

Positive Discourse Analysis: Contesting Dominant Discourses by Reframing the Issues

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Abstract

Signalling one of the new directions now emerging alongside (Critical) Discourse Analysis, Jim Martin and David Rose (2003) have called for more Positive Discourse Analysis. PDA describes what texts 'do well' and 'get right' in our eyes. This paper thus investigates strategies for propelling marginal discourses into the mainstream news media. News stories tend to appear in the press within overarching 'frames' (Gamson 1989; Lakoff 2002), e.g. in an analysis of 1,000 news items on the Russian-Chechen conflict, the 'Villain—Victim' frame is widespread (to caricature: Russians are human-rights-abusing aggressors; Chechens are oppressed independence-fighters). Interviews with journalists support this textual analysis. Only very rarely do news stories successfully contest the dominant frames. The paper (i) discusses current research on counter-discourse, (ii) takes a case study approach to illustrate five strategies used in those few texts which contest the mainstream discourse, and (iii) suggests more general explanations – drawn from lexicogrammatical analysis, media practices, cognitive linguistics and psychology – as to why the 'radical reframing' strategy works. Despite the small scale nature of this analysis, it illuminates a useful application of PDA. Identifying which reframings resonate with editors (i.e. are selected for publication) could guide academics wishing to publicly contest media coverage of their areas of expertise or other socially salient issues.

Keywords: *Positive discourse analysis, Counter-discourse, Frame analysis, News media, Cognitive Linguistics*

1. Introduction

'Critical Approaches' to discourse studies have been going strong for thirty years, and have generated several new directions.¹ One particularly interesting approach which has emerged in recent years is Positive Discourse Analysis (PDA, cf. Martin and Rose 2003). Based on a similar premise as critical approaches, PDA is also fuelled by the potential for analysis to have an effect – however small – on the social world. The difference being that it analyses the discourse we like rather than the discourse we wish to criticise. Media observers have often noted a tendency for various news media to cover an issue or event in a very similar way, for example the prevalence of the *technological progress* frame in reporting nuclear power before the Chernobyl accident (Gamson and Modigliani 1989). Occasionally, however, news articles are published which manage to *contest* the main, central, predominant frames for reporting the news. Here PDA sees a positive development that could yield fruitful insights for those wishing to counter what they see as questionable dominant messages. This paper takes a case study approach to illustrate five strategies for contesting the mainstream discourse – some more effective than others. First I will discuss the current research on counter-discourse, then outline five strategies for contesting mainstream media messages, and finally suggest more general explanations

as to why these strategies ‘work’ (or do not). Although each explanation offers valid insights, none is sufficiently powerful to account for the phenomenon on its own. This paper thus sketches an integrated, interdisciplinary approach – drawn from research on lexicogrammar, media practices, conceptual integration (‘blending’) and curiosity – to analyse successful counter-discourse.

2. Counter-discourse

The idea of constant struggle over meaning is shared by various approaches to discourse analysis. Laclau and Mouffe’s (1985) discourse theory, for instance, argues that although all discourses try to take on a dominant (hegemonic) position, ‘closure’ (complete dominance) is never fully possible. There is always a gap, through which marginal discourses can break in and take over a more central position. As, for example, the feminist discourse broke into the mainstream view that only men were fully competent to vote. The presence of this gap means there is a constant struggle for hegemony. The ‘counter’ of counter-discourse should not, then, be taken as a static entity; rather, this constant struggle over meaning emphasises the ‘fluidity’ of what is predominant and what is dissenting, leaving space for alternative representations to shift into a mainstream space (Bamberg and Andrews 2004).²

Similarly, in Lakoff’s (2002; 2004) analysis of political discourse, there is a struggle between various ‘frames’ for conceptualising politics. He describes an overarching *Nation-as-Family* metaphor, articulated in phrases such as *founding fathers*, *Uncle Sam*, *Big Brother*, and *sending our boys to war*. This metaphor encompasses two models of family life, each entailing its own type of parent-child relationship. The ideal government is conceptualised either as a *Strict Father* or as a *Nurturant Parent*; the citizens are seen as the *Children*. A preference for either of these two models influences an individual’s view of, for example, social security: For those preferring a *Strict Father* frame ‘social security’ evokes images of a ‘nanny-state’ and the suppression of individual self-discipline, self-reliance and ambition, whereas for a *Nurturant Parent* frame it prompts support for those born into less fortunate social circumstances.³ In Lakoff’s analysis the Republican and the Democratic parties in the USA are struggling to establish which meanings dominate political life in terms of these two frames respectively (cf. Cienki 2005).

2.1 Framing

‘Framing’ has been termed a fractured paradigm (Entman 1993), since a multitude of disciplines employ the term, each with their own definitions. The use of the term ‘frame’ in this paper draws on cognitive linguistics and media analysis. Cognitive linguistics sees a frame as the background knowledge ‘activated’ by one particular word (concept). Frame knowledge is crucial to understanding the meaning of a word in its fullest sense (e.g. the term *uncle* makes sense only in relation to *father*, *mother*, *aunt*, etc within the frame of *kin relations*, cf. Lee 2001:8). Media analysis extends this to say that not only words but ‘[f]acts have no intrinsic meaning’. Facts make sense only when ‘embedded in a frame or story line that organizes them and gives them coherence, selecting certain ones to emphasize while ignoring others’ (Gamson 1989:157).

Similarly, Fauconnier and Turner refer to ‘organising frames’, which specify ‘the nature of the relevant activity, events and participants’ (2002: 123). In the prototypical *buy-sell* frame, for example, we see the economic activity, the instance of purchasing,

and the roles of buyer and seller. We will return to organising frames in Section 4 below.

2.2 Countering discourse in the public space

The central interest in this paper is the struggle over meanings made in the media. This interest is not only academic, but also practical. Many discourse analysts feel moved to express their dissent from the mainstream media on email lists, for example regarding the reporting of Hurricane Katrina in 2005. There was a great deal of debate about the social construction of the actors involved in New Orleans, with blacks 'looting' and whites 'finding food'. If 'we' (as analysts) have a toolkit of effective strategies then perhaps we will feel more willing or able to counter the mainstream media views in the public sphere rather than limiting our comments to academic email lists.

A range of discourse analyses have looked at counter-discourse (the discourse of dissent, emancipatory discourse). Most of this research, however, investigates discourse in *non-dominant spaces*. On the one hand, in alternative media, such as local gay-oriented newspapers (Miller 2005), homeless journals (Harter, Edwards, McClanahan, Hopson, & Carson-Stern 2004) and the British radical press (e.g. SchNEWS, Atton 2002). On the other hand, in alternative communities of practice, such as new social movements (e.g. Crossley 1998 on anti-psychiatry, Dunmire 2004 on the Zapatistas), non-elite discourse (Hull 2001) and the feminist movement (Kingfisher 1996). So far, however, there is very little research on countering 'from within' the mainstream discourse (but see De Cock 1998; Hall 1997; Lynn 2003).

2.3 Case study: Russia

The case study in this paper focuses on Russia and the macro-strategies used in the English-language news media to contest the dominant, accepted, naturalised views of that country. This focus provides a very useful baseline for investigating the media's counter-discourse due to the overwhelming consensus in the mainstream western news media coverage of Russia. No matter what the issue, from democracy, media freedom, civil society and Chechnya to natural energy supplies, Russia is generally portrayed as the authoritarian, imperial power; the bully; the aggressor. This is not the place to describe the contemporary reporting of Russia (for details cf. Crudopf 2000; Loew and Pfeifer 2001; Macgilchrist in press; Neumann 1993; Paul 2001). If we agree, for the purposes of this paper, that the mainstream representation of Russia is generally fairly negative, with (i) Russia generally positioned as the aggressor in any two-state encounter and (ii) President Vladimir Putin busy rolling back democracy, this will allow us to focus on the strategies used in the news media to contest this view.

3. Counter-discursive strategies

The five discursive strategies to be developed here are: logical inversion, parody, complexification, partial reframing and radical reframing.

3.1 Inversion

The first and most straightforward strategy used to contest the mainstream view is to *invert* it. If, for instance, the mainstream view contends that *Russia is rolling back democracy* the inverted response is to argue that *no, in fact it is not*. Peter Lavelle,

writing for the news agency UPI, often uses this approach. In a recent story on new legislation regulating the activities on non-governmental organisations (NGOs), he writes:

Controversial since President Vladimir Putin announced the need for such legislation last summer, the bill debated Wednesday *is not nearly as sinister as many media reports suggest.* (Lavelle 2005)

He then reports that the new legislation provides exactly the transparency that the west demands and he points out that the new legislation is almost exactly the same as the United States FARA (Foreign Agents Registration Act) laws regulating the activities of NGOs.

Lavelle offers logical, plausible and credible arguments. By pointing out the positive aspects of the legislation and comparing the laws in other countries, he inverts the standard frame of Putin 'rolling back democracy'. The problem with this strategy of inversion is that few mainstream media will print it. Lavelle's story here was written for UPI, i.e. to be sold on to other news media. But no publication printed it. It was available only from the news agency directly and reached a small, mainly expert, audience via distribution on, for example, the email group, *Johnson's Russia List*. It was not available to newspaper readers.

As many analysts have argued (e.g. Lakoff 2002, 2004), simply countering a dominant frame with logical arguments does not work (where 'work' means have an effect; change the prevailing view of the situation). The arguments are simply ignored or disbelieved. Section 4 below discusses explanations as to why this seems to be the case.

3.2 Parody

A second discursive strategy is slightly more sophisticated but also marginalised: *parody* (cf. Caldas-Coulthard 2003). Mary Dejevsky, a commentator in *The Independent* in the UK regularly parodies the dominant western view of Russia. She tends to use parody in the first paragraph of her stories. In this way she activates commonly shared knowledge as a 'peg' to catch her audience, but at the same time she questions this apparent 'knowledge'.

If you believed (almost) everything you read or hear about Russia today, your mind's video would run something like this. Vladimir Putin spends his time polishing his KGB medals and lording it over the Kremlin like a diminutive Ivan the Terrible. Having devastated Chechnya and shut down regional democracy, he then ripped the heart out of the independent media. He is bent on establishing a dictatorship. (Dejevsky 2006)

Although this extract offers numerous interesting discursive features, for economy of space, I will not delve into detailed lexicogrammatical analysis; focusing instead on the macro-strategies of dissent. Dejevsky uses irony here to refer to issues probably known to most casual newspaper readers while at the same time positioning herself as disagreeing with them. The second paragraph begins with:

This is one reading of what is going on. I invite you to consider another.

The alternative view Dejevsky suggests is that there is a veritable 'cultural feast' in mainstream Russian TV. If Putin were so autocratic (Stalinist) and the media so

controlled, would they now be filming books by Soviet dissidents which were banned in Soviet times (Bulgakov, Solzhenitsyn, Pasternak)?

Nevertheless, although it begins with a parody of the dominant descriptions of Russia, Dejevsky's article can still be read as a logical inversion of the dominant stories. They say: Russia clamps down on media freedoms. She replies: no it does not. The problem is then similar to the first strategy: her voice is heard only in *The Independent*, the smallest circulation 'broadsheet' in the UK.⁴

3.3 Complexification

The third strategy for breaking into the consensus view – and the first to make it into the higher circulation mainstream media – is to *complexify* the issues. The topic here is Chechnya. News about Chechnya generally positions Chechens as either the victims of Russian brutality (in the *Villain-Victim* frame) or as Islamist terrorists attacking the west (in the *War on Terror* frame). In a study of 1,000 news items about the Russian-Chechen conflict from 1995 to 2005 I found very few articles which offered a nuanced or detailed picture of the situation in Chechnya (Macgilchrist in press).⁵ An excellent example of complexification, however, is John O'Mahony's (2001) article about a football match between the Russian *Zhemchuzhina Sochi* team and Chechnya's *Terek Grozny*. A seemingly perfect topic to attract readers, O'Mahony uses football as a peg to weave history, politics, emotions, individual stories, and background and context of the conflict into the dramatic details of one tense football game.

The story starts in 'the shadow of a jagged range of the Caucasian hills' with Terek's 'final pre-match training session'. The scene is set; the Chechen characters are introduced. The story constantly circles and touches on its main focus: football. But among the descriptions of the training, the players, the trip to the match and then the actual match, the story incorporates the paradoxes and anomalies of the situation in two ways. Firstly, by mentioning two sets of 'facts' which are usually presented in isolation from one another in two separate news frames – (i) *The Russian Aggressor*, and (ii) *The Chechen Bandit*. Secondly, by including aspects of the story which are generally omitted from western news coverage.

The dominant *Guardian* frame in covering the Russian-Chechen conflict could be called *The Russian Aggressor*: The features of this frame are articulated by lexical choices, for instance:

- The first phase of the conflict in 1994 as a 'Russian *invasion*'.
- The new Chechen government in 1999 being '*installed*' by Moscow.
- The '*utter destruction*' of houses; the '*killing*' of '*close relatives*'.
- The '*Russian chauvinism that sparked the war in the first place*'.

To keep a news frame coherent, many stories either omit contradictory facts or incorporate them with distancing lexis (e.g. 'Officials *claimed*', etc). As one journalist said, 'with every story you start with a thesis [...] If a bland statement doesn't fit your thesis you do filter it out.'⁶ Another foreign correspondent for a quality daily newspaper reported that his editors 'cut out bits if it disturbs the central argument'.⁷ O'Mahony's story, however, also includes information which undermines a simple understanding of the conflict. The story includes several features of what could be termed *The Chechen Bandit* frame, which is rarely articulated in *The Guardian*:

- In 1994 *'the separatist policies of the then Chechen president, Dzhokhar Dudayev, destabilised the region'*. *The Guardian* usually places full blame on Yeltsin for any instability at this time.
- The *'daily kidnappings and murders'* in independent Chechnya after 1996. Whereas the period of instability between 1996 and 1999 is generally ignored by the mainstream western news media, this article gives detailed description of the situation:

'When the Russians were invading,' he [Anzor Izmailov, a midfield player] continues, *'I think that 90% of the Chechen people supported independence. But that all changed. At first, there was this euphoria that such a big country had submitted to such a little nation. The Chechen politicians promised us equal rights with other countries, sporting events, even the Olympic Games. But soon all this disintegrated into criminality. It became dangerous to walk on the streets. One day in 1998, I was going training when I stumbled into a shoot-out between two groups in Mercedes and Jeeps. It was like Chicago in the 30s.'*

By including elements from both these narrative frames as valid information – i.e. not delegitimising either with the use of reporting verbs such as *'claimed'* – neither frame is constructed as the single, simple interpretation of events.⁸ The story has multiple meanings. There are multiple people to *'blame'*. It is however also possible to read the story as the overcoming of blame: this was an unfortunate stage in history, which is now nearly over. Life can begin to return to normal.

The second feature of O'Mahony's text which complexifies the issue is the inclusion of positions omitted by all other news stories in the corpus of 1,000 texts. For example:

'In the beginning, we all thought the Russian army would arrive in Chechnya to restore order,' says forward Magomed Magomayev, *who was in Grozny when the fighting began. 'Nobody could believe that the Russians would just end up killing us like animals.'*

This suggestion that Chechens welcomed the Russian military to restore stability to the region disturbs a major pillar of most western reporting of the conflict: the historical continuity of the *'century-old conflict'*, which, it is generally suggested, has never really stopped since Russians first invaded in the eighteenth century. This quote indicates that there were positive relations between Russians and Chechens as late as 1994.

Similarly, the article builds up an image of normal everyday life in Chechnya which is absent from almost all other stories about Chechnya. The people in this story are concerned with *'normal'* (western) everyday issues, such as work, friendships, sport. This does not fit into the standard representation of conflict zones, which are often described as primitive places of ethnic strife, i.e. distanced from civilised, western life (cf. Philo 1999). O'Mahony, on the other hand, quotes the minister for sport and tourism, Khaidar Alkhanov saying that this match *'is a sign of peace, that [...] we can return to normal human life.'*

Not only does the explicit phrase indicate the possibility of normal human life returning, but also the introduction of Alkhanov as the minister for *sport and tourism*. The writer gives Chechen optimism a voice in the western media. At the very least, readers are left wondering if this normal life Alkhanov imagines really can return,

rather than interpreting the conflict as a hopeless stalemate as did much western reporting from 1999 to 2005.⁹

Thus, the article complexifies the issue of culpability in the Russian-Chechen conflict. It does not take sides, as much of the press coverage does. Embedding elements from both the *Russian Aggressor* and *Chechen Bandit* frames in the normality of a football game offers a reading position that, I would argue, avoids assigning blame. Readers' attention is directed at the football players' attempts to rebuild a normal life, not only at the brutality of war. The various stories and comments highlight the complexity of the situation and build up an image of lives in flux, with potential for hope as well as frustration.

Nevertheless, the problem with complexification is twofold. Firstly, complexity takes time and column inches (as indeed this description of complexification is relatively lengthy). This particular article is over 3000 words long. Very few casual readers get beyond the headlines and first paragraphs, which points to the second part of the problem. Headlines and introductory texts tend to be written by (non-specialist) editors rather than the journalists themselves.

War games

Ravaged by years of conflict, Chechnya is in the painful process of reconstruction. Two weeks ago, its star football team *emerged from the wilderness* to face a Russian side. The match became an *incendiary focus of bitter enmities*, reports John O'Mahony.

Considering the nuanced message of the text as a whole, this introductory blurb seems to build up two images of Chechnya which the rest of the text counters.

1. The article works at the normality of modern Chechen life, contesting the stereotype of Chechens as 'mountain warriors', but the blurb refers to *wilderness*, working up precisely that warrior image and recalling – for this reader at least – Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.
2. The main article also counters the simple image of *bitter enmities* by describing the complex (and sometimes positive, trusting, hopeful) relationships between Chechens and Russians.

Once again, despite the attempt to reformulate the view of Russia, the headline and caption draw the story into the predominant *Guardian* frame of bitter hostility between Russia and Chechnya.

3.4 Partial reframing

Complexifying an issue requires a relatively long article. Issues can, however, also be reframed in shorter, more accessible articles. The fourth strategy is *partial reframing*, with the next section describing the fifth and final strategy, *radical reframing*. Reframing can be defined as shifting an issue away from its conventional 'location' within one set of shared assumptions and reconstruing it within a different set of knowledges.¹⁰ In this way the issue is assigned a different interpretation, i.e. comes to have a different 'meaning' in its new context.

At the beginning of 2006, news consumers heard that the Russian gas company Gazprom turned off its gas supplies to Ukraine. Generally this was framed as Russia 'bullying' Ukraine, using 'strong-arm tactics' to 'punish' Ukraine for going its western / anti-Russian way during the Orange Revolution of 2004-05.

Paul Robinson in *The Spectator* takes this position as his baseline. He does not disagree with the mainstream frame that Russia is using gas as a geopolitical 'weapon', but he does shift the focus of explanation. After pointing out that Gazprom was making a loss selling gas to Ukraine for \$50 (per 1000 cubic metres), rather than the market price of \$230, the article continues:

Now you might imagine that it is entirely Gazprom's business if it wants to make a loss on some of its deals; but not so *in the eyes of the ever-meddling European Union, which for years has been demanding that Russian companies stop subsidising energy prices and start charging market rates.* (Robinson 2006)

The article reframes the issue of gas sales within a critique of the *ever-meddling European Union*. i.e. it fits into a more general Euro-sceptic frame. Instead of construing the halt to gas supplies within the frame of Russia's strong-arm politics, he reconstrues it within the frame of free market economics. Gazprom is reacting to market demands. This free market frame then entails a logical criticism of the EU's unnecessary involvement, and no longer foregrounds Russia the bully.

This is indeed an example of 'reframing'. The article counters the mainstream frame by drawing on an alternative frame and thus suggesting that the Europhiles are in no position to criticise Russia for complying with EU demands. Nevertheless, the reframing is only 'partial', since the article does not question the mainstream view that the price increase was indeed a geopolitical power move by Russia (in the article's words it was '*a very crude pursuit of [Russian] national interest*'). He merely says that *other* commentators are in no position to criticise the price increase.

3.5 Radical reframing

The final strategy for contesting the dominant discourse is a more radical attempt to break into the consensus and entirely turn around the reporting of an issue. *Radical reframing* involves not only dialogue with other frames, as in the Euro-sceptic account, but also an inversion of the mainstream view of the issue. As indicated above (3.1), the mainstream media tend to ignore news stories which simply invert the conventional view with logical arguments. Blending an inversion with elements of other prevalent frames can, however, propel the counter-discourse into the publication.

One fairly radical reframing is John Laughland's (2004) article in *The Guardian* headlined *The Chechens' American friends*. Previous research has shown that *The Guardian* has a very strong position with regard to the Chechen-Russian conflict (cf. Macgilchrist in press). In their view, Russia's brutal repression of the Chechen independence movement has forced Chechens to a politics of frustration, i.e. the Russian military is the root cause of the various sieges, hostage-takings and attacks carried out over the last few years. The merits and demerits of this frame are beyond the scope of this paper. Of interest here is how one article with an entirely different perspective comes to be printed in the newspaper.

The article was written just after the Beslan school siege in 2004 as a response to numerous media reports which gave Putin direct responsibility for creating the conditions that led to the hostage-taking. Laughland makes use of various discursive strategies to position himself towards these reports, including parody, nominalisation, extrematisation, etc. He inverts the western media stories which, for instance, argue that Russian television 'played down' the siege. To counter this, he describes the extensive coverage he saw on Russian television. The most noteworthy strategy for

our purposes, however, is his dialogue with another very prominent frame in *The Guardian*:

On closer inspection, it turns out that this so-called ‘mounting criticism’ [of Putin] is in fact being driven by a specific group in the Russian political spectrum - and by its American supporters.

In addition to the distancing *so-called* and the scare quotes around *mounting criticism*, Laughland here introduces his prime move in contesting the criticism of Putin: he discredits the critics. He goes on to say that the specific groups driving the criticism are, firstly, Russian politicians ‘associated with the extreme neoliberal market reforms which so devastated the Russian economy’ in the 90s, and secondly, American neoconservatives.

The Americans involved are members of the ACPC, the American Committee for Peace in Chechnya. Not only are they introduced as neoconservatives, they are described as supporters of the ‘war on terror’. That *The Guardian* opposes the war on terror can be seen not only by its articles on the topic, but also by the editorial suggestion that the employees join the *Stop The War Coalition* en masse. The journalists declined, preferring to retain the image of political neutrality.¹¹

The article lists eight members of the ACPC, and gives each the exact opposite of what Jonathon Potter calls ‘category entitlement’ (Potter 1996): this is *category disentanglement* at work. In the list, each epithet is in direct contrast to *The Guardian*’s dominant discourse.

The list of the self-styled ‘distinguished Americans’ who are its members is a rollcall of the most prominent neoconservatives who *so enthusiastically support the ‘war on terror’*. They include Richard Perle, the notorious *Pentagon adviser*; Elliott Abrams of *Iran-Contra* fame; Kenneth Adelman, the former US ambassador to the UN who egged on the *invasion of Iraq* by predicting it would be ‘a cakewalk’; Midge Decter, biographer of *Donald Rumsfeld* and a director of the *rightwing Heritage Foundation*; Frank Gaffney of the *militarist Centre for Security Policy*; Bruce Jackson, former US military intelligence officer and one-time *vice-president of Lockheed Martin*, now president of the US Committee on Nato; Michael Ledeen of the *American Enterprise Institute*, a former admirer of *Italian fascism* and now a *leading proponent of regime change in Iran*; and R. James Woolsey, the former CIA director who is one of the *leading cheerleaders behind George Bush’s plans to re-model the Muslim world along pro-US lines*.

Readers of *The Guardian* will recognise the frame being articulated here. The traditionally left-leaning newspaper is consistently critical of *rightwing* social reforms, and *militarist* approaches, *regime change along pro-US lines*, *Lockheed Martin*’s arms sales, etc. By aligning himself with a frame which is prevalent in the pages of *The Guardian*, Laughland is working at gaining credibility for the argument he will propose. If we think of words not as the linguistic expression of underlying ‘concepts’, but as ‘tools that cause listeners to activate certain parts of the knowledge base’ (Lee 2001: 11) then this inclusion of the neoconservatives activates a frame for readers who agree with *The Guardian* on global issues. In general, the ‘connotations’ (i.e. the shared frame knowledge) of *neoconservative* as used in *The Guardian* could prime the reader to question the legitimacy of, and motivation for, whichever entity / policy / group / suggestion the neoconservatives are supporting.¹²

In this case the neoconservatives support the mainstream media's condemnation of Russia's apparent causal role in the school siege; they support Chechnya and mitigate the attackers' responsibility for the school siege. That Laughland highlights these Americans' role in propelling a certain message through the media turns this condemnation on its head: he mitigates Russia's responsibility and works up the Chechens' culpability.

In addition to this disentanglement of the ACPC, the text builds up the author's entitlement to speak. The final caption at the end of the article defines the author for the readers:

John Laughland is a trustee of the *British Helsinki Human Rights Group*.
www.oscewatch.org

This final sentence positions Laughland within the human rights field, with the *Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe* named in the internet link as validation. Given that *The Guardian* coverage of Chechnya tends to focus quite heavily on human rights issues, this final descriptor emphasises his 'category entitlement' as a commentator on these matters.

Thus, Laughland utilizes two of *The Guardian*'s own priorities (frames) to undermine the dominant *Guardian* discourse:

- (1) his own position aligned with a human rights organisation, and
- (2) his critique of US 'military-political' institutions and neoconservative individuals.

The article thereby radically reframes the Chechen-Russian conflict. It does not blame Vladimir Putin and Russian policies for creating the conditions leading to the Chechens' hostage-taking attacks. Instead, it moves the coverage out of the simple *Russia-represses-Chechnya* frame, and into the frame of global geopolitical machinations, in which – it is implied – dubious neoconservative motives are central.

Other articles on Russia engage in similar moves to radically reframe the issues, by appropriating the anti-war, anti-neocon discourses (Kraus 2004; Lieven 2004) or the discourses of, for example, technological progress (Guterman 2004), and rule of law (Greeley 2005).

Of interest here is that these radical reframings are successful: they are printed in fairly prominent positions in the mainstream media. If we shift the issues we feel strongly about (perhaps: education, health, language, representation, misrepresentation) closer to the space currently inhabited by dominant frames they are much more likely to be printed. This is not a matter of subsuming one's own perspective and issues under the mainstream view, but of utilising the space offered by the dominant frames to achieve a wider dissemination of marginal views. Rather than the monologue of logical arguments, reframing enters into dialogue with other issues to grab media attention. This could be a very useful strategy for academics to break into the consensus of whichever issue they feel strongly about.

4. Explanations

The third aspect of counter-discourse to be discussed is why certain texts 'work'; why some texts are printed in the mainstream public space and effectively contest the dominant view. I will suggest four levels of explanation for the success of *radical reframing*.

4.1 Discourse: Lexicogrammar

Firstly, the micro-techniques of lexicogrammatical choice. These include extrematization, scare quotes, parody, nominalisations, etc., which distance the authors from the dominant view and indicate to the reader that this could be a controversial, interesting article. These discursive features have been investigated in numerous research studies over the last thirty years, since the critical discourse analytical approach was initiated.¹³

Connected to this approach is also a consideration of the readers' identification with the article. What subject positions does the article offer the readers (always bearing in mind that some readers reject or negotiate the meanings offered by the text, cf. Hall 1980/94)? The focus on human rights and the discrediting of George Bush's 'cheerleaders' could open up a reading position of an intelligent, discerning, caring individual; one who has been afforded the competence to assess the various interpretations of the conflict and make up his or her own mind. This contrasts with some logical arguments, which position the reader as naïve or gullible for having believed the mainstream view (e.g. Wachendorfer 2001).

4.2 Political economy: Publication

Secondly, the level of publication practices: why was this article accepted for publication? Media analysts draw our attention to the ambiguity in the news business which produces texts attempting to simultaneously increase circulation figures and contribute to the image of the (elite) news media as the fourth estate in a democracy (cf. Bagdikian 2004; McChesney 2004; Zelizer 2004). The push for high sales means articles must 'peg' the readers within the first few lines; they must attract readers' attention and preferably hold it for some time (we will return to this below, 4.4).

At the same time, the need for news media (in their self-professed role as democratic institutions) to offer a fair and balanced perspective on current events brings us back to what Laclau and Mouffe (1985) call the 'lack of closure' in the dominant discourse. In the name of balance, news media are compelled to open up a space in the mainstream discourse for alternative views. By allowing non-mainstream voices into this space, the struggle over meaning continues. Nevertheless, many more articles are rejected than accepted, particularly those which do not agree with the dominant discourse of the newspaper in question. So, why are certain articles, including Laughland's *The Chechens' American Friends* (3.5), published? I would argue they are printed because they articulate at least one dominant frame (in this case two overlapping frames: the anti-neoconservative and anti-war positions), i.e. the author (i) adopts a frame which prevails in the newspaper coverage of other issues in order to (ii) frame his or her marginal topic and thus (iii) propel it into the mainstream space.¹⁴

4.3 Cognitive linguistics: Blending

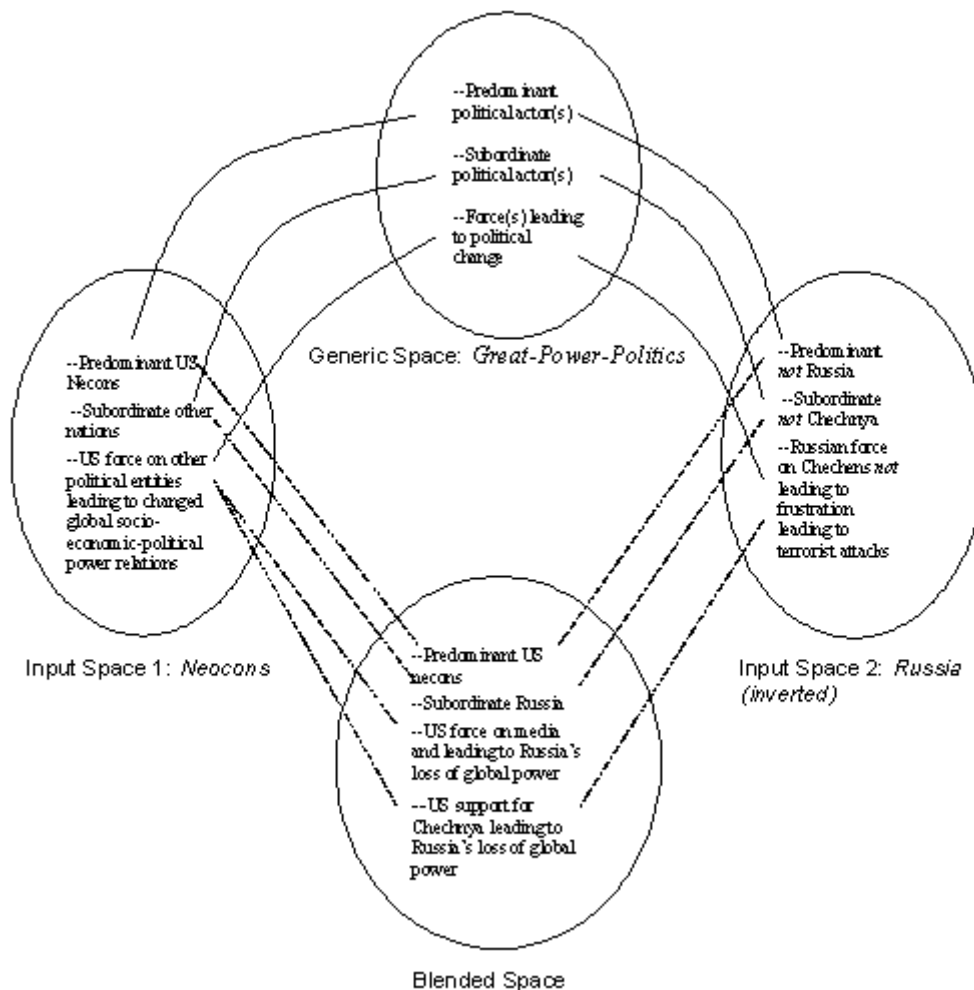
But what exactly happens during the articulation of these dominant frames? The third level attempts to explain how elements of the frames are blended to produce an alternative, marginal, frame. An alternative which is, however, accepted by the mainstream. Borrowing concepts from cognitive linguistics for use in media discourse analysis, it could be argued that reframing is an example of 'conceptual integration'. This section draws heavily on Fauconnier and Turner's *The Way We Think* (2002: esp. 39-65, 122-135; cf. also Fauconnier and Turner 1996; Turner 1996).

If we take the Laughland article, we see two ‘input spaces’ which regularly appear in the pages of *The Guardian* (see Fig. 1). According to Fauconnier and Turner, input spaces are ‘partial’; ‘they contain elements and are typically structured by frames’ (2002: 40). The two input spaces in Laughland’s article each contain three major elements within a geopolitical frame: Firstly, a space for American neoconservatives in which (i) the globally predominant political actor is ‘the USA’, (ii) the subordinate political actors are numerous other nations, and (iii) the central force exerted by one actor on another is American incursion into local cultures, economies and/or politics. This force leads to global transformations of social, economic and political relations. Observing *The Guardian* on any day provides at least one example of this frame, for example,

Any temptation to hang on [in Iraq] must be resisted, even if the pressure comes from the Iraqi government or, more certain, from the US, which wants Britain to offer political cover and to protect supply lines to the north (Guardian Editorial, 28 Oct 2006).

In this extract, the predominant actor is *the US*, the other nation under pressure is *Britain*, and force is being exerted on Britain to retain their military presence in Iraq.

Figure 1. Conceptual integration in John Laughland’s *The Chechens’ American Friends*, *The Guardian*, 8 Sept 2004



The second input space takes the dominant *Guardian* view of Russia and inverts it: (i) the predominant political actor in the region is *not* (as generally argued) ‘Russia’, (ii) the subordinate political actor is *not* ‘Chechnya’, and (iii) the central force exerted by one actor on another is *not* Russian persecution of the Chechens, i.e. Russia is *not* forcing the latter to retaliate in a politics of frustration. One of many examples of this frame before inversion was published during the Beslan school siege:

Since plunging recklessly back into Chechnya in 1994, Putin, his predecessor Boris Yeltsin, and the once proud Red Army have caused such untold misery, such rank injustice, such fury and despair that, like the Americans in Iraq, they created a breeding ground and magnet for the religious extremists they struggle to extirpate. (Tisdall 2004)

Laughland integrates these two input spaces to present a new ‘blended space’ with his article which contests the regular *Guardian* reporting. In this third space, (i) the predominant political actor in the region is ‘the USA’, (ii) the subordinate political actor is ‘Russia’, and (iii) the central forces exerted by one actor on others are, firstly, US neoconservative support for the Chechens and, secondly, US neoconservative influence on the media. Both of these forces lead to geopolitical change: Russia is losing prestige, power and influence both locally (with Chechnya) and globally (due to what Laughland presents as the misrepresentation of Russia as the primary cause of the Beslan school siege). Following Fauconnier and Turner this could be considered an example of a *mirror integration network*, in which ‘all spaces (inputs, generic and blended) share an organizing frame’ (Fauconnier and Turner 2002: 122).¹⁵

The organising frame could be called Great-Power-Politics, with the attendant roles of primary, powerful, political actors; secondary, less influential, political actors; and further political entities. In this frame, power relations are enacted through the exertion of force. Although the organising frame retains these elements, the constellation of characters in the blend (neocons, Russia, media, Chechnya) differs from regular *Guardian* coverage.

4.3.1 Properties of blends

To elaborate on the theory of conceptual blending, a few points should be made about the properties of this blend.

Firstly, the *generic space* illustrates *cross-space mapping*, i.e. the links between the two input spaces. They share (i) the *roles* of predominant and subordinate political actor, (ii) the *process* of the exertion of force by one actor onto another and (iii) the *political result*, i.e. the ensuing transformations (whether these are the smaller-scale effects of a specific attack on a school or theatre, or the large-scale effects of globalization).

Secondly, *selective projection* means that although these elements are also projected from the input spaces to the blend, not all features from the inputs are projected. The blend does not contain economic details, the local specificities of the Russian-Chechen conflict, historical relations, etc.

Thirdly, the blend has an *emergent structure*, i.e. there are elements in the blend which are not in either of the inputs. This is generated by (i) *composition* (‘relations that do not exist in the separate inputs’), i.e. the neoconservative support for a smaller country, Chechnya (as created by the choice of headline: *The Chechens’ American Friends*, rather than for instance *Chechen-American Friendship*); (ii) *completion* (the

background knowledge brought to the blend by the reader), e.g. Soviet-US relations - and struggle for global dominance - during the Cold War; and (iii) *elaboration* (which Fauconnier and Turner refer to as 'running the blend'), i.e. treating the blend as a simulation and running it to see in which directions it can develop. Here, for instance, drawing on the background knowledge of Soviet-US relations (provided by completion), we can run the simulation to track the events which could follow the Beslan school siege. What would happen if the ACPC successfully advocates for Chechen independence? Would US corporations take over the strategically vital oil pipelines in Chechnya, which link Caspian oil reserves with European markets?

Finally, the *entrenchment* aspect of blending is illustrated by the entrenched (i.e. widely articulated) nature of the input spaces, which are well-known to the community of *Guardian* readers.

Looking at the five discursive strategies described above (in sections 3.1 to 3.5), it seems that the four which were published blend frames to a certain extent. Only *inversion through logical argument* (3.1) remains within one frame, countering the central frame with alternative facts. It remains unpublished. The other four strategies blend two or more input spaces. Mary Dejevsky (3.2) uses parody which relies heavily on metaphor (*your mind's video, diminutive Ivan the Terrible, ripped the heart out of the independent media*). Understanding metaphors is generally thought to depend on the integration of the 'source' (e.g. *video*) and 'target' (e.g. *perception of news stories*) domains. Similarly, complexification (3.3) also involves the blend of popular sports coverage with political reporting. In this case, football news remains the organising frame with extra information given about the players and the context as would often be the case for in-depth feature articles. That the context in this case is political is a result of blending football with political news coverage of conflict zones. Finally, *The Spectator* article (3.4) blends its *Russia* input space (focusing on Russia's strong-arm tactics) with its *free-market* input space (demanding the economy be unregulated by, *inter alia*, the EU). The latter becomes the organising frame for the blend which justifies Gazprom's actions in order to criticise EU hypocrisy.

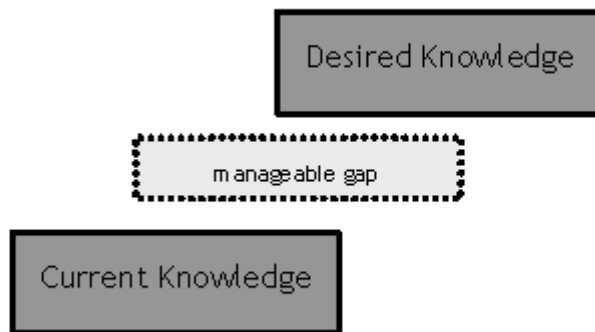
Thus, blending offers a plausible explanation for the articulation of the marginal discourse. Each of the published texts offers a minority view of Russia from within the organising frame of a different topic or trope. In each case, the organising frame already has some resonance with the prevailing discourse of the publication. If the text remains within a frame which is critical of Russia and inverts the arguments ('yes it is' – 'no it is not'), it seems to have less chance of reaching a wide audience. The published texts here adopt an extant, acceptable, credible frame for their chosen topic (in this case Russia/Chechnya) and integrate their views with this frame. They push themselves into the mainstream space and contest the predominant discourse from within; hence disseminating their views to a wider readership.

Nevertheless, cognitive linguistics tends to forget the social context of discourse. Although blending plausibly explains the creation and interpretation of the texts, it is insufficient to explain how the counter-discourse 'works' in the specific news media context. Here further insights from psychology appear useful when integrated with the political economy of the media. Returning to the competitive nature of consumer news, a crucial factor in news selection is what journalists refer to as 'pegging' readers. An article is likely to be published if the editors think it will arouse readers' curiosity and make them purchase the paper.

4.4 Psychology: The curiosity gap

From William James to Piaget to Vygotsky to Howard Gardner, scholars have long been trying to theorize curiosity (cf. Gardner 2004, Loewenstein 1994). The most relevant approach for this paper is the ‘information-gap’ perspective, also called the Curiosity Gap Model (Gentry et al. 2002; Loewenstein 1994).

Figure 2. The Curiosity Gap



The curiosity gap is based on the assumption that individuals seek moderate levels of uncertainty, as evidenced in, for instance, the popularity of puzzles, and the success of problem-solving tasks in education (cf. Hebb 1949). The key notion here is a *moderate*, or *manageable* gap between the individual’s current knowledge and their desired knowledge state, i.e. between what the individual knows and what she is expected to know (see Fig 2). If the gap is too large, the individual is discouraged by the amount of cognitive work required; if the gap is too small, the individual becomes apathetic and has little desire to do any cognitive work at all. Translated into media terms this implies that if the article is too far from the reader’s current knowledge of the world, it will be ignored; if the article tells readers what they already know, it will be deemed uninteresting. The key is to meet the readers where they are and add a *manageable* amount of new information. In Howard Gardner’s terms, it is about taking people from the ‘X stage of sophistication’ to the ‘X+1’ stage, rather than the X+2 or X+3 level (2004:59). In media terms, this evokes Galtung and Ruge’s (1965) description of the news values of ‘consonance’ and ‘continuity’ (i.e. the tendency for news to first meet readers’ expectations and then develop the story from there), and highlights the importance of ‘immediacy’ in news production (cf. Schlesinger 1977).

Thus, simply employing logical arguments to refute the current mainstream knowledge of Chechnya does not entice the readers into the article. It ignores their current level of knowledge and adds too much complexity within one frame. Laughland activates his readers’ current shared knowledge about neoconservatives and adds a new dimension by weaving in information about Chechnya. He enters into dialogue with a frame the readers are comfortable with, rather than presenting the monologue of his own counter-arguments.¹⁶

The curiosity gap perspective also recalls the metaphor used by Laclau and Mouffe in their discourse theory. If discourse can never be fully dominant, there is never full ‘closure’ in discourse. There is a continuous struggle to fill the gap in the dominant discourse. If marginal views make use of effective strategies, they can break into this

gap and fix their own meanings to concepts, thus shaping what becomes dominant and mainstream.

5. Concluding remarks

This paper has presented five discursive strategies for contesting the mainstream discourse from within that mainstream discourse: (i) logical inversion, (ii) parody, (iii) complexification, (iv) partial reframing and (v) radical reframing. It seems radical reframing – the blending of salient elements of input spaces – is a particularly effective strategy. The case study, *The Chechens' American Friends*, successfully challenged the mainstream reporting of the Russian-Chechen conflict. Four levels of explanation were suggested for the success of radical reframing: (1) lexicogrammatical elements (lexical choice, scare quotes, etc), (2) the meso level of production practices (within a competitive consumer news market), (3) the blending of input spaces or frames and (4) the curiosity gap perspective. It should be stressed that only the second level, the newsroom practices, are likely to be consciously deliberated decisions. These explanations are not incompatible; they should be seen as levels or dimensions of an integrated process of news production. It seems plausible that all four levels must be at work simultaneously in order for a controversial article to be published.

Certainly, further research on a larger scale is necessary, to investigate, firstly, whether radical reframing is a more general phenomenon, applicable to other news media topics or indeed to other forms of social interaction, and, secondly, to what extent the proposed explanations are more than speculation. Nevertheless, the analysis here seems to have an immediate practical utility. No matter how discursively competent we are, we still often try to persuade others by offering logical arguments refuting (inverting) our interlocutor's arguments. Far be it for me to suggest leaving this form of rational debate – this paper undoubtedly also puts it to use. But an effective 'toolkit' for disseminating marginal views (such as hinted at by, for example, the FrameWorks Institute, www.frameworksinstitute.org¹⁷), would take advantage of these insights into how others frame their messages to successfully contest the dominant meanings in contemporary society.

¹ Key texts in Critical Linguistics and Critical Discourse Analysis are, inter alia, Fairclough (1989, 1995); Fowler (1991); Fowler, Hodge, Kress, and Trew (1979); Hodge and Kress (1979/93). More recent studies are printed in, for example, the journals *Discourse & Society*, *Discourse Studies*, *DAOL* and this publication.

² This concept of fluidity also draws on linguistic approaches which see linguistic structures as dynamic, not static entities, for example, Langacker's metaphor of natural language as a 'biological organism' (1991: 510).

³ Lakoff is careful to point out that these are only 'prototypical' cases; few individuals would adopt a fully Strict Father or completely Nurturant Parent outlook. Our conceptual systems are not necessarily consistent; rather we 'operate with multiple models in various domains' (Lakoff 2002: 14).

⁴ Circulation figures for *The Independent* for August 2006 are 254,854 (compared to *The Daily Telegraph's* 898,289, *The Times's* 675,030, *The Guardian's* 362,844 and *The Sun's* 3,223,841) (*Media Guardian* 2006).

⁵ For example, none considers the 'entrepreneurs of violence' on both sides of the conflict who are perfectly happy to prolong the conflict in order to continue their racketeering (Hughes 2001; Russell 2005). Of the corpus of over 1,000 texts, less than 1% contested the predominant view in each publication; the majority of these were letters. This larger study (from which the extracts in this paper are drawn) involves news items on Russia published in the UK, USA and Germany from 1995 to 2005. The study focuses primarily on four news 'events': the Budennovsk hospital siege in 1995, the conflict between Russia and Chechnya in Dagestan in 1999, the theatre hostage-taking in Moscow 2002 and the

Beslan school siege in 2004. The coverage of each event (for the seven days following the initial report) was analysed in nine newspapers (*The Guardian*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Sun*; *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Post*; *Die Süddeutsche*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Bild*). In addition, further articles of relevance were tracked for the intervening period, and semi-structured and open-ended interviews (face-to-face and via email) were conducted with editors, journalists and Moscow-based foreign correspondents.

⁶ Interview, Moscow, October 2005. The journalist did go on to say that he tries to include ‘more measured’ and ‘dissenting’ voices. But a ‘mixed picture can end up undermining your argument’. He pointed out that the reader could think the journalist sounded ‘wishy-washy’ and as if they ‘didn’t know what [they] were talking about’.

⁷ Interview, Moscow, October 2005.

⁸ Compare, for example, Werner Adam (2002) in the FAZ, who gives a 1,500 word report of the events since 1994. His story is however, firmly in the Russian Aggressor frame. To mention only one item, his description that ‘Chechnya became a synonym for unrestrained criminality’ after 1996, is bracketed: that sentence is preceded by ‘The Chechens saw themselves forced to organise their basic survival as their own directors’ (*Die Tschetschenen sahen sich gezwungen, ihr nacktes Überleben weitgehend in eigener Regie zu organisieren*), and followed by ‘Shortly after [Maskhadov’s legitimate election], Maskhadov, who was aiming for compromise, was tricked by Moscow’ (*Kurz darauf wurde der auf Ausgleich bedachte Maschadow zudem von Moskau hinters Licht geführt*). These two sentences (a) minimise Chechen responsibility for the criminality since it was caused by Russia and (b) frame Russia as the deceiver, the aggressor.

⁹ ‘Stalemate’ was an opinion explicitly voiced in a series of editorials in numerous newspapers included in the larger study these extracts are drawn from.

¹⁰ For more on the plural form of knowledge, and its situated nature, cf. Haraway (1988/96).

¹¹ Interviews, Moscow, October 2005.

¹² This draws on Stanley Fish’s (1980) concept of ‘interpretive communities’; i.e. the community of *Guardian* readers have learnt to read meaning from the *Guardian* pages in a certain way; the majority will agree with a certain interpretation or they would choose to purchase a different newspaper.

¹³ See footnote 1 for key references.

¹⁴ It should be noted that even when they are accepted for publication, marginal voices tend to be printed below the fold with little or no accompanying visual imagery.

¹⁵ Alternatives would be, for example, ‘single-scope networks’, in which two spaces have different organizing frames, of which one is projected to organise the blend (Fauconnier and Turner 2002: 126), or ‘double-scope networks’, which have ‘inputs with different (and often clashing) organizing frames as well as an organizing frame for the blend that includes parts of each of those frames and has an emergent structure of its own’ (Fauconnier and Turner 2002: 131).

¹⁶ This builds on the idea that an individual needs to know something to want to know more. Information ‘primes the pump of curiosity. [...] Preexisting interests, by focusing attention, play an important role in determining what information is salient to an individual and, thus, which informational reference points become elevated.’ (Loewenstein 1994: 93).

¹⁷ For details on the FrameWorks Institute and its suggestions for effective framing of public policy issues, see www.frameworksinstitute.org/strategicanalysis/perspective.shtml

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