

DISCURSIVE STRUCTURES IN THE NETWORK SOCIETY

A THEORETICAL CASE STUDY ON THE ROLE OF IMMATERIAL STRUCTURES IN MEDIA ORGANISATIONS

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Abstract

The article takes the debates on structure and agency as a starting point to emphasise the importance of finding a balanced approach towards the discursive and the material in these debates. Through a critical reading of Giddens' structuration theory and Castells' network society theory, the tendencies in sociological (and communication and media studies) theory to render agency too present, to privilege the material over the discursive, and to fixate and permanently sediment all four concepts, is highlighted. The article then reverts to the notion of "discursive structure" as elaborated in Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory to further unravel the complexities of the relationships between these four categories, while at the same time guaranteeing that the cultural-discursive dimensions of structure gain more visibility. The workings of this more fluid and immaterial model of discursive structures is illustrated by focussing on the media organisation, as one of the points where the discursive and the material, and structure and agency meet. Through the lens of the media organisation we can see how agency and structure are both located at the level of the material and the discursive, and how the material and the discursive both have structure and agency.

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Structure and Agency

One of the long-standing debates in the social sciences is the structure and agency debate. Without wanting to revisit the history of sociology, it is important here to look at (some of) the key terms of this debate. Traditionally, agency refers to the capacity of individuals for independent action and free choice, while structure is used as an overarching label for patterned social arrangements that are sometimes defined as limiting individual freedom. As Gardner (2004, 1) summarises it, agency:

concerns the nature of individual freedom in the face of social constraints, the role of socialisation in the forming of “persons” and the place of particular ways of doing things in the reproduction of culture. In short, it is about the relationships between an individual human organism and everyone and everything that surrounds it.

In his structuration theory, Giddens argues against a dualism between agency and structure, and proposes instead a duality of structure, where structure is both the medium and outcome of social action. To use his words: “By this duality of structure I mean that social structures are both constituted by human agency, and yet at the same time are the very medium of this constitution” (Giddens 1976, 121). For Giddens (1998, 76), this implies the reproduction of structures through agency-driven activities: “We should see the social life not just as ‘society’ out there, or just the product of ‘the individual’ here, but as a series of ongoing activities and practices that people carry out, which at the same time reproduce larger institutions.”

Structure is not to be equated with constraint but is always both constraining and enabling. This, of course, does not prevent the structured properties of social systems from stretching away, in time and space, beyond the control of any individual actors. Nor does it compromise the possibility that actors’ own theories of the social systems which they help to constitute and reconstitute in their activities may reify those systems. The reification of social relations, or the discursive “naturalization” of the historically contingent circumstances and products of human action, is one of the main dimensions of ideology in human life (Giddens 1984, 25-26).

At the same time, Giddens (1991) sees the process of individualisation as one of the key characteristics of present-day society, where specific ways of life become dis-embedded en re-embedded. More specifically, Giddens places a strong emphasis on the notion of reflexivity, where – after “the hold of tradition was broken” (Giddens 1991, 155) – the self becomes constituted by the reflexive ordering of self-narratives. To quote Giddens (1991, 51): “Self-identity, in other words, is not something that is just given, as a result of the continuities of the individual’s action-system, but something that has to be routinely created and sustained in the reflexive activities of the individual.” This focus on the project of the self does not imply that the notion of structure disappears from the analysis. In *Modernity and self-identity*, Giddens discusses a series of dilemmas (Unification versus fragmentation; Powerlessness versus appropriation; Authority versus uncertainty; Personalised versus commodified experience) which all have a structural dimension. For instance, in the case of commodification, Giddens (1991, 198) writes: “For the project of the self as such may become heavily commodified. Not just lifestyles, but self-actualisation is packaged

and distributed according to market criteria." Nevertheless, through this emphasis on the self-reflexive individual, agency becomes privileged over structure.

Secondly, Giddens tends to privilege a more material perspective on structure. This does not imply that immaterial aspects are completely ignored, though. As the above quote from *The Constitution of Society*, for instance, indicates, ideology plays a role in his work. Also his definition of structure itself, as the combination of rules and resources, brings in a more culturalist dimension. Giddens (1984, 25) defines structure as "Rules and resources, or sets of transformation relations, organized as properties of social systems." Rules are seen as "techniques or generalisable procedures applied in the enactment/reproduction of social practices" (Giddens 1984, 21), and their role in the constitution of meaning is emphasized (Giddens 1984, 20), which opens up possibilities for a more culturalist reading. Recourses are located at the level of allocation and authority, and defined as "the media whereby transformative capacity is employed as power in the routine course of social interaction" (Giddens 1979, 92). While allocation covers those "capabilities which generate command over objects or other material phenomena," and thus has a clear materialist focus, authorisation (seen as those "capabilities which generate command over persons" (Giddens 1979, 100)) again has a potential culturalist dimension. Despite these (still rather vague) links to the more immaterial dimension of structure, Giddens's main focus is on the material, which has led authors like Archer (1988, xi) to add a third element to the (material) structure and agency debate, namely (immaterial) culture. She writes that "there is a similar task of reconciling objective knowledge [...] with human activity and our capacity for generating new interpretations within our heads or for the interpersonal negotiation of new meanings." Speaking more broadly, Giddens's position bears witness of the tendency of sociologists to focus on structure as material, not acknowledging (or thematising) the presence of structure in culture, as Sewell (1992, 3) argues:

Sociologists typically contrast "structure" to "culture." Structure, in normal sociological usage, is thought of as "hard" or "material" and therefore as primary and determining, whereas culture is regarded as "soft" or "mental" and therefore as secondary or derived. By contrast, semiotically inclined social scientists, most particularly anthropologists, regard culture as the preeminent site of structure.

The Network Society: Individualism and Opened Up Structures

The sometimes problematic way that in sociological (and media studies) theory is dealt with structure and agency can also be illustrated through the case of the network society. The "network" metaphor is frequently used to describe the contemporary societal configuration, simultaneously highlighting the role of new media within this configuration. Here in this segment I want to focus on one elaboration of the network metaphor, as developed by Castells in *The Rise of the Network Society* (2010a), where he claims that networks are the "new social morphology" (Castells 2010a, 500). If we zoom in closer on what Castells means by networks (and *in extenso*, the network society), we can find the following description, expressing the hope for permanent extension and connection: "Networks are open structures, able to expand without limits, integrating new nodes as long as they are able to communicate within the network, namely as long as they share the same communicational

codes (for example, values or performance goals). A network-based social structure is a highly dynamic, open system, susceptible to innovating without threatening its balance." (Castells 2010a, 501-502). At first sight, Castells places a strong emphasis on structure, for instance, when he explains the objective of this book:

This book studies the emergence of a new social structure, manifested in various social forms, depending on the diversity of cultures and institutions throughout the planet. This new social structure is associated with the emergence of a new mode of development, informationalism, historically shaped by the restructuring of capitalist mode of production towards the end of the twentieth century (Castells 2010a, 14).

At the same time, Castells' approach of structure is characterised by a series of problems. First, there is, like with Giddens, a strong emphasis on the material dimension of structure, as is illustrated by his following statement: "The convergence of social evolution and information technologies has created a new material basis for the performance of activities throughout the social structure. This material basis, built in networks, earmarks dominant social processes, thus shaping social structure itself." (Castells 2010a, 502) Broad-sweeping models of the network (or information) society come with a high price. Obviously, there is always the risk of essentialisation, and the negligence of the contingency and diversity that characterise the social. In Castells' case, two nuances first need to be made. Castells (2010a, 502) explicitly warns against a homogenising approach of the information society: "Thus, to some extent it would be improper to refer to an "informational society," which would imply the homogeneity of social forms everywhere under the new system. This is obviously an untenable proposition, empirically and theoretically." And secondly, he spends ample attention to the notion of diversity, frequently emphasising its importance. Nevertheless, Castells does not escape the logics of homogenisation, as diversity is only placed (and tolerated) within the frontiers of the network society itself. This frontier is created by combining diversity with comprehensiveness (Castells 2010a, 507). The following quote shows this homogenising logic of the one network:

What characterizes the new system of communication, based in the digitized, networked integration of multiple communication modes, is its inclusiveness and comprehensiveness of all cultural expressions. Because of its existence, all kinds of messages in the new type of society work in a binary mode: presence/absence in the multimedia communication system. Only presence in this integrated system permits communicability and socialization of the message. All other messages are reduced to individual imagination and to increasingly marginalized face-to-face subcultures (Castells 2010a, 405).

Agency itself is not very present in *The Rise of the Network Society* (2010a) – this issue receives more attention in the second part of the trilogy, *The Power of Identity* (2010b) – but in the former publication the network itself gains agency because of its strong impact on the social. For instance, when talking about politics, Castells (2010a, 507) writes: "Ultimately, the powers that are in the media networks take second place to the power of flows embodied in the structure and language of these networks." One of the consequences is that the cultural is placed in a secondary position, as the following sentence illustrates: "Cultural expressions are abstracted

from history and geography, and become predominantly mediated by electronic communication networks [...]” (Castells 2010a, 507).

This brings us to another problematic field of tension within the network society (and Castells’ approach of it), which is the position attributed to culture. At first sight, culture plays a crucial role in *The Rise of the Network Society* (2010a). In the conclusion, Castells comes close to declaring the cultural the most significant dimension of the network society, when he states that “[...] we have entered a purely cultural pattern of social interaction and social organization” (Castells 2010a, 508). In other places, he does refer to Barthes and Baudrillard, claiming that “Thus, there is no separation between ‘reality’ and symbolic representation. In all societies humankind has existed in and acted through a symbolic environment” (Castells 2010a, 508), but these more culturalist ideas are not integrated within the main thrust of his work.

A first problem is the materialisation of culture, where Castells shifts back to the logics of structure, and moves away from meaning. This reductive approach towards culture becomes apparent when Castells discusses the culture of the informational economy, and primarily locates culture within institutions and organisations. To use his words: “I contend, along with a growing number of scholars, that cultures manifest themselves fundamentally through their embeddedness in institutions and organizations” (Castells 2010a, 164). Although – at least potentially – an argument could be made about organisational culture, Castells (2010a, 164) tends to look more at the relation between “the development of a new organizational logic” and “the current process of technological change.”

Secondly, Castells tends to homogenise and regionalise culture. Culture is attributed to specific regions in the world, where specificity is generated through the logics of the nation or region, as is for instance the case in East Asian business networks. Castells (2010a, 195) writes: “Both the similarities and the differences of East Asian business networks can be traced back to the cultural and institutional characteristics of these societies.” Within these regions, little acknowledgement is given to the existence of the many different cultural positioning that characterise these regions (or nations). Interestingly enough, in one of his sentences defining culture, he disconnects it from collective identities: “Symbolic communication between humans, and the relationship between humans and nature, on the basis of production (with its complement, consumption), experience, and power, crystallize over history in specific territories, thus generating *cultures* and *collective identities*” (Castells 2010a, 15). Later, Castells (2010a, 357, my emphasis) also uses cultures (in plural), again signifying national or regional cultures. Moreover, here too, culture becomes seen as secondary, impacted upon by “the” new technological system: “Because culture is mediated and enacted through communication, *cultures* themselves – that is, our historically produced systems of beliefs and codes – become fundamentally transformed, and will be more so over time, by *the* new technological system.”

A possible solution for this homogenising tendency towards culture is Castells’ focus on identity, but here we see a strong individualising tendency towards the concept of identity (and little room for escaping the logics of the network society itself). This individualised approach towards identity can be found in his early definition of identity, as “the process by which a social actor recognizes itself and constructs

meaning primarily on the basis of a given cultural attribute or set of attributes, to the exclusion of a broader reference to other social structures” (Castells 2010a, 22). Again, identity is deemed to play a significant role in the network society, as Castells writes (2010a, 22): “The first historical steps of informational societies seem to characterize them by the pre-eminence of identity as their organizing principle.” The network society metaphor aims to capture the societal changes that have led to the fragmentation of the social through increased processes of individualisation, as Castells remarks: “The dissolution of shared identities, which is tantamount to the dissolution of society as a meaningful social system, may well be the state of affairs in our time” (Castells 2010b, 420). But this metaphor also aims to provide a hopeful and alternative model for capturing societal coherence. Again, as Castells writes: “However, we have also observed the emergence of powerful resistance identities, which retrench in communal heavens, and refuse to be flushed away by global flows and radical individualism” (Castells 2010b, 421). Nevertheless, the individualised approach towards identity also comes with a price, as the cultural-discursive role of (collective) identities remain virtually absent, blocking the structural-cultural dimension of the subject position from gaining any visibility and prominence in his work.

Immaterial Structures: Discourses and Fantasies

One area where the issue of immaterial structures has been theorised is post-structuralist discourse theory (DT), for instance, by Laclau and Mouffe (1985). The theoretical starting point of Laclau and Mouffe’s DT is the proposition that all social phenomena and objects obtain their meaning(s) through discourse, which is defined as “a structure in which meaning is constantly negotiated and constructed” (Laclau 1988, 254). The concept of discourse is also described as a structured entity, which is the result of articulation (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 105), which in turn is viewed as “any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice.”¹ In this – what they call – radical materialist position the discursive component of reality is emphasised without equating discourse and reality.

As the definitions above indicate, discursive structures (and their articulations) play a vital role in the construction of the social. In Laclau and Mouffe’s (1985) work, we find a clear acknowledgement of the materialist dimension of social reality, which is combined with the position that discourses are necessary to generate meaning for the material, and provide us with structures to think the social. In their discourse theory, the focus on meaning and discourse is legitimised by asserting that, although a “stone exists independently of any system of social relation [...] it is, for instance, either a projectile or an object of aesthetic contemplation only within a specific discursive configuration” (Laclau and Mouffe 1990, 108). For Laclau and Mouffe, meanings and identities are constructed through the process of articulation, which involves linking up discursive elements around a number of privileged signifiers, which they call nodal points. These nodal points temporally construct and stabilise discursive structures, or, in the words of Torfing (1999, 88-89), they “sustain the identity of a certain discourse by constructing a knot of definite meanings.” Nodal points too are constructed on the basis of articulation:

The practice of articulation consists in the construction of nodal points which partially fix meaning; and the partial character of this fixation proceeds from the openness of the social, a result, in its turn, of the constant overflowing of every discourse by the infinitude of the field of discursivity (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 113).

One of the areas Laclau and Mouffe focus on is how the identity of individual or collective agents is discursively structured. Identity is – according to Sayyid and Zac (1998, 263) – defined in two related ways. First, identity is defined as “the unity of any object or subject.” This definition links up with Fuss’ (1989, ix) definition of identity as “the ‘whatness’ of a given entity.” A second component of the definition of identity arises when this concept is applied to the way in which social agents can be identified and/or identify themselves within a certain discourse. Examples Sayyid and Zac (1998, 263) give of these structural positionings are “workers, women, atheists, British.” Laclau and Mouffe call this last component of identity a subject position, and define it as the positioning of subjects within a discursive structure:

Whenever we use the category of “subject” in this text, we will do so in the sense of “subject positions” within a discursive structure. Subjects cannot, therefore, be the origin of social relations – not even in the limited sense of being endowed with powers that render an experience possible – as all “experience” depends on precise discursive conditions of possibility (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 115).

This last definition implies neither a structuralist nor a voluntarist position. In spite of Laclau and Mouffe’s unanimity with Althusser’s critique on the autonomous and completely self-transparent subject (which is a voluntarist position), they vehemently reject Althusser’s deterministic working of economy in the last instance (which is a structuralist position), as they think that this aspect of Althusser’s theory leads to a “new variant of essentialism” (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 98).

Society and social agents lack any essence, and their regularities merely consist of the relative and precarious forms of fixation which accompany the establishment of a certain order. This analysis [of Althusser] seemed to open up the possibility of elaborating a new concept of articulation, which would start from the overdetermined character of social relations. But this did not occur (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 98).

Their critical attitude towards Althusser does not alter the fact that Laclau and Mouffe borrow the originally Freudian concept of overdetermination from Althusser, though not without altering its meaning. Laclau and Mouffe see identity as a fusion of a multiplicity of identities, where the overdetermined presence of some identities in others prevents their closure. The multiplicity of these discursive structures will prevent their full and complete constitution, because of the inevitable distance between the obtained identity and the subject, and because of the (always possible) subversion of that identity by other identities. It is precisely the contingency of identities that creates the space for subjectivity and the particularity of human behaviour. In this way, a structuralist position is avoided, and a poststructuralist stance is taken.

Although even in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985) identities were seen as a fusion of a multiplicity of identities, where the overdetermined presence of some identities in others prevents their closure, Laclau's later work more clearly distinguishes between subject and subjectivation, and between identity and identification. The impossibility of the multiplicity of identities to fill the constitutive lack of the subject prevents their full and complete constitution because of the inevitable distance between the obtained identity and the subject, and because of the (always possible) subversion of that identity by other identities. In Laclau's (1990, 60) own words: "the identification never reaches the point of full identity." As Torfing (1999, 150) illustrated, there are many possible points of identification:

A student who is expelled from the university might seek to restore the full identity she never had by becoming either a militant who rebels against the "system," the perfect mother for her two children, or an independent artist who cares nothing for formal education.

Precisely the contingency of identities and the failure to reach a fully constituted identity creates the space for subjectivity, agency, freedom, and the particularity of human behaviour:

The freedom thus won in relation to the structure is therefore a traumatic fact initially: I am condemned to be free, not because I have no structural identity as the existentialists assert, but because I have a failed structural identity. This means that the subject is partially self-determined. However, as this self-determination is not the expression of what the subject already is but the result of the lack of its being instead, selfdetermination can only proceed through processes of identification (Laclau 1990, 44).

In other words, and more generally, in Laclau and Mouffe's DT, discourses and identities are thus not defined as stable and fixed: a discursive structure is never safe from elements alien to that discourse. There is always a surplus (or a residue of elements) – the field of discursivity – that prevents the full saturation of meaning (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 112). Later on, (mainly) Laclau will refer to the Lacanian concept of lack to theorise this structural openness. The overdetermination of discourses (and the impossibility to reach "a final closure" (Howarth 1998, 273)) is also made explicit in the concept of the floating signifier, which is defined as a signifier that is "overflowed with meaning" (Torfing 1999, 301). Floating signifiers will in other words assume different meanings in different contexts/discourses. At the same time, discourses have to be partially fixed, since the abundance of meaning would otherwise make any meaning impossible: "a discourse incapable of generating any fixity of meaning is the discourse of the psychotic" (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 112).

Especially by bringing in Gramsci's work (with hegemony as the most obvious concept), the strong impact of discursive structures become clear. Originally, Gramsci (1999, 261) defined this notion to refer to the formation of consent rather than to the (exclusive) domination of the other, without however excluding a certain form of pressure and repression. Howarth (1998, 279) describes Laclau and Mouffe's interpretation of the concept as follows: "hegemonic practices are an exemplary form of political articulation which involves linking together different identities into a common project." This does not imply that counter-hegemonic articulations are impossible and that hegemony is total (Sayyid and Zac 1998, 262). As Mouffe (2005, 18) formulated it:

Every hegemonic order is susceptible of being challenged by counter-hegemonic practices, i.e. practices which will attempt to disarticulate the existing order so as to install other forms of hegemony.

The ambition of these hegemonic projects is to become a social imaginary, which is defined by Laclau (1990, 64) as “a horizon: it is not one among other objects but an absolute limit which structures a field of intelligibility and is thus the condition of possibility of the emergence of any object.” The strength of these social imaginaries is based on what Stavrakakis (1999, 96) calls “an ethics of harmony,” a desire for reality to be coherent and harmonious which is always frustrated and unattainable because of the contingency of the social.

If we turn to a more psycho-analytical vocabulary, we can say that social imaginaries are fantasies that enable an overcoming of the lack generated by the contingency of the social and the structural impossibility of attaining reality (or the Real, as Lacan would have it). In Lacanian psycho-analytic theory, fantasy is conceptualised as having (among others) a protective role (Lacan 1979, 41). In providing the subject with (imaginary) frames which attempt to conceal and finally to overcome the lack (Lacan 1994, 119-120), fantasy functions as “the support that gives consistency to what we call ‘reality’” (Žižek 1995, 44). Subjects “push away reality in fantasy” (Lacan 1999, 107); in order to make the reality (imaginary) consistent, social imaginaries are produced, accepted and then taken for granted.

Fluid Organisational Structures

The workings of these more fluid and immaterial model of discursive structures can be illustrated by focussing on the media organisation, as one of the points where the discursive and the material, and structure and agency meet. Media organisations are first of all (meso) structures that group people and objects, and that develop specific activities and deploy levels of agency. They are also locations where the material, with its structures and agencies, meets the immaterial-cultural, the discursive, with its structures and agencies.

In general, media organisations can be seen as attempts to delineate a unity and to protect its stability, through the logics of functionalisation, coordination, finalisation, formalisation and centralisation (Etzioni 1961; Hatch 1997), while simultaneously being exposed to centrifugal and centripetal forces. Also, at this level, organisations cannot be seen as homogenous; they react differently when confronted with the complexity of environmental relationships. One way to capture the (differences in) organisational, interorganisational and environmental fluidity is through Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) metaphor of the rhizome. The metaphor of the rhizome is based on the juxtaposition of rhizomatic and arbolescent thinking.² The arbolescent is a structure, which is linear, hierarchic and sedentary, and could be represented as “the tree-like structure of genealogy, branches that continue to subdivide into smaller and lesser categories” (Wray 1998, 3). It is, according to Deleuze and Guattari, the philosophy of the State. The rhizomatic, on the other hand, is non-linear, anarchic and nomadic, but still a structure. “Unlike trees or their roots, the rhizome connects any point to any other point” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 19). In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari (1987) enumerate a series of characteristics of the rhizome – the principles of connection and heterogeneity, multiplicity, asignifying rupture, cartography and decalcomania. Connection and

heterogeneity imply that any point of the network can be connected to any other point, despite the different characteristics of the components. The concept of multiplicity constructs the rhizome not on the basis of elements each operating within fixed sets of rules, but as an entity whose rules are constantly in motion because new elements are always included. The principle of the asignifying rupture means that “a rhizome may be broken, shattered at a given spot, but it will start up again on one of its old lines, or on new lines” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 9). Finally, the principle of the map is juxtaposed with the idea of the copy. In contrast to the copy, the map is:

open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification. It can be torn, reversed, adapted to any kind of mounting, reworked by an individual, group, or social formation. It can be drawn on a wall, conceived of as a work of art, constructed as a political action or as a meditation. Perhaps one of the most important characteristics of the rhizome is that it always has multiple entryways (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 12).

This discussion on the arbolescent and the rhizomatic can be used to emphasise the materiality of media organisations, and how they are assemblages at both the intra-organisational and extra-organisational level. Even though the organisation of communication is at the core of their objectives, they are – as arbolescent or rhizomatic structures – much more than this. Moreover, without wanting to dichotomise between the arbolescent and the rhizomatic, media organisations are characterised by more diversity than for instance the network society theory allows us to see.

But apart from the more material characteristics of media organisations, their discursive characteristics can be emphasised also, without aiming to disconnect the discursive from the material. At the internal-discursive level, media organisations are sites where organisational culture develops, circulates and is preserved. Siehl and Martin (1984, 227) describe organisational culture as follows: “organizational culture can be thought of as the glue that holds an organization together through a sharing of patterns of meaning. The culture focuses on the values, beliefs, and expectations that members come to share.” As Martin (2002, 3) remarks, the field of organisational culture is broad, and, for instance, includes “the stories people tell to newcomers to explain “how things are done around here,” the ways in which offices are arranged and personal items are or are not displayed, jokes people tell, the working atmosphere [...], the relations among people [...], and so on.” Organisational culture, or “the way of life in an organization” (Hatch 1997, 204), produces discourses on (amongst many other areas) the general objectives and specific tasks of the organisation, the means and decision-making procedures that need to be used to achieve them, the language and conceptual framework, the membership boundaries and criteria for inclusion (and exclusion), and the criteria for allocation of status, power and authority, and rewards and punishments (based on Schein (1985), see also the summary by Hatch (1997, 213)). At the same time, organisational culture is not homogeneous, and the above-mentioned areas provide ample opportunity for conflict, contestation and power struggles within the media organisation.

Organisational culture does not stop at the borders of the media organisation (however permeable these borders might be). Organisational identities and

discourses interact with the networks, environments and cultures in which the media organisations are embedded. These outsides offer to media organisations fields of discursivities that provide the discursive elements to construct the organisational cultures. Obviously, discourses on “good” decision-making, leadership and membership, and on the legitimacy of the organisational objectives, are not continuously reinvented by each individual organisation, but are part of a broader cultural configuration, a discursive structure, that seeps into these organisations. Organisations, at the same time, are not without agency, and can – within the limits of a set of hegemonies and driven by fantasies – articulate existing elements into particular discourses. Simultaneously, they are sites of the deployment of individual agencies. Through their practices and discourses, organisations also support, normalise, and sometimes undermine and contradict existing cultural configurations. Their voices contribute to society’s discursive production, sometimes entailing the promise of social change, but often contributing to the continued fixation of society’s rigidities.

One way to theorise (and name) these discursive productive capacities is to return to Deleuze and Guattari’s work, and more specifically their notion of the machine. In their *Anti-Oedipus*, they define the machine as “a system of interruptions or breaks,” whereas the breaks “should in no way be considered as a separation from reality; rather, they operate along lines that vary according to whatever aspect of them we are considering. Every machine, in the first place, is related to a continual material flow [...] that it cuts into” (1984, 36 – emphasis removed). Deleuze and Guattari (1984, 36) also point to the interconnectedness of machines when they say that “every machine is the machine of a machine.” It is seen as the law of the production of production: “[...] every machine functions as a break in the flow in relation to the machine to which it is connected, but at the same time is also a flow itself, or the production of a flow, in relation to the machine connected to it.” Although Deleuze and Guattari often apply their machine concept to the human body (e.g., the mouth-machine), they also use the machine concept in a much broader way, for instance in talking about abstract machines such as capitalism. As Raunig (2007, 147) points out, in Guattari’s (1972) first machine text (*Machine and Structure*, originally written in 1969) he uses the machine to discuss the revolutionary organisation as an institutional machine that does not become a state or party structure. Without being completely faithful to Guattari’s framework, which sees the machine as unstructuralisable (see Genosko 2002, 197), his theoretical reflections on the revolutionary machine allow me to articulate the (media) organisation as a discursive machine, which is contingent on, but also embedded in, fields of discursivity and continuous productivity.

As machines, media organisations accommodate a series of subject positions that play a key role in the (media) organisational culture. These subject positions play a significant role, as they (co-) structure discursive positionings and material practices. Subject positions such as “journalist,” “media professional,” but also “audience member” circulate widely in society, and carry specific – sometimes dominant – meanings that affect the position and power relations of the involved actors. The discursive affordances of these signifiers, for instance, normalise specific types of behaviour, and disallow other kinds of behaviour. At the same time, these subject positions provide the building blocks for people’s subjectivities. Through the

logics of identification, subject positions provide the opportunities for the exercise of agency. And as mentioned before, subject positions are not necessarily stable, and they can be contested, resisted and re-articulated. Especially the journalistic identity, and its articulation with professionalism, is worth mentioning here in its combination of notions of public service, ethics, management of resources, autonomy, membership of a professional elite, the need for immediacy, and objectivity (see Deuze 2005, Carpentier 2005). But the journalistic identity is only one of the many subject positions that circulate within media organisations.

The specific position of (mainstream) media organisations within society strengthens their role as discursive machines. Obviously, media products have achieved a pervasive and spectacular presence in everyday life, to the degree that they have become difficult to (desire to) escape from. These media products are carriers of a multitude of discourses, which in many cases are contradictory, but they do not always evade the workings of hegemony. Especially the discourses about the media sphere offer contain legitimisations for the media organisation's hegemonic practices and cultures (see Couldry 2003). Media products, for instance, are carriers of normalising discourses about the media organisation's claims to direct access to reality, its centrality and its elitist position in society. But they include also normalisations of mainstream media production cultures, where media professionals still hold strong – sometimes post-political – positions of power to internally manage the resources deemed necessary and to provide publicness and visibility to, and framings for, other societal actors. In this sense (mainstream) media organisations are machines that interrupt, channel, fixate and produce flows. Their position also brings contestation, struggle, resistance and instability because the ways that they interrupt, channel, fixate and produce flows are not always accepted.

However dominant the mainstream media organisational logics, there are two structural contestations of (some of) its basic premises. The first contestation is grounded in the sphere of alternative and community media organisations, which introduced a different model of media organisation. This alternative model was a critical response to the internal logics of mainstream media organisations, and their construction as large-scale, vertically structured, arbolic, sometimes bureaucratic organisations, staffed by professionals and geared towards large, homogeneous (segments of) audiences. The alternative model critiques the nature of the external-material articulation of mainstream media as closely connected or part of the arbolic networks of state and market. On an external-discursive level, mainstream media are critiqued for being carriers of dominant discourses and representations. The second structural contestation of the mainstream media organisational model shifts attention to another concept, that of community. Here, the argument is that (mainstream media) organisations are bypassed by communities of users. One component of this argument is the virtual community's capacity to bring people together. For instance, Rheingold's (2002, 2 – emphasis removed) definition of virtual community includes the verb "to organize," but it is the community that is the location of the process, not the organisation. His definition includes the following components:

Organized around affinities, shared interests, bringing together people who did not necessarily know each other before meeting online; Many to many media ...; Text-based, evolving into text plus graphics-based communications

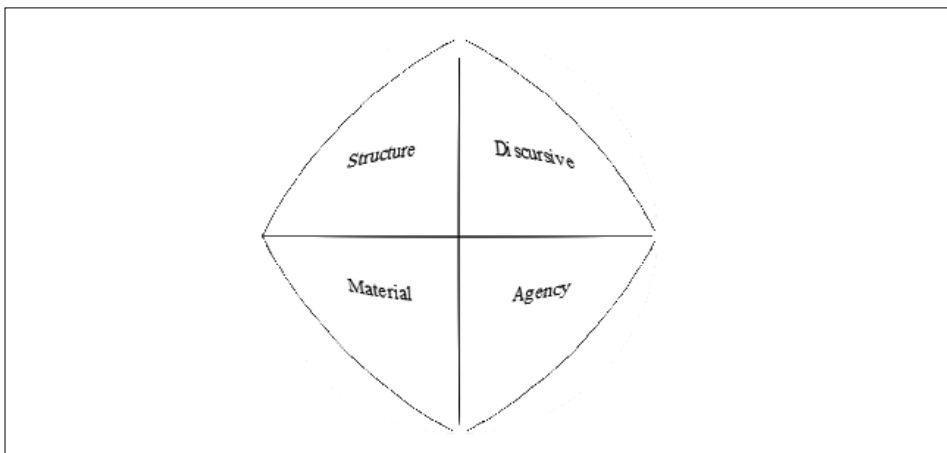
...; *Relatively uncoupled from face-to-face social life in geographic communities* (Rheingold 2002, 2).

Castells (2010a, 386) employs a similar definition in his *The Rise of the Network Society*, which also uses the verb “to organize” in relation to the virtual community. Moreover, he emphasises the possible and relative formalisation of communities, which again are (implicitly) contrasted with organisations. He defines the virtual community as “a self-defined electronic network of interactive communication organized around a shared interest or purpose, although sometimes communication becomes the goal in itself” (Castells, 2010a: 386). Such communities may be relatively formalised, as in the case of hosted conferences or bulletin board systems, or be spontaneously formed by social networks, which keep logging into the network to send and retrieve messages in a chosen time pattern (either delayed or in real time). Both contestations show that dominant discourses that try to fixate the social, have not established themselves as exclusive sense-making mechanisms. On the contrary, different (discourses about) organisational cultures continue to exist.

A Brief Conclusion

The objective of this text is not to reinvent the structure – agency debate, and offer yet another theoretical elaboration of the relationship between structure and agency. What this text does aim to do is to show the sometimes complex (theoretical) relationship between structure and agency on the one hand, and the discursive and material on the other. The analysis of Giddens’ and Castells’ work shows that problems with the balance between structure and agency remain, where agency sometimes becomes too present, for instance through the emphasis on reflexivity and (individual) identity, or through turning the network (society) itself into a living entity. A second and arguably more structural problem is the tendency to privilege the material over the discursive, where the immaterial becomes neglected and defined as secondary, or where culture becomes materialised. A third problem is the tendency to fixate these four categories, where, despite sometimes explicit attempts to avoid them, the logics of homogenisation and essentialisation persist.

Figure 1: The Four Concepts



This text can be read as a strong plea for an analysis of the interconnections between the structural, agency-driven, material and discursive (see Figure 1), where each of these concepts (and its relations with the other three) are given the attention they merit. At the same time, this text aims to illustrate this point by focussing on the organisation, which is seen as a social nodal point where these four concepts interlock. Through the lens of the media organisation we can see how agency and structure are both located at the level of the material and the discursive, and how the material and the discursive both have structure and agency.

The importance of combining these four concepts is not only to be found at the conceptual-theoretical level, where it can indeed structure and enrich our theoretical and empirical analyses, but its importance can also be found at the level of the critical. Critical analysis needs to take the role of discursive structures into account, as the hegemonies that these discursive structures sometimes form and support can be just as disruptive, disempowering and disqualifying than an unequal division of material resources is. Secondly, also the notion of the contingency of the social can strengthen the critical project substantially, as it provides hopeful support for social change. Radical contingency implies that no hegemony is set in stone; it can always be altered and replaced by more just, equal and empowering articulations. Obviously, the model of radical contingency also allows acknowledging that the effort to change hegemonies that are intensely sedimented within the social sometimes has to be enormous, but it also offers a theoretical backbone for the radical-democratic utopian belief that another world is possible.

Notes:

1. Laclau and Mouffe see elements as differential positions, which are not (yet) discursively articulated. Moments are differential positions, which are articulated within a discourse.
2. Deleuze and Guattari's work is situated within the field of epistemology. Here I focus more on organisational structures that are seen as the sedimentation of the arborescent and/or rhizomatic ways of thinking.

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