

Identity, Empowerment and Change, Handout 26

Understanding the news – questions to ask

What is fact and what is interpretation?

Distinguish the facts whose accuracy can be readily checked from statements of opinion and interpretation.

What language is used?

Are words neutral or are they emotive and loaded? For example, how are words such as *freedom-fighter*, *terrorist* and *vigilante* used? Or *invasion* and *liberation*? How does the report use the word *say*, implying that someone is telling the truth, and the word *claim*, implying that someone may not be? What choice is made between *Third World* and *Global South*?

Is the account balanced?

Is more than one point of view reported, and is each different point of view presented fairly and neutrally?

Complexity and uncertainty

When points of view are reported is it acknowledged that the people quoted are in certain respects uncertain, both in their perceptions of what actually happened and in their interpretations and opinions?

Quotations

Who is directly quoted and how are they referred to? For example, are they said to be 'experts', 'professionals' or 'representatives'? How much information is given about who they are? Does it sometimes happen that someone is quoted anonymously, and could the quotation therefore be fictitious?

Background

Reporters and newscasters frequently go for 'bang bang' items with immediate and attention-grabbing impact rather than provide 'explainers', giving information about the general context and historical background. What is the balance in the report you are looking at between explainers on the one hand and immediate facts on the other?

Cause and effect

Reports sometimes run two items together with words such as following, later, subsequently, previously. They do not actually say, when using such words, that there is a causal connection between the events. They do, however, imply such a connection. Do you see this happening in the report you are studying?

Motivations

Are words used which imply how someone is motivated and could it be that they are misleading? For example, the phrases Muslim terrorist and Islamic terrorist are frequently used, but the term Christian terrorist in reports from Northern Ireland have seldom if ever been used.

Freedom to make up one's mind

This is one of the most important questions of all. News channels claim to distinguish between providing facts and providing interpretations. But do they in fact do this? Are you confident that you can make up your own mind on the basis of what is reported, or can you see that you are being subtly (or perhaps unsubtly) led to adopt a particular point of view?

What are the assumptions about the audience?

Who does the reporter think they are talking to? That is, what knowledge and understanding do they assume the audience to have, and what predispositions and expectations?

Identity, Empowerment and Change, Handout 27

Media Portrayals of Islam and Muslims

1 Generalizations

Are Muslims seen as basically all much the same, or are they represented as being engaged in reflective disagreement and dialogue with each other, with a range of different views?

2 A plague on them all?

In so far as Muslims are seen as having disagreements with each other, for example between Shi'a and Sunni or between Sufi and Political Islam, is the assumption that all are wrong, all as bad as each other? Or is there a much more nuanced and sensitive account of differences amongst Muslims, similar to the differences, deliberations and disagreements that exist amongst non-Muslims?

3 Two kinds of Muslim?

Are Muslims divided into two broad categories, 'good Muslims' (hard-working, decent, law-abiding and 'moderate') and 'bad Muslims' (mixing religion with politics, inclined to extremism and terrorism, making unreasonable demands)? Or is the multi-faceted complexity of Islam, both in the present and the past, recognized and attended to?

4 Like or unlike?

Are Muslims seen as totally 'other', separate from the so-called West, or as both similar and interdependent, sharing a common humanity, a common set of aspirations and values, a common history and a common space? Are there stories in the media about 'ordinary' Muslims, people 'just like ourselves'?