



## A Critical Discourse Analysis of the Representation of Cambodia in Global Media:

### The Case of “Scambodia”

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Language in media discourse plays a crucial role in shaping public perception and constructing social realities. Rather than functioning as a neutral medium, journalistic language reflects underlying ideologies, power relations, and institutional priorities. This essay applies Norman Fairclough’s (1995) Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework to examine two contrasting texts: a Wall Street Journal (WSJ) article that employs the term “Scambodia,” and a response article that criticizes this usage. By analyzing these texts across three dimensions—text, discursive practice, and social practice—this essay demonstrates how discourse constructs national image, reinforces inequality, and becomes a site of ideological contestation.

#### Textual Analysis

At the textual level, the WSJ article utilizes language that is both evocative and ideologically loaded. The term “Scambodia” is a clear example of lexical innovation used for rhetorical impact. By blending “scam” with “Cambodia,” the term reduces a sovereign nation to a singular association with criminal activity. From a CDA perspective, this constitutes negative labeling and stigmatization, which contributes to the construction of a simplified and derogatory national identity (Fairclough, 1995).

Furthermore, the article employs metaphorical language, such as describing a “gold-hued skyscraper” as a “monument to the spoils generated by transnational cybergangs.” This metaphor establishes a symbolic linkage between visible economic development and illicit activities. Such linguistic choices create a causal narrative without explicit empirical substantiation, thereby reinforcing a particular interpretation of reality.

In contrast, the response article adopts a formal and evaluative tone, emphasizing concepts such as “credibility,” “responsibility,” and “journalistic standards.” It explicitly frames the term “Scambodia” as “mockery” and a “derogatory distortion,” thereby recontextualizing the discourse. Through this lexical strategy, the response text challenges the legitimacy of the WSJ’s framing and attempts to restore a more neutral representation.

#### Discursive Practice

At the level of discursive practice, the WSJ article reflects a selective and problem-oriented narrative construction. The text foregrounds cybercrime and financial exploitation while omitting broader contextual factors, such as:



- The transnational nature of cybercrime networks
- The involvement of multiple national actors
- Ongoing enforcement efforts by Cambodian authorities

This selective inclusion and exclusion illustrate what van Dijk (1998) describes as ideological discourse structures, where information is strategically organized to emphasize “negative other–presentation” and “positive self–presentation.”

The response article operates as a counter–discourse, directly contesting the dominant narrative. It reintroduces omitted information, including government crackdowns and international dimensions of cybercrime, thereby offering a more complex and balanced account. This interaction between texts exemplifies a discursive struggle, in which competing narratives seek to define meaning and influence audience interpretation (Fairclough, 1995).

Additionally, the intended audience plays a significant role. The WSJ article appears to target a Western readership, particularly by highlighting American victims. This audience orientation reinforces a narrative centered on Western interests and vulnerabilities, while marginalizing alternative perspectives.

### **Social Practice**

At the broader social level, these discourses reflect structural inequalities in global media representation. Western media institutions, such as The Wall Street Journal, possess significant agenda–setting power, enabling them to shape international perceptions of countries, particularly those in the Global South (McCombs, 2004).

The use of a term like “Scambodia” can be interpreted as part of a broader pattern of discursive marginalization, in which developing nations are disproportionately associated with crime, disorder, and instability. This aligns with postcolonial critiques that highlight how media representations often reproduce hierarchical distinctions between the “developed” and the “developing” world (Said, 1978).

The response article explicitly challenges this imbalance by raising the issue of double standards, questioning whether similar derogatory language would be applied to Western nations facing comparable issues. This critique exposes the implicit biases embedded in global journalism and calls for more equitable standards of representation.

Moreover, the discourse has material implications. Media representations influence not only public opinion but also economic and political outcomes, including investment decisions, tourism, and diplomatic relations. Thus, discourse operates as a form of symbolic power with real–world consequences (Bourdieu, 1991).

### **Conclusion**



This analysis demonstrates that the representation of Cambodia in the WSJ article is not a neutral reflection of reality but a constructed narrative shaped by linguistic choices, selective framing, and broader ideological forces. The use of the term “Scambodia” exemplifies how language can function as a tool of stigmatization, reinforcing unequal power relations in global media discourse.

At the same time, the response article highlights the potential for resistance through counter-discourse, emphasizing ethical responsibility and the need for balanced reporting. Ultimately, this study reaffirms a central insight of Critical Discourse Analysis: discourse is both shaped by and constitutive of social power, and critical engagement with language is essential for promoting more equitable and responsible communication.

## References

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