media represent a key field of struggle between the different forms of rationality over the source and effects of risks and their possible solutions (see Cottle 1998).

This can be translated easily into discourse analytical terms. The struggle which Beck describes between different claims – between claims deriving from social rationality and scientific rationality and between claims deriving from private everyday life and mediated experience – can be seen as a struggle between competing discourses each representing opposing representations of the world and identities for actors.

Beck's theory gives us insight into the broader social developments connected to the mediatization of culture and politics under conditions of uncertainty in risk society, but there is, we think, the need for systematic theoretical and empirical work on the constitution of 'the political' in the interplay between the discourses of politicians, media and citizens (see Cottle 1998 for a similar point).

To further our understanding of the changed structural relations between the media and politics, it is necessary to reflect theoretically on the precise manner in which the relationship between political institutions and media institutions has developed from its historical roots to the present day.

As we see it the history of 'the media' taken as one is characterised by an increasing independence of the media vis-à-vis other social institutions, including 'the political', and by an increasing complexity of the relationships between the actors inside and outside the media both as regards sources and audiences.

Building on Hjarvard's analysis of the historical development of political communication and the media in Denmark (Hjarvard 1999) we see a historical process in which the media start out – in the period of the so-called four-party press – as being completely subordinated to 'the political', in the form of political parties owning and controlling newspapers, which were used mainly to confirm the respective party congregations in the true political faith, and to some extent also as vehicles of agitation among prospective disciples. At this time, Hjarvard argues, the media were hardly a social institution in its own right, but were subordinate to

the political institution, functioning as the mouth-pieces of political interests with a class foundation.

In Denmark the rise of the media as an independent social institutions was a consequence of the parallel development of broadcasting media with a public service obligation and the increasing, commercially motivated orientation of the newspapers towards the general public and consequently – ideally – a non-partisan fair and objective representation of all legitimate political interests. As Hjarvard argues, “the particular voices were brought into the same space and were therefore forced to speak in terms of ‘common sense’ and to show a general consideration for the common interest” (Hjarvard 1999:32).

In both of these historical periods the media were defined primarily by their relationship to ‘the political’, first as a communicative entity that was embedded into the political institution, later as a social institution with an interdependency relationship to ‘the political’. Now the ties with ‘the political’ are if not severed then at least significantly relaxed, since broadcasting entered its age of deregulation in Denmark in the late 1980s.

With the dominant medium of television being brought into the marketplace, either directly in terms of commercial TV stations dependent on advertising revenue, or indirectly as the license-fee financed national television station comes under pressure from market-driven competitors<sup>4</sup>, the media attain a greater degree of independence, with ‘politics’ becoming merely one area to vie for the media’s attention. Essentially this means that the whole media scene in Denmark is now effectively market-oriented or even market-dictated. This in turn implies a clearer orientation towards the tastes and preferences of interesting, i.e. commercially attractive audience groups, both in terms of modes of address and in terms of the aspects of life covered in the content, a state of affairs that is only moderately tempered by public service considerations.

As Hjarvard argues this does not mean that the media are becoming less important for the country’s political communication. On the contrary, the increased independence of the media in a late-modern society characterised by a fundamentally changing landscape of politics (as argued in the preceding section) means that the political role of the media is greater than ever, even if it is fundamentally different from the political role of the media in previous periods. Politics can be said to have become mediated.

At a first glance serious ‘politics’ may seem to be disappearing from the media’s content as human in-

terest stories abound and the collective pastime of whole populations is claimed to be to “amuse ourselves to death” (Postman 1984) with celebrity gossip, sport spectacles and other types of tabloid journalism. We would argue, however, that politics is there, albeit under different guises, in a lot of media content today. Even a media event seemingly devoid of any serious social significance like the death of Princess Diana may on closer inspection turn out to be loaded with moral issues (the boundary between public and private in the modern media world), constitutional questions (the role of the monarchy in modern British society), not to speak of the meta-dimensional self-reflection of the media about the media.

In more traditional journalism ‘the political’ is being subsumed under the concerns of an individualised ‘life politics’: No contemporary Danish newspaper has sections called ‘domestic politics’ or ‘foreign policy’ any longer; instead there are sections called “Danmark”, “Inland” (which translates as ‘domestic affairs’), and “Udland” (translates as ‘foreign affairs’). Some articles still deal with parliamentary political processes of a traditional kind, especially in connection with major events in the calendar of parliamentary politics or in connection with political ‘deals’, but most of the political coverage in today’s newspapers is embedded into articles that deal with life-political topics like the environment, education, health, culture, media, etc. and their various sub-areas. ‘The political’ in the traditional sense has become merely one dimension of society’s negotiation of collective meanings and legitimate decisions.<sup>5</sup>

Therefore, as ‘the political’ subsides on the pages of the newspapers, loses prominence in the audio-visual presentations of the broadcast media, and is reconceptualised in the minds of citizens, the media’s mediation of politics acquires an increasing influence on society’s decision-making processes, because they become “independent negotiators of public consent to political decisions” (Hjarvard 1999:36):

This continuous – and media-based – production of consent is far more intangible and phantom-like than the kind of consent (or the lack of it) that is produced through referenda. But in spite of its intangible character this consent, manifesting itself at a given point in time as ‘public opinion’ about a given subject, exercises considerable influence on the decision process. (ibid.)

The political influence of the media ultimately rests on the shoulders of the journalists (in the broad sense of all those who have a hand in the production of politically relevant media discourses), who thus become a kind of modern augur,<sup>6</sup> centrally placed at the intersection of two communication axes: that between different actors within the political institution, and that between the political institution and the general public, or citizens.



Source: Hjarvard 1999.

It is important to note that both axes are dialogic, i.e. on the vertical axis journalists become go-betweens who both communicate the deliberations from the political system to the citizens, and channel public opinion from the citizens into the political system. The latter happens when journalists – augur-like – engage the citizenry trying to map popular sentiment among those organisations and individuals affected by political initiatives or political omissions, in order to bring crystallising views and attitudes on to the public agenda, ready for the politicians to build into their deliberations and policy initiatives.

Similarly, by bringing the variety of views in the political community on to the public agenda journalists on the horizontal axis become the mediators within the political system of an indirect dialogue between political actors across the political spectrum, as when one politician is informed by the media about the position taken by another on a policy issue.

No model expresses everything about the corner of reality which it wishes to illuminate. While this model of journalistic mediation certainly captures an important aspect of media power (the centrality of the journalist), it omits other equally relevant aspects of mass-mediated communication. Its main shortcoming has to do with the fact that it confuses the interpersonal and the mass-communicated processes of journalistic work.

First, it pretends that there is no direct interpersonal contact between political actors and citizens, which is misleading in so far as political actors are also citizens who, despite the seclusion, and sometimes collusion, of the political world, talk to other

human beings outside the political system, and are often approached in writing or in person by concerned citizens.<sup>7</sup> A triadic model of the communication between politicians, journalists and citizens would have more adequately expressed this relationship. However, such a model would not express the fact that citizens talk to *each other* about a host of life-political issues!

Secondly, the model does not capture the textual aspect of the publishing process, i.e. the fact that journalists regularly produce articles or programmes which have another kind of permanence as political discourse than do the interpersonal exchanges between actors. A circular model of Encoding – Media Text – Decoding (Hall 1973) would be able to better express the centrality of the media text in the political process, and other important dimensions would be covered if the model was made graphically to include the Source-Journalists relation of the Encoding, and the dialogic and contextual aspects of the Decoding that goes on in citizens' interpretive communities.

The main lesson to be learned from this brief outline of the changing institutional relationship between politics and the media is – tying in with the implications of the changed character of 'politics' in the preceding section – that the increased institutional centrality and discursive complexity of the media in modern society call for a holistic exploration of the political communication process. An in-depth understanding of political discourses in contemporary society requires an approach that integrates the analysis of the mass-communicated political discourses with the interpersonal discourses at both 'ends' of the circuit.

Ideally one should attach equal importance to the sending and the receiving ends of the process. If this is not possible (as it may not be in our case because of lack of resources) the main analytical effort, as we see it, should give equal emphasis to the political discourses of the media as *text*, looking both at modes of address and representations of social reality, and to the political discourses of *audiences*, both as they engage the texts of specific political media discourses and as they engage generally in defining 'the political' drawing on parliamentary politics and life politics alike.

Much as we regret having to let a consideration of the source-journalist relationship recede into the background of this study we nevertheless have to observe that the news gathering process and the workings of news institutions have been analysed extensively by political communication scholars in

the past. The relationship between political discourses of the media and their reception by audiences, on the other hand, is severely under-researched in political science as well as in media and communication research.

### Researching Mediatized Political Discourses: A Project Outline

Following from the discussion above the objective of the present research project can be described as the clarification of how 'the political' is constituted in contemporary Denmark in the interplay between the discourses of politicians, media and citizens in everyday life. A related aim is to answer the question of how the complex communicative processes of the mediatized political system may affect democratic decision-making processes, and consequently how political power is articulated in and around media discourses in Denmark at this point in time.

In the following we shall present the planned empirical design of the project and the main theoretical foci of analysis as well as our theoretical orientation within the heterogeneous academic field called 'discourse analysis'.

#### *Empirical Design*

The project will undertake two comprehensive, contextually anchored analyses of contemporary political media discourses in a holistic perspective. Each analysis includes a detailed linguistic and rhetorical analysis of the print and electronic media's representation of the specific political phenomenon and a focus-group based reception study of audience discourses elicited in connection with the media discourses. Time and resources permitting, the political discourses of journalists and their political sources may be included for the sake of obtaining a holistic perspective on the social circuit of political discourses.

The first analysis, which includes two cases, will focus on the media's discursive *representation of political events*, branching out in two different directions: The first case deals with a *politically defined event*, i.e. an event that originates purely within the traditional political system – even though this event may in recent years have undergone considerable discursive change as a consequence of its mediation by the media.

#### **Political media discourses: analytical design:**

1. The media's representation of political events
  - a. Case 1: An event defined by the political system
  - b. Case 2: An event defined by the media
2. The media's rhetorical strategies in a given policy area

Which particular event of this kind to analyse has not yet been determined, but one possibility is the Prime Minister's annual Opening Address to Parliament in which he presents government initiatives and priorities of the coming parliamentary session, usually witnessed by the monarch in person. The PM's speech and the subsequent responses to it by all political parties always receive full media coverage: The speech itself – which we see as an instance of 'elite political discourse' in spite of its increasing audience-friendliness – is broadcast directly, some quality newspapers publish the full text, and it is available on the web pages of media organisations, Parliament and the PM's party.

The speech (including its reception by other parties) also receives full editorial treatment in the various media: The PM appears on the evening news of both the main TV channels, he is interviewed on radio news, and usually he also appears later the same evening on a kind of crossfire program with critical journalists. Newspapers report on the speech, most devote an editorial article to it, and columns by political commentators. Etc.

The speech therefore enables us to analyse it interdiscursively over a number of discursive domains, including that of audience discourses in the focus groups, in order to explore its particular blend of institutional political discourses and citizens' discourses, and thereby to relate the realm of politics to the realm of everyday life. Ideally we would also hope to include an analysis of the rhetorical processes through which journalists see themselves to be tailoring their mediations of the speech to the needs of various audiences.

The second case in which we hope to illuminate properties of the representation of political events takes its point of departure in a *media-defined event* to be selected from the media agenda at the time of the investigation. This discursive event is intended to focus on the ways in which media function as an agenda-setting and ideologically framing independent political institution with the capability of alerting politicians to urgent social issues and putting

pressure on them to act in the interest of the common good.

As with the first case we will analyse the event as it is textually constructed in a number of media, as it is perceived by audiences and constructed in focus group discourses, and, resources permitting, as it is conceptualised and represented in journalists' discourses.

The second analysis will focus on *the media's rhetorical and presentational strategies* when they address different audiences in a given policy area, for instance environmental policy or consumer policy. The analysis will include a detailed linguistic-rhetorical examination of texts from print, broadcast and web media as well as a reception analysis of the audience signifying processes triggered by these texts; as before, resources permitting we will also explore the communicative intentions underlying the different presentational strategies employed by journalists.

The final selection of genres and styles for analysis depends on the availability of suitable political discourses at the time of investigation. The selection will be made from the following non-exhaustive list of formats: the homepages of political parties, quality and tabloid newspapers' coverage of the policy area, radio news programs, traditional television news programs, innovative (i.e. more conversational) television news programs, television studio debate programs, talk shows, and thematic entertainment programs on TV such as consumer-oriented game shows.

The research objective of the second analysis is to explore the communicative appeal of different strategies of address to different audiences: What is the role played by different genres and styles for the audience comprehension of social issues and for generating audience interest and involvement in the issues? How are relations of power created and maintained between different social actors – politicians, journalists, experts, citizens – through the use of different forms of presentation? The answers to these questions have clear implications for a discussion of the media's role in processes of democratic empowerment or passivisation.

As mentioned above our approach throughout combines textual discourse analysis with reception analysis of audience talk about mediatised politics. For this part of the analysis we are planning to use a *focus group design* in order to at least partially simulate the dynamic processes of verbal interaction in everyday life. We shall recruit four focus groups with a total of 30 informants selected on the basis of a value-based approach to social segmentation

called "Minerva" (Dahl 1996;1997; Schröder 1995), which is used widely in commercial communication research. We shall use this quantitative approach merely to ensure that informants are drawn from a variety of sociocultural backgrounds, while the data collection and analysis will be qualitative throughout.

### *Theoretical Foundations*

Theoretically the project builds to a great extent on the approach to discourse analysis developed by Norman Fairclough under the name of 'critical discourse analysis' (Fairclough 1992, 1995, 1998). This approach to discourse analysis is language based, social constructionist and holistic (Jørgensen & Phillips 1999). It holds that discourse is simultaneously constituted by social reality and constitutive of social reality, and the main purpose of its analytical practice is precisely to demonstrate how social reality is reproduced as well as changed by the discursive practices in social institutions and everyday life.

Critical discourse analysis thus breaks decisively with previous critical approaches to linguistic analysis, which tended to see textual practices as wholly determined by socio-economic structures and therefore as reproductive of the dominant social order. This 'structuralist' perspective, however, is not abandoned altogether, but is reconceptualised within a theory of human and social agency that tries to grasp the interconnectedness of social stability and change.

Critical discourse analysis is holistic because it insists that communicative processes can only be understood if they are conceptualised as signifying *processes* that take place under specific situational and social circumstances, in which constraining and enabling factors co-occur. The analytical process should therefore encompass both the media texts themselves with all their verbal and visual signifying structures, the institutional and everyday contexts of media production and consumption<sup>8</sup>, and the sociocultural practices at the macrosocial level (Deacon et al. 1999).

One of the challenges for this project lies in subjecting some of Fairclough's conclusions about the macrodiscursive order of late modernity to critical scrutiny on the basis of empirical work. Fairclough's achievement consists in bringing together a detailed linguistic analysis of a vast range of textual forms with the theoretical insights of recent social theory. He is therefore able to put forward more substantiated claims about the 'discur-

sive predicament' of the current age than previous analysts who lacked a foundation either in linguistic analysis or in social theory.

We are particularly interested in two of the salient features of Fairclough's discursive portrait of the modern age: *marketisation* and *conversationalisation*. Fundamentally both of these discursive phenomena originate in larger socioeconomic and sociopolitical developments over the last decades that may be summed up by the term 'commercialisation' and which – even though they are to some extent simply a product of the inherent dynamics of capitalism – hit the domain of the media even more forcefully due to the deregulatory efforts of neo-liberal governments in many western countries during the 1980s.

Crucially, in Fairclough's analysis these phenomena are not just 'ideological' or 'political' processes that are brought about by impersonal forces that impinge on human social existence. They are phenomena that are produced through human agency, in public and private institutions and in everyday life, through the web of discourses through which society lives.

'Marketisation' means that the ways of thinking that properly belong in the economic context of the market start to discursively colonise other areas of society, which used to be functioning on other, non-commercial, principles. Fairclough (1993) thus demonstrates how institutions of higher education become increasingly dominated by perhaps improper 'market' ways of conceptualising their identity and role in society.

It is a commonplace to direct the same criticism towards the political realm, where politicians and parties, in election campaigns and other contexts, increasingly define themselves as 'sellers' of 'commodities' that 'customers' want, with all that such 'promotion' and 'packaging' entails in terms of focusing on surface rather than substance (Wernick 1991, Franklin 1994). Similarly, and perhaps more seriously, politicians are subordinating themselves to a commercial logic which limits the scope for political ideas and solutions.

In this project we wish to analyse the media's political discourses and explore the extent to which the discourse order of the market has penetrated the discourse order of politics. While we do expect to find evidence of 'marketisation of politics', however, we shall be equally observant of the extent to which the opposite process, 'the politicisation of the market' may be affecting the total picture of political discourse in contemporary Denmark.

The marketisation process is in some ways related to the process towards increasing 'conversationalisation' of media discourses, because they are both caused by increasing commercialisation: Stronger commercial pressures on the (broadcast) media force them to maximise their audiences and therefore to increase 'rapport' with their audiences, i.e. to find the popular wavelength that makes the audience tune in to the particular channel (Bruun 1997). The media therefore increasingly have to 'speak the same language' as ordinary people do, and to abandon their highbrow, paternalistic modes of address. We may therefore perhaps more aptly call the process 'colloquialisation', as it has to do with the general adoption of a popular idiom, including a more dialogic, conversational format (Hjarvard 1998).

This renaming of the phenomenon may also enable us to discern more clearly that we are really dealing with an age-old process which has characterised the tabloid press for more than a century, but which has only recently found its way into broadcasting, and thus into the domain of public concern and outcry.

In this project we wish to explore the extent to which the contemporary media can be said to have become colloquialised and conversationalised. We also wish to explore how such processes affect the media/audience relationship: Until now the public – and most of the academic – debate about colloquialisation has tended to emphasise the cultural and political danger of citizens' understanding of complex social affairs becoming 'trivialised' as a result of more popular forms of address. However, as with the possibility of there being a flip side to 'marketisation', we wish to investigate whether the colloquialisation of political discourse may have an enabling or empowering effect on non-educated (and educated?) audiences who are not educationally equipped to follow abstract, formal and linguistically complex accounts of socially relevant subject matters (Livingstone & Lunt 1994; Graber 1994).

Many observers have commented on 'personalisation' as a salient consequence of both the marketisation and colloquialisation of political discourses in the media: What the politician stands for is of little interest, as long as he/she appears to be a solid, commonsensical and trustworthy person. Hjarvard (1999:43), drawing on Goffman (1992) and Meyrowitz (1985), attributes this development especially to the technological properties of modern broadcasting. It is particularly the front-staging medium of television whose visual representation of political

actors causes their physical appearance to distract viewers (sic!) from the substance of the political message.

In this project we will look into the personalisation of politics both in the media and among audiences, looking for additional factors that may motivate citizens to attach themselves to politicians rather than to policies or parties. Looking for a more social explanation of personalisation we shall explore whether allegiance to a politician may to some extent be a response to the general erosion of institutional authority in contemporary society. At a time when it is always possible to find an expert who disagrees with another expert, and when no political truth remains unquestioned for very long, it may become more important to develop a link of trust to a politician who may be trusted to exercise sound judgement when faced with recurring dilemmas than to follow a rigid ideology or party program.

It is highly probable that such allegiance to the politician-as-person must be regarded as temporary, something to be won continuously by politicians through the media's political discourses. In this respect the citizen's relation to the politician comes to resemble any other interpersonal relationship in late modern society: due to the disappearance of lasting interpersonal networks, personal relationships are permanently up for renewal. The successful politician is one who understands that citizens' support must be continuously won through a relationship of 'active trust' (Giddens 1994b). This is a discursive mechanism.

We supplement Fairclough's form of discourse analysis with a discursive psychological approach, which places rather more weight on how discourses are used as flexible resources in talk-in-interaction. Here we follow the approach of Wetherell and Potter (1992) which combines a poststructuralist, dis-

course-theoretical focus on the ways in which specific discourses constitute identities such as citizens, experts or consumers and categories such as 'the political', *and* an interactionist focus on the ways in which people's discourse is oriented towards social action in specific contexts of interaction such as political interviews in the media. This work is positioned between poststructuralist discourse theory which identifies abstract discourses circulating in society or in a specific social field, and forms of discourse analysis (heavily influenced by conversation analysis and ethnomethodology) which concentrate on how social organisation is accomplished through talk-in-interaction. At its extreme, discourse theory tends to reify discourses, viewing the individual language user as a mere epiphenomenon of discourse, while the tendency, at the other extreme, is to neglect that the specific discursive resources to which people have access delimit what it is possible for them to say. In taking a mid-position and viewing people as both products of specific discourses *and* producers of talk in specific interactional contexts, the aim is to take account *both* of the constraints on action imposed by the use of specific discursive resources *and* of people's role as agents in processes of discursive and hence political change.

As regards audience theory we are inspired by what may be called the British/Scandinavian approach to media audiences that draws on British cultural studies (Morley 1992; Corner et al. 1990; Livingstone & Lunt 1994), social-semiotic and pragmatic-linguistic forms of understanding the media/audience nexus (Jensen 1987; Schröder 1994; 1997; Poulsen 1992), and media ethnography (Drotner 1994). These traditions are brought together in a critical dialogue in Alasuutari (1999).

## Notes

1. This paper was presented to the 14<sup>th</sup> Nordic Conference of Media and Communication Research, the "Political Copmmunication" Working Group, Kungälv, Sweden, 14–17 August 1999.
2. The project presented in this paper is one of many funded by the large-scale "Power and Democracy in Denmark" research initiative commissioned and funded by the Danish Parliament in 1998. The research initiative is set up in an *organisational* framework that is completely independent of the political actors, who have left it entirely in the hands of an

- academic steering committee to define the research priorities and to award research grants. The research team of the project *Mediatized politics: political discourses and the media in contemporary Danish democracy* consists of Louise Phillips and Kim Christian Schroder, Department of Communication, Roskilde University, Denmark. The project runs for a two-year period 2000-2001 and is the only project within the initiative that has political discourses and the media as its focal area of investigation.
3. This broad understanding of the political is in line with many forms of discourse analysis. For Laclau and Mouffe (1985), for example, the political arena

revolves around the construction of the social world. The political is not confined to parliamentary politics or to the interaction between the official political system, the social system and the economy but refers more broadly to the condition whereby we always construct the social in specific ways that exclude alternative forms of social organisation.

The theory takes as its starting point the structuralist point that the social world is constituted in meaning in discourse and that, owing to the basic instability of the language, meaning is never fixed. No discourse is a closed entity; it is constantly being transformed through contact with other discourses. Different discourses – which each represent a specific way of talking about and understanding the social world – compete with each other in order to achieve hegemony, i.e. to fix language’s meanings in exactly their own terms. Hegemony can, therefore, be understood as the dominance of a particular perspective. Drawing on this approach, our study views contemporary politics as a field of conflict between discourses which put forward competing constructions of the world including the domain of the political.

4. This very compressed account leaves out a number of important details about the competitive TV scene in Denmark in the late 1990s, e.g. details to do with mixed financing of advertising revenue plus license fee (TV2) or advertising revenue plus subscription fee (TV3, TV Danmark), and politically imposed mixed public service and commercial obligations (TV2).
5. Hjarvard gives the example of a letter to subscribers from the chief editor of the major Danish national newspaper *Politiken* in which the paper’s strong points are being emphasised: “Whatever stands close to your heart you’ll find it in *Politiken* – the country’s leading cultural newspaper. We cover it all: Life and death, books, films, architecture, sex, love, rock, food, wine, fashion, parenting, children, partnership, entertainment, marketing, art, theatre, travel... and a lot more (...)”. As Hjarvard observes the only time the word ‘politics’ is mentioned is in the newspaper’s title (Hjarvard 1999:34).
6. In ancient Rome the augur was a religious official who observed and interpreted omens and signs to help guide the making of public decisions.
7. In July 1999 Danish media coverage of an alleged too restrictive policy of tourist visa for individuals from conflict-ridden areas resulted in some parliamentary politicians receiving more than sixty letters from concerned citizens, who thus provided ammunition for the ensuing political negotiations about a more permissive visa policy.
8. Critical discourse analysis as practised by Fairclough and his followers does not usually live up to the holistic ambition. Most frequently the consumption of texts by users is completely ignored (Swales and Rogers 1995; Schrøder 1998). This shortcoming

is not problematic when the object of analysis is interpersonal communication in daily life under conditions of co-presence, because here receivers of messages are also producers and vice versa. But it is invalidating for the analytical understanding of communication in a mass-mediated context like ours, where the recipients’ understanding and use of the media text cannot be inferred through textual analysis.

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