# CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS (CDA) & INTERVIEWS

- Project: Dissertation (Honours)
- 4 Participant Organisations / Websites

*Thank you to all participants!*

# THE INTERNET AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF ENVIRONMENTAL KNOWLEDGE:

## AN ANALYSIS OF COMPETING DISCOURSES AMONGST HYDRO-ELECTRICITY GENERATION RELATED WEBSITES

*- Unpublished Honours Dissertation 2002*

# THE INTERNET AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF ENVIRONMENTAL KNOWLEDGE (2002)

*The Research Model*

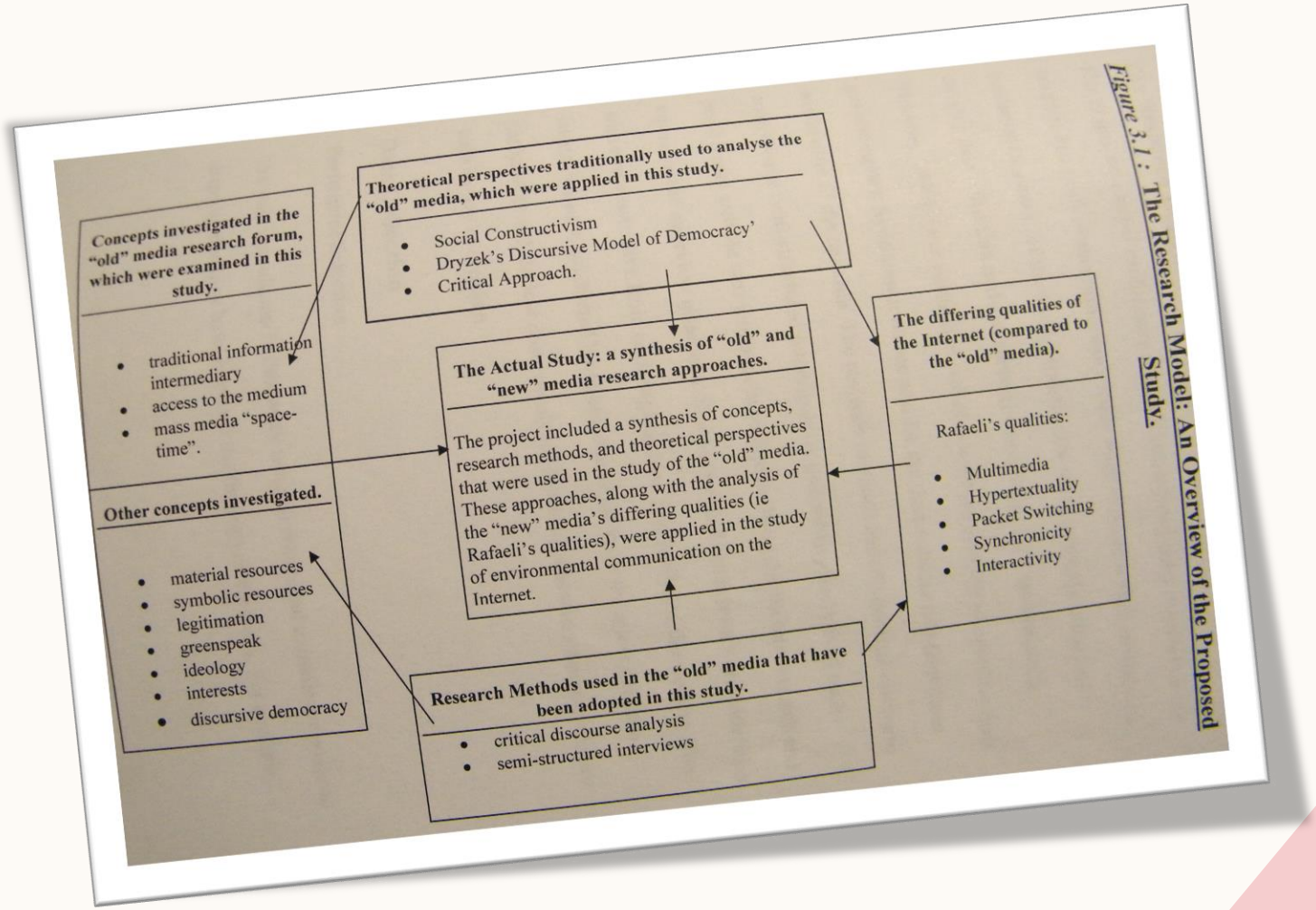


*Figure 3.1 :* The Research Model: An Overview of the Proposed Study.

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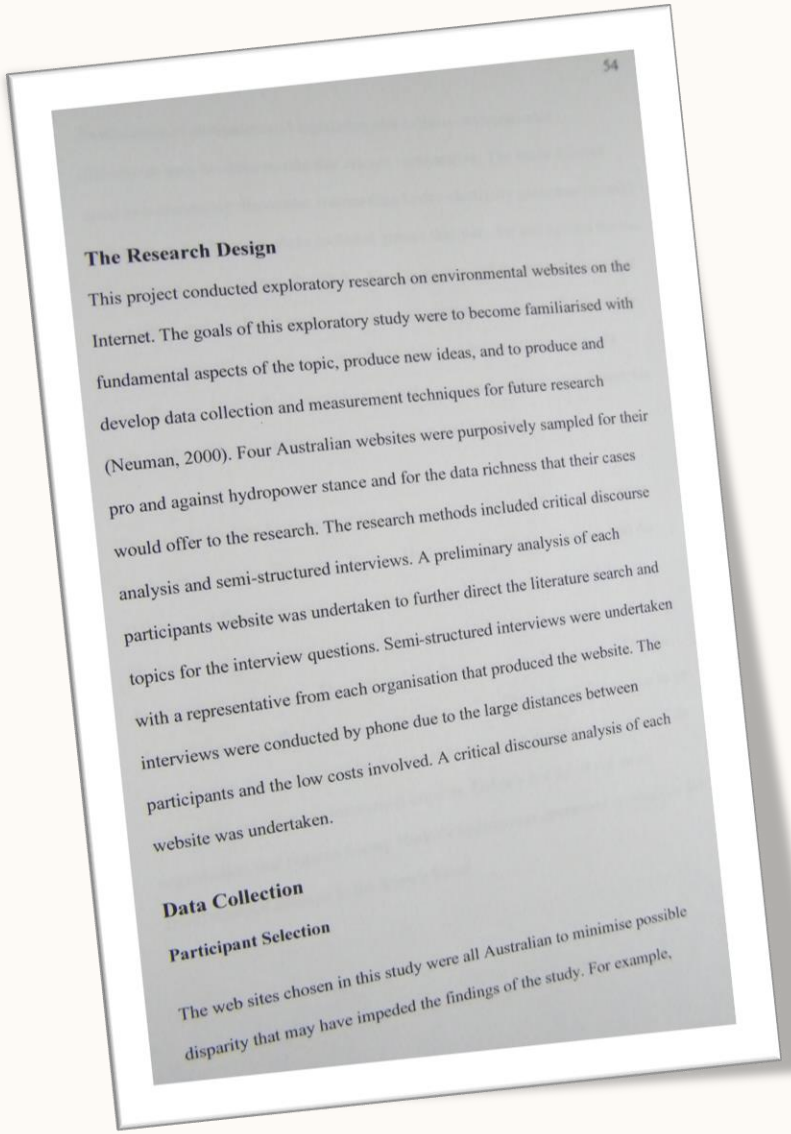
*Research Design, Data Collection & Participant Selection (4 organisations)*



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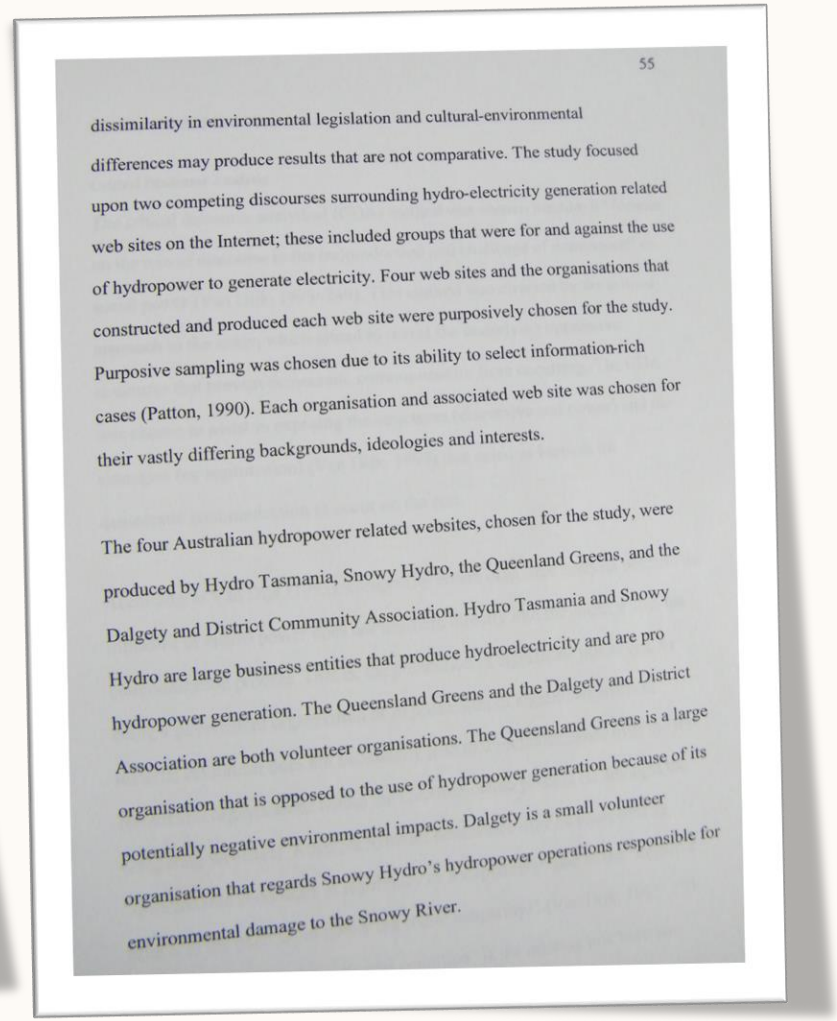
**The Research Design**

This project conducted exploratory research on environmental websites on the Internet. The goals of this exploratory study were to become familiarised with fundamental aspects of the topic, produce new ideas, and to produce and develop data collection and measurement techniques for future research (Neuman, 2000). Four Australian websites were purposively sampled for their pro and against hydropower stance and for the data richness that their cases would offer to the research. The research methods included critical discourse analysis and semi-structured interviews. A preliminary analysis of each participants website was undertaken to further direct the literature search and topics for the interview questions. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with a representative from each organisation that produced the website. The interviews were conducted by phone due to the large distances between participants and the low costs involved. A critical discourse analysis of each website was undertaken.

**Data Collection**

**Participant Selection**

The web sites chosen in this study were all Australian to minimise possible disparity that may have impeded the findings of the study. For example,



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dissimilarity in environmental legislation and cultural-environmental differences may produce results that are not comparative. The study focused upon two competing discourses surrounding hydro-electricity generation related web sites on the Internet; these included groups that were for and against the use of hydropower to generate electricity. Four web sites and the organisations that constructed and produced each web site were purposively chosen for the study. Purposive sampling was chosen due to its ability to select information-rich cases (Patton, 1990). Each organisation and associated web site was chosen for their vastly differing backgrounds, ideologies and interests.

The four Australian hydropower related websites, chosen for the study, were produced by Hydro Tasmania, Snowy Hydro, the Queenland Greens, and the Dalgety and District Community Association. Hydro Tasmania and Snowy Hydro are large business entities that produce hydroelectricity and are pro hydropower generation. The Queensland Greens and the Dalgety and District Association are both volunteer organisations. The Queensland Greens is a large organisation that is opposed to the use of hydropower generation because of its potentially negative environmental impacts. Dalgety is a small volunteer organisation that regards Snowy Hydro's hydropower operations responsible for environmental damage to the Snowy River.

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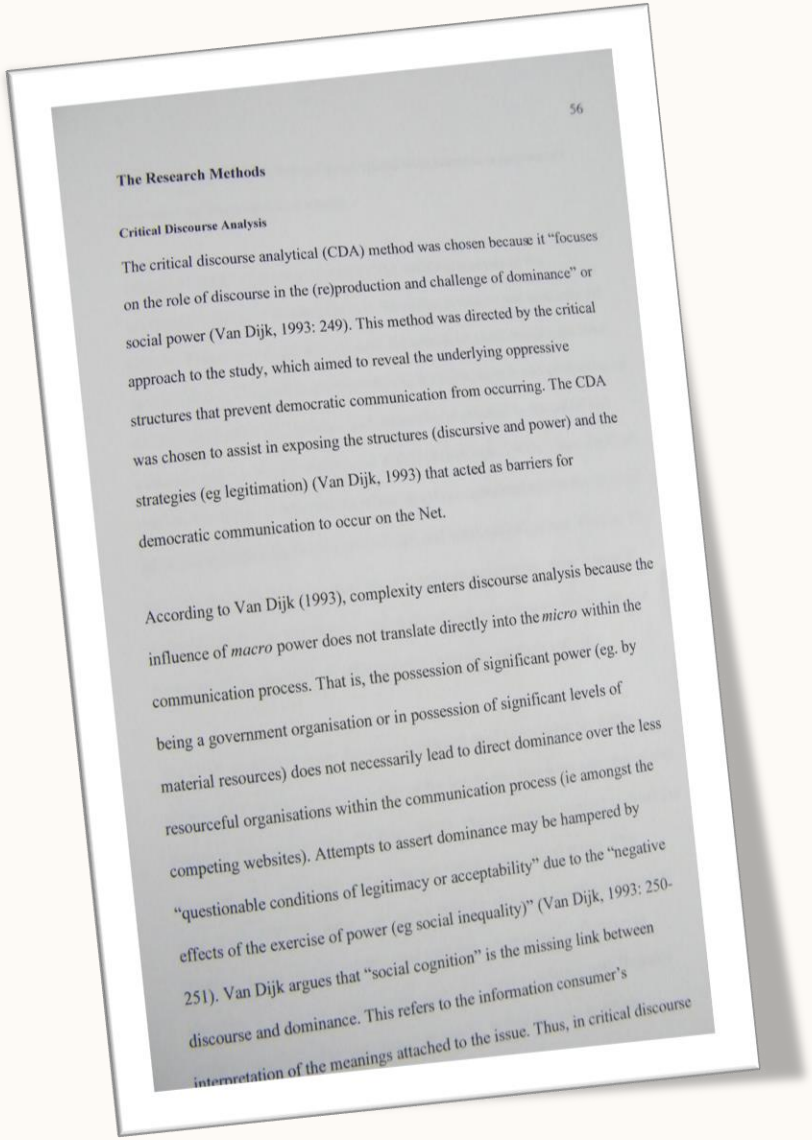
*Research Methods, Discourse Analysis and Semi-structured Interviews*



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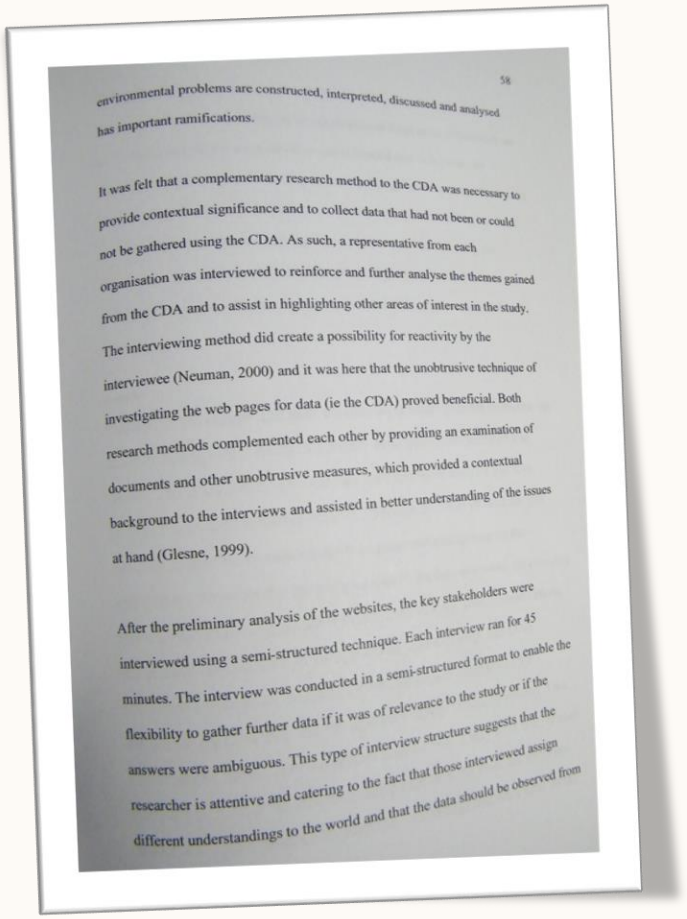
**The Research Methods**

**Critical Discourse Analysis**

The critical discourse analytical (CDA) method was chosen because it "focuses on the role of discourse in the (re)production and challenge of dominance" or social power (Van Dijk, 1993: 249). This method was directed by the critical approach to the study, which aimed to reveal the underlying oppressive structures that prevent democratic communication from occurring. The CDA was chosen to assist in exposing the structures (discursive and power) and the strategies (eg legitimation) (Van Dijk, 1993) that acted as barriers for democratic communication to occur on the Net.

According to Van Dijk (1993), complexity enters discourse analysis because the influence of *macro* power does not translate directly into the *micro* within the communication process. That is, the possession of significant power (eg. by being a government organisation or in possession of significant levels of material resources) does not necessarily lead to direct dominance over the less resourceful organisations within the communication process (ie amongst the competing websites). Attempts to assert dominance may be hampered by "questionable conditions of legitimacy or acceptability" due to the "negative effects of the exercise of power (eg social inequality)" (Van Dijk, 1993: 250-251). Van Dijk argues that "social cognition" is the missing link between discourse and dominance. This refers to the information consumer's interpretation of the meanings attached to the issue. Thus, in critical discourse



environmental problems are constructed, interpreted, discussed and analysed has important ramifications.

It was felt that a complementary research method to the CDA was necessary to provide contextual significance and to collect data that had not been or could not be gathered using the CDA. As such, a representative from each organisation was interviewed to reinforce and further analyse the themes gained from the CDA and to assist in highlighting other areas of interest in the study. The interviewing method did create a possibility for reactivity by the interviewee (Neuman, 2000) and it was here that the unobtrusive technique of investigating the web pages for data (ie the CDA) proved beneficial. Both research methods complemented each other by providing an examination of documents and other unobtrusive measures, which provided a contextual background to the interviews and assisted in better understanding of the issues at hand (Glesne, 1999).

After the preliminary analysis of the websites, the key stakeholders were interviewed using a semi-structured technique. Each interview ran for 45 minutes. The interview was conducted in a semi-structured format to enable the flexibility to gather further data if it was of relevance to the study or if the answers were ambiguous. This type of interview structure suggests that the researcher is attentive and catering to the fact that those interviewed assign different understandings to the world and that the data should be observed from

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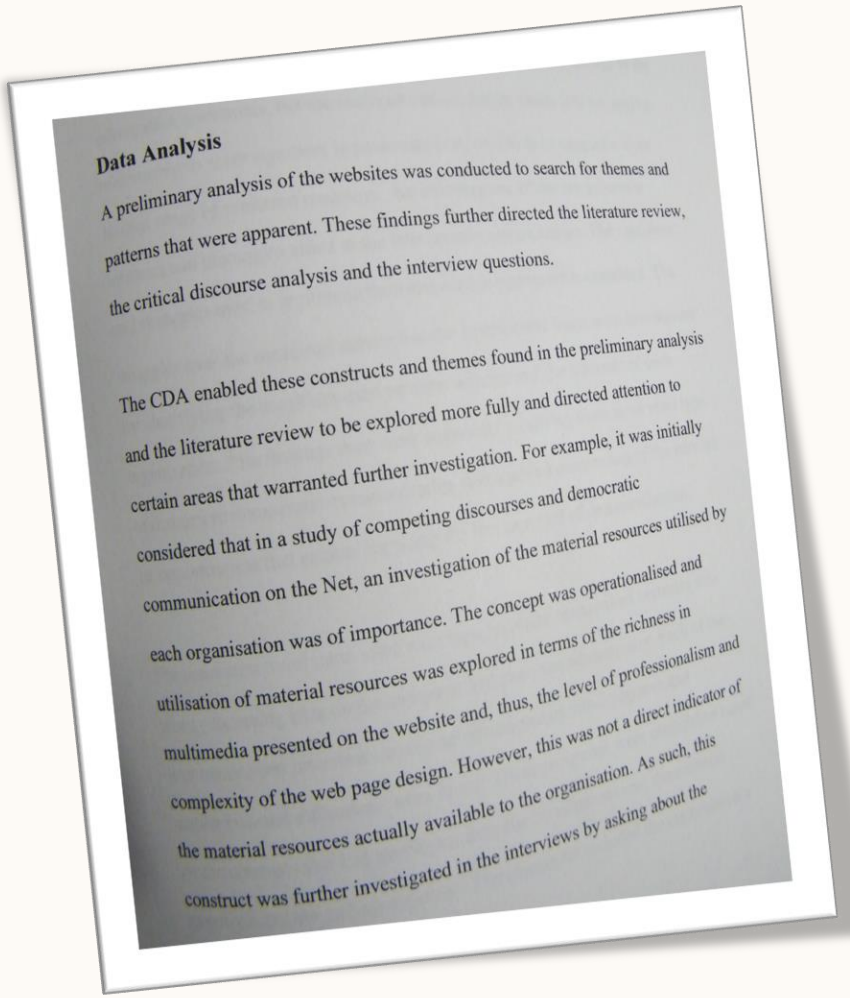
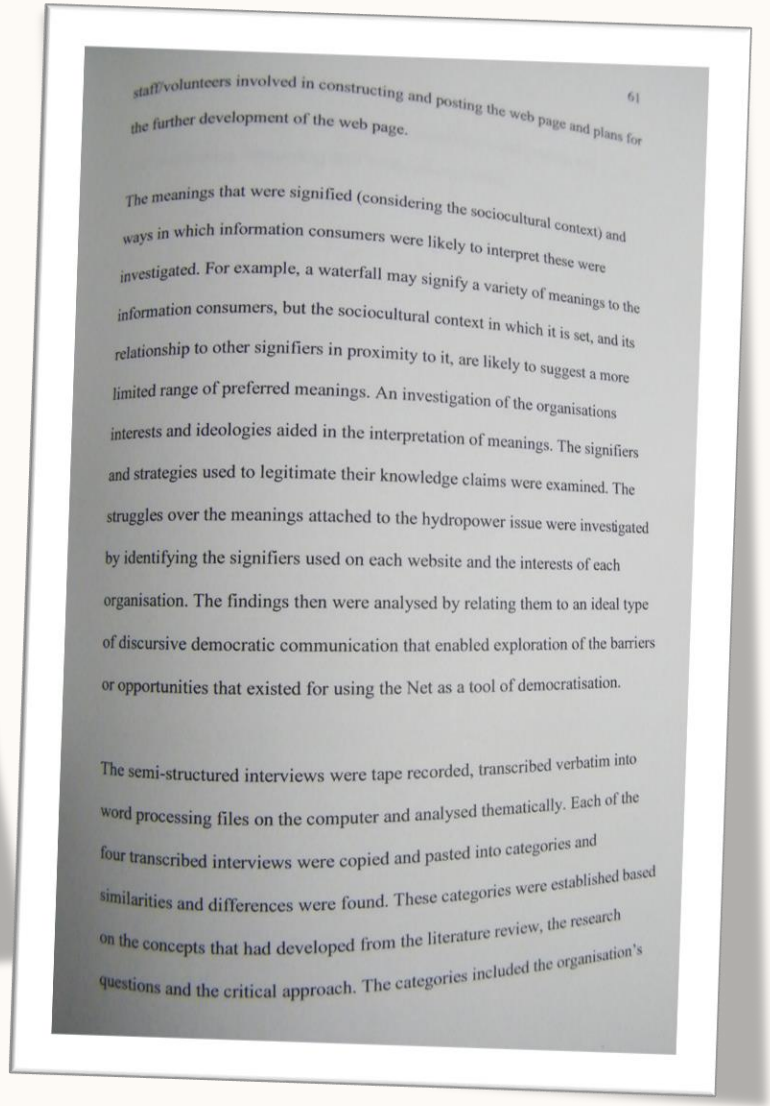
*Data Analysis*



**Data Analysis**

A preliminary analysis of the websites was conducted to search for themes and patterns that were apparent. These findings further directed the literature review, the critical discourse analysis and the interview questions.

The CDA enabled these constructs and themes found in the preliminary analysis and the literature review to be explored more fully and directed attention to certain areas that warranted further investigation. For example, it was initially considered that in a study of competing discourses and democratic communication on the Net, an investigation of the material resources utilised by each organisation was of importance. The concept was operationalised and utilisation of material resources was explored in terms of the richness in multimedia presented on the website and, thus, the level of professionalism and complexity of the web page design. However, this was not a direct indicator of the material resources actually available to the organisation. As such, this construct was further investigated in the interviews by asking about the



staff/volunteers involved in constructing and posting the web page and plans for the further development of the web page. 61

The meanings that were signified (considering the sociocultural context) and ways in which information consumers were likely to interpret these were investigated. For example, a waterfall may signify a variety of meanings to the information consumers, but the sociocultural context in which it is set, and its relationship to other signifiers in proximity to it, are likely to suggest a more limited range of preferred meanings. An investigation of the organisations interests and ideologies aided in the interpretation of meanings. The signifiers and strategies used to legitimate their knowledge claims were examined. The struggles over the meanings attached to the hydropower issue were investigated by identifying the signifiers used on each website and the interests of each organisation. The findings then were analysed by relating them to an ideal type of discursive democratic communication that enabled exploration of the barriers or opportunities that existed for using the Net as a tool of democratisation.

The semi-structured interviews were tape recorded, transcribed verbatim into word processing files on the computer and analysed thematically. Each of the four transcribed interviews were copied and pasted into categories and similarities and differences were found. These categories were established based on the concepts that had developed from the literature review, the research questions and the critical approach. The categories included the organisation's

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*Democratization, Resource Disparity and Accessibility*

The implications of this analysis for democratization are evaluated through reference to the green model of discursive democracy due to its emphasis on ecological rationality in the decision-making process. It is argued that the qualities of the Internet that set it apart from traditional mediums do present opportunities to promote discursive democracy.

Despite the different levels of resources possessed by the organisations responsible for each website, access to the medium was not problematic in the way experienced by marginal groups in relation to traditional media. The disparity in resources, however, reflected in the types and concentration of signifiers displayed on each website … the ability to access the communication process and contest such claims does as least promote opportunities for democratization according to the representative model. Thus, democratization of environmental decision-making [by users] via the Net faces both challenges and opportunities.