# CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS USING VAN DIJK'S MODEL ON CNN NEWS ABOUT GIRLS' BIRTHDAYS CELEBRATE IN AFGANISTAN

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***ABSTRACT***
*This study aims to examine a CNN.com news article titled "Kiana Hayeri's haunting images show what it means to be a teenage girl in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan" using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) based on Teun A. van Dijk's theory. The focus is on how the media constructs social reality and embeds ideological values through linguistic structures within the text. A qualitative descriptive method is applied, with analysis covering three main dimensions: macrostructure (main theme), superstructure (text organization), and microstructure (word choice, syntax, and language style). The findings reveal that CNN.com frames the narrative of Afghan teenage girls living under Taliban rule through symbols of subtle resistance, such as secretly held birthday celebrations. The article employs emotionally resonant and narrative language to evoke empathy toward issues of gender inequality. Through its strategic use of language, CNN.com not only delivers information but also shapes public opinion and conveys social criticism in an indirect, non-confrontational manner.*
***Keywords:*** *Critical Discourse, CNN.Com, Van Dijk's Theory, Afghan Women, Symbolic Resistance, News Framing.*

## INTRODUCTION

The role of media in conveying global information is increasingly crucial, especially with the presence of online media that offers fast and broad access to the world community (Anderson, 2023). CNN.com is one of the digital news platforms from the internationally known CNN cable television network. This site was launched in 1995 by Cable News Network (CNN), part of Warner Bros. Discovery, as part of a digital transformation to reach a wider audience via the internet. CNN.com presents a variety of information ranging from international politics, economics, technology, health, entertainment, to current events from various parts of the world (CNN, 2024).

Whether through print or online media, news text remains the main element in conveying information that cannot be separated from the discourse structure. In a news text, continuity of meaning and interconnectedness between parts are needed to form a complete message. The text itself generally refers to written language, while discourse includes communication in oral and written form that contains certain structures and contexts (Oetomo in Amalia, 2022). CNN.com as an international news portal utilizes a clear and systematic discourse structure, considering linguistic elements such as syntax, semantics, and the right choice of diction, to convey information effectively and easily understood by a global audience (Richardson, 2007; Wahdah, 2018). By using informative and objective language, CNN.com is able to form a discourse that is not only factual but also communicatively interesting.

Discourse is understood as the most complete language unit in grammatical structure, because it covers all the ideas and meanings that are to be conveyed (Kridalaksana,

2008:259). In discourse, there is a series of thoughts, concepts, and ideas that are structured, so that they are easily understood by readers if delivered in writing, or by listeners in oral form. In online news platforms such as CNN.com, the use of written language requires high precision because it is not supported by visual or gestural elements that are usually present in direct communication. Therefore, accuracy in compiling texts is crucial. In addition, the process of compiling news texts on CNN.com is also influenced by certain values, including the ideology and interests of the media institution itself. Through a discourse analysis approach, readers can trace the hidden meanings, communication goals, and ideological constructions in news texts, which ultimately help readers understand the context of information more broadly and critically (Richardson, 2007; Fairclough, 2010).

Critical discourse analysis is an approach used to analyze and explain the meaning behind a text, especially texts that represent social realities that are intentionally formed by dominant individuals or groups in order to achieve certain goals (Darma, 2009:49). In the context of media such as CNN.com, this analysis is relevant because news does not only convey facts, but also constructs reality based on certain points of view. Brown and Yule (1984) stated that critical discourse analysis is basically a communication tool that aims to understand how language is used in a social context. Meanwhile, Eriyanto (2009) emphasized that critical discourse analysis does not only see text as a linguistic structure, but also as an ideological practice, where language is used to shape public perception of an event. Thus, analysis of CNN.com news can reveal how the media constructs narratives based on certain interests or ideologies that are embedded in word choices, sentence structures, and news focus.

Critical discourse analysis is a method used to examine the use of language, both in spoken and written forms, by paying attention not only to linguistic aspects, but also to the social, political, and ideological contexts that surround it (Syafryana, 2022). In relation to news on CNN.com, critical discourse analysis can help reveal how language is used not only as a means of conveying information, but also as a tool for representing power and interests. There are three main perspectives in understanding language in discourse analysis. First, language is seen as a medium that connects humans with reality outside themselves, so that discourse analysis is used to explore the structure, rules, and meaning in the text. Second, language is understood as a central element in the process of social interaction, so that discourse analysis functions to reveal hidden messages related to the dynamics of society. Third, language is considered an expression that plays an important role in shaping the theme, direction, and strategy of conveying messages in discourse texts (Eriyanto, 2006). Therefore, through this approach, we can see how CNN.com constructs and frames news in a way that is not neutral, but is full of language choices that have certain meanings and purposes.

Critical discourse analysis is a method to uncover hidden meanings in a discourse, whether delivered in writing, orally, visually, or in other forms of media, with a critical approach. When used to analyze news content on CNN.com, this approach helps reveal how information is constructed and interpreted. One theory that is often used in this approach is the critical discourse analysis theory of Teun A. van Dijk. According to van Dijk (1997), a discourse has three main interrelated structures, namely text structure, social cognition, and social context. The text dimension focuses on the way language is conveyed in the text used to emphasize a particular topic or theme. Furthermore, the text structure consists of three important parts. First, the macro structure, which is the core meaning or main idea that is studied through the discourse topic. Second, the superstructure, which is the framework or

pattern of text organization that forms the logical arrangement of information. Third, the micro structure, which is related to detailed aspects of language, such as word choice, sentence structure, and style of language that builds meaning in the news text. Through this analysis, we can trace how CNN.com shapes messages and public opinion through language construction in each layer of discourse (van Dijk, 1997).

The critical discourse analysis model developed by Teun A. van Dijk does not only focus on the linguistic structure in the text, but also includes a study of social structures, power relations, and the dominance of certain groups in society that are reflected in the production of discourse. In the context of CNN.com news, this approach allows us to understand how news not only contains information, but is also influenced by ideology, perception, and broader socio-political interests. Van Dijk emphasizes the importance of analyzing discourse holistically, not only based on the content of the text, but also by paying attention to how the text is produced, by whom, and in what social situations (Eriyanto, 2009). This theory divides the analysis into three main dimensions: text, which reflects the structure of language and the content of the message; social cognition, which relates to the thought processes, understanding, and ideologies of individuals or groups that produce text; and social context, which includes social, political, and cultural conditions that influence the birth of discourse. In practice, these three dimensions work in an integrated manner to reveal the discourse strategies used by media such as CNN.com in framing a particular event or issue (van Dijk in Eriyanto, 2009).

Studies on critical discourse analysis of online media news texts using the Teun A. van Dijk model have been widely conducted by a number of previous researchers. One example is the study by Julaeha, Suherman, and Julianto (2021) entitled Critical Discourse Analysis of the Teun A. van Dijk Model on CNN Indonesia Online News Discourse Texts. This study highlights how the macro and micro structures in news texts about the 2020 simultaneous regional elections published on cnnindonesia.com form certain narratives and views. Although CNN Indonesia and CNN.com come from different entities, this analytical approach can also be applied to understand how CNN.com as an international media frames an issue through word choice, text structure, and the social context behind it. Van Dijk's model provides a framework for examining how news texts on CNN.com are influenced by power, ideology, and social dynamics as reflected in the language structure used (van Dijk in Eriyanto, 2009).

This study has points of similarity and difference compared to previous studies. The similarity lies in the object of study analyzed, namely the dimensions of the text based on the critical discourse analysis model developed by Teun A. van Dijk. The difference lies in the type of discourse analyzed and the media source. This study specifically examines news texts from CNN.com that discuss public policy issues and global social dynamics, which are seen as reflecting certain ideological constructions from the media. CNN.com as an international news media has a reporting character that is inseparable from the editorial interests and perspectives of journalists who form certain narratives. Therefore, this study focuses more on the structure of the text as the center of analysis, by outlining three main elements in the discourse structure, namely: macro structure (introduction, main content, conclusion), superstructure (headline, body, ending), micro structure (semantics, syntax, stylistics, rhetoric). This approach makes it possible to reveal how CNN.com texts are formed not only by linguistic elements, but also by the social and cognitive contexts that influence their production (van Dijk in Eriyanto, 2009).

**METHODS**

This study applies a qualitative descriptive method using a critical discourse analysis model developed by Teun A. van Dijk, with an emphasis on textual aspects in news published on CNN.com. Qualitative research aims to reveal and explain data in depth, not in the form of numbers, but in the form of narratives rich in meaning. Data in this research were a news texts from CNN.com.

The article that was the focus of the analysis was published on April 16, 2024, through the official CNN.com channel in the category "Education" or "U.S. News" (CNN.com, 2024). The data collection technique was carried out using a documentation approach through in-depth observation of the news text. The analysis process was carried out in three main stages according to Van Dijk's model, namely macro-structure analysis (main theme of the text), superstructure (text framework), and microstructure (word choice, syntax, and style). All data contained in the narrative and quotations in the CNN.com text are used as evidence to describe the meaning, ideology, and discourse strategies used by the media.

This study began with the data collection stage through the process of identification, grouping, and interpretation of news texts originating from CNN.com. The analysis was conducted using a critical discourse approach from Teun A. van Dijk, which aims to understand how the news describes social reality, especially those related to public policy issues and international dynamics. By using this approach, researchers can examine the discourse structure and explore the relationship between the use of language and power in the dissemination of information to the public (Eriyanto, 2009).

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

As an international online news platform, CNN.com has the primary mission of providing accurate and comprehensive information to a global audience regarding current issues. By utilizing both narrative and visual approaches, the media outlet plays a role in shaping public perception through the presentation of relevant discourse. One of the articles analyzed in this study is titled *"Kiana Hayeri's haunting images show what it means to be a teenage girl in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan"*, published on November 13, 2024. The article portrays the lives of teenage girls in Afghanistan under Taliban rule, combining textual narration and visual documentation to highlight gender inequality and socio-cultural pressures within a broader societal context (CNN, 2024).

**1. Text Dimensions**

**a. Macrostructure**

Van Dijk (1997) explains that *macrostructure* refers to the overarching theme or global meaning that shapes the entire discourse. It outlines the central idea conveyed across all parts of the text. In the CNN article titled *"Kiana Hayeri's haunting images show what it means to be a teenage girl in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan"* (CNN, 2024), the macrostructure can be divided into three main components:

1. Introduction: Thematic Opening of the Discourse

The article begins with a depiction of a birthday party held by three young girls in Kabul. While the scene appears typical on the surface, its deeper significance lies in the fact that it occurred in secrecy under the Taliban regime. This opening subtly introduces the theme of hidden resistance within everyday life.

According Fairclough (1995) notes that the beginning of a media text often employs familiar, emotional imagery to build a connection with the reader. Such openings are commonly used to frame ideological issues in an accessible and relatable way. In this case,

the joyful party contrasts with the repressive setting, drawing attention to the underlying political tension.

2. Main Content: Factual Development of the Theme

The body of the article focuses on documenting the lives of Afghan women following the Taliban's return to power. It highlights the erosion of basic rights, including limitations on education, employment, and public presence. Through the visual project, the journalists present detailed accounts of how women navigate daily life under increasing restrictions.

According Wodak (2001) argues that the core of a discourse often functions to legitimize or criticize social practices through strategic selection of facts and voices. The CNN article supports its central theme by focusing on the suppression of women's freedoms, thereby constructing a clear narrative of structural inequality and resilience.

3. Conclusion: Closure and Reinforcement of Central Meaning

The article concludes by emphasizing that small acts of joy—such as holding private celebrations or dancing away from public view—are forms of symbolic resistance. Merely continuing to live and find meaning under authoritarian rule is framed as an act of courage and defiance.

According Van Dijk (1997) points out that conclusions in news discourse often serve to reinforce the ideological stance established earlier. Similarly, Scott and Vinthagen describe this type of endurance as *micro-political resistance*, where surviving with dignity becomes a meaningful response to oppression.

**b. Superstructure**

1. Headline

Text: *"In This Birthday Party Portrait, Teenage Girls Celebrate In Secret In Afghanistan"*

The headline introduces the main theme of the article—teenage girls in Afghanistan holding birthday celebrations secretly under Taliban rule. It functions as the top-level element of the superstructure by capturing the central issue in a concise and attention-grabbing way.

According Entman (1993) suggests that headlines act as framing devices that influence how readers perceive an issue, often emphasizing themes such as repression and resistance.

2. Body (Introduction and Main Content)
   a. Paragraph 1: *"The photograph could have been taken at any birthday party..."*
      This paragraph presents a scene that appears cheerful and ordinary, but it also subtly implies the presence of danger and restrictions faced by the girls.
      Comparison: Van Dijk (1997) describes this technique as implicit semantic structuring, in which critical meanings are conveyed indirectly.
   b. Paragraph 2: *"But with their faces turned away from the camera..."*
      Here, the narrative explains the decision to hide the girls' faces, reflecting their fear of Taliban policies that prohibit women from revealing their identities in public.
      Comparison: Scott (1985) interprets such acts of concealment as a quiet form of resistance to oppressive authority.
   c. Paragraph 3: *"Taken earlier this year by Iranian-Canadian photojournalist..."*

This paragraph introduces the photographer and outlines the purpose behind the visual project: documenting the daily struggles of Afghan women whose rights are being continuously eroded.

d. Paragraph 4: *"Hayeri and Cornet traveled to seven provinces..."* The journalists collected stories and images from different Afghan regions to compile a comprehensive portrayal of women's experiences under Taliban control.
Comparison (Paragraphs 3–4): Hariman and Lucaites (2007) argue that visual journalism like this serves as a form of public testimony, combining emotional engagement with historical documentation.

e. Paragraph 5: *"'Week by week, there was a different fear,' Hayeri recalled..."* This quote illustrates how fears evolved over time, moving from immediate safety concerns to broader worries about social transformation and women's futures.
Comparison: Chong and Druckman (2007) highlight how personal testimonies enhance reader empathy through emotional and narrative framing.

f. Paragraphs 6–8: *"The pair wanted to present a nuanced view..."* These sections emphasize that Afghan women's experiences are diverse, depending on their local contexts, and cannot be reduced to a single narrative of victimhood.

g. Paragraph 9: *"Cornet noted the Taliban's rule isn't homogenous either..."* Cornet notes that even within the Taliban, differing perspectives exist, including some leaders who tolerate underground girls' schools.
Comparison (Paragraphs 6–9): According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), presenting diverse perspectives helps avoid oversimplification and promotes a more accurate and respectful understanding of marginalized groups.

h. Paragraphs 10–11: *"Over the course of the six months... her mom had made for her."*
The narrative returns to the personal moments of the girls, focusing on a birthday celebration and illustrating their efforts to retain joy and youth in a repressive environment.

i. Paragraph 12: *"Though music and dancing in public have been outlawed..."* Despite restrictions on public celebrations, the girls continue to express joy in private, turning simple acts like dancing, braiding hair, or using henna into meaningful gestures of resistance.
Comparison (Paragraphs 10–12): Scott (1985) refers to these subtle actions as *everyday resistance*, where people assert autonomy through routine behaviors that challenge authority in quiet but powerful ways

3. Ending
Text: *"Resistance for Afghan women cannot mean to go on the street... how do you go on about your lives?"*
The article concludes by emphasizing that merely continuing to live and find joy in everyday moments is a form of resistance for Afghan women. In the face of constant oppression, the ability to experience small pleasures symbolizes strength and resilience.
Comparison: Scott and Vinthagen argue that surviving under authoritarianism, while maintaining dignity and everyday routines, constitutes a meaningful form of micro-political resistance.

**c. Microstructure**
a. Semantics (Meaning and Content)

Semantics refers to the meaning constructed within the discourse, focusing on the theme, presuppositions, implicatures, and contextual background.

Findings:

1. Main theme: Silent resistance by young Afghan girls against Taliban oppression, expressed through small yet meaningful acts such as celebrating birthdays, uncovering their hair, dancing, and sharing photos.
2. Presuppositions:
   a. The Taliban strictly monitors and controls both public and private life.
   b. Acts like partying or revealing hair are considered risky.
3. Implicature: Simple actions that might seem trivial in a free context become symbolic forms of resistance against political repression.
4. Contextual background: The political and social situation in Afghanistan after the U.S. military withdrawal in 2021, which marked the Taliban's return to power.

According J.Richardson (2007), in *Analysing Newspapers*, observes that international media often highlight individual struggles and symbolic acts as forms of resistance under oppressive regimes a tendency clearly reflected in this CNN article.

b. Syntax (Sentence Structure)

Syntax concerns how sentences are grammatically constructed to build narrative and emphasis.

Findings:

1. The article contains many complex and compound sentences, often using subordinate clauses to convey cause-effect or contrast, e.g., "Though music and dancing in public have been outlawed…".
2. Passive voice is used strategically, such as in "Resistance is existing," to highlight the subject (women) while downplaying the actor (Taliban), maintaining a tone that is both neutral and powerful.
3. Relative clauses appear frequently, for example:
   a. "The girls… who live in Kabul…"
   b. "…which they documented…"
4. The sentences lean toward a narrative and human-interest style rather than direct, factual reporting — typical of feature journalism.

According Van Dijk (1998) suggests that complex sentence structures and the choice between active or passive voice can be tools for highlighting or obscuring certain agents in discourse. CNN's use of syntax draws attention to the personal experiences of women while softening direct confrontation with the Taliban as active agents.

c. Stylistics (Language Style and Diction)

Stylistics examines word choice, metaphors, and stylistic devices used to create emotional and thematic effects.

Findings:

1. Emotionally evocative diction is used, such as: *"immaterial losses," "a deeper significance," "pockets of joy," "strip them from their identities."*
2. Existential metaphors like *"Resistance is existing"* illustrate that simply living is an act of defiance.
3. The article uses a narrative and empathetic tone, expressing suffering without directly accusing the oppressors, thereby building emotional solidarity with Afghan women.

4.  Aesthetic expressions are present in phrases like: *"a big black and gold, super dramatic dress,"* and *"braiding each other's hair,"* adding a humanizing and artistic touch.

   According Fairclough (1995) explains that media language often becomes poetic and emotionally resonant to engage readers with social issues that are difficult to address openly. CNN appears to use this strategy to humanize the subjects while avoiding overt political language.

d. Rhetoric (Discourse Framing and Persuasion)

   Rhetoric looks at how information is framed to attract attention, persuade, or influence the audience.

Findings:

1.  The opening sentence provides a sense of normalcy with a peaceful birthday scene, only to gradually reveal a hidden, disturbing reality a technique to capture reader interest.
2.  Dramatic contrast is used effectively joy at a party juxtaposed against Taliban pressure creating emotional depth.
3.  Direct quotes from the journalists (Hayeri and Cornet) enhance authenticity and provide personal perspectives.
4.  The article does not follow a rigid inverted pyramid structure typical of hard news; instead, it guides the reader slowly through emotional and political layers.
5.  Repetition of key terms such as "resistance," "loss," and "identity" reinforces the core messages and rhetorical power.

   According Bell (1991) notes that in human-interest journalism, a "delayed shock" narrative starting with a calm scene before revealing harsh realities is an effective rhetorical device. CNN applies this technique masterfully in this article.

**CONCLUSION**

   This study finds that CNN.com, through the article "Kiana Hayeri's haunting images show what it means to be a teenage girl in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan," constructs a narrative of subtle resistance and gender inequality using Van Dijk's Critical Discourse Analysis model. At the macro level, the article emphasizes symbolic resistance by Afghan girls through ordinary actions like private birthday celebrations. The superstructure organizes the story to build emotional engagement while exposing social injustice. At the micro level, CNN uses emotive language, complex sentence structures, and persuasive techniques to highlight oppression without direct confrontation.

   Overall, CNN not only reports events but also shapes public perception by embedding ideological messages within its language. The article becomes a medium to humanize the struggles of Afghan women and subtly criticize the repressive context they live in.

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