

Research Design for Critical Discourse Analysis of Institutional Racism in the United States using Congressional Hearings of TikTok and Facebook

Introduction: Background of the Study:

March 23, 2023 saw TikTok's CEO Shou Zi Chew appearing before the United States Congress. Chew was appearing at a Congressional hearing in Washington D.C. to defend TikTok against facing a nationwide ban or forced sale order, after concerns regarding TikTok's data privacy practices were raised by representatives from both Republican and Democrat parties (Whateley & Mok, 2023). The scandal is very reminiscent of the 2018 Facebook-Cambridge Analytica Scandal that Mark Zuckerberg's Meta found itself embroiled in. Zuckerberg was also asked to testify before the United States Senate Judiciary Committee about data privacy and his company's practices (Watson, 2018).

Both hearings represent the growing concerns regarding privacy on the internet and the sovereignty of data produced in a country. The concept of data sovereignty has been around for a long while, and refers to the concept that the handling of data generated within the borders of a state should be subject to the state's laws (Acronis, 2021). Various laws, such as the EU General Data Protection Regulation, Canada's Personal Information Protection and Electronic Documents Act, and California's California Consumer Privacy Act. Data "flows are increasingly blocked by governments which seek to protect their country's people, sovereignty and economy," (The Economist, 2020).

The 2023 TikTok and 2018 Facebook hearings have a lot in common – both raise concerns regarding the vulnerability of citizen's data in the hands of technology conglomerates and even national security and integrity. Concerns with TikTok's data handling practices and ties to the Chinese government were raised by the Trump administration back in 2020, while

the Cambridge Analytica Scandal saw the claims of possible Russian interference in US elections.

Both hearings also lasted for hours, with representatives from both parties posing the questions. However, one of the main differences between the hearings was Congress' interactions with CEOs Chew and Zuckerberg. Facebook and TikTok have faced similar charges of unsafe data practices and possible foreign intervention, however, Congress' approach to each organisation and both individuals has differed.

This essay will elaborate on the aims and objectives of the proposed research and consider the emerging hypotheses. It will then discuss the methodology chosen to conduct the research and examine its suitability as an approach. Lastly, it will discuss the implications of this research design.

Aims, Objectives and Hypotheses:

This research aims to understand how the language and phraseology used within Congressional hearings and the professional attitudes of lawmakers perpetuate institutional racism in the United States.

The study will analyse the different approaches taken by US lawmakers towards interrogating CEOs Zuckerberg and Chew during their testimonies before Congress. By analysing the different approaches, the researcher wishes to highlight the differences between the attitudes of lawmakers towards two people representing different communities. i.e., white Americans (Zuckerberg) and immigrants (Chew). The objective is to establish that the use of certain language encourages the power imbalances that delineate the experiences of the “homegrown” and the perceived “other.”

This researcher hypothesizes that Congress' willingness to “listen to” or accept explanations was higher with Zuckerberg than with Chew. Next, Chew was faced with

aggressive language, intensive questioning, and confrontational attitudes, while Zuckerberg received (comparatively) amicable language, lenient questioning, and non-confrontational attitudes. The last hypothesis that emerges is that Zuckerberg was allowed to elaborate but Chew was never given a similar opportunity. Instead, he was forced to answer detailed questions with a yes or no, belittling the subjectivity required of sensitive and detailed questions.

Proposed Methodology and Implications:

The researcher proposes using critical discourse analysis to examine the two Congressional hearings. Critical discourse analysis is a branch of the discourses analysis approach of qualitative research methodology. According to Jürgen Link, discourse can be understood as

“...an institutionally consolidated concept of speech inasmuch as it determines and consolidates action and thus already exercises power.”

(Link, 1983, p. 6 in Jäger, 2001, p. 34)

Similarly, Michel Foucault describes discourse as

“the way in which a particular set of linguistic categories relating to an object frame the way we understand that object.”

(Bryman, et al., 2021, p. 484)

Thus, based on the above provided definitions of discourse, it is possible to infer that it refers to language, its usage and the social power structures, hegemonies and ideologies that are central to both language and its usage. Discourse analysis can then be understood as an examination of language within its immediate context to understand how it aids the construction of power (Bryman, et al., 2021). Critical Discourse Analysis takes this examination one step further by analysing the role of language in constructing, exerting and maintaining pre-existing social hegemonies and power structures.

“In other words, CDA aims to investigate critically social inequality as it is expressed, signalled, constituted, legitimized and so on by language use (or in discourse),” (Wodak, 2001, p. 2).

This makes critical discourse analysis the perfect method to conduct this comparative study between Congressional approaches to Meta and TikTok. “The approach aims to examine how language is used to exercise power in society – in other words, how language constructs ideas and practice of discipline,” (Bryman, et al., 2021, p. 492).

The research will study the subtle power structures and hegemonic ideals that are perpetuated by the usage of certain language. The main objects or instances of study will be the two Congressional testimonies of Mark Zuckerberg (2018) and Shou Zi Chew (2023). The hearings will be sourced from the official YouTube channel of The Washington Post. There is no specific reason for them being sourced from The Washington Post, except that the channel has made the full hearings available without any edits.

The two hearings differ in the lawmakers’ usage of different language and tone for Chew and Zuckerberg. Critical Discourse Analysis, then, becomes central to understanding the subtlety and nuance in their exertion of power. It will enable the researcher to pinpoint the instances of difference and analyse how the language and tone used helps in exerting prejudice in two similar situations.

In the hearings, various aspects, behaviours, and choices can be better understood by applying the multi-dimensional framework of critical discourse analysis. The dimensions of the framework are as follows:

“...(i) examination of the actual content, structure and meaning of the text under scrutiny (the text dimension); (ii) examination of the form of discursive interaction used to communicate meaning and beliefs (the discursive practice dimension); and (iii)

consideration of the social context in which the discursive event is taking place (the social practice dimension).”

(Grant, et al., 2004, p. 11)

Using the content from the two hearings, this researcher believes that it is possible to examine the body language of the main people involved, i.e., the representatives, Zuckerberg and Chew, and the actual words that were said by each party during the hearing, under the first dimension of critical discourse analysis. As a part of the text dimension, the analysis here will involve breaking down the grammar, vocabulary, and rhetorical structures of the speech patterns of each person involved. For instance, both Chew and Zuckerberg seemed nervous in their testimonies, their answers were evasive and they were unprepared for some questions that were posed to them by Congress (Paz, 2023), (Gutman-Wei, 2018). Congress, however, had differing attitudes: while their questions were pointed in both cases, they were much more likely to believe Zuckerberg than Chew (Gutman-Wei, 2018), (Thorbecke, 2023).

A similar approach can be applied to the amount of time each person was given to speak, the tone that was used to address each person, whether the person speaking was constantly interrupted or not. Critical discourse analysis allows for the acceptance and analysis of these discursive moments within the greater context of critical analysis – another methodology, such as conversation or thematic analysis would not allow for the same.

This researcher proposes the use of critical discourse analysis for various reasons.

The first is that critical discourse analysis views, texts (in this case, the hearings) as “social spaces in which two fundamental social processes simultaneously occur: cognition and representation of the world, and social interaction,” (Fairclough, 1995, p. 6). This approach is beneficial to understanding the subjects discussed at the two hearings within the greater social, political, and economic contexts that surround them. The research subjects are placed within

the context of a rising technocratic consciousness which “fulfils the ideological function of legitimating the pursuit of particular interests,” (Held, 1990, p. 264) and is contrasted by a nationalistic and protectionist approach to data, digital identity, and the internet.

Critical discourse analysis will allow the subjects to be analysed and understood within these contexts, and will also allow the researcher to map how these contexts affect the situation itself. “Simply put, CDA involves the use of discourse analytic techniques, combined with a critical perspective, to interrogate social phenomena” (Ainsworth & Hardy, 2004). By critically analysing the hearings as discourse, and comparatively understanding the language, phraseology and attitudes used and embodied by Congress, it is possible to understand the role that this discourse plays in perpetuating institutionalized racism in the United States.

The second reason is that of the centrality of intertextuality in critical discourse analysis. “Intertextual analysis shows how texts selectively draw upon *orders of discourse*,” (Fairclough, 1995, p. 188). Essentially, it can be understood as taking into consideration and analysis, the various connections that different texts and approaches may have with each other (Bryman, et al., 2021). Through an interdisciplinary and mediated approach, it will be possible to relate the language used in the hearings with the larger sociopolitical contexts of American society and their history of racism.

The third reason is that critical discourse analysis has been used in the past to study and interpret the relational structures between language and racism (Wodak & Reisigl, 2001; Wodak, 2014). Thus, it will be possible to supplement the findings of the study with similar critical discourse studies that have been conducted in the past. Also, the emphasis in critical discourse analysis is on examining the implicitness of power structures through an analysis of language usage. The very idea of institutional racism suggests that racism is veiled under the guise of standard practices which are set up against a marginalized group of people.

This reason is also supported by the interdisciplinary approach encouraged by critical discourse analysis as a research methodology. It allows for analysis with the inclusion of each ideology and discursive stance, whether it be political, economic, social, technological, or ideological.

Other methodologies were also considered while designing this research, however, they were ruled out for various reasons. Quantitative content analysis cannot be considered as it cannot provide an answer to the main research question – it involves reducing content to set data points for analysis against a set code. However, such an analysis can be beneficial in finding out whether institutionalized racism was reflected from the language used in the hearings and not how language is used to perpetuate it. Similarly, qualitative content analysis or conversation analysis would not be able to provide the intertextual and interdisciplinary approach that critical discourse analysis provides to the study. Structured interviews are not possible for two reasons: the first is that the study involves a lot of high-profile people who will be very hard to get a hold of, and the second is that interviews might be plagued by individual, corporate and political interests.

However, while critical discourse analysis seems like the completely self-fulfilled ideology, this researcher believes that focus-group studies can be used in the future to supplement the purely discursive analysis. This might also help mitigate the issue of critical discourse analysis seeming speculative or derivative in nature (Bryman, et al., 2021). Another issue that arises is the sheer length of the two hearings and the amount of content that will need to be analysed critically – everything will need to be taken into consideration and understood and analysed within both, its own context, and the greater context of the study. One way to mitigate that is narrowing down on the discussion of one topic from both hearings, perhaps data privacy or foreign intervention (Cranz, 2023) (Watson, 2018), and critically analysing only related speech.

An ethical consideration that plagues the study is gaining the consent of the “participants.” Since the participants are high-profile public figures, it is hard to get their consent to be involved in this study. The study itself, also seeks to analyse institutional racism by comparing two relatively powerful people within the technological industries. Thus, the researcher will need to take into consideration the implications that their privilege (in the form of their wealth, education, and connections) may have had on the hearings themselves. Lastly, since the study involves analysing hearings that also discussed national security concerns in the United States, it is necessary to certain claims, discussions, and conversations within that context as well. The topic will need to be dealt with, with sensitivity and discretion.

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