



The Mediated Representation of Working Conditions in the Global South

Discourse, Ideology and Responsibility

av

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Abstract

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This thesis examines the mediated representation of workers' working conditions in the Global South. Using a qualitative approach inspired by Critical Discourse Studies, it focuses on ideological representation in newspapers from Sweden, the USA, Chile and China/Hong Kong. The aims are to understand how working conditions are represented; identify key themes of news reporting; understand how newspapers convey ideological discourses about 'foreign' and 'distant' working conditions; and provide critical insights into how the topic is represented in newspapers in terms of its *relevance* (to a national readership) as well as *agency* and *responsibility* (i.e. who is responsible for working conditions?) and the possible ideological impact thereof on the reader and their knowledge/interpretation of this issue.

The results suggest that the general structuring of Swedish media discourse on workers' conditions runs thematically across various parts/sections of the production industry: garments, electronics, food, furniture and toys. In addition, further themes/frames are used in the coverage (working conditions in the workplace, salary, conditions of employment, housing, workforce composition and workers' organizations), further particularising the explored focus of media representation.

The study also suggests that mainstream news media represent working conditions in ways that exclude a range of key issues, actors and causalities. Constructed at the level of media discourse, such problematic representations largely conceal the structural, institutional and corporatist responsibility behind the global exploitation of workers and their largely unfavourable working conditions. Instead, responsibility for those working conditions is effectively and strategically shifted away from the wider global system of capitalist-driven exploitation into individual social actors, in both the Western world (in the form of particular transnational corporations and in the form of readers/ users as consumers) and the Global South (in the form of local factory owners, governments, officials etc.).

Speaking from a critical perspective and offering a number of empirically-funded insights, the study suggests that newspapers construct the key topic as relevant through a number of thematic and argumentative frames. Of these, the 'consumer framework' – which effectively serves to shift responsibility away from wider structural socioeconomic causes to an individual level – remains central. The thesis also shows that the representation of working conditions in the Global South is strongly embedded within a highly problematic colonial (or post-colonial) imagery. Therein, the exploitation in the Global South is seen as a localised 'cultural problem' of 'them' rather than a systematic problem related to global capitalism and its transnational system of social and economic inequality.

Keywords: Working Conditions, Global South, Media Studies, Journalism, Representation, Discourse, Ideology, Capitalism, Transnational Corporations

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