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Discourses in/of Disruption

Introduction

Discursive orders become visible where they get irritated or disrupted. The unquestioned yet effective foundations of what can be said in certain social and historical constellations become particularly clear when they are questioned, attacked or subverted (Butler 1997, p. 19; Tavory/Fine 2020). Discursive orders, from this perspective, prove to be fragile and vulnerable, while at the same time they provide powerful mechanisms and procedures of averting the dangers of disruption (Foucault 1971, pp. 8).

From a methodological point of view, the concept of disruption should be at the heart of discourse analysis. While focusing on transtextual patterns and regularities of discursive formations, the analytical interest of discourse analysis should also be directed at discontinuities, at the unpredictability and contradictoriness of discursive events. However, discourse analysis has not yet sufficiently addressed the mutual constitution of social and epistemic orders on the one hand and disruption on the other.

In that sense, discourse-analytic works that explicitly elaborate on the concept of disruption are rather scarce. For example, MacMillan (2002) shows how media coverage on educational policy events in the tabloid press constructs and frames these events as being symptomatic for alleged social disruption, which then, conversely, reinforce moral standards. Hayward (2020) focuses on social movements whose practices of protest (see also Dang-Anh/Meer/Wyss (eds.) 2021) can be described as political disruption aimed at “interrupt[ing] privileged people’s motivated ignorance” (Hayward 2020, p. 448). Through what she calls “epistemic disruption”, that is the withdrawal of cooperation from hegemonic norm systems, protest can shift the terms of public discourse and thus itself become productive and empowering, even if it fails to win public sympathy. Still another perspective is taken by Porten-Cheé/Kunst/Emmer (2020) who analyse uncivil online behaviour in comment sections as disruptive discourse. By violating norms of public discourse in terms of argumentative relevance and civil tone, disruptive discourse like hate comments threatens public deliberation on the one hand. On the other hand, it evokes practices of counter speech as civic intervention and thereby unfolds community-building effects.

All studies mentioned therefore emphasize the two-faced nature of disruption. While causing interruptions of routinized practices and ways of thinking, it may also create new practices and new epistemic orders on the other. This is in line with the concept of “adaptive disruption” as delineated by Koch, Nanz and Pause:

Adaptive disruptions [...] are characterized by ruptures that occur and unfold in a way that departs from what is envisaged by a society’s preventive measures. At the same time, these are incidents that can be put to productive social use, since the disruption in question generates new forms of knowledge and appeals to a society’s ability to learn. (Koch/Nanz/Pause 2018, p. 76)

Although the authors do not take an explicit discourse-analytic perspective here, it still seems to be most compatible with discourse analysis both in theory and methodology.

However, disruption and disruptivity are not only latent aspects of discursive orders and methodological foci. Rather, they can themselves become a topic of discourse when they are collectively articulated, e. g. in crisis and catastrophe discourses (Vollmer 2013, pp. 6–12) or in technopolitical discourses on what is called disruptive innovations (Antos 2017; Daub 2020). More recently, Donald Trump's renewed US presidency, which is based entirely on the discourse strategy of disruption (Koch/Nanz/Rogers 2023), has also been accompanied by an international political discourse on disruption and its risks and potentials for power and value systems. What is of interest here are the linguistic patterns and the epistemic framings of talking, writing, and reflecting about disruptions and what conclusions can be drawn about epistemic orders from the fact that something is perceived as disruptive at all. As becomes clear from this, disruption as a discursive process and as a topic of discourse can of course fall into one, when analysing, for example, how discursive negotiations of disruptive events may find their echo in discursive disruptions or are constructed by them in the first place.

The contributions in this volume are dedicated to the multifaceted entanglements of discourse and disruption. They focus both on discourses *in* disruption, addressing disruptive subversions of discursive orders and constellations, and discourses *of* disruption, addressing discursive negotiations of disruptive dynamics and events. They deal with a variety of topics from a broad range of epochs, cultural contexts, discourse actors, and societal domains. In sum, the contributions demonstrate that the concept of disruption is a fruitful concept for linguistically oriented discourse analysis and, conversely, how a discourse-analytic perspective is a promising approach for the study of disruption.

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