



The provocation of plaiting palm leaves

Habermas, Foucault and media presentations of education in Danish television

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ABSTRACT

This article demonstrates how an underlying knowledge of education is relied upon and reproduced in a number of television presentations of a specific education scheme in Denmark, the Free Youth Education scheme. Employing post-structuralist analysis of discourse, the media's critical presentations of the education scheme are shown to draw upon and recreate a conception of education as a non-leisure preparation for work, which should focus on obtaining specific, factual and immediately 'useful' skills and knowledge, and as an 'un-free' activity that does not contribute to personal development. In a Habermasian approach, the analysed news features could be viewed as instances of a responsible public service media fulfilling its role as the warning system in a 'context of discovery'. In contrast, the post-structuralist perspective reveals the particular mechanisms and implications of a power-knowledge constellation.

KEY WORDS ■ agenda-setting ■ discourse analysis ■ education ■ post-structuralism ■ public service media ■ public sphere ■ television news

Introduction

This article analyses a set of television news features on the Danish semi-public national television station TV2. The features focused on a specific education scheme, the Free Youth Education, and they were very effective in influencing agendas and in stimulating public debate in Denmark. I want to confront two different interpretations of these features and their context. In a Habermasian understanding, the news features and their effects on agendas in Danish society can be viewed as an example of the successful workings of a public sphere and of on-going processes of rationalization and legitimization in modernity. However, when analysed from a post-structuralist perspective, it

appears that the features both rest upon and reproduce a power–knowledge constellation in which **the concept of education** is equipped with certain taken-for-granted qualities, namely as an un-free, non-leisure preparation for work activity, which should focus on obtaining specific, factual and immediately ‘useful’ skills and knowledge.

It is not possible on this basis to claim that ‘Habermas is wrong’, for the Habermasian framework is carefully constructed as a self-referential system which deflects criticism. Yet, the analysis of the news features illustrates the fruitfulness of studying communication from an outset which is not constrained by Habermasian notions of power, knowledge and rationality.

The following section presents the news features and their context and describes their consequences for media coverage and public debate in Denmark. In the third section, I apply a Habermasian understanding of the public sphere in interpreting the news features and the surrounding events. The fourth section contains the alternative analysis, the perspective being a post-structuralist understanding of power, knowledge and discourse. The final section sums up the analysis and puts the conclusions into a wider perspective.

The story

On 21 February 1998, one of the top stories on the Danish TV2 national 7 o’clock news focused on a particular youth education programme, the ‘Free Youth Education’ scheme. The anchorwoman introduced the story:

Now we focus on adult and further education, that education which every year costs the state 10 billion kroner. In a series of features this week we will take a look at what the state really gets for this money. Some of it goes to the so-called free youth education, an education which is so free that there is virtually no control over it, even if it sometimes is quite exotic.

The story cuts to a group of three young persons who are apparently performing a traditional dance with swords, in an Asian or Oceanic country. The voice-over which accompanies the dancing youths continues:

This is education for Danish tax money. Camilla Laursen and two other young persons from Aarhus are spending 10 weeks on Bali among other things learning a Balinese war dance. The education is paid for by the state, and in addition the young persons have in their pockets about 3700 kroner from the State Education Grant on which to live.

After a brief interview with Camilla, the news feature goes on to explain the Free Youth Education scheme, how free it is, how much money the state will

pay for each participant, all illustrated with pictures of dancing and palm-leaf-plaiting Danish youths on Bali. This is followed by an interview with an education counsellor located on the island. The penultimate sequence shows a discussion between an education counsellor and a young woman, who is planning a stay on a native American reservation in North America as a part of her education programme. The young woman explains that she will use her stay there to find out in which direction she wants to go concerning work later in her life. The feature cuts back to the group of dancing youths on Bali and dwells on them for a few seconds without comment.

The Free Youth Education scheme was a particular education scheme in Denmark, launched in January 1995 by the then centre-left government. It sought to address the problem of the 'residual group': the approximately 25 percent of each year group which dropped out of the Danish education system after having completed elementary school. It did so by allowing participants in the scheme to construct an education or training programme of their own choice: with the assistance of a counsellor, participants could put together their own two- or three-year programme, consisting of elements of school-based learning, voluntary work and apprenticeships. Part of the individual programme could be carried out abroad. In addition to the state education grant, i.e. income support to individual participants which all Danish students may receive for a specified period of time, the state provided funding for counselling and for the purchase of specific educational activities. The overall aim was to steer the participants back into the conventional education system or into employment but also to support the personal development of each participant.

The scheme was abolished in early 2002 following the election of a right-leaning government in Denmark. It would be wrong to claim that the television presentations of the scheme in early 1998, which I analyse here, have caused this development. Yet, they undoubtedly contributed to a situation where the scheme was considered problematic: the news feature and TV2's follow-up coverage¹ had a large impact on the public. When broadcast, they provoked a debate comparable to an uproar and political pressure which, at one point, threatened to shut down the entire scheme at short notice or alter it fundamentally, even if very little was then known about its effects.² Representatives of the Danish employers' confederation and the trade union confederation complained about the scheme, characterizing it as a waste of resources and deploring the fact that it distracted young persons from conventional formal education programmes. Representatives of both government and opposition parties criticized the Free Youth Education for having become a playground for strong children of well-off middle-class families and not the

marginalized, ‘weak’ groups for whom they thought it had originally been intended.³

The media coverage and the nature of the debate was also affected considerably (Figure 1 and Table 1). At one point, newspaper coverage had increased more than fourfold to what it was prior to the television features. The debate as reflected in newspapers became polarized, commentaries accounting for almost two-thirds of total newspaper coverage after the TV2 story, as opposed to a quarter of the previous coverage.

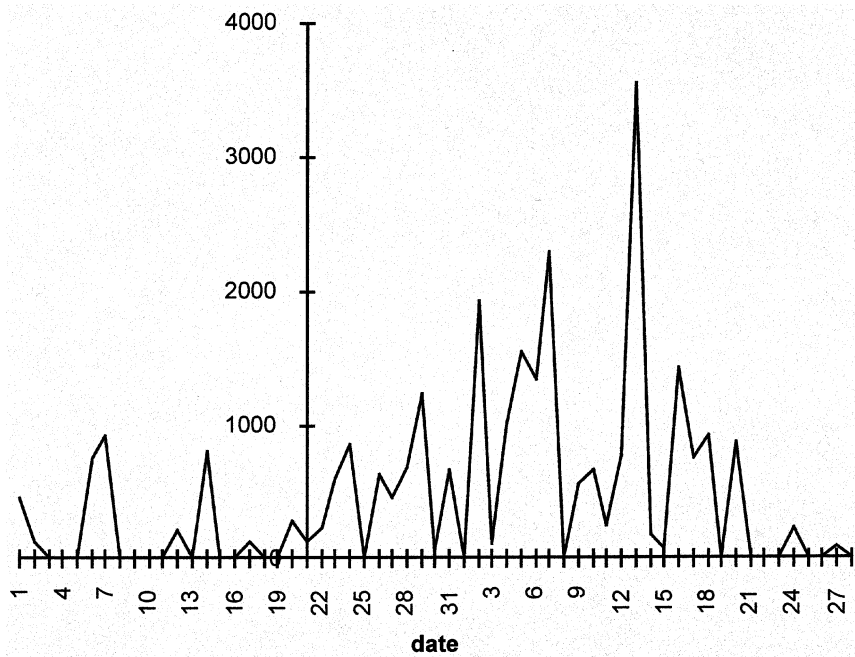


Figure 1 Media coverage in daily and weekly newspapers before and after TV2 news features 21 January 1998.⁴

Table 1 Commentaries as percentage of all articles

Week no.	Articles	Commentaries	Commentaries (Per Cent)
1–4	16	4	25
5–9	64	39	61

The public as a source of rationality

In media theoretical terms, the effect of the TV2 news features is an example of efficient agenda-setting. Through the features, an issue was firmly placed on the media agenda, just as the same issue was placed higher on both the public and political agenda. Not only did general media coverage of the Free Youth Education scheme increase considerably, the character of the coverage also changed to a predominance of comments where a personal position was explicitly presented, suggesting that the issue had been put higher on the public agenda.⁵ And finally, the repeated media interventions by politicians in the wake of the news features can be taken as an expression of a higher prioritization of the issue on behalf of political decision-makers.⁶

How would this process appear from a Habermasian point of view? Jürgen Habermas, the most prominent theorist of the public sphere, readily admits that a differentiation and professionalization of the public sets in as soon as it expands beyond very simple interactions, a development which is followed by unequal possibilities for influencing opinion formation and an unequal distribution of what he terms social power (Habermas, 1996: 373–4). He also willingly concedes that modern mass media face increasing pressures on the selection of focus and material, on both the supply and demand side, and that media messages are subject to information-processing strategies oriented by reception conditions as perceived by media experts, programme directors and the press. Presentation of news and commentaries therefore, for the most part, follow market strategies (Habermas, 1996: 376–7).

Yet, at the bottom of his theory of democracy, the public sphere remains essential as the source of reason and legitimacy, at least to the extent it is linked to civil society and thereby to the communicative structures of life worlds. The effects of professionalization and differentiation notwithstanding, it is in the public sphere that communicative power (the potential for a common will, shaped in coercion-free communication, which together with the medium of law can generate legitimate law) can be generated. The media in this connection have the potential to function as an important facilitator. This is the case at least to the extent that the media in question are linked with civil society and understand themselves as mandatory for this civil society. This means that they should maintain independence from political and economic pressures and impartially seek to take up the concerns and proposals of civil society, attempting to justify critique and confront the institutionalized political process with requirements for legitimization (Habermas, 1996: 378–9).

Being one of two television networks in Denmark with a public service obligation, TV2 fulfils most of these criteria. Commercial funding of the

network is not insignificant but a degree of independence is secured through public funding. Independence from political interference in programming is guaranteed by law, just as there is a statutory requirement for the network to seek 'quality, diversity and pluralism' in its programmes and to prioritize 'impartiality and objectivity' in its news coverage (Søndergaard, 1995).

Even if the TV2 features may apply specific information-processing strategies oriented towards facilitating reception, this would not seem problematic in the specific context. To Habermas (1996: 377), the problematic core in these information-processing strategies is that they 'come together to form a syndrome that works to depoliticize public communication'; but depoliticization can hardly be seen to result when the effect of the features was precisely to 'politicize' a specific field, at least in the sense that they made it the subject of intense public debate and criticism.

From the Habermasian point of view, the news features' multiple agenda-setting effects can, therefore, be viewed as an element of a wider discursive process of collective will formation, a process which approximates a situation of coercion-free communication. In a 'context of discovery', where questions of societal importance may be raised and made the object of open debate and contestation, the TV2 news features of January 1998 illustrate how the mass media can act as an institutionalized warning system, having both the capacity to identify, interpret and formulate questions of potential societal importance and the ability to exercise this capacity in such a way as to affect the routines of the institutionalized political system and its 'context of justification' (Habermas, 1996: 358–9). The TV2 features and their effects thus serve as a good example of the productive workings of the public sphere and of the ongoing process of societal rationalization in which claims of validity must be justified in discourse and where rational agreement and legitimate law may, in the last instance, be the result.

Publics as power-knowledge

This Habermasian assessment can, however, be confronted with another type of analysis and another set of conclusions. Thus, may not power be present even under conditions approximating 'coercion-free communication'? What if 'the better argument', which is supposed to have the last word in coercing free communication through its peculiar 'coercion-free coercion' (Habermas, 1981: 47), is little more than a hegemonic conception having been internalized by the participants in discourse (Fraser, 1989: 49)? If one takes as a starting point the assumption that power does not have a specific limited nature which means

that it can be eliminated through the mere absence of hierarchy and asymmetry in debate, it becomes possible to ask questions pertaining to the power-knowledge effects of what is seen as these 'better arguments': the effects of those constellations which have been constituted as knowledge, the given and self-evident in what Habermas terms the life-world sphere, the culturally inherited stock of patterns of interpretation handed down in language. It opens up the analysis to a focus on the procedures, institutions and conditions which establish these 'knowledges' and rationalities (Potter, 1996: 86) and to an exploration and questioning of the given and self-evident in public discourse.

In this Foucaultian perspective, the public sphere is thus not assumed to make up a source of rationality and legitimacy, as is the case when Habermas claims that life-worlds, civil society and the 'civil' public sphere *by definition* represent resources for communicative action and thereby for communicative rationality.⁷ Rather, the notion of rationality and power as constituting two opposing categories is deconstructed, insofar as the notions that 'rationality' can be understood as one given and unequivocal category and that the ability to coerce intentionally exhausts the concept of power are both rejected. 'Rationalities' are specific and historically variable phenomena just as these rationalities have power effects in the sense that rationalities, and the specific knowledges which are embodied in these rationalities, enable or disable specific possibilities of thinking and acting, and equip subjects and objects with enabling or disabling attributes, with positions of authority or submission, with a status of uncontestability or the opposite (Foucault, 1977: 27–8).

From this perspective it is not possible to speak of the public as a sphere which differs fundamentally from other spheres in the sense that under the right circumstances it is a power-free place. Instead, spaces for public debate, defined by being open to all and by equality of participation, must be seen as arenas of power-knowledge constellations, as one among other important arenas where power-knowledge constellations are (re)produced and where contending constellations confront each other (Haahr, 2000).

The power effects of knowledges are clear. If a phenomenon has obtained the status of knowledge it is beyond debate. Only when it has lost its status as knowledge does it become 'the contested'. Knowledges, in other words, limit possibilities and constrain the sphere of politics insofar as these knowledges are the self-evident points of departure for debate rather than a part of the debate itself and insofar as politics is exactly the sphere of the unsettled (Connolly, 1993: 227). The very condition that a statement has the status of knowledge entails that alternative understandings are excluded. What we know is the given, the obvious, the objective (Laclau, 1990: 34).

How can one explore this 'given and self-evident' in public discourse? In the present context: by identifying the taken-for-granted structures of meaning which underlie the explicit arguments.⁸ Or, put in terms of positivist media theory, one could say by studying the framing of public issues as having or not having specific attributes. However, in a post-structuralist discourse analytical perspective the focus would not only be on the attributes of issues which are presented or not presented but also on those underlying knowledges which make those attributes contextually meaningful (Rittenhofer, 1998: 47). This approach also reflects a Derridarian concern for the absent: we cannot assume that what is actually presented in language is all there is to it. Equally important may be the absent, those knowledges which are implied or subdued as self-evident truths or unthinkable thoughts (Fairclough, 1995: 106–9; Potter, 1996: 81–5).

Indeed, in the case of the media presentations of the Free Youth Education scheme, much is revealed in focusing on the implied premises of explicit arguments rather than the arguments themselves. Thus, in the following analysis the focus is not on the sorts of activities which are shown in the news features and the arguments which are being presented. Instead, the aim is to identify the statements and sets of statements upon which arguments rest and against the background of which arguments must be understood (Rittenhofer, 1998: 47). In this connection, one of the characteristics of the news features in question is that activities and arguments are relatively clear-cut. Representatives of the Free Youth Education scheme and participants in it are concerned to show that the scheme is valuable and worth preserving, while the news features as such criticize the value and appropriateness of the scheme.

While not taking for granted that any *specific* extract of the news features can be characterized in this manner, these different sorts of orientations provide a helpful frame for interpreting the detail and for extracting underlying statements (cf. Potter and Wetherell, 1994: 48–9, 56). Thus, if the news features are basically there to argue for and demonstrate the worthlessness of the Free Youth Education scheme, an underlying knowledge of the category of education can be identified. This is so since a critique of a given element implies the existence of its opposite, the un-criticizable.

In this respect, the approach adopted here parallels studies of mechanisms of 'othering' as the category through which elements of self-definition and self-understanding are defined and brought to the fore in a dialogical manner, namely in the discursive interplay between and inter-related construction of 'self' and 'other' (cf. Said, 1978; Hall, 1996; Riggins, 1997). Viewing the construction of 'self' and 'other' as a dialogical process means that self and other are co-constructed in a parallel manner. Similarly, in the present case the

process of a presentation of critique simultaneously constructs the explicitly described category and the implicitly presupposed alternative.

The production of 'education' through criticism

Now let us focus on some extracts from the news features which explicitly or implicitly question the value of the Free Youth Education scheme, thereby at the same time producing a specific knowledge of 'education'.

A series of statements concerning 'education' can be extracted this way. I argue that in the course of the two features which are analysed here,⁹ a knowledge of education is being produced in which education is a non-leisure preparation for work, which should focus on obtaining specific, factual and immediately 'useful' skills and knowledge, which does not contribute to personal development, which is basically an 'un-free' activity and which should be of a limited duration, no longer than necessary for the students to obtain ordinary employment.

Education as work and as opposed to leisure

The first of these statements – education as non-leisure, as fundamentally opposed to activities which relate to holidays and leisure time – can be identified in several connections, in the form of voice-over, pictures and graphics. It is perhaps the one statement on 'education' which stands out most clearly from the news features. Extract 1 sheds some light on the production of this statement.¹⁰

The production of 'education' as 'non-leisure' is apparent in the parts of the extract which follow the anchorwoman's introduction. Thus, in presenting the island of Bali as a *holiday* island, not the tropical island of Bali or just the island of Bali, the voice-over labels the activities in the simultaneous film sequence – Trine and Camilla dancing – as a holiday or a leisure activity. The following part of the extract extends this by making use of a rhetorical strategy where a conflict between pictures and spoken words is constructed. The sequence is, in fact, an example of alternative versions being presented in a single construction.¹¹ That is, the programme-makers are reporting the official justification for the Free Youth Education scheme through the voice-over, at the same time as they are undermining this version through developing their alternative in the pictures (see Potter and Wetherell, 1994: 52–4, 59–60 for a similar example).

Extract 1 *Close-up, anchorwoman introducing the feature*

Anchorwoman: The free youth education should have been an offer to the weakest young, but now it turns out that the education attracts quite a different type of young person, namely the strong. The LO (the Trade Union Confederation) and the DA (the Employers Confederation) are furious.

Film sequence showing young persons doing a sword dance in a tropical country.

Voice-over: Trine and Camilla from Aarhus are dancing a war dance on the holiday island Bali.

Cut to a film sequence showing both young women plaiting palm leaves. Cut to a close-up of a pair of hands plaiting leaves.

Voice-over: They are attending the free youth education. The stay in Bali is part of their preparation for a job in the Danish labour market.

Cut to a semi-close-up of Trine, the background is from Bali.

Trine: We are not to . . . relaxing. Something is happening, sure.

Interviewer: Do you work every single day?

Trine: Yes . . . we do. We have dance lessons every day. Decoration lessons every day. And then, down at a library which is called Pantok where we are doing some different things, with . . . it is also something with children.

Thus, according to the voice-over, Trine and Camilla are on Bali to prepare for a job in the Danish labour market. Parallel to these spoken words, the pictures show the two women engaged in the plaiting of palm leaves and subsequently a pair of hands plaiting, an activity which is almost as remote from a job in the Danish labour market as one can possibly imagine.

In the extract's interview with Trine, she appears to be attempting to justify her stay in Bali. However, her argument is located within a framework in which the stay has already been accepted as problematic. The question which precedes Trine's first answer is not included in the sequence but she is defending herself against a claim that a stay in Bali equals 'relaxation'. Since the question which precedes this defence is meant as a criticism of the Free Youth Education scheme, it is implied that education is opposed to relaxation and equal to 'work'.

Furthermore, the question which is explicitly posed in the sequence presupposes that education equals 'work every day'. Through her question, the

interviewer casts doubt on whether the stay in Bali means ‘work every single day’, implying that this ought to be the case, and thereby also that ‘education’ means ‘work every day’.

Several other stretches of the news features underpin the presentation of the Free Youth Education as ‘leisure’ and ‘spare time occupation’, thereby producing a knowledge of ‘education’ as non-leisure. In Extract 2, the interviewer explicitly labels the Free Youth Education programme of Trine as ‘spare time’, implying that ‘education’ is the opposite of ‘what you would have liked to do in your spare time’ or, in other words, the opposite of ‘personal wishes and interests’:

Extract 2 *Semi-close of Trine, being interviewed in a living room in Denmark*

Interviewer: So one could say that the free youth education for you (. . .) has been what you would have liked to do in your spare time but with a state education grant in your back pocket.

Trine: Yes it probably has

Shortly after this sequence, the voice-over and a graphic illustration explain that 43 percent of all participants include activities abroad in their individual programme:

Extract 3

Voice-over 43 percent choose to travel, like Trine and Camilla.

Graphic: *Full screen: ‘43 %’*
Behind the figure ‘43 %’ there is a drawing of a sun, a palm tree and musical notes.

Stays abroad are presented as ‘travel’ and not, for instance, as ‘study abroad’, ‘receiving education/training abroad’ or ‘internships abroad’, in itself constituting a labelling of activities abroad as ‘leisure’ or ‘holiday’. This labelling is made explicit in the graphical display in which the figure 43 percent, referring to the share of young persons in the scheme for which stays abroad comprise an element in their overall education plan, is accompanied by a sign referring to ‘holiday’.

In Extract 4, CS is apparently presenting an argument against the conception that a stay in Bali should be considered a holiday. However, the sequence actually has the opposite effect, producing a statement that it is indeed ‘holiday’, at the same time producing a knowledge of ‘education’ as ‘non-holiday’.

Extract 4 *Semi-close-up of a man sitting in a chair on a veranda in front of a wooden house on Bali. He is wearing a white T-shirt with a colourful imprint on the front. He is sun-tanned.*

CS
(presented as 'FYE
counsellor, Bali'):

The idea that what is going on here that it should be a kind of a disguised holiday (. . .) um (. . .) could very well arise in Denmark. When you *see* them running around here um dancing a little and um staying in the sunshine and having money sent from Denmark, living inexpensively down here. But it isn't. It is not a holiday.

The points here are accountability and justification. Making one's actions and claims accountable can be viewed as constructing them in ways which make them hard to rebut or undermine, ways which make them seem fair or objective (e.g. Watson and Sharrock, 1991). However, the *absence* of justification and accountability similarly undermine claims. In Extract 4, there is not only an absence of accountability. Through the way in which the sequence is constructed, the larger part of CS's argument is a description of 'holiday-like' activities which form part of the stay in Bali. Hence, his own descriptions actively undermine his claim that 'this is not holiday' and any justifications for this claim which may have followed have been cut out.

The physical setting for the presentation of CS's claims further undermine them. It is useful to compare the set-up of the sequence in Extract 4 with other sequences in the news features which comprise an interview with a business man, a politician and representatives of employers and employees, respectively. All the latter persons are filmed standing, against the background of offices, walls or passages, and they are all wearing business suits. CS, in contrast, is filmed wearing a T-shirt and he is sitting in a relaxed posture on a veranda in a tropical country, radiating 'holiday'.

Education as obtaining specific skills and immediately 'useful' knowledge

Several elements in the news features produce another aspect of 'education', namely as an activity aimed at obtaining specific skills and knowledge, which should be of immediate use for potential employers and lead directly to employment.

Extract 5 *Semi-close-up of Camilla, sitting on a veranda of a wooden house on Bali.*

Camilla: Well, I get (. . .) for fun (. . .) Well I don't know whether I get kind of an enormous *knowledge* from it but um it's fun trying something different, getting another culture.

Cut to Trine and Camilla, sitting in a couch in Denmark, looking at photos in a photo album.

Voice-over: After having returned from Bali, Trine and Camilla acknowledge that they can use neither the course in war dance nor the decoration course for anything whatsoever. Even if Trine and Camilla *cannot* use the stay in Bali for anything, the counsellors *maintain* that stays abroad in connection with the free youth education are good for the young.

In Extract 5 Camilla appears to excuse the statement that she has not obtained 'enormous knowledge' from her activities on Bali, thereby pointing to a statement that 'knowledge' of a kind, which the two courses do not represent, forms a part of 'education'. The subsequent voice-over furthermore presents 'education' as 'usable' and as usable for 'something'.

The knowledge of 'education' which is being produced in Extract 6 is intimately related to skills which are immediately necessary for subsequent employment. Activities which do not directly prepare participants for a specific job are implied to be 'non-education':

Extract 6 *Sequence showing three dancing youths in a practice room on Bali*

Voice-over: Seven out of ten pupils in the free youth education choose creative and soft subjects such as theatre, dance and street performance. Trine's goal is to become a social worker and Camilla wants to become a kindergarten teacher. They have both chosen war dance and palm leaf plaiting on Bali as a preparation for these education programmes.

War dance and palm leaf plaiting are presented as a preparation for specific employment in an ironic manner, in which the claim that the two courses are directly related to the employment wishes of Trine and Camilla is undermined by the picture side of the sequence. The stark contrast between what is happening on the screen and what is going on in the Danish labour market, as the voice-over refers to it, casts doubt on the claim about a relation between the two. The sequence thus again exemplifies a situation where alternative versions are presented in a single construction, the programmers' version being privileged.

'Education' as intimately related to 'job' is also a statement which can be extracted from Extract 7. Education is presented as a means to obtain employment for as many as possible, just as the Free Youth Education scheme is 'non-education' precisely for failing to be a means to employment:

Extract 7 *Semi-close-up, interview with HB, filmed against the background of an orange wall.*

HB
(presented as
educational
secretary, the trade
union
confederation)

It is all about having so many people *employed* as possible, and also about giving the young persons a good take off for the labour market. And it is *this* which I question that the free youth education contributes to at all.

Education as opposed to excitement and personal development

A further element is the production of education as opposed to both personal development and to excitement. From Extract 8 it appears that pursuing your personal development is extravagant. The Free Youth Education scheme is thus presented as 'non-education' in allowing young persons an opportunity for personal development, partly paid for by public means for a two-year period.

The Free Youth Education scheme is also presented as a problem in offering 'excitement' and a 'break'. That 'break' as opposed to 'education' fits well with the production of 'education' as 'work' and as opposed to 'leisure'. That 'excitement' is also opposed to 'education' similarly fits well with the presentation of 'personal development' as 'non-education'.

Extract 8 *Semi-close-up, interview with HB, filmed against the background of an orange wall.*

HB
(presented as
educational
secretary, the trade
union
confederation)

Is it *true* that you at an age of 17 to 18 years are to have *two* years paid by the public finances, for pursuing your personal development at that age, I *do* perhaps think it is a bit extravagant.

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Furthermore it turns out that the weak group, for whom this scheme was actually intended, are not the ones who attend it. Those who attend it are those who in reality are resourceful, because here is an opportunity which they believe could be exciting and will give them a break before they are about to choose an education. I am convinced this is not an appropriate way to spend money.

The production of education as 'un-free'

That 'education' is also opposed to 'freedom' appears from Extract 9. In the first part of the sentence, a conflict is explicitly created between 'free' and 'education', as it is stated that it is questionable whether one can call the Free

Youth Education scheme an education, since it is 'so free'. 'Free' noticeably also equals 'dangerous' in this sentence.

Extract 9

HS
(presented as
chairman of
Parliament's
educational
committee)

Semi-close-up, interview with HS, filmed in a passage

That one must make it so free that in reality it turns out to be limited what (. . .) whether one can call it an education (. . .) erm (. . .) that, that I find, I find it *dangerous* because it it it can actually precisely it can be precisely something which can contribute to postponing the choice of *a lot* of people, erm, because now we'll take these three years and then we'll see.

Extract 9 also feeds in with the production of an intimate relation between 'education' and subsequent work, as 'education' is implied to be an activity which should have a limited duration. It is presented as problematic, indeed dangerous, that the choice (of 'education') is postponed by the 'non-education', implying that people should finish their education as soon as possible, that education should be no longer than necessary. Necessary for what? For finding a job?

'Education' and 'non-education' summarized

Table 2 summarizes the statements on 'education' and 'non-education' which have been extracted here, capturing the essence of discursive knowledges of 'education' as they have emerged in the presentation of the Free Youth Education scheme on Danish television.

Table 2 'Education' and 'non-education' in the news features

'Education'	is opposed to:	'Non-Education'
equals:		equals:
Work (every day)		Relaxation
(Subsequent) job		Holiday
Employment		Leisure
Specific skills		Break
'Useful' knowledge		Personal wishes and interests
Limited duration		Personal development
Compulsion (Un-freedom)		Excitement
		Freedom
		Danger

Sketches of an alternative

There is, however, also another set of statements on 'education' which can be extracted from the arguments in the features. This version is only vaguely identifiable, which is, in itself, significant, pointing to a systematic privilege for the previously described knowledges of 'education'. But even if its contours are vague, an alternative version is clearly there. Its characteristics are that it maintains some of the elements which are used to characterize 'non-education' but notably without presenting them as a *problem*, whereby they would become 'non-education'. On the contrary, the potentials of these elements are claimed:

Extract 10 *Semi-close-up, interview with Camilla, sitting in living room*
 Camilla: [About learning war dancing and palm leaf plaiting:] We can't use it *precisely* as such, rather it (. . .) has probably been a little (. . .) to try out something different and fun, but actually, you *can*, there are some possibilities for trying, you can make some materials here in Denmark, but you don't *have* palm leaves here, so (. . .)

Interviewer: Why is it then so good that you have learned it?

Camilla: (. . .) It is probably good for myself, I have become more (. . .) I think I have become more mature from it.

Extract 11 *Semi-close-up, interview with Trine, sitting in living room*
 Trine: We are not sitting and *relaxing* on the other side of earth, we are doing something, we are staying in *one* place and we, you learn a lot, that's for sure.

Interviewer: *What* have you learned?

Trine: We have worked in a library, which was also an information centre, where you, you talk English there (. . .) with those who are there (. . .) and um just having to put books in order in a different country, it is something, it, I don't know (. . .).

Clearly, Camilla and Trine are both struggling to escape the knowledge of 'education' within which the interviewer's inquisitive questions are posed. This is the knowledge where 'education' equals specific and immediately job-relevant, 'useful' skills. They are not really able to do so, as they both try to justify their activities with reference to precisely those specific skills: Camilla considers the possibility of making and working with some kind of 'palm leaf substitute' in Denmark, in order to render her plaiting course 'useful' but gives it up. Trine also tries to point to specific skills, namely English language skills, developed in a library, to justify her activities.

Yet, both Trine and Camilla refer – or try to refer – to something apart from skills. Camilla puts it in terms of ‘maturity’. Trine appears to be saying that putting books in order in a library in a different country was indeed a very special and intense experience for her. ‘Personal growth’ or ‘personal development’ could be what is vaguely hinted at here, the vagueness perhaps stemming from the systematic privilege of the programmers’ version, in the news features and maybe also in the wider society.

In conclusion

A Habermasian understanding of the TV2 news features and their effects would point to the television channel’s activities as evidence of a functioning public sphere: Responsible media make use of their capacities to take up ‘questions of public concern’ and to require legitimization from the institutionalized political process. Thereby they fulfil their obligations to serve as civil society’s institutionalized warning system.

Conversely, a post-structuralist perspective reveals how an underlying set of knowledges, a particular power–knowledge constellation, is drawn upon and recreated in the news features. Thus, what from a Habermasian point of view appears as a well-functioning ‘context of discovery’ has a very different side to it when viewed from here. The ‘questions of public concern’ are framed in a manner which depend on and reproduce a specific power–knowledge constellation which is anything but ‘impartial’. The analysis shows how a set of knowledges of ‘education’ is constructed, with education as an un-free, non-leisure preparation for work activity, which should focus on obtaining specific, factual and immediately ‘useful’ skills. In effect a particular binarism of two mutually exclusive categories is thereby created, the content of the category of ‘education’ being defined by its opposite, ‘non-education’.

This binarism may help us understand the news features’ apparent success in affecting agendas in Danish society. Thus, several other analyses have pointed to precisely the employment of bipolar oppositions as a very efficient discursive tool for placing a given debate within a particular framing. Keeping our focus on public debates about education, Green (1986: 20), for instance, concludes on binary oppositions that ‘binarism is a practice that is both powerfully generative and profoundly restrictive and regulatory in terms of how thinking and discourse proceeds’. Similarly, Kenway (1990) describes how Australian educational policy was fundamentally shaped by a debate, the frames of which had been defined by a series of binary oppositions. Knight et al. (1990) and Ball (1990) also point to the importance of binary oppositions,

in the debate about multiculturalism in Australian educational policy and in a discussion of the significance of management discourse in the British educational system respectively. Finally, Ball (1994: 28–47) views the political dominance of ‘cultural restorationism’ in British educational policy in the early 1990s as the expression of the employment of a series of simple polarities among a group of right-wing conservative politicians.

It is not possible against this background to claim that ‘Habermas is wrong’. From a Habermasian point of view, the news features themselves, the public debate they caused in Denmark and the analysis of them in this article would make up distinct elements in a discursive process in which certain validity criteria are always already presupposed. By engaging in argumentative criticism, we presuppose a difference between persuasion and power just as we submit ourselves to the validity criteria of communicative rationality (cf. Chambers, 1996: 137–8, 234). In this manner, the Habermasian framework is carefully constructed as a self-referential system which deflects criticism.

Yet, in contrasting the two interpretations, the fruitfulness of the post-structuralist perspective is highlighted. Where the specific nature of power, knowledge and rationality is viewed as an object of study rather than as a set of assumptions upon which to proceed, the result is a richer analysis of public discourse. The Habermasian assessment of the Free Youth Education news features is rather sterile in comparison, leaving few openings for the study of the contents rather than just the procedural surroundings of communication.

This does not mean that the two perspectives are entirely incompatible: in applying a post-structuralist analytic to public discourse, new fields are, in effect, pulled into the domain for Habermasian critical discursive testing, as self-evident knowledges are re-articulated as contestable versions. As described by Luke (1997), critical discourse analysis is ‘a situated political practice: a machine for generating interpretations and for constructing readings, none of which is neutral or unsituated’. In this manner, analysis of discourse may open up ‘possibilities of thinking otherwise’ (Foucault, 1985: 9; 1987: 112), in questioning the limits of what is seen as the given. As opposed to what is often argued, such analyses therefore contribute to the modernist project of self-referential critique, the continuous questioning of itself which can be seen as the defining characteristic of modernity (McCarthy, 1994; Conway, 1999: 71).¹²

This having been said, the compatibility remains partial, for the post-structuralist perspective must reject claims that under the right circumstances the norms and understandings which emerge from such critical discursive testing can claim universality and that these understandings are elevated above relations of power.

Notes

- 1 The first feature was followed by a live interview with a counsellor in the education scheme and by a more comprehensive feature on the subject in the regional network news at 7.30 pm, to be concluded with a repeat story in the late 10 o'clock news, and a follow-up story in the 7 o'clock news on 22 January.
- 2 In early 1998, very few individuals had completed a full programme, and a comprehensive evaluation of the scheme had just been initiated.
- 3 See, for example, the Danish national dailies *Aktuelt*, 10 February 1998 and *Information*, 11 February 1998. In effect, the scheme was not particularly intended for 'weak' groups but more broadly for the 'residual group' of young persons who leave the education system at an early stage.
- 4 Figure 1 and Table 1 are based on a registration of all Danish newspaper articles concerning the Free Youth Education scheme in January and February 1998. The newspapers covered included national, regional and local newspapers and daily and weekly newspapers. Magazines and local advertising weeklies are not included.
- 5 The distinction between the media agenda, the public agenda and the political agenda is made by among others Rogers and Dearing (1988) and Dearing and Rogers (1996). Rogers and Dearing define the public agenda as the agenda which emerges when a representative sample of the population in question is asked to identify the most important problems confronting a society at a given point of time. As it appears, the concept of 'the public agenda' is used in a somewhat different sense here, namely as the agenda which emerges from the debate sections of daily newspapers.
- 6 It should be acknowledged that the increased presence of political decision-makers in media presentations following the TV2 features may also be seen as a different expression of the news features' effect on the media agenda. It is a journalistic decision whether to provide space or not for politicians' opinions, just as it is a possibility that politicians appear in the media on the media's initiative.
- 7 According to Habermas, that part of the public which is anchored in civil society is also *by definition* separate from strategically oriented actors: 'Civil society . . . is demarcated from the state, the economy, and other functional systems, but coupled with the private spheres of the life-world' (Habermas, 1996: 367–8).
- 8 It is a presupposition for the possibility of analysing the given, self-evident and objective that this objectivity is never complete. As long as they can be made the object of analysis, such knowledges must, in principle, be contingent and open to contestation. However, knowledges can only be characterized as such to the extent that their immediate contextual status is that of self-evidence, i.e. that a certain given understanding is presupposed for utterances to be contextually meaningful.
- 9 The following analysis is based on the 7 o'clock news report on TV2 national news and on the 7.30 regional news from TV2 Øst – the TV2 regional network for Eastern Jutland – both broadcast on 21 January 1998.
- 10 The problem of translation for discourse analysis and textual analysis, in general, should be acknowledged here, although it will not be addressed. There is always a 'loss of meaning' when we confront another culture. 'Culture difference

emerges from the borderline moment of translation [that can be described] as the “foreignness of languages” (Bhabha, 1990: 314).

- 11 I take ‘versions’ to refer to statements the truth status of which is more contested than knowledges.
- 12 ‘Genealogy informs practical reasoning, which in turn enables strategic political resistance’ (Conway 1999: 71).

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