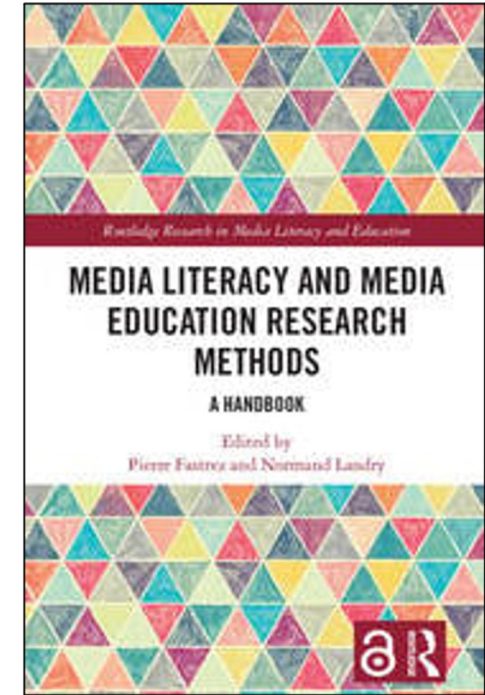


Critical discourse studies for research on media and information literacy projects

An illustrated discussion of seven methodological considerations



Book editors:
Pierre Fastrez & Normand Landry

JAN ZIENKOWSKI

GEOFFROY PATRIARCHE



Introduction

Landry and Fastrez point out that **media education** should be “considered as a praxis” (2024, 4):

“The practical application of theoretical knowledge for normative and transformative processes” (Landry & Fastrez 2024, 4)

Media education initiatives are often **responses to social and political anxieties**:

*“Thus, **media education programs** are, implicitly or explicitly, **shaped by sociopolitical projects that justify them**, focusing on **aims as diverse as** youth protection, social empowerment, citizen participation, productivity and employability, or intercultural dialogue” (Landry & Fastrez 2024, 4)*

In **our chapter** we present **Critical Discourse Studies (CDS)** as a framework **for analysing the social, political and ideological dimensions of MIL projects**.

Introduction



*"In today's digitised societies, making sense of the media landscape and learning to navigate it **responsibly** is **essential for modern day citizenship**. Indeed, a capacity for digital citizenship is required, one that understands that **by receiving a quality media literacy education**, new media need not be barriers, but powerful tools, **for civic engagement**. To ensure that digital citizenship is **attainable by all members** of society, media literacy programmes must **include** and **reflect the most vulnerable segments of society**." (Media Literacy for All, 2 juillet 2020)*

Introduction



*“The EU is an extraordinary and unprecedented political humanitarian, economic and social experiment. The general mistake is to assume that the EU is perfect. The EU is not perfect, but **its enormous advantages are often taken for granted** – from free roaming on phones to ensuring peace and economic stability on a continent historically prone to devastating and near-constant war and conflict. However, these advantages are taken for granted. It is **through EAVI’s campaign that we will show you that even if EU is not perfect, it’s the best idea we’ve had so far** (Guy Verhofstadt).” (EAVI Manifesto, s.d.)*

Introduction

CDS is often dealt with as a toolbox for the development of media and information literacy. **We** sought to demonstrate **what CDS can tell us about discourses constitutive of MIL initiatives**.

We propose **seven essential methodological considerations** to take into account in a CDS of the social, political and ideological dimensions of MIL projects such as those of EAVI.

Applied to EAVI, our brand of CDS is designed to answer research questions such as:

- What capacities, skills and/or forms of awareness does EAVI value and stimulate?
- What notions of citizenship, politics and democracy does EAVI (re-)articulate and/or advocate?
- What forms of critique are (not) being promoted in EAVI's MIL project?

MIL projects often promote media-related competences and skills. They also invite media users to develop **specific forms critique and (political) subjectivity**.

CDS offers a framework for analysing the way EAVI articulates MIL-related signifiers and practices constitutive of a preferred mode of subjectivity and an associated socio-political project.

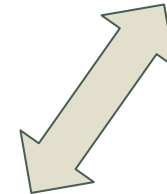
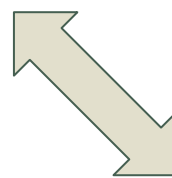
Seven methodological considerations: an overview

1. Constructing a CDS-informed problematic

- 1.1. Choosing an appropriate CDS perspective
- 1.2. Identifying the discourses that seek to define the reality under investigation

2. Collecting the data

- 2.1. Defining criteria for the selection of cases
- 2.2. Delimiting the discourse that one seeks to analyze



3. Analyzing the data

- 3.1. Choosing relevant units of analysis
- 3.2. Doing a preliminary analysis via inductive coding
- 3.3. Analyzing the political and ideological dimensions of discourse

1.1. Problematic - choosing an appropriate CDS perspective

CDS is an umbrella term referring to a **transdisciplinary** domain of discourse **theoretical** and discourse **analytical** approaches (Angermuller et al., 2014).

Critical discourse scholars explore the **reproduction, contestation, and (de)legitimation** of **power relationships** through **discourse**.

The **choice for a particular approach has consequences** for the entire **research design**. We opted for **Essex style discourse theory**, conceptualizing **discourse as an articulatory practice**:

Articulation is a performative discursive **practice** through which social actors **attempt to fix the meaning of self, other and society**. It is the **practice of linking discursive elements** (words, sentences, images) in a sentence, statement or narrative. In the process the **meanings of signifiers shift and change** in function of the established relationships. Articulation is a **fundamentally political practice**.

caveat: discourses as articulatory practices can never be closed in a final sense. There is an **inherent polyphony** in every discourse.

1.1. Problematic - choosing an appropriate CDS perspective

The **Essex approach to discourse** offers a concept of discourse that **allows us to explore how EAVI articulates MIL related signifiers**. Consider the signifiers articulated in the EAVI logo:



Linguistic pragmatics understood as the study of language use in context (Verschueren, 1999) allows us to consider the way social actors use multimodal discourse in reflexive ways.

Combining **poststructuralist discourse theory** and **linguistic pragmatics** allows us to understand **subjectivity**

“as a way of relating oneself to a reality that can only be made sense of in and through discourse” (Zienkowski & Patriarche, 2023, p. 291)

“Subjectivity involves an imperfect reflexive awareness of the discourses, practices and processes that constitute our sense of self” (Zienkowski & Patriarche, 2023, p. 291).

1.1. Problematic - choosing an appropriate CDS perspective

Our **combined** poststructuralist and linguistic pragmatic **approach to discourse** allowed us to ask **research questions** of the following type:

- **How do MIL-related signifiers** (e.g. 'media literacy', 'critique' and 'citizenship') **get articulated** with each other and with other elements in EAVI's multimodal texts?
- **What forms of political subjectivity are being constructed** through the MIL discourses that articulate signifiers such as 'media literacy', 'citizenship', and 'critique'?
- What **forms** or **modes** of **critique** and what sort of (European) **society does EAVI articulate and advocate** in the process?

1.2. Problematic - identification of discourses fixing the meanings of MIL

How the research topic has been imagined and problematized by the actors in the public sphere (politicians, organizations, academics) ⇒ A **problematization of problematizations**.

MIL initiatives acquire sense in a wider discursive field where **competing discourses attempt to fix the meaning of MIL** and other related signifiers. **Mapping** the discursive field

- enables **the naming** of discourse(s) in the corpus under investigation
- enables **a contextualisation** of statements in the corpus under investigation
- enables **the identification of absences and omissions** in the corpus

A **literature review of academic discourses** provides a good starting point for an exploration of the discursive field of MIL.

The **discursive field of MIL** is also developed **outside of academia** by civil society organizations, educational actors, and policymakers.

1.2. Problematic - identification of discourses fixing the meanings of MIL

We identified **two types of tension structuring the discursive field of MIL**, based on a literature review of **texts dealing with media literacy** (including ‘information literacy’, ‘digital literacy’, etc.), **citizenship** and **critique** (e.g. critical awareness, critical thinking)

‘Critical’ vs ‘non-critical’ approaches to MIL

- **MIL can be approached as a politically neutral set of tools, competences, and practices.** Halpern (2014) writes that “critical thinking is the use of those cognitive skills or strategies that increase the probability of a desirable outcome ... thinking that is purposeful, reasoned and goal-directed” .
- **MIL can also be approached as a politicizing and emancipatory activity.** The **concept of critique** is grounded in “critical” or “radical” philosophies and refers to the ability of recognizing and **problematizing ideologies embedded in media**. MIL becomes a “pedagogy of resistance and liberation” (Hidgon, 2020).

Utilitarian vs holistic MIL concepts

- **Utilitarian approaches treat MIL as a set of skills for employment and employability.** It is criticized for promoting neoliberalism, individualism and marketization (Drotner et al., 2017).
- **Holistic approaches conceive of MIL as an opportunity for collective critical citizenship.** MIL is construed as a set of resources required for citizenship, participation, and “living together” (Landry & Roussel 2018).

2.1. Data collection - criteria for selecting cases

Qualitative CDS often rely on case study research. A guiding question for the selection of cases: **What the case is a case of?**

There are **multiple selection strategies** that **may inform the research focus** (Flyvberg, 2001):

- Selection of **typical** cases
- Selection of **extreme** or deviant cases
- Searching for maximum **variation**
- ...

Practical considerations **come into play** as well: accessibility of data, feasibility of data collection and analysis, limited resources (time, personnel, ...).

2.1. Data collection - criteria for selecting cases

We decided to focus on EAVI (European Association for Viewers interests).

We had **strong indications** that this organization would be a **typical case** of an organization developing a MIL program in relation with **a preferred mode of politics and subjectivity**.

- EAVI presents itself as “an international non-profit organization registered in Brussels which **advocates media literacy and full citizenship**”.
- EAVI is **relevant for** researching **the political dimension** of MIL projects - *cf.* EAVI’s slogan “Media literacy for citizenship”.
- EAVI develops **a wide range of initiatives** at the crossroads of research, education and (European) public policies.

The **choice for EAVI** was also informed by practical considerations:

- EAVI produces and publishes many **different types or genres of discourse** at the **crossroad** of **academic, policy, and educational discourses**.
- Its working language is **English**. EAVI provides a **free online access** to a wealth of **diverse documents**.

2.2. Data collection - what type of discourse(s) do you look for?

Your corpus should enable you to find traces of discourses circulating in society. **No data collection (corpus, dataset) can ever exhaust a discursive field.**

This raises the question of the **unities of discourse** you seek to identify:

- What types of boundaries do you draw around discourse?
- How do you delimit discourses?
- What types of boundaries do you draw around them?

Unities of discourse(s) can be identified on the basis of various criteria. For instance:

- the **knowledge** and **practices** that discourses produce (e.g. academic MIL discourse, policy MIL discourse, pedagogic MIL discourse),
- the **entities or institutions producing the discourses under investigation** (e.g. academic institutions, policy makers, public intellectuals, MIL practitioners),
- the **genre conventions shaping mediatized statements** (e.g. scientific articles, course materials, advocacy papers, policy documents, op-eds),
- **a specific period, language, medium, etc. ...**

Caveat: the boundaries of a discourse can never be fixed in a final sense. Discourses are open structures.

2.2. Data collection - what type of discourse(s) do you look for?

Discourses are inherently heterogeneous or polyphonic. The discourse of EAVI is not *only* or *exclusively* the discourse of EAVI.

- EAVI (re)articulates **voices of other actors in all of its publications**, both implicitly and explicitly, without necessarily endorsing them.
- EAVI posts **videos** containing media critical **analyses of** intellectuals like **Noam Chomsky**, **documentaries of Alan Curtis** about propaganda, etc.
- The EAVI website contains **documents produced by EAVI** (videos, pedagogic materials, standpoints, ...) as well as **documents written by public intellectuals** and **other commentators**.

We focused on a previous version of EAVI's website to create a **dataset of 70 documents** containing:

- **All webpages and documents** including **at least one occurrence of MIL-related signifiers** (e.g., media literacy, digital literacy, data literacy);
- **EAVI blog posts** published **between 2020 and 2019** containing **MIL-related signifiers**;
- **The four videos** of the EAVI series ***A Journey to Media Literacy***, including time-stamped **transcripts**

Re-posted videos and documentaries were excluded because they are not necessarily representative of EAVI's official MIL discourse (e.g. videos of Noam Chomsky or documentaries of Adam Curtis).

3.1. Analysis - choosing relevant units of analysis

Discourses can be analyzed at multiple levels of structure (word-choice, sentences, argumentative patterns, narratives, intertextual structures, ...)

Discourse scholars cannot analyse all levels simultaneously ⇒ **what discursive forms and functions should be the focus of our analysis?**

The **main criterion for choosing unit(s) of analysis: their relevance to the research question.**

Other criteria for choosing particular unit(s) of analysis **include:**

- **Coherence:** what aspects and levels of discourse allow the documents under investigation to cohere?
- **Recurrence:** what discursive elements and choices reappear within/across the documents under investigation?

It **may nevertheless be necessary to focus on several aspects and levels of discourse**, especially when analyzing heterogeneous datasets.

3.1. Analysis - choosing relevant units of analysis

All discourse scholars need to decide **what discursive forms and functions** are most relevant to their research projects.

It is also essential to choose the **units** (or objects) **of analysis** that will serve as **primary entry point** into the analysis.

What **units of analysis** did we focus on to investigate the way EAVI's articulated MIL signifiers with concepts of citizenship and critique?

- **text segments** (sentences and paragraphs) containing implicit or explicit descriptions or definitions of “media literacy”, “citizenship” and/or “critique”.
- **Images, scenes and segments of transcribed video** containing metaphors fixing the meaning of MIL signifiers, critique and citizenship in the 4 EAVI videos

At what level should we analyze EAVI's articulatory practices (e.g. word choice, labels, metaphors, argumentation, narrative ...)?

3.2. Analysis - inductive coding as a preliminary analytical step

As a **preliminary step** in our discourse analysis **we coded our units of analysis** (statements, sentences, paragraphs) **inductively**.

- Coding = **labeling** practices that allow researchers **to describe, categorize and organize data**.
- **Coding** is an act of **rearticulation** and **recontextualization**: coded elements are labeled and linked with each other in overarching categories, generating (new) meanings in the process.
- **CDS do not require coding** but coding can be a useful preliminary step that facilitates discourse analytical analysis and interpretative work.

Coding can be facilitated by **Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software** (CAQDAS) such as NVivo, Atlas.ti, MaxQDA, Dedoose

3.2. Analysis - inductive coding as a preliminary analytical step



1) We coded **text segments and video transcripts containing explicit statements** about literacy, citizenship and critique. This coding allowed us **to identify the relevant segment** for further coding and analysis (*cf.* consideration 3.1 on the unit(s) of analysis).

Example: signifier “critique”

▼	MIL SIGNIFIERS
	Democracy
	Civicness / civility
	Critique
	Citizenship
▼	Literacy
	Media ILiteracy
	Digital literacy
	Film literacy
	Information literacy
	Literacies
	Data literacy
	Media literacy
	Media wisdom
	Scientific literacy
	Statistical literacy
	Visual literacy
	Undemocratic

Resource	EAVI Future of Europe.pdf	Added	12/09/2020	Username	GeoffroyPatriarche	# Codes	12
	 The 2019 European Parliamentarian Elections are coming and we all need to save Europe from this disinformation and propaganda. EAVI's contribution to this is by way of its media literacy tool, which allows us to critically analyse the information which individuals are exposed to. Media Literacy is our life raft in the muddy waters of fake news. It enables us to deconstruct text and critically analyse it, avoiding the traps of fake news. It is our mission to prevent Euroscepticism turning into hate speech and propagand...						
Resource	EAVI Lesson-Plan-fake-News-and-Fact-Checking.pdf	Added	12/09/2020	Username	GeoffroyPatriarche	# Codes	13
	 Lesson Plan: Fake News and Fact-checking Duration: 1½ hours Materials: Infographic: Beyond 'Fake News' Download a copy of our Beyond Fake News infographic with the link above. It is also available in Greek, French and Dutch. Game: Beyond the Headlines Graphic: 5 Key Concepts and Questions for Media Literacy Introduction The work needed to effectively filter information in our media-saturated environment takes time and skill. A recent study showed that the more content we consume, the more o...						

3.2. Analysis - inductive coding as a preliminary analytical step



2) We inductively coded these text segments **for implicit and explicit definitions and descriptions of MIL, critique and citizenship** (pink codes). We stucked as closely as possible to the original wording.

Example: definition or description of MIL



Created By Jan_Zienkowski Created On 12/15/2020

Depending on who owns or controls particular media, how and for what they are designed, their barriers to access and the level of expertise they require, these things can lead to or worsen significant issues of freedom and inequality of opportunity in society. This is especially true for those who are already vulnerable, such as children, elderly, refugees, disabled, and economically insecure.

Attached Codes



- ✕ ML as an awareness of the control m...
- ✕ ML as an awareness of hidden forces...
- ✕ ML as leading to freedom and self-m...
- ✕ ML as an awareness of media reprodu...

3.2. Analysis - inductive coding as a preliminary analytical step



3) We went through another cycle of coding **to group these definitions and descriptions (pink codes) at higher levels of abstraction (blue codes)**. The objective was to identify family resemblances between different definitions and descriptions of MIL, critique and citizenship.

▼	CZ - definitions and descriptions
▼	CZ - Activist citizenship
	CZ as manifesting itself through civil society i...
	CZ as combating hate speech
	CZ as combating discrimination
	CZ as protecting democratic functions
▶	CZ - Advocated citizenship
▼	CZ - Beneficial citizenship
	CZ as being able to take full advantage of the...
	CZ as enjoying the benefits of the media
	CZ as people who are offered opportunities t...
▶	CZ - Citizenship as a condition for MIL
▶	CZ - Citizenship as contributing to the media
▶	CZ - Critical citizenship
▼	CZ - Deliberative citizenship
	CZ as being part in a broader conversation th...
▶	CZ - Formal citizenship
▶	CZ - Inclusive citizenship
▶	CZ - MIL as a condition for citizenship
▶	CZ - Mediated citizenship
▶	CZ - Ordinary citizenship
▶	CZ - Participatory citizenship

▼	CRITIQUE - definitions and descriptions
	CRITIQUE - as a (life) skill
▶	CRITIQUE - as a constituent of MIL
	CRITIQUE - as a judicious way to deal with the ...
▶	CRITIQUE - as a mode of media use or consu...
▼	CRITIQUE - as a practice of evaluation or asse...
	CRITIQUE - as a practice of evaluation or jud...
	CRITIQUE - as the ability to distinguish facts ...
▶	CRITIQUE - as a work on the self
▼	CRITIQUE - as being aware or conscious
	CRITIQUE - as a consciousness of the impact...
	CRITIQUE - as a consciousness of the impact...
	CRITIQUE - as a consciousness of the impact...
	CRITIQUE - as a consciousness of the impact...
	CRITIQUE - as a matter of conscious engage...
	CRITIQUE - as an awareness of the way data,...
	CRITIQUE as an awareness of the way media ...

3.3. Analysis - the political and ideological dimensions of discourse

RQ: How does EAVI articulate a preferred mode of subjectivity and society with(in) its MIL discourse?

We were **interested in the political and ideological dimension of EAVI's discourse.**

- **Ideology:** a social, political and interpretive function of discourse. Ideology allows subjects to imagine social reality and to justify and/or challenge specific injustices and (in)equalities. We cannot escape ideology but it is possible to become reflexively aware of the way ideology informs (our) identities, statements, practices, norms and values.

⇒ Ideology informs our sense of self, other, and society

We can **use the coded segments to answer this discourse analytical question:**

- What **performative functions** do articulations of 'MIL', 'citizenship' and 'critique' perform in relation to EAVI's preferred mode of politics and society?

3.3. Analysis - the political and ideological dimensions of discourse

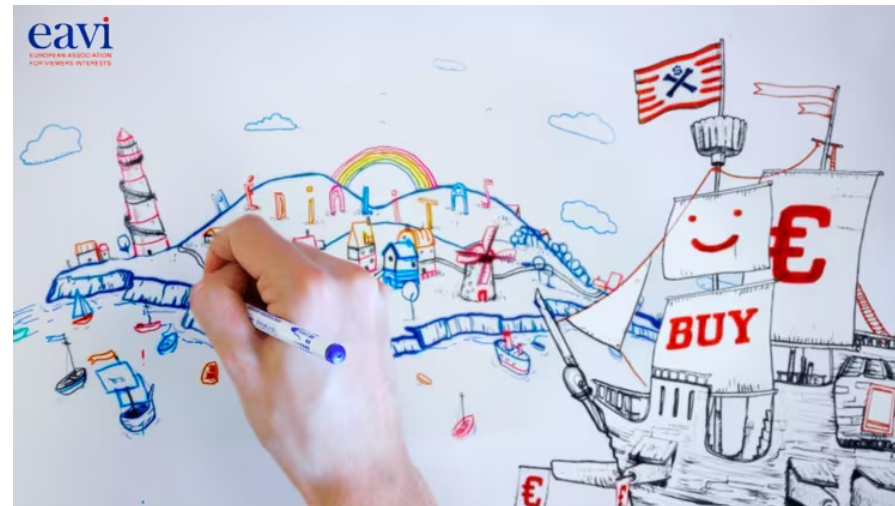
EAVI acknowledges radical forms of critique (e.g. Chomsky, Curtis) but does not integrate them into its preferred mode of subjectivity.

It sees MIL as a transformative project with implications for the individual as a whole

- A **holistic** approach to MIL that cannot be reduced to acquiring social skills
- Includes an awareness of how media shape the lives of citizens
- A heightened reflexive awareness of one's own (political beliefs, biases, rational limitations)
- Critical thinking as a mode of 'self-discipline', as an attempt to overcome different forms of bias
- Critique as an ideologically neutral (meta)cognitive project. It does not problematize (all) ideologies.

We do not claim that EAVI is ideologically neutral though. EAVI does not recognize the contingency of its own project and presents its project as a socio-political necessity.

3.3. Analysis - the political and ideological dimensions of discourse



3.3. Analysis - the political and ideological dimensions of discourse

The **ideological and political dimensions of EAVI's MIL discourse** also crystallize in implicit and explicit **assumptions about the ideal society**:

- Its preferred mode of subjectivity is entangled with(in) a **liberal democratic pro-EU project**.
- EAVI labels the EU with values such as **multiculturalism, diversity and democracy**.
- EAVI is **critical of 'extremist' forms of nationalism** hostile to the EU. Media literacy as a weapon against such projects.
- MIL is articulated as a **tool that facilitates political participation of citizens in the EU** and its nation-states.
- EAVI nevertheless relies on a **rather weak notion of participation** (as a mode of critical reading).

Conclusion

Each stage of a CDS involves acts of rearticulation whereby new meanings get fixed in partial and provisional ways (cfr. Glynos & Haworth 2007).

MIL discourse is dispersed across a multiplicity of media and texts belonging to different genres. The establishment of **coherence is to some extent an effect of the analytic work** itself.

Our brand of CDS allows for a form of critique that is **not necessarily (only) based on a *hermeneutics of suspicion***.

Our CDS attempted to explain the forms and functions of a particular discourse, denaturalizing it. The **goal is to facilitate debate** on the political dimension of identities, practices and policies.

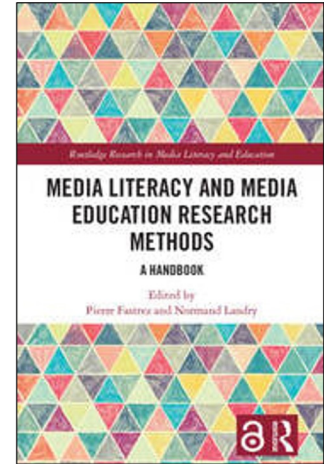
CDS does not necessarily delegitimize MIL projects but will render their contingency and implications explicit.

Even if MIL projects do not present themselves as such, **they often involve political projects built on strong ideological assumptions.**

Further readings about the presentation

This presentation was based on:

Zienkowski, J., & Patriarche, G. (2023). Critical discourse studies for research on media and information literacy projects: An illustrated discussion of seven methodological considerations. In P. Fastrez & N. Landry (Ed.), *Handbook of media literacy and media education research methods* (pp.288-304). Routledge.



The complete analysis of EAVI's MIL discourse can be consulted here:

Patriarche, G., & Zienkowski, J (2022). Shaping Political Subjectivity through Media and Information Literacy: A Critical Discourse Study of EAVI's Project. *Recherches en communication*, 54, 271–290.

Open access: <https://ojs.uclouvain.be/index.php/rec/article/view/62783>

