Chapter 14

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

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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...
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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