

Media literacy

Introduction

In their book *Bad News from Israel*, the Glasgow University Media Group found in a study of the effect of TV news that TV viewers who felt they were watching 'an incomprehensible and irresolvable litany of death and suffering', switched channels or simply walked away from their screens.

The researchers quoted a student who commented that the news 'never explains it so I don't see the point in watching it – I just turn it off and just go and make a cup of tea or something. I don't like watching it when I don't understand what's going on'.¹ Such passivity is the hallmark of a bystander as distinct from an active citizen.

The questions an active citizen needs to ask about the media, including the blogosphere, are briefly sketched in this paper.

What is fact and what is interpretation?

Can the reader readily distinguish between facts whose accuracy can be easily 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'?

¹ *Bad News from Israel*, Philo and Berry 2004, page 240, exact details to be added.

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?

Source: adapted from *Citizenship and Muslim Perspectives* by Muhammad Imran and Elaine Miskell, Birmingham 2003.