

Part 2 – Language and mass communication

Higher level

HL

In Activity 3.2 on bias on page 70, there was a list of headlines about Christine O'Donnell from different newspapers and news organisations about one story published on one day. In groups, look at how different newspapers report the same events. Choose a news story and find five different headlines on it. Compare and contrast the headlines. Is there bias in any of the headlines? How is language used to achieve certain effects?

'Freedom of expression – in particular, freedom of the press – guarantees popular participation in the decisions and actions of government, and popular participation is the essence of our democracy.'
Corazon Aquino (1933–2009)

Key terms



Emotive language is language that both reflects the emotional tone of the writer and instigates an emotional response from the reader. It is also known as loaded language.

Censorship is the intentional removal of information that the censor, be it a government or media agent, deems harmful, sensitive or controversial.

Euphemisms are words or phrases that are substituted for more direct words or phrases in an attempt to make things easier to accept or less embarrassing.

'I have always been firmly persuaded that our newspapers cannot be edited in the interests of the general public from the counting room.'

Franklin D. Roosevelt (1882–1945)

TOK



Figure 3.4 This cartoon raises some basic, but important, questions about the nature of good journalism. What is the difference between rumours and news? Why might a news story contain lies? What does innuendo mean? Why does innuendo not belong in good investigative journalism?

Journalism and linguistic devices

You have seen how journalism can be biased and sensational because of the constant pressure to provide newsworthy stories. Now let us turn to the linguistic devices that characterise sensationalism and bias.

Emotive language

The hallmark of sensationalism is **emotive language**. The headlines in the activity about the Christine O'Donnell story (Activity 3.2, page 70) included words and phrases such as *stumbles*, *gets a lesson* and *blanks*. These all contain emotive language: they have connotations which sound more extreme than blander, more basic vocabulary. They appeal to our emotions. The journalist could have said, for example, that O'Donnell *did not know* the First Amendment instead of *stumbles* or *blanks*; the straightforward *did not know* would have been less emotive, less 'loaded'.

Euphemisms

Some people refer to the media as 'the filter'. This is an interesting image that suggests our version of reality is really someone else's selection of reality. In more extreme terms, one could argue that our news is censored. While we may think of **censorship** as a device allowing governments to intervene and remove news stories, burn books or block radio frequencies, there is also the notion of censorship through language, which can be seen as a more devious sort of censorship.

Newspapers can filter the truth by the use of **euphemisms**. Euphemisms are words that make unpleasant things or ideas sound milder and less offensive. We use them to be less direct when talking about taboos or ideas that may be difficult to accept or embarrassing. Instead of saying that someone has *died*, for example, we say they have *passed away*. We often find euphemisms being used in reports about wars. Below are some examples of

euphemistic words and phrases used in reports about modern wars. Next to them is a more direct way of saying what they mean. The examples reveal how language can be used as a tool by governments and journalists to manufacture consent and, in this case, justify wars.

Euphemism

collateral damage
to neutralise
friendly fire
enhanced interrogation
air campaign

Meaning

death of civilians
to kill
accidental killing of soldiers on the same side
torture
bombing

THIS MODERN WORLD

by TOM TOMORROW

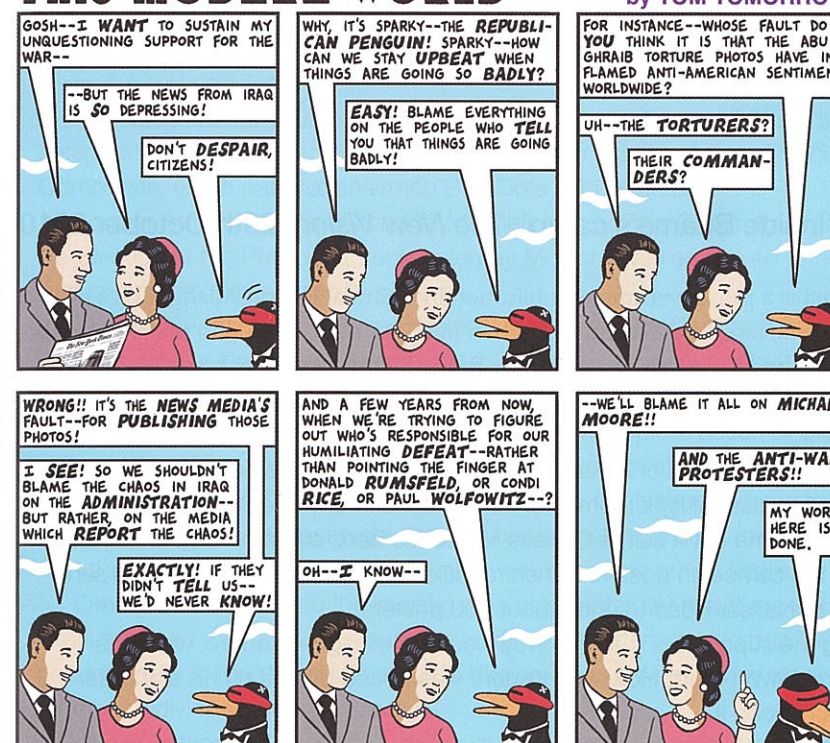


Figure 3.5 While Sparky the republican penguin seems comical, do you think he presents a case for censorship that many people subscribe to?

Vague language

Some words in the English language have very clear meanings, such as *chair* or *bachelor*. Others words, especially quantifiers, such as *a lot*, *frequently* or *far away*, are vaguer and may mean something different to one reader or another. Part of becoming more media literate is learning to spot vague language. Writers may use such devices to avoid honest reporting while readers can make false presumptions if they do not spot vague language.

In Text 3.3 you will be looking at the front page of a tabloid newspaper, *The Sun*. In one of the articles, we see vague language about a 'stunning model', who was the 'passion flower' of Jean Collin's husband. This husband planned to 'ditch' his soap-star wife, after stealing 'half her fortune' and running away with his lover. As critical readers we have to ask ourselves several questions about this vague language: How one can quantify this lover's good looks? What is a 'passion flower'? Was he 'ditching' his wife or was she divorcing him? How much exactly is 'half her fortune'? There is room for several interpretations to this text, which is why we should be wary of vague language.