

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'?

5 Partners or enemies?

Are Muslims seen as an aggressive enemy to be feared, opposed and defeated, or as co-operative partners with whom to work on shared problems, locally, nationally and internationally?

6 Really religious?

Are Muslims seen as hypocritical in their religious beliefs and practices, using religion to justify things that cannot be justified, or simply to give themselves a sense of identity, or are they seen as sincere and genuine?

7 Identity as well as belief?

Are Muslims represented as all holding certain theological beliefs, essentially, or is it recognized that being a Muslim is for some people more to do with ethno-religious identity, or affiliation to a broad tradition and heritage, than with holding specific beliefs?

8 Abusive language?

Is immoderate language used, for example language that compares Muslims to animals, or that claims they are insane? Or are disagreement and criticism expressed with civility?

9 Attention to Muslim insights and arguments?

Are Muslim criticisms of the so-called West rejected out of hand or are they considered and debated?

10 Double standards?

Are double standards applied in descriptions and criticisms of Islam and the so-called West, or are criticisms even-handed?

11 Who gets to speak?

Are Muslim voices sought out and quoted and is there a range of such voices? Are they given a fair hearing, or are they ridiculed or sidelined? And is it shown that many non-Muslims seek and express solidarity with Muslims on many issues?

12 Common sense?

Are anti-Muslim comments, stereotypes and discourse seen as natural and 'common sense', or as problematic and to be challenged?

