

Leen Van Brussel, Nico Carpentier, and Benjamin De Cleen (Eds.), **Communication and Discourse Theory: Collected Works of the Brussels Discourse Theory Group**, Bristol, UK: Intellect, 2019, 427 pp., \$40.31 (paperback), \$31.00 (ebook).

Reviewed by

Xin Zhang

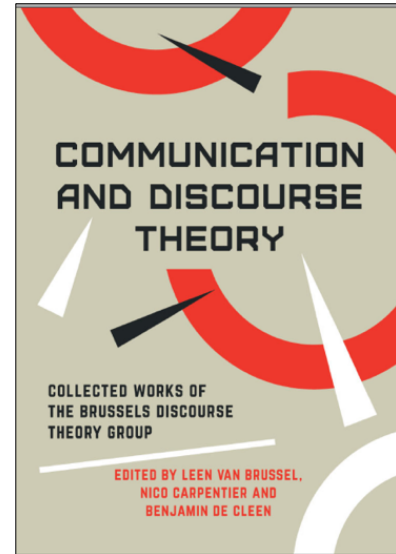
Zhejiang University of Finance and Economics, China

and

Yiming Chen

Jinan University, China

Communication and Discourse Theory: Collected Works of the Brussels Discourse Theory Group, edited by Leen Van Brussel, Nico Carpentier, and Benjamin De Cleen, offers representative case studies on current applications of discourse theory (DT) in media and communication research, essentially inspired by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's (1985) poststructuralist views. This work significantly contributes to research intersections on discourse and communication.



The editors open *Communication and Discourse Theory* by introducing three poststructuralist and post-Marxist DT ideological dimensions as essential for understanding the empirical case studies (Smith, 1999). The first is DT's ontology that the meaning of an object or social phenomenon is gained through discourse, which forms the identity structure of that object or phenomenon. Accordingly, the discursive structure is not absolute; it is unstable, incomplete, and complex, as meanings can be partially or temporarily assigned through the contingency logic of articulation practices. Political identity theory, the second dimension, refers to the discourse construction of hegemony, according to which floating signifiers, subject position, and nodal points within a political context place certain discourses in hegemonic positions under various societal conditions where identification processes are subject to multiple logics.

Logically, the first two dimensions lead to the last—the democratic theory of radical pluralism—which represents Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) ideal blueprint for achieving democracy through constant ideological competitions to occupy hegemonic discourse. This model is considered the translation recourse for developing a discourse-theoretical analysis (DTA). The introduction also describes how DT support has benefited four areas of media and communication studies: communication, rhetoric, and media strategies; discourses in media organizations; media identities, practices, and institutions; and media and agonistic democracy.

While not asserting a critical media politics and political discourse analysis position, the work in this collection closely relates to ideological struggles, democratic activities, and politics in everyday life:

Copyright © 2021 (Xin Zhang, vivianxin123@hotmail.com, and Yiming Chen, jjidayiming@163.com). Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution Non-commercial No Derivatives (by-nc-nd). Available at <http://ijoc.org>.

Each can demonstrate media influence since society is considered highly mediatized. Therein, the political philosophical nature of DT provides its strong interpretability for two orientations: media and political ideology analysis and analysis of media and discourse conflicts in everyday life.

As such, the first section is situated in political ideologies. Yiannis Mylonas (chapter 1), Kirill Filimonov and Jakob Svensson (chapter 2), and Benjamin De Cleen (chapter 3) respectively unveil the hidden ideological discourses of neoliberalism, feminism, and political struggles in Greece's mainstream newspaper *eKathimerini*, Sweden's 2014 Feminist Initiative Election Campaign, and Belgian City theaters. The second section applies DT to interactions between communication and the politics of everyday life. The analytical approach to DT still stresses the political nature of discourse, including everyday conversations, because DT scholars contend that pluralistically ideological discourse struggles also occur in everyday life. Leen Van Brussel (chapter 4) analyzes the media discursive construction of "good death" and Carpentier (chapter 5) probes how fidelity, seduction, and sexuality are discursively articulated and participated into people's daily life, defending the role of popular culture by analyzing an American reality show.

The third section addresses media production, considering media in a discourse role to conduct critical-culturalist analyses by mobilizing DT. Chapter 6 (Jo Bogaerts and Carpentier) and chapter 7 (Carpentier and Marit Trioen) provide quite insightful argumentation with a DT lens to deconstruct traditional journalism's hegemonic discourses but envision a reliable journalism in the postmodern age. In particular, Bogaerts and Carpentier uncover a disputable gap between objectivity-as-a-value and objectivity-as-a-practice that appeals to the pluralism of journalistic identity. However, while both authors envision online journalism with its hypertextuality, multimediality, and interactivity that could fit into the pursuit of authenticity, the profit-driven situation might be underrated in current online news production. Some practices even get into making gimmicks, winning hotspots to entertain the public, or to win high click rates, which all run opposite to the claim of authenticity. Thereby, we would suggest that more empirical studies on professionalization of online journalism that could be inspired and developed by Carpentier and Trioen's discursive theoretical exposition are indispensable.

In the fourth section, audiences and participation are considered. Guiquan Xu (chapter 8) outlines a historical and cultural contextualization of Chinese audience (Shouzhong) studies, starting the discourse-theoretical analysis from a political concept of "mass" to an economic one of "audience," and finally leading to an "audience-consumer-public" era in the socialist market economy's civil society. Krista Lepik and Carpentier (chapter 9) adapt the concept of articulation from DT to expand the understanding of visitors of public knowledge institutions as people, target groups, and stakeholders—roles involved in deploying complex power strategies in Estonian society. The subject position, a crucial concept in DT, helps Carpentier and Wim Hannot (chapter 10) interpret how media practices becloud the identity of ordinary people through analysis of the Flemish talk show *Jan Publiek*.

The fifth and final section presents research on media and communication practices in activism, resistance, and empowerment in diversified global discourses. Giulia Airaghi (chapter 11) examines online bartering as a counter-hegemonic resistance through rejecting the modern Western concept of money and provides an alternative consumption model. Incorporating Lacanian fantasy theory with DT, Itir Akdoğan

(chapter 12) investigates how activists in Istanbul motivate fantasies for social change and resist society's existing mechanisms to arouse an unfulfilled desire for a democratic society. The last case study (chapter 13) again analyses Vlaams Belang (see chapter 3), but focuses on discourse contests between people, popular culture, and populism, revealing how popular culture can be a weapon for resisting the political parties of extreme populism.

This book's main contribution is to demonstrate that DT is employed in communication studies not from lack of attention but for its practicability, which represents a strong, systematic interpretation of communication practices. The authors fill methodological gaps with their analyses by explaining how the interpretative mechanisms underlying DT are operationalized. This work has forged a responding relationship with Carpentier and De Cleen's (2007) breakthrough article on bringing discourse theory into the field of communication and media studies in 2007, further consolidating Lincoln Dahlberg and Sean Phelan's (2011) views that DT's poststructuralism and post-Marxism have resonated with the development of media, communication, and cultural studies since the 1970s (p. 8). With the publication of this collection, we can see Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) DT is no longer restricted to the philosophical debate on political ideas or fragmentation of its theory applications by establishing an equivalent applicability value, like Foucault's (1972) DT, which can be incorporated into broader empirically based social research, especially for analyzing complex communication practices.

The work further contributes by translating DT into a DTA methodology. Like the technique developed for critical discourse analysis, supported by Foucault's DT, for examining wider social language practices, this work introduces a technical approach to DTA by translating Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) ontological and epistemological logics into multiple applications relative to research problem properties, outlining a methodological toolkit for operationalizing discourse analyses. Rather than treating discourse as language, the DTA methodology considers all social phenomena as discourse employed to understand representational and ideological meaning structures, so it can be used to interpret language and nonlanguage social practices on a more macro-contextual and textual level. Thus, this approach has minimized the stereotypes of discourse analysis as residing in micro linguistic or language-centered analyses and being too abstract for empirical research.

These 13 case studies employ multiple layers of DT in complex communication practices. Core concepts generated from DT such as articulation, nodal points, subject position/identity, and hegemony establish a methodological toolbox for DTA that can enrich the research strategy for discourse analysis with a unique advantage toward political discourse and ideological discourse media and communication research. DT is not only relevant methodologically but also for ontological and epistemological concepts such as contingency of meaning structure, articulatory practice, overdeterminism, and a macro-understanding of discourse, which can be incorporated to develop theories on media and communication. Continued digital media and Internet advancements will accelerate social changes and their complexity; thus, determining how DT may offer vigorous interpretations requires further study. In turn, how would the outcomes of applying DT in empirical research on media and communication promote revision of Laclau and Mouffe's DT itself to accommodate a changing and digital society? This could be a future direction.

References

- Carpentier, N., & De Cleen, B. (2007). Bringing discourse theory into media studies: The applicability of discourse theoretical analysis (DTA) for the study of media practices and discourses. *Journal of Language and Politics*, 6(2), 265–293. doi:10.1075/jlp.6.2.08car
- Dahlberg, L., & Phelan, S. (2011). *Discourse theory and critical media politics*. Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Foucault, M. (1972). *The archaeology of knowledge* (A. Sheridan, Trans.). New York, NY: Pantheon.
- Laclau, E., & Mouffe, C. (1985). *Hegemony and socialist strategy: Towards a radical democratic politics*. London, UK: Verso.
- Smith, A. (1999). *Laclau and Mouffe: The radical democratic imaginary*. New York, NY: Routledge.