

# Whose Discourse? A Comparison of the Foucauldian and Habermasian Concepts of Discourse in Critical IS Research

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## ABSTRACT

The concept of discourse is of high importance for non-positivist research in information systems. At the same time there are different concepts of discourse that are used simultaneously and often without clear recognition what their choice entails. This paper therefore aims to clarify the conceptual basis of working with discourses in IS research. In order to do this it describes and compares the notions of discourse as we find them in two of the most influential discourse theories, namely those by Michel Foucault and Jürgen Habermas. A comparison of the two from the point of the IS researcher argues that the most important feature that Foucault's and Habermas's discourse theories have in common is their critical intention. From this point of view, both concepts have strengths and can be used to complement each other despite their fundamental differences.

## Keywords

Discourse, IS research, Habermas, Foucault, critical theory

## INTRODUCTION

Information Systems (IS) as the academic discipline that is interested in the mutual influence of technology, individuals and social entities has long discovered the importance of discourses. Discourses play a role in understanding what information and communication technology (ICT) is, how it can be used, how different interpretations affect use etc. On a more fundamental level, it has been argued that ICT is even constituted by discourses (Gergen, 1999).

At the same time, however, it is not always clear what a discourse is. It has something to do with communication, with the exchange of ideas and views. But does that mean that every act of communication is a discourse? If not, what are the criteria that define discourses and distinguish them from chat, idle talk, or other forms of communication? Are there conditions of discourses? What is the purpose of discourses? This paper will concentrate on the theories of discourse developed by Michel Foucault and Jürgen Habermas. The mere mention of these names should indicate why the paper fits in the critical research stream of the conference. Habermas is the most prominent representative of the Frankfurt School, the probably most influential group of critical theorists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Foucault has been an equally influential thinker whose main achievement it was to critically reinterpret some of the basics of our individual and social self-understanding (cf. Brooke 2002).

## THE CONCEPT OF DISCOURSE

This section will attempt to clarify what the term "discourse" means in the theories of Foucault and Habermas. A useful starting point is the etymology of the term "discourse". The Latin root of the term is the verb *discurrere*, which means literally "to run apart", from *currere*, "to run". *Diskursus* thus means "to run to and fro" (cf. Encarta 1999, 538), which has developed into the idea of an exchange of ideas. The English, French, and German use of the term differ slightly. The French *le discours* is slightly less formal than the English discourse. While it still refers to serious statements, it is more part of the ordinary use of language. *Donner un discours*, for example, means to give a speech or presentation. *Discours* therefore does not necessarily refer to an immediate exchange of ideas. On the other hand there is the German term *Diskurs*, as used by Habermas is probably even more formal in its use than the English term. The use of *Diskurs* in German stands for a clearly defined debate about a specific topic. What we should keep in mind is that Foucault's *le discours* and Habermas's *der Diskurs* are not identical.

### **Foucault's Discourse**

Foucault is interested in discourse as the societal process of understanding and self-definition. His research concentrates on the way discourses are organised and, more specifically, on who gets to participate and contribute and who is excluded. This question of inclusion or exclusion from discourse is the central theme of his work and it can be identified in most of his diverse writings. The procedures that control and organise discourses are manifold. They include truth, conversational taboos, madness, doctrine, (scientific) discipline and others (Foucault 1971).

Foucault wants to show that the European idea of universal communication is a myth and that access to communication is regulated by rituals that are not subject of discourses and that are not rationally defined or defended. Despite the fact that our societies appear to honour discourses, they are in fact afraid of the word. Foucault tries to show the lack of rationality of discourses and to demonstrate their character as events rather than continuous developments. Discourses are discontinuous, risky, and overlapping. We are actually using discourses as a form of violence (Foucault 1971, 55).

Using this background, Foucault's concept of discourse has been widely received in social sciences, including business studies and information systems. Researchers who refer to Foucault's view of discourse tend to recognise that it is not a precise definition of the term that is of interest to him but rather the procedures and social interactions that shape communication. Drawing on Foucault, Knights & Morgan (1991, 253), for example see discourse as "set of ideas and practices which condition our ways of relating to, and acting upon, particular phenomena."

A central aspect of Foucauldian discourses is power. Power is recognised to be a core constituent of all discourses and one of the reasons why one participates in discourses (Foucault 1971, 12). Power also has to do with madness and wisdom. Power produces and defines knowledge. Power and knowledge imply one another (Foucault 1975, 32). Discourses produce power but they can also expose it and render it fragile (Foucault 1976, 133). An important aspect of the power relationship in discourses is the question of inclusion or exclusion. Foucault is interested in the criteria according to which specific views are considered legitimate contributions and individuals are allowed to participate or not. Another important question of the power to shape and direct discourses relates to the meaning of concepts. Foucault's writings are relevant here because they suggest that terminology is central to the functioning of discourses but that it is not neutral. The power to define terms determines the outcome of discourses.

Related to Foucault's concept of power is another concept that seems to exert great power over the imagination of IS scholars, namely the Panopticon. The term "Panopticon" describes a prison where all of the prisoners are constantly subject to covert observation. Bentham, who coined the term, saw it as an improvement over traditional methods of punishment. It was meant to modify the convicts' behaviour and to allow them to be reintegrated into society. Foucault's recasting of Bentham's idea of the Panopticon is of interest because it links the ideas of power, discipline, education, and access to discourses. At the same time it seems to strike a chord in IS scholars because organisational use of information and communication technology (ICT) seems almost predestined to re-enact new versions of the Panopticon (cf. Goold 2003).

Despite, or maybe because of, the importance of the concept of power for Foucault's idea of discourse it is important to note that he does not talk about power as we know it from political theory as the ability to force others to do one's bidding. It is more than mere repression (Foucault 1994). Power is not a thing that can be possessed, nor is it necessarily negative (Knights & Willmott 1999). Power has something to do with discipline, discipline over the human body as well as academic disciplines (cf. Introna 1997). It tends to be spread throughout discourses and can affect those on top of the apparent hierarchy as well as those on the bottom (cf. Wong 2002). Discursive power is linked, via the idea of the Panopticon, to technology and its organisational or societal use (cf. Edenius 2003). Discourses in this view are not universal exchanges of ideas but can better be compared with markets and negotiations where different stakeholders have different market power and the production of discourse depends on the social, technical, and other capital.

Foucault's concept of discourse is critical because it analyses and deconstructs our enlightenment ideas of rational communication. It questions our self-image and shows some of the underlying realities of modern societies. Foucault develops powerful analytical tools and he arguably does so in order to improve social reality.

### **Habermas's Discourse**

In Habermas's theoretical writings the concept of discourse is as central as it is in Foucault's but it takes on a different meaning. Habermas's probably most important work, the Theory of Communicative Action (1981a/b), explains the concept and function of discourses. Communicative action is distinguished from other types of action such as pragmatic action or strategic action and it is characterised by the fact that it takes the other serious and accepts him or her as equal and deserving respect. Communicative action thus always has an ethical side to it. The background to this is the conception of humans as

social beings who need to interact in order to survive and prosper. We need to collaborate and by employing communicative action we do so in a moral fashion.

Whenever we communicate, in every speech act, the speaker implies at least three validity claims (*Geltungsansprüche*). These are truth, (normative) rightness, and authenticity. This means that no matter what a speaker says, it is implied that the content of the statement is true, that it conforms with normative rules, and that the speaker is veracious, means what he or she says. One can doubt whether a statement is true, whether it is allowed, or whether the speaker is authentic in saying it. This is where discourses enter the picture. Discourses are the means or the medium (cf. Habermas 1981a, 39) to clarify contentious validity claims (cf. Ulrich, 2001). In a discourse all of the parties affected by the claim get to discuss it with the aim of resolving their differences and arriving at a consensus regarding the claim. The result of the discourse is a claim that is valid for the participants of the discourse (cf. Ess 1996). It is important to note that Habermas does not produce material rules for the evaluation of speech act. His theory is formalistic in that it provides procedures that, if adhered to, will produce the validity of claims. This formal character of Habermasian discourses allows the inclusion of all aspects that seem relevant to participants including historical or local particularities that are important for a given problem.

As already indicated, an important aspect of discourses is that they are inherently ethical. Normative validity claims are part of all speech acts and there is no value-neutrality in communication. This is caused by our social nature and the resulting vulnerability which ethics is meant to alleviate. Discourses do not create norms but they are used to check existing norms for validity (Habermas 1983, 132).

Habermas sees communicative action as the expression of rationality (Ceccez-Kecmanovic et al. 2002). He defines rationality as a disposition of subjects who are capable of speech and action, which is expressed in behaviour for which good reasons exist (Habermas 1981a, 44). The normative term "rational" is to be used for those discourses in which contentious validity claims are discussed under certain conditions. These conditions are supposed to ensure that the better argument wins (Habermas 1998, 138f). This idea of the better argument that convinces the participants in the discourse is central to Habermas's theory and it is also a clear contradiction to Foucault's discourse where power and discipline carry the day.

The idea that there are better arguments and that these are recognisable and of universal validity is a strong restatement of the hopes of Enlightenment that reason can understand the world. However, Habermas reformulates it in such a way that it reflects the "linguistic turn" of philosophy and that it overcomes the solipsist dangers of, for example, Kantian thinking. At the same time Habermas realises that real discourses are often skewed and that the factors which are the focus of Foucault's investigation may have a stronger influence on the outcome of discourses than rationality and good arguments. He therefore defines the conditions under which rational agents would be able to find a consensus by using the exchange of arguments (Habermas 1998, 278). These conditions are usually called the "ideal speech situation". This is defined by a number of factors. The most important ones according to Habermas are: (a) nobody can be excluded from the discourse, (b) everybody has the same chance to contribute, (c) the participant must mean what they say, (d) the communication must be free of external as well as internal constraints (Habermas 1996, 62; Habermas 1998, 282; Habermas 1984, 160; Hirschheim & Klein 1994).

While the ideal speech situation will rarely be realised, it is still important because of its transcendental quality. That means that it is a condition of the possibility of discourse. Participants in everyday communication need to pretend that the ideal speech situation is given in order for communication to make sense (cf. Introna 1997).

## **DISCOURSES IN INFORMATION SYSTEMS**

The last section tried to give an overview of the concepts of discourse as we find them in the writings of Foucault and Habermas. Briefly, Foucault stands for the investigation of the influence of power and bodily discipline on historical discourses whereas Habermas stands for the normative explication of the validity and acceptability of discourses. Foucault can be read as an attack on the universalistic idea of scientific rationality whereas Habermas tries to uphold the power of reason and the validity of norms despite the end of the grand narratives.

### **Foucauldian Discourses in IS**

There is a wealth of references to Foucault's understanding of discourses in the non-positivist literature on information systems. The reason for this may be that the organisational use of information and communication technology (ICT) provides decision makers with numerous possibilities to exert power, to change discourses, to discipline and normalise users. All of these are central themes for Foucault and consequently there seems to be a good fit between Foucault and (critical) IS research.

As Foucault's framework aims to expose the hidden influences on discourses, the power relations and the normalising effect, it can be used to analyse the influence of the use of ICT on communication. Edenius (2003), for example, discusses the way email shapes our discourses. A somewhat more general overview of the effects of computer-mediated communication is offered by Yoon (1996). Since Foucault's approach is highly critical of established institutions, his view of discourses is often utilised in research that aims to critique the status quo. One such area is that of exclusion. While the rhetoric of ICT is often highly inclusive and paints utopias of universal access, the reality is frequently that ICT excludes certain groups or individuals from discourse. This is the problem area of the "digital divide", or of access (Kvasny & Trauth 2003; Thompson 2003; Wastell 2003).

Another discourse accessible with Foucault is that of management fashions. Management fashions are of high importance concerning the adoption and use of technology. They shape our perception and define what is seen as rational. At the same time they are results of discourses (Doorewaard & van Bijsterveld 2001). Foucauldian discourse analysis can thus help us understand the development and trajectory of management fashions such as ERP (Westrup 2003), SCM, TQM, etc.

Finally we find applications of Foucault's view of discourse in research regarding singular organisational occurrences such as the introduction of a new system in the London ambulance service (McGrath 2003) or a specific use of a particular word with defining power for discourses such as the "surgical strike" in modern technology-supported warfare (Bissett 2002).

Using a Foucauldian approach can also be problematic. His concept of power is so wide that it is hard to distinguish from mere influence (Habermas 1994a). An even more serious problem is his basis of critique. Foucault criticises all discourses, including his own. He does not give us a way of determining which discourses are more desirable than others or which use of power is more legitimate than another. This is why Habermas can call him a "fortunate positivist" for whom validity is expressed in terms of power only (Habermas 1994b, 88). This also explains why Habermas charges Foucault with relativism. Furthermore, Foucault's writings, albeit self-critical, are arguably not applicable to themselves. They do not analyse their own genealogical roots in the same way they apply genealogy to other discourses.

Summarising the problems, one could say that Foucault offers great perspectives for the analysis and critique of extant social structures and that he sharpens the perceptions of discourse pathologies but he offers no means to address them normatively.

### **Habermasian Discourses in IS**

Scholars who use a Habermasian understanding of discourse tend to do so because of the normative direction it offers. Habermasian discourse always aims in the direction of ideal discourse and the ideal speech situation. Discursive action based on this idea is meant to promote cooperation and to arrive at generally acceptable principles (cf. Lyytinen & Hirschheim 1988). Consequently, one can frequently find references to Habermasian discourses in research that addresses issues of high ethical importance. Given the formal character of Habermas's theory of discourse, the application of this theory needs to concentrate on the processes of achieving validity of claims rather than on the content of particular claims. A typical question would be how discourses can be instituted that achieve consensus regarding contested validity claims which usually contain an ethical angle.

A prominent example of this would be the application of ICT in government and democracy. Democratic processes determine rights and obligations, the norms and the type of interaction between individuals. It is therefore not surprising that researchers who are interested in the impact of ICT on democratic processes use the Habermasian lens. It has been found that ICT has an ambivalent impact on e-government or e-democracy. On the one hand, it can improve discourses and help approximate the ideal speech situation (Heng & de Moor 2003). On the other hand, ICT can also skew discourses, hide inequalities and unacceptable outcomes (cf. Ess 1996; Kolb 1996). Another example of Habermasian discourse as a theoretical framework for studying the use of technology in organisational settings is that of e-learning or e-teaching. Again, these are quite obviously ethically charged as they determine the individual's role in society but also our individual and collective outlook on life. To understand the role of ICT and its impact on education Habermas offers an interesting perspective that allows the incorporation of normative matters going beyond the more technical research on e-teaching and e-learning (cf. Settle & Berthiaume 2002).

However, even though Habermasian discourse seems tailor-made for addressing issues that have an obvious ethical angle, one can also find Habermasian or similar approaches in more traditional IS research. One example is that of a rather conventionally motivated information systems development where Habermas's theory of discourse is used to determine the user requirements. The argument for Habermas (or related discourse theories) in this type of situation is that it is useful because it maximises the amount of information and minimises the risk of failure (cf. Elkjaer et al. 1991; Metcalfe & Lynch 2003). One can observe attempts to take these normative and factual considerations and turn them into applicable IS methodologies such as ETHICS, which is explicitly based on Habermas ideal speech situation (Hirschheim & Klein 1994).

There are several problems of the application of Habermas's theories in IS. One of them is the difference between ideal and real discourse. Real discourses are only binding when they approximate ideal discourses, which is always only possible to a certain degree. The question is when real discourses are sufficiently close to ideal discourses to exert normative power and produce acceptable results.

A related problem is that of the realisation of discourses. In many cases it will simply not be possible to include all of the parties who would have an interest in the discourse. In the case of IS research this problem can arise because commercial entities tend to be based on rigid hierarchies which by definition exclude the possibility of a free exchange of ideas where the better argument wins. Similarly, using IS as a means of discourse can also be problematic because of the change in communication structures it may entail (cf. Lyytinen & Hirschheim 1988).

Another problem of Habermasian discourses is that they are supposed to lead to a consensus. While Habermas recognises that the consensus is to be found in the realm of the ideal speech act rather than the real discourse, he believes that consensus in some way can be achieved, and be it only the consensus that no consensus is achievable.

A last problem that results from the use of discourses for technical purposes such as IS development is that of the instrumentalisation of discourses. Discourses as expressions of communicative action must be open to the better argument in a power-free zone. Apart from the practicalities of determining this, there is the problem that instrumental use of discourses for specific purposes, such as ISD, run counter to the very idea of discourses. This is a theoretical problem but it also creates practical repercussions (Howcroft & Wilson 2003).

### **THE RELATIONSHIP OF HABERMASIAN AND FOUCAULDIAN DISCOURSE IN IS RESEARCH**

The relationship between the two understandings of discourse is complex. The two authors have themselves engaged in a debate about their different views (cf. Kelly 1994). This debate was somewhat one-sided because Foucault died soon after starting to consider the Habermasian viewpoint whereas Habermas had time to develop his arguments in more depth. An important difference between the two is that Habermas's theory is reflective, that it considers its own ontological and epistemological roots, whereas Foucault is less clear about these. It is not possible to reiterate this entire debate here. We will concentrate on spelling out its meaning for IS researchers.

Using Foucault's discourse theory implies that the researcher is interested in the way discourses are structured, in the processes that allow or disallow access, and in the genealogy of the discourse. The central point of interest tends to be that of power and of the bodily means of exerting power. A Foucauldian approach shows how the traditional ideas of rationality were created and what that means for current discourses.

The scholar who wants to utilise Foucault's ideas as a basis of research will need to be critical of his or her research object in the sense that the creation and constitution of the object is of interest rather than the obvious appearance. Questions of power, discipline, and rationality are of central interest, particularly those that are not obvious and can only be discovered by a look at hidden backgrounds and tacit assumptions.

In contrast to a Foucauldian researcher who is interested in the structure and genealogy of discourses, a Habermasian researcher would concentrate on their validity and adherence to the procedures implied in the ideal speech situation. At the same time, Habermasian discourse theory can be seen as a continuation of critique from Kant to the Frankfurt School and therefore requires a critical perspective. The very idea of a Habermasian discourse is critical because the normative construct of the ideal speech situation allows the identification of shortcomings of real speech situations. This "critical turn" can be applied to information systems (cf. Ulrich 2001) where it looks at the content of discourses and at the different validity claims rather than the origin and social environments of statements. Choosing a Habermasian approach goes beyond an objective analysis of discourses and requires the researcher to understand him or herself as part of an ongoing discourse. One important aspect of this is that Habermasian discourse will generally aim to emancipate agents, an aim that can also be transferred to IS research (cf. Hirschheim & Klein 1994).

Choosing a Habermasian approach puts high demands on IS researchers. They are required to be critical and emancipatory, to participate in discourses and to be open to discussion. They should realise the ethical implications of their research and act on them. This means that validity claims should become transparent, that the affected parties should be able to participate in discourses, and that differences in the ability to be heard should be minimised (cf. Apel 1988).

The relationship between the two concepts of discourse is not easily captured. On the one hand, one could argue that they are contradictory. Foucault's concentration on power and bodily discipline in real discourses seems to be incommensurable with Habermas's emphasis on acceptability. The underlying concepts of rationality seem to contradict each other. A Foucauldian discourse analysis cannot capture the difference between legitimate and illegitimate uses of power, it treats the individual as

merely a product of its environment and generally does not care for the participants' views of power in discourses. One could thus argue that on the basis of a Foucauldian discourse, it is impossible to use a Habermasian perspective and vice versa.

On the other hand, there are correspondences between the two. They both see discourses as constitutive for reality, not only for social reality but generally for our individual life-worlds and our collective environments. Individual as well as collective identities are shaped and created by discourses. The probably most important point where they coincide is the idea of critique. While one can argue that Foucault's critique is theoretically deficient because he offers no alternative, no way of distinguishing acceptable from unacceptable uses of power, it can also be argued that his main motivation was the critique of modern society and the hope to change it (Foucault 1994b). The most important correspondence between Habermas and Foucault can thus be said to be their critical approach, their hope to use their work to improve the social world (Brooke 2002). This correspondence between the two can best be explained by emphasising their Marxist background. Neither Habermas nor Foucault could easily be called a Marxist but their intellectual and institutional development is closely linked to Marxist thought and thus to a fundamental critique of the alienating circumstances of the capitalist mode of production.

## CONCLUSION

How can IS researchers profit from this discussion? There are two possible answers to this question. The first one is that the two concepts of discourse are fundamentally incommensurable. If this is true then this paper can at best help researchers choose their position and avoid the mistake of mixing up the two. The second possible answer is that the two are complementary. The main line of this answer is that both aim to be critical in order to improve human circumstances. Researchers who follow this line of reasoning need to consider where and in what way a Foucauldian and Habermasian perspective of discourse can complement one another.

As an answer to this question it can be argued that a Foucauldian perspective can be helpful for a Habermasian researcher because it sharpens awareness of non-discursive elements of discourses. Looking at the genealogy of discourses and power constellations that shape them may help understanding and contextualising validity claims. A Habermasian researcher could use Foucauldian arguments within discourses in order to expose hidden validity claims that have been taken for granted but that may not be tenable when seen in broad daylight. Participating in and understanding real discourses will often be easier when one takes the Foucauldian perspective into account.

On the other hand, a Foucauldian may need the help of Habermasian ideas in order to fulfil her critical intention. Given that Foucault is good at exposing problematic practices but less so in offering alternatives, a Habermasian view may help develop alternatives. Furthermore, Habermas offers an insight into the individual that Foucault neglects. The shape of real discourses is clearly dependent on external power and it is to Foucault's credit that this has become more explicit. At the same time it is questionable whether discourses can really be understood without a reflection on the individual's understanding and thus on validity claims. This leads back to the critical aspect because an understanding of the views of the affected is necessary to develop an idea of improving social realities.

Summarising, one can state that for researchers with a critical intent the combination of Foucault's and Habermas's theories can be a useful approach to reaching their goals.

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