Chapter 14

Critical Electronic Discourse Analysis:
Social and Cultural Research in the Electronic Age

Bob Hodge
University of Western Sydney, Australia

ABSTRACT

This chapter investigates and endorses the integration of two existing research traditions, electronic discourse analysis (EDA) and critical discourse analysis (CDA), into a more powerful and comprehensive form of analysis of electronic discourses, Critical Electronic Discourse Analysis (CEDA). It sets this analytic project against the massive, unpredictable changes in culture and society which are associated with the electronic media revolution. It argues for innovative forms of analysis, in which 'electronic discourse analysis' acquires two over-lapping interpretations: electronically enabled analysis of discourses in all media; and all forms of analysis of electronic discourses and the social forms they express. It uses McLuhan and multi-modality theory to argue for major continuities and significant breaks in semiotic modes over long periods. It argues that powerful innovations in analysis and technology need to recognize and incorporate the two fundamental semiotic modes, digital and analogue, and not seek to replace one with the other.

INTRODUCTION

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) has become a leading tradition for analysing issues of language and society as they are expressed in and act through discourse (Wetherell, Taylor, & Yates, 2001). In some respects, this tradition sets the benchmark for the critical analysis of discourse as a social, political and cultural force. Yet most current forms of CDA do not engage closely with electronic forms and processes of discourse, Electronic Discourse Analysis (EDA). In this chapter I will argue that a strong union and dialogue between these two strands has exciting possibilities for both, as Critical Electronic Discourse Analysis (CEDA). CEDA can produce more powerful and comprehensive analyses that would illuminate both fields in their current forms. It can feed innovation

across all areas affected by electronic discourse, adding a critical dimension that is often lost in more technologically oriented forms of research.

CDA emerged in the 1970s in a context where the force and effects of specific media of communication were treated as largely irrelevant for analyses of what mattered, messages and effects of power, in the medium that mattered, verbal language, mostly in its written form. That productive but simplifying assumption is no longer plausible. Electronic media technologies using digital coding systems have exploded in the past 50 years. They have transformed the communications landscape, drastically altering the available strategies for exercising or resisting power which were the major theme for critical discourse analysis. Many have claimed there has been a communication revolution that has changed the rules of the game. It is necessary to undertake a fundamental review of what critical discourse analysis now is and what it can and should do, in and for the new agendas of the electronic age.

Conversely, as the present book illustrates, the technological dimensions of electronically mediated forms of discourse are so new and ill-understood that the task of criticism of these processes and products has tended to be deferred or relegated to a subsidiary place, and electronic discourse analysis has only recently emerged. This chapter will look at these developments, CDA and EDA, from both sides. It will look at EDA in two complementary senses: as the analysis of electronic discourse and the social forms it rests on, and as the use of electronic forms or aids to analysis, deployed on objects in old or new media or both. In both these senses, EDA generates new objects for critical analysis, while offering new resources for general critical discourse analysis.

The chapter will argue that this new scope and the new concepts that underpin it turn out to strengthen the enterprise of CDA, bringing back into it some dimensions of language and social processes which it should never have ignored. At the same time, this form of analysis, CDA plus

EDA in tandem (or CEDA, as I have called it), can together establish a general perspective on what kind of world is being created by electronic texts and practices, as the context for analysis of subtle but potent meanings and effects of electronic forms. In this way it can shift electronic discourses from a specialist and marginalized place in the spectrum of social and discursive activities to a central and more widely valued (and widely studied) position.

BACKGROUND

The claimed media 'revolution' – if there is one – has to be analysed in the forms in which it manifests itself, but many of the claims themselves are made in verbal language, and analysing them draws on the classic resources of CDA. To illustrate the practices of CDA and show their value for understanding how electronic forms are currently constructed in powerful discourses, I quote the title of a recent electronic publication, published under the auspices of the MIT Sloan School of Management: *Race Against the Machine: How the Digital Revolution Is Accelerating Innovation, Driving Productivity, and Irreversibly Transforming Employment and the Economy* (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2012).

Traditional CDA is good at taking pieces of text apart to reveal complex ideological forms and processes. The analysis of discourse about electronic discourses and practices may seem esoteric and remote from EDA practitioners' interest in the construction and analysis of the electronic discourses themselves, but I will argue that these surrounding discourses play a crucial role in legitimating and shaping electronic practices. In this case, these influential authors promote a 'digital revolution' which ought to give high value to everyone who works with electronic media. However, a critical perspective warns practitioners to be aware that this is not a blank cheque. There is always fine print, meanings to be picked up by CDA, affecting which aspects of electronic forms are central and which are not.

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