

# Research Paper

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## Critical Discourse Analysis of Political Discourse in political television shows.

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This research paper will attempt to discuss and answer questions related to the topic of political discourse in the media through the analysis of data from 2 political tv shows with divergent political views, the review of topic related journal articles as well as in class textbook quotes and references.

## **Introduction**

“Political ads tend to be about one thing: pushing people’s buttons. Get a voter in the gut, and you’ve got him at the polls” (Cottle, 2012). Advertisement is just one medium where political discourse is present. Other mediums include newspapers, radio programs, internet, monthly and weekly publications, and television.

This year due to the presidential election in November between an incumbent president and a future republican nominee, the political discourse seems to be filled with tension and anger. From liberal newspapers to more conservative ones, from shouts on radio airwaves by angry commentators to frustrated statements on television from political pundits, the truth seems lost in the mix between each sides of the media. As the race heats up so does the rethoric being used by the media and the candidates. But what you see isn’t always what you get; and what you hear isn’t always what is true. Perceptions are often transformed into realities for the greater public.

The power relationship between politicians and interviewers, 30 second political ads, comments by political pundits on television shows, and small parts of large speeches being decontextualized and recontextualized in the media are all various mechanisms of political discourse. Previous researches have detailed other diverse political discourse devices such as “the strategic use of pronouns in political interviews” (Fetzer & Bull, 2008), the “mediated visibility” (Lundell, 2010) management of politicians, the “two theories central to strategic political communication: indexing and echoing” (Coe, 2011), and “the Aristotelian persuasive strategies of logos, ethos and pathos” (Poggi, 2005) which “are always present in every persuasive discourse” (Poggi, 2005). These varied communication and linguistic mechanisms

lead to a power struggle between the distinct forms of media and the politicians over the control of their image, their public persona and their message.

Much attention is paid in previous research to those different components. One component of that struggle is the “journalistic interview” (Ekstrom, 2001) which consists of a rapport of dominance and power between the interviewer and the interviewee. It often makes “use of politicians’ answers to construct stories for TV news” (Ekstrom, 2001, 564). One important part of this mechanism is the political soundbite (whereby politicians’ answers are presented in a decontextualized and recontextualized form). It is important to be aware that “there is no guarantee that the interview material has retained its original meaning. On the contrary, interview answers are often used strategically to mean what the story requires them to mean” (Ekstrom, 2001).

Another component is image. Since the advent of television, the image of politicians has been added to the words they utter. It has been an important and crucial point for the past 60 years in the American political world. As there are ways to manage speech, whether it is decontextualized or recontextualized, there are also means in which politicians attempt to manage their image or visibility. One technique is the management of visibility, which discusses “the ways in which individuals seek to employ the means of communication at their disposal in order to manage their visibility before others” (Lundell, 2010, 220). The visual is as important as the auditory. A simple picture, a peculiar dress wear, or bad make-up, may lead to a misinterpreted situation and the loss of control of one’s public image.

Other researches have focused on the clues, words, factors, strategies to look for in rapport management such as linguistic strategies, whether speeches are direct or indirect, self

enhancing or self effacing, etc. The who says what how to whom and when he/she says it plays a unique role in the understanding of the strength, power and ideas behind some interviews, advertisements and political television shows and their influence on each of us everyday. There are consequences to the ways demands are made, statements are expressed and counter arguments are put forward in conversations.

Pronominal shifts, form and function of pronouns in context, as well as how the pronouns are used can strengthen the validity of an argument and shift responsibilities in particular contexts (Fetzer & Bull, 2008). In other words, each pronominal shift in a specific context has a clear reason and goal towards confirming an argument or avoiding a personal answer. “The dichotomy of what is said versus what is meant” (Fetzer and Bull, 2008) in any utterance by any politician in any context is yet another crucial component of the aforementioned struggle.

Previous researches explained the different techniques, strategies and ways in which to manage ones’ image, focusing mostly on the politicians image. But the goal for any politician, or political pundit, is the same as the one expressed at the beginning of this introduction: to get the voter to vote in his/her favor, or in other words to persuade him/her. “Persuasion is a process in which communicating beliefs to other people is aimed at influencing them” (Poggi, 2005). The logos, ethos and pathos strategies (“rational argumentation, the speaker’s credibility and reliability, and the appeal to emotion” (Poggi, 2005) ) are a part of that process.

This research paper aims at contributing to an awareness of how political television shows and their host participate in the framing and maintenance of a political climate through the use of different political discourse and linguistic strategies. My research paper relies on previous studies of various political discourse mechanisms, in class textbook theories as well as data

analysis from 2 political tv shows from opposing political views. However, I do not believe the results of this research paper to be applicable in a broader and larger context.

## **Method**

I will use CDA (Critical Discourse Analysis) as my method of analysis. My choice of this approach for this research paper is motivated by my interest in describing “the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context” (Van Dijk, 2008). The focus of my paper deals with the political discourse in political television shows, their implications and potential impact on a broader audience. According to Janet Holmes (2008), “CDA is explicitly concerned with investigating how language is used to construct and maintain power relationships in society; the aim is to show up connections between language and power, and between language and ideology” (p. 389).

In political television shows, nothing is said randomly; each word, each sentence, each question is uttered to have a calculated and specific goal. It is about power: power of information, power of perception, power of control of the narrative to create a particular perception of reality for their targeted audience. Context ( where and when) plays a crucial part in this method of analysis as it often dictates the reasons behind the ideologies being defended. My data will consist of 2 minutes of political discourse from 2 different political television shows on both MSNBC and Fox News. My focus will be two shows in particular from 2 opposing networks: “The Rachel Maddow Show” on MSNBC which has a more liberal leaning target audience and “Hannity” on Fox News, which has a more conservative leaning targeted audience. Each data will attempt to reflect the ideologies of each political show. The data was recorded on Tuesday March 27<sup>th</sup> 2012 at 6 and 8 pm. The context is the debate over healthcare



## The Rachel Maddow Show MSNBC (03/27/2012)

1 Rachel M: >But here's the here's the overall political context for this big high  
2 profile case right heading into this big high profile very partisan  
3 inflected court case on this big achievement of Barack Obama's first term  
4 in office Bloomberg news polled Americans last week on how Americans  
5 thought that justices would go about deciding this case (.) 8 percent of  
6 Americans said they weren't sure (.)how how justices would decide this  
7 (.) 17 percent of Americans said that justices would decide this case  
8 so:ley on its legal merits (.)and 75 percent said that they thought that  
9 justice's own politics would influence how they ruled on this case 75  
10 percent (.)in other words after Bush V Gore (.)after Citizens United (.)  
11 we don't expect much as a country anymore from this supreme court (.)  
12 we do not expect that they're just out there neutral (.) calling balls and  
13 strikes fairly making non partisan objective legal judgements (.) if you  
14 go by what people tell pollsters we think they're partisans (.) at least we  
15 think the majority of the court is a partisan body that will do anything to  
16 help politicians who are on their side and to hurt politicians who are on  
17 the other side<

### Data Analysis

The context surrounding the data is the debate at the supreme court of the United States of America concerning the healthcare reform law, also know as the Affordable Care Act. Each party has a different agenda: the republicans would like to have it repealed, the democrates would like to keep it as law. As the debate at the supreme court takes place, so does the debate in the various forms of the media, the political television talk shows being one of them. Context often dictates who, when and how the information is being presented. The framing is crucial to how information or conversations are perceived by the various audiences. Here, Hannity has two guests (Jay and Jamie) substituting for the two larger opposing views: for and against the law. The debate here takes the shape of an interview between the host (Hannity) and his two guests (Jay and Jamie). As Ekstrom (2001) notes, "interviewers have the upper hand. Their questions set the agenda and deline the domain in which interviewees can act" (p.565) and furthermore, "questions can contain implicit assumptions and statements" (p.565). Hannity's statement (L1-

L9) describing the justices reaction, behaviour and the quality of the solicitor general details the frame to which Jamie must react. In essence, it is implied that the defense from the solicitor general was poor, and even the justices agree. Hannity insists on his last point by stating the line 11 before Jamie can react. Jamie attempts to react, first by intervening with the use of *uh* and *well*, then by turning his focus on the justices which is followed by once again Hannity's reaction on line 15 and 18. Suddenly, the framing shifts to the idea of one of the guests attacking the justices being outrageous. The implication being: who are you to dare to defy the supreme court justices. Rapport management is in the balance. The result is called political equivocation: what is said versus what is meant, and the negotiation of validity in front of a large audience. From line 32 to line 34, both guests are negotiating the validity of what Jaimie has just said on line 23 to 28. Jaimie did not attack the integrity of the court, nor did he speak negatively about them. However, Jay changes the direction of what was said to make it mean what he wants the larger audience to believe. The arguing is a robust sign of negotiation of the validity of Jay's attempt and argument. A couple of other interesting techniques usually used in interviews are the turn-taking, and the neutrality of the interviewer. Once again, neither seem to be followed. Line 21-22 indicate how Hannity feels about a serious intervention by Jaimie. Hannity prepares his audience to be entertained, and in the process diminishes any strength of Jaimie's argument. If it is entertaining, thus it can't really be taken seriously.

On the Rachel Maddow show, the approach is somewhat different. It takes the shape of an introductory monologue on the topic of the day: healthcare reform at the supreme court. However, Rachel presents a survey to support her own point: the trustworthiness and objectiveness of the justices. In lines 11 and 12, the Americans she referenced previously becomes "we". She also goes on to address the audience as "you". Both pronominal shifts lead to a short social distance and



connection with them. “Because of an individual’s multiple social, discursive and interactional roles, a personal pronoun can refer to more than one identity and therefore can express multiple meanings” (Fetzer, Bull, 2008, p.275). Here Rachel uses the pronoun “we” at different levels: to include herself in the majority of Americans, according to one poll which she chose and shared, to also include part of her audience which identifies with her and finally to exclude the opposing audience from the majority. It is a very powerful “we”. “The pronoun we might refer to the dyadic set of politician and interviewer, but the set might also include the audience in the studio, the audience at home, the party the politicians represents” (Fetzer, Bull, 2008, p.275). Here the “we” pronoun could also mean, maybe implicitly, the democratic party.

## **Discussion**

Politics is a game where everyone has something to sell: an ideology, a thought, a candidate, or a perception leading to a reality, etc. And as the previous analysis of the 2 short sequences from 2 distinct political shows revealed, the help of various linguistic and visual devices such as body language, facial expressions, tone of voice, vocabulary, intonations, image, television sets, tv show guests, their title and the way they are introduced are just some of the techniques used to confirm the sale.

The topic of this research paper dealt with these factors in the context of the political discourse in the media, with a special focus on the techniques and realities of the television interview. Just like the table of content at the beginning of a book, an agenda is set at the top of a program to inform the audience about what they will see and hear. The choice of the agenda sets the tone of a show with the choice of certain topic over others. The art of rethoric, which is part of the journalistic interview, is the art of illusion. It is the art of creating what is not real with speech mechanisms which help reinforce the illusion.

Both Hannity and Rachel Maddow made use of the various previously mentioned techniques to create, maintain and emphasize a particular rapport management with their audience. Television hosts are subjected to and rely on public approval everyday. Their shows are an arena, their guests are fellow participants, and their discourse is the bread thrown at the audience. They must keep the audience entertained at all costs.

The interruption of his guest by Sean Hannity, the announcement of survey numbers put on the big screen by Rachel Maddow underlined with red and blue colors, the echoing of the republican party's message of criticising healthcare, or the pronominal shifts used by Rachel Maddow to include us with her in the conversation, are just a few ways to mix the implicitness with the explicitness of their discourse. This research paper, however, did not focus on the importance of the visual part in the analysis of the data. It is, nevertheless, important to be aware of some of those other factors, such as the visuals and decorum of the studio, influencing the delivery of political, and other, messages.

The relative short amount of data creates the necessity to analyse further the relation between political discourse and political pundits on television, its effects and consequences on a wide public, as well as its role on the mood of the general audience. Because this data only reflects one moment in time in a current divisive political world, a deeper study with a larger data on a longer period of time is essential to determine a bigger and more general trends. But there are other areas which should be explored in more detail: how today no one listens to contrary positions from theirs and, as a result, only watch what they want to hear.

Political discourse is a two way street where what is being said is as important as what is being heard. Truly listening to what the different media people, political pundits and

commentators, as well as politicians are saying is paramount to the understanding and realization of the techniques of discourse.

In conclusion, it seems that today the media is steered by ideological journalism. Often, answers from interviewees are divorced from the questions of the interviewer. Each word is carefully uttered and calculated. The interview is an asymmetrical form of conversation where information is key and its delivery, king. In short, the art of rhetoric, of which the interview is an integral part of, contains different sections of power: the power of information, the power of perception and the control of the narrative. It might be viewed as unfair, unjust and illogical to manipulate and force some unproven distorted beliefs upon others, but we, the audience, must then be unwilling to submit to the media's framing power.

But the "political interviews are looked upon as an event in which the interviewer and interviewee negotiate claims in front of a ratified audience" (Fetzer & Bull, 2008, p.272). A constant negotiation is what is being achieved as two or more people interact on any given moment in any given context. The political television shows are negotiations, good and/or bad, which take place in front of a large audience. The goal of this brief research was to draw attention to some of the linguistic and other tricks used by the various hosts so that we, the audience, may attempt to construct an autonomous position in relation to this practice that we have become an integral part of each day.

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