Discursive Strategies in Constructing Leadership in Online Business Media

Leadership

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Abstract

This is a study of how leadership is constructed in online business publication.

Introduction

Leadership—both as a construct and a practice—attracts massive attention. It holds a pivotal place in policy debates, trend analysis, and global affairs. The media provides a platform for most of the discourse about leadership. The media produce and reproduce notions of leadership in diverse ways when they report on various players, such as politicians, businessmen/women, sports leaders, and conflicts mediators. Dominant notions of leadership—known as leadership representation—has been studied, producing a significant understanding in how journalists and commentators conceptualize leadership (see Campus, 2013; Chen & Meindl, 1991; Hannah & Zatzick, 2008; Iszatt-White, Whittle, Gadelshina, & Mueller, 2018; Mavin, Bryans, & Cunningham, 2010). However, there is little or no study that looks at leadership representation in industry specific media outlets, such as the business press or e-publishations.

Many analysts recognize the media’s role in shaping public perceptions (Caudwell, 1971; Altheide, 1976; Hall, 1977; Williams, 1977; Fishman, 1980; Jensen, 1987). Industry specific media, such as the business press and online publications, have similar roles. They do so by covering a wide range of issues, including organization and management. In addition to dedicated special interest business publications (e.g., Fortune, Business Week, Wall Street Journal and Inc.), general interest press outlets (e.g., New York Times, Time) regularly feature business and management oriented articles (Chen & Meindl, 1991). Arguably, the business media do not engage only in simple reporting, but also they transmit a variety of messages about organizations and how they function.

One of the specific ways the business media impact public perception is through its presentation of constructs related to actors and their roles in online platforms. In this regard, business media’s increased commitment to regularly and extensively cover various topics on leadership is worth exploring. Not only do the business media report on trends and developments as related to corporate leadership, they also feature various extended accounts on CEOs, leadership development, and leadership challenges. Given their perception shaping role, it is imperative that research explores and examines what the business media cover about leadership and the underlying orientations that inform editorial and authorial decisions regarding what to say about leadership. This paper is part of a larger research effort to analyze the discourse of leadership in the business media (see Tessema, 2019). In this paper, the focus is on common discursive strategies that writers employ to construct dominant meanings of leadership.

Methodology

The study of leadership as a discourse provides considerable insights into how scholars, practitioners, and the
public perceive leadership. Various spaces of discursive practices can be studied to understand leadership discourses. One such discursive practice space is the business media that devotes considerable effort in disseminating information about leadership. While understanding the discourse of leadership in the context of business media offers insights into the dominant meaning of leadership that the business media present, it is also useful to look at discourse strategies that these writers adopt to communicate meanings about leadership. This study attempted to analyze the discourse strategies employed in five business e-magazines, and the findings indicate that writers exploit lexical, syntactic, and textual methods to present their meanings of leadership.

The present study is part of a larger project on exploring the discourse of leadership in the business media. The project looks at leading business media and their coverage of leadership. A universe of texts for the project was sampled through online searches for leading outlets that feature leadership texts to a wide audience. The sampling criteria include the following: i) readership reach as confirmed by the size of print circulation or number of readers; and ii) frequency or regularity in which the topic “leadership” and related issues are featured as measured by having a regular section totally devoted to the subject “leadership.” As a process, five online business magazines were identified, and these magazines are Forbes, Entrepreneur, Fast Company, Inc, and Fortune. These e-magazines (which also have print circulations) cover leadership extensively and regularly either as news items (e.g., when they feature news of CEOs) or feature articles contributed by business journalists, CEOs, leadership trainers, coaches, consultants, and gurus.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Online Magazine</th>
<th>Number of Articles</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Forbes</td>
<td>249</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fortune</td>
<td>248</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entrepreneur</td>
<td>197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fast Company</td>
<td>184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inc.</td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the study, the reading of the e-magazines was informed by the Foucauldian conception of discourse, which defines discourse as a set of related statements that produce and structure a particular order of reality, and which within that reality makes available specific subject positions. Similarly, Hallidayan (1994) method of text analysis was adopted, making two kinds of meaning-making visible, namely ideational (e.g., typification of leader) and textual (e.g., amplification of a meaning related to leadership in a text).

Findings

Discourse analysis of the sample texts reveals that the business media construct leadership primarily as leader agency. The business media, while emphasizing the primacy of the leader, obscure follower agency and the roles various tangential players have in business and social actions (see Tessema, 2019). How does the online business media perpetuate such a discourse of leadership? What are the dominant discourse strategies? These questions inevitably lead to looking at textual constructions and elements. Analysis of the sample business texts reveal six representation strategies that writers employ to convey their contents. These are simplification, amplification, enumeration, imperative, typification, and metaphor.

Simplification

The most common strategy in portraying leadership in the business media is simplification. Leadership, be it as an action, a process, or agency, is often depicted simplistically. Its defining elements are minimized. Similarly, the work or process required to acquire the capacity to become a leader is lessened. For example, in the “7 Harsh Truths That Will Improve Your Leadership Skills Overnight” (Inc. March 27, 2018), the writers reduce the capacity to be an effective leader to a few steps that can be completed “overnight.”
Evidence of a simplifying orientation is present not only in the selection of leadership traits and characteristics, but also in the use of words such as “easy,” “simple,” and “fast.” In “3 Easy Ways to Help Your People Become Great Leaders” (Inc., July 6, 2017), the writer does not only deploy few characteristics, but also he uses the word “easy” to show the “ordinariness” of the learning process. These texts, like many other leadership texts in the press and popular books, claim “leadership greatness” is not only possible, but also easy to attain:

Illustrative Excerpt 1 After studying the assessments of over 20,000 leaders … there is a way for you to improve as a leader much quicker than traditional thinking. (Inc., Nov 21, 2017)

In addition to minimizing the quality of leadership to a few traits, habits and character and directly using words synonymous with “simplify,” the articles claim that access to certain types of information or materials can also make someone a great leader. In “30 Motivational Quotes That Will Inspire You to Lead” (Inc. April, 13, 2017), reading certain lines from “great” leaders is claimed to be inspiring. A significant number of writers in the business media empathizes the value of watching TED videos. For example, in “25 TED Talks That Will Make You a Better Leader” (Inc. September 14, 2015), the writer identifies 25 TED talks that he promises to be transforming.

Amplification

The content and method of leadership is not only simplified, but also it is amplified. In other words, the description of an effective leader or the performance of an exemplary leader is presented in exaggerative terms. The common exaggerating strategy is the piling of words. Another way of amplifying a meaning is through high sounding adjectives and nouns. Both piling and high-sounding words such as these are common: “traits of exceptional leaders,” “becoming a remarkable leader,” “highly successful leader,” “brutal truth about great leaders,” and “7 harsh truths that will improve your leadership.” Such a strategy seems to accord with what the literature on romance of leadership (e.g. Meindl, Ehrlich, & Dukerich, 1985) suggests about how the role of leadership or leaders presented.

Enumeration

A related, but common discourse strategy across the e-magazines, is enumeration, a deliberate attempt to establish a number that constitutes the sum of qualities that define leadership. Enumeration is an ordered listing of attributes, qualities, and functions. Although there is no evidence of “ordering” in the current corpus of texts, listing is common. Essentially, it is a pattern common among many of the titles to use a numerical value to identify traits, characters, behaviors, skills, and habits that the writers deem necessary to define leadership. An interesting enumeration practice is to list a large number of personal qualities in texts such as this: “22 Qualities That Make a Great Leader” (Entrepreneur, October 28, 2016). The style of popular media might call for catchy titles. Except in cases where simplification is attempted, the enumeration appeared to focus on maximizing a list.

Imperative

Another common strategy is the use of imperatives, a peremptory or commanding tone both in the titles and within the body of texts. Imperative has various stylistic and semantic functions. One function is to emphasize a message. Another reason why writers use imperative is to show authoritative intent. Imperatives have various characteristics. They are directional and forceful. They also signal confidence, certainty, and authority.

The following excerpt from the article “Master These 6 Coaching Skills to Lead Your Team Where They’ve” might illustrate the imperative character of the writing style:

Illustrative Excerpt 2 When you commit to coaching your team members, take the time to explain why you are coaching that person. Tell them that you are making a commitment to developing everyone on the team and that you are going to be coaching them on a regular basis. The reason behind this is to help them get where they want to go and to help them grow and achieve their goals. (Entrepreneur, April 19, 2018)
When writers use imperative, they adopt a *telling* orientation.

*Typification*

An implicit style in representing leaders is typification. There is an endless use of adjectives in front of the noun “leadership.” A concept that can represent this process is typification. Although typification evokes different meanings (e.g. see Alfred Schultz, who introduced the term) in this paper it is used to refer to the constant attempt to put constructs or adjacent constructs in various, but related, categories. The attempt to make a distinction between two meanings that on the surface look similar or perceived to be used interchangeably is a common practice in leadership texts.

A common adjective-noun pairs in the business texts include “great leaders,” “exceptional leaders,” “remarkable leaders,” “effective leaders,” and “disruptive leaders.”

Illustrative Excerpt 3

Anyone in a management or supervisory role is a leader, but not everyone in those positions exhibits *true leadership*. Think of leadership as next level management. The *best leaders* take their expert management skills and combine them with people skills to become well rounded and highly successful. The difference between being a *good leader* and a *great one* is in the relationships you build with your team. (*Forbes*, August 28, 2018)

As this excerpt illustrates, fine distinctions such as “good” and “great” leaders are presented. Similarly, writers offer categories such as “exceptional leaders,” “remarkable leaders,” and “effective leaders” in their portrayal of leadership. A deeper look at such a representation reveals a depiction of a hierarchy of leaders with an apparent aim of distinguishing what is “ordinary” from the “extraordinary.”

*Metaphor*

The least, but very effective strategy, is the use of metaphor to represent leadership. Metaphors might be understood as a simplifying process. However, the simplification as intended through metaphors and reduction of complexity are not the same. As presented earlier, simplification in the sample business leadership texts is an attempt to wrongly minimize or educe a complex practice. In metaphor, the attempt is to use an analogy to expedite an understanding of a complex process or practice.

As shown in following excerpt, the metaphor of nourishing others is employed to represent the actions of leaders. According to the writer, a major function of leadership is to offer emotional support which is analogues with nourishing others.

Illustrative Excerpt 4

The recent news story of a Thai soccer team trapped in a cave highlights a range of nourishing interactions. The team literally lacked food, and yet they were nourished by their coach in the form of meditation and emotional support. It proved to be a way to keep the young adolescent’s calmer, which enabled them to explore possible escape routes in small groups. Most of us are not literally facing life and death in our jobs, but some do feel trapped. We all need conditions and experiences that are nourishing. (*Forbes*, August 14, 2018)

Table 2 *Main Discourse Strategies Used to Portray Leadership in Online Business Magazines*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discourse Strategy</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Simplification</td>
<td>Seeking a simplistic or short-cut representation of what is naturally a complex process or phenomenon.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amplification</td>
<td>A lexical strategy used to exaggerate or emphasize a meaning or a message through words.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enumeration</td>
<td>A deliberate attempt to establish a number that constitutes the defining quality.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imperatives</td>
<td>A peremptory or commanding tone both in the titles and within the body of texts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Typification</td>
<td>Identifying types of leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metaphor</td>
<td>A type of analogy which achieves its effect via association, comparison or resemblance.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Conclusion

Besides focusing on the content of leadership (e.g., meaning of leadership, significance of leadership, the actions of leaders), the study of leadership discourse should analyze the multiple ways people construct leadership. This study is an effort in that direction, and its contribution needs to be seen in the context of the interdisciplinary nature of leadership.

Various societies engage in various discursive practices of portraying leadership and leaders through arts, texts, media, and rhetoric. While doing so, they use discourse strategies to represent meanings of leadership in ways that fit their perception, amplify certain aspects, and minimize other aspects. This study looked at how business-oriented publications portray leadership by focusing on five leading business e-publications. It found six discourse strategies, namely simplification, amplification, enumeration, imperative, typification, and metaphor. The strategies fulfill two main functions. One is to emphasize a certain meaning of leadership. Amplification and imperatives fulfill the function of emphasizing. The second is to simplify a process or a phenomenon, which is attempted by simplification, enumeration, typification, and metaphor.

The basis of the writers’ claims to knowledge about leadership is rarely stated. However, they occasionally premise their statements on prior leader observations, scholarly sources, or authoritative sources.

References


