

Disrupting the media discourse:

An analysis of the announcement of the Brazilian media consortium during the COVID-19 pandemic

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DiscourseNet

Collaborative Working
Paper Series

no. 2/3 | July 2020

Special Issue: Discourse Studies Essays
on the Corona-Crisis

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Typeset by David Adler

Citation

Lopes, Shara L. C. & Queiroz, Pedro H. S. (2020): Disrupting the media discourse: An analysis of the announcement of the Brazilian media consortium during the COVID-19 pandemic, *DiscourseNet Collaborative Working Paper Series*, no. 2/3, Special Issue: Discourse Studies Essays on the Corona Crisis, <https://discourseanalysis.net/dncwps>.

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Edited by Jens Maefße, David Adler & Elena Psyllakou

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An analysis of the announcement of the Brazilian media consortium during the COVID-19 pandemic

Shara L. C. Lopes & Pedro H. S. Queiroz

This work analyzes excerpts from a media article in which Brazilian media companies announced their participation in the formation of a consortium motivated by the need to disclose real data on the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil. We used French discourse analysis in order to investigate how memory and preconstruct function in the underlying interdiscourse of this text. We conclude that there is a structural disruption of the discursive order, which is articulated by preconstructs such as “the role of journalism”, “the common good” and “the decision”. Furthermore, we verified that the discursive memory built around the imaginary of what the media discourse is about and how it should function is activated at the same time that it is forgotten in a speech of one of the consortium members.

Keywords: media discourse; preconstruct; discursive memory; COVID-19

1 Introduction

Notwithstanding the supposed underreporting¹ of COVID-19 cases on Brazilian territory, mainly due to the scarcity of tests applied but also due to the delay of the results, the Latin-American country also faces another challenge while dealing with the pandemic: problems related to the disclosing of data by the Ministry of Health. On June 7, 2020, the ministry, which had already made errors in the daily supply of data, took its website down for 19 hours and, when it came back, 857 death reports were missing, blaming the secretariat of the states of Roraima and Bahia for the mishandling of the data.²

After that, some Brazilian media outlets (*G1, O Globo, Extra, O Estado de S. Paulo, Folha de S. Paulo* and *UOL*) established an “unprecedented” (as it is emphasized by them in most articles about this issue) partnership, in order to “(...) work in a collaborative way to gather the necessary information in the 26 states and the Federal District”³. The information is harvested by direct contact with health departments of each federal state, what could be considered a parallel work to the federal government.

Another feature that marks the singular status of the pandemic situation in Brazil in relation to other countries is the instability in the direction of the main post responsible for conducting the combat of the disease: the Health Ministry, which has already faced two changes of leadership since the beginning of the pandemic in Brazil. On April 16, minister Luiz Henrique Mandetta was dismissed by president Jair Bolsonaro for defending the social distancing policy as the main way of combating the spread of the disease, in an opposite stance to what was expected by the president. The other physician that was nominated to the post, Nelson

- 1 Considering this underreporting, Brazil likely is the new world epicentre of the disease since May 2020, surpassing the USA. <https://saude.abril.com.br/medicina/coronavirus-estimativa-aponta-numero-de-casos-14x-maior-do-que-o-oficial/>
- 2 Available on: <https://noticias.uol.com.br/saude/ultimas-noticias/redacao/2020/06/08/citado-em-erro-de-governo-roraima-aponta-tres-mortes-a-mais-que-ministerio.htm>
- 3 Available on: <https://g1.globo.com/bemestar/coronavirus/noticia/2020/06/17/brasil-tem-45585-mortes-por-coronavirus-mostra-consorcio-de-veiculos-de-imprensa-atualizacao-das-13h.ghtml>

Teich, also could not hold on to it for very long. His fault was to go against the president on the social distancing issue as well and additionally on the indiscriminate use of chloroquine for the treatment of patients with coronavirus. Since May 16, the ministry is directed by the army general Eduardo Pazzuelo, provisionally until June 03, and since then permanently.

Thus, our proposal is to analyze the functioning of the media discourse in its specific relationship to the current institutional discourse. We employed French discourse analysis as theoretical framework and selected as corpus excerpts of the article that reports the creation of the aforementioned consortium. The core concepts we will draw on in our analysis are “discursive memory” and “preconstruct”.

2 Preconstruct and discursive memory

Discourse Analysis (DA) assumes that every discourse is crossed by interdiscursivity, that is, every discourse is necessarily related to a set of other discourses with which they share a discursive space. This primacy of interdiscourse over discourse counterpoints the illusion of the subject as source of meaning for discourse since social-historical determinations are responsible for the discursive productions.

For Pêcheux (1975, p. 146), the interdiscourse is “a complex whole in dominance”, and these relations of “contradiction-unevenness-subordination” are established between its elements: the diverse discourses. The author proposes a materialistic view of discourse according to which the evidence of the subject and the transparency of meaning are effects of the functioning of discursive formations (DFs), also ideologically defined by the preconstruct (HENRY, 1975).

The preconstruct⁴, defined as a “previous, exterior, independent construction by opposition to what is constructed in the enunciation” (COURTINE, 1984, p. 74), offers an alternative to the argumentative semantic’s notion of presupposition and may be identified by typical syntactic constructions, such as nominalization, defined article and explicative clauses. Courtine claims:

“The preconstruct thus points to the evidences by which the subject sees itself attributing the objects of his discourse: ‘what every one knows’ and simultaneously ‘what every one can see’ in a given situation. (...) If the preconstruct gives its objects to the enunciating subject under the modality of the exteriority and pre-existence, this modality

is effaced (or forgotten) in the movement of identification” (COURTINE, 1984, p. 74–75)

We then come to the discussion about the memory-forgetfulness pair developed by Courtine (1984). Discursive memory is the necessary condition for the existence of the discursive event, it is what “allows memory, repetition and refutation inside a DF (discursive formation) but also the forgetfulness of these elements” (COURTINE, 1984, p. 106). This definition is allowed by the theoretical perspective that subject-positions are always determined by the discursive formations that regulate the enunciative act and that the subject isn’t a source of meaning of the statement.

Thus, the enunciable, although returning to the already constituted memory (the “already-said”) is shown, in the statement, as originated from the speaking subject, who, in turn, “forgets” the discursive formation to which it is affiliated to in order to speak. In Courtine’s own words (1999, p. 106), “the objects we call ‘statements’, in whose formation the particular knowledge of a discursive formation is constituted, exist *in the long duration of a memory*, as long as ‘formulations’ are taken *on the short duration of an enunciation*”.

3 Memory and preconstruct in the Brazilian media discourse about the pandemic

In Brazil, speeches about pandemic are not limited to the media sphere. Other discourses such as medical, political and economic ones are also functioning, very often contradicting each other on the proper way to deal with the disease, as well as the historical one, which retakes the memory of other epidemics, such as the Spanish flu (however, these will not be addressed here).

In this more properly analytical section, we consider excerpts of the news article “Communication media outlets form a partnership to provide transparency to COVID-19 data”⁵ published by the participants of the media consortium announcing this “unprecedented” consortium of the Brazilian press as well as justifying this decision. We work analytically with the notions of preconstruct and discursive processes of memory and forgetfulness presented in the previous section.

Given that media discourse is not a “self-constituting discourse” (MAINGUENEAU, 2006)⁶, it is build on the legitimization provided by other discourses such as the scientific and the legal discourse, for example. In order to

4 See the analysis of preconstruct and articulation of statements made by Pêcheux (1975) through an analysis of explicative and determinatives relative clauses, as well as the retaking of this text by Maldidier (1993) in the integral context of Pêcheux’s work.

5 Available on: <https://g1.globo.com/politica/noticia/2020/06/08/veiculos-de-comunicacao-formam-parceria-para-dar-transparencia-a-dados-de-covid-19.ghtml>.

6 For more informations on this concept, see Self-constituting discourses (MAINGUENEAU, 1999), available on: <http://dominique.maingueneau.pagesperso-orange.fr/pdf/Self-constituting-discourses.pdf>.

accomplish its social function of informing and guaranteeing credibility, newspapers usually draw on specialists and official figures. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, media of the affected countries have used the data published on a daily basis by their federal governments in order to construct news and publish them. However, this relation between mainstream Brazilian media and the Brazilian government faced dilemmas, which intensified until the media outlets took a peculiar decision: to break the discourse order searching for legitimization by a kind of “self-legitimization”, in the last instance.

In the article that announces the foundation of the consortium, the participants remind the readers that they are performing atypically, for themselves, a function that is not theirs: the collection and recording of daily data related to the pandemic in Brazil. Let us turn to the first part of the article:

“Responding to Jair Bolsonaro’s government’s decision to restrain access to data on the COVID-19 pandemic, G1, O Globo, Extra, O Estado de S. Paulo, Folha de S. Paulo and UOL media vehicles decided to form a partnership and work collaboratively to seek the necessary information in the 26 states and the Federal District.

In an *unprecedented* initiative, staff from all media outlets are going to split tasks and share the obtained information so that Brazilians can keep up with the evolution and the total of deaths caused by COVID-19 as well as the consolidated numbers of tested cases with positive results for the new coronavirus. The daily report will be closed at 20 h.

The federal government, through the Ministry of Health, should be the natural source of such figures, but recent attitudes by authorities and of the president himself put in doubt the availability of data and its accuracy” (emphasis added).

Considering the terms of Charaudeau’s semiolinguistics theory, some acknowledgments are aimed in social contract, one of them is know-how, that is, credibility (CHARAUDEAU, 2006). Know-how in the journalistic field is guaranteed mostly by the search for reliable sources, which in turn renders the news trustable in the eyes of readers. In the Brazilian context of the beginning of June 2020, mainstream media share with their audience that this know-how would be compromised if they kept the traditional source of information for the numbers of the pandemics, and, for this reason, justify the decision of taking over a new function. This way they recur to the underlying discursive memory of the ideal *modus operandi* of journalistic practice, that is: the newspaper presents facts based on reliable sources other than itself.

The lexical choice, as well as the syntactic organization of the first sentence already points to the previous/motivating dilemma for the creation of the consortium. By presenting “In response to the decision of Jair Bolsonaro’s government to restrict access to data on the COVID-19 pandemic”, the enunciating subject mobilizes at least two

preconstructs presumably already given for the readers:

1. “the decision”, nominalization whose preconstruct is “government decided”;
2. the restriction, in the form of the verb “to restrict”, whose preconstruct is “government restricted”.

As the choice for the lexeme “decision” supposes a deliberate act of the refereed subject, in that case the president Jair Bolsonaro, the use of the verb “restrict” indicates an evaluation by the enunciator about the set of facts listed in the following excerpt and, based on that exposure organization, corroborate the choice of the term as well as its underlying judgement. The enumeration follows:

“Changes made by the Ministry of Health to the publication of its pandemic balance sheet reduced the amount and quality of the data. First, the disclosure hour schedule, previously at 5 pm in the administration of Luiz Henrique Mandetta (until april 17), passed to 7 pm and then to 10 pm. This hinders or even makes impossible the publishing of the data on newscast or printed vehicles. “*Jornal Nacional stories are over*”, said president Jair Bolsonaro in a debauchery tone when commenting the change.

The second change was of qualitative nature. The internet portal in which the ministry discloses the numbers of deaths and contaminations was taken down last Thursday evening. When it returned, after more than 19 hours, there were only information about ‘new’ cases, that is, recorded on the same day. *Consolidated data and the historic of the disease since its beginning were vanished*. There were also missing links for the download in sheet format, which are essential for the researches and journalists analysis and that fed other dissemination initiatives.

Among items that were no longer published are: curve of new cases by date of notification and epidemiologic week; accumulated cases by date of notification and epidemiologic week; and deaths accumulated by date of notification and epidemiologic week.

This Sunday (7), the government has announced that it would go back to informing its balances on the disease. *But have shown conflicting numbers*, released within a few hours.”

In the first two paragraphs of this second part of the news article, changes in information or its supply by the federal government through the Ministry of Health are recalled in two blocks. The first one exposes problems with the official data disclosure schedule, which was gradually postponed from 5 to 10 pm. This period ends with a direct quote from a speech by the President described as an act of debauchery for the Brazilian media, since it attacks directly the most important Brazilian newscast: the *Jornal Nacional*.

The quoted speech activates the discourse memory that follows most pronouncements of the current president of the republic, even before he was in office, that is the internal warfare discourse, or, if we prefer, in the terms of Rocha: “Bolsonarist cultural war”⁷. For Rocha, the an-

7 See <https://estadodaarte.estadao.com.br/guerra-cultural-bolsonarista-retorica-do-odio/>.

nihilation of the other is one of the cornerstones of this rhetoric of hatred used by Bolsonaro and applauded by his followers. It encompasses the discourse of refusing and mocking the Brazilian media, viewed as an enemy.

Through this warfare, the alteration of the discursive order regarding the relationship between institutional discourse (the discourse of official government institutions, such as the Ministry of Health) and media discourse is allowed or even required. If in the “natural state”, the institutional discourse would serve as reliable for the media discourse, in the state of war that order is altered. In that case, the press sees itself (or shows itself discursively) challenged to seek other primary sources and to serve as the last word, or the most creditable, as an alternative for the federal institutional discourse.

The parts of the excerpt in blue color and underlined are hyperlinks to others articles of the vehicle, which configure self-quotations. These quotations work in the text as formative of the temporal argumentative thread that signals the amount of conflicting situations which led to the formation of this media consortium. The following excerpt shows the use of the encapsulating deictic as a closing key to the argumentation/justification of the decision-making announced by the story.

“As a result of these omissions, the partnership between the media vehicles will collect the data directly from federal state health departments. Each press agency will disclose the result of such monitoring in their respective channels. The group will draw public attention if there is no transparency and regularity on the disclosure of data by the states.”

The anaphoric expression “these omissions” can be seen as retaking two possible referents. It refers both to the set of data listed on the immediately preceding paragraph and to the general set of situations presented on the block of previous paragraphs. In this last sense, the gradual changes of disclosure of schedule as well as the turning off the Ministry of Health website for a long time (19 hours straight) are both viewed as acts of omission equivalent to the information listed later.

The paragraphs that conclude the article summon a variety of quotes from representatives of the news organizations participating in the consortium. We analyzed one speech in particular that also retakes by a process of forgetfulness the economic relation that encompasses the media vehicles united in this sui generis consortium formation:

“At this crucial moment, we have put our competition aside for a common good: deliver to society the most accurate data possible about the pandemic. This information guides people and public policies. Without them, the country plunges into a blind flight. Journalism will fulfill its role”, affirms Allan Gripp, editorial director of O Globo” (emphasis added).

The excerpt of Gripp’s speech activates a discursive memory of “normal” economic functioning of capitalism and, in doing so, refers to inescapable internal tensions within the journalistic practice as a business activity, since it exposes its motivations that are not necessarily coincident; that is, on one side beating the competition (“in this crucial moment” left aside) and, on the other hand, serving a “common good” of providing “information [that] guides people and public policies”, without which “the country plunges into a blind flight”. This way the enunciator brings to the spotlight the question of what, after all, the “role” of journalism should be.

The statement is structured in a sense of establishing this implicit hierarchy of journalism’s roles through two main preconstructs: “a common good” (that is such thing as a common good) and “its role” (newspapers have a role). Both are taken as discursively established and interact with each other constructing the idea that the “role” of the newspaper is to seek “the common good” and activate this memory that points to the journalistic practice in Brazilian tradition while promoting the forgetfulness of another purpose, through its direct reference in the first part of this excerpt, that of beating the concurrence.

4 Conclusion

In this text, we analyzed excerpts from the article that communicated to the Brazilian audience the formation of a consortium of major Brazilian media vehicles. In order to proceed the analysis we applied some concepts of Discourse Analysis, such as: discursive memory and preconstruct. With this it was possible to identify how both, the functioning of preconstructs and the activation of discursive memories built around the imaginary of what media discourse is and how it should work in relation to other discourses (such as the institutional), are notoriously summoned for organizing the analyzed article that introduces the consortium on Covid-19 data to the Brazilian public.

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