

## Activity 15

### Items in today's news

– critical questions to ask

#### Summary

Young people are given a list of questions to ask about a news story on TV or in a paper, and use these with regard to a specific cutting, or item on a website, or clip of film. On the basis of their analysis, they draft an imaginary letter to the editor or to the Press Complaints Commission. If the item is recent, they write such letters for real.

#### Why?

The benefits that young people gain from this exercise include the following. They:

- practise discussion, negotiation and cooperation skills in interaction with each other, and skills in explaining and justifying their views and ideas
- practise listening skills, skills in understanding views different from their own, and skills in reaching consensus
- develop knowledge and understanding of the nature and consequences of racisms in society, including Islamophobia
- develop knowledge and understanding of rule of law and anti-discrimination legislation
- develop knowledge of the principles underlying successful campaigns, projects, movements and struggles for justice and equality, both in the past and the present
- consider critically how the media present stories, information and explanations
- develop pride in their own identity and strengths, and resilience in coping with the persistent stream of anti-Muslim ignorance and prejudice present in some of the print media.

#### Preparation

You need some news cuttings, or else items from websites, including the websites of broadcasting organizations. You can easily find relevant stories by using the Search facility. Also you can build up a useful collection by subscribing to the regular mailings of the Forum Against Islamophobia and Racism (FAIR). Entitled Daily News Digest, the service is described at <http://www.fairuk.org/dnd.htm>.

A specimen news item is provided in Handout 29.

Also you need some questions, in order to guide how news items are studied and analysed. Possible lists of questions are provided in Handouts 26 and 27.

#### Procedure

Young people may:

- examine a news item, and ask and answer questions about it, along the lines suggested in Handouts 26 and 27
- create their own newspaper-style or TV-style reports, based on real or imaginary events in their own school.
- sort through ten or so 'snippets' of news, or about ten real or imaginary press releases, and imagine themselves to be an editorial team whose task is to put the items in a sequence and to allocate space and time for each
- compare and contrast how the same story is presented by the BBC and the print media, and how it is treated in different newspapers
- write headlines for the same story, as they might appear in different newspapers.

## 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'?

**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?

