

Media monitoring

Reading between the Lines

A Guide to Critical Media Consumption



מרכז להגנת הדמוקרטיה בישראל (ע"ר)

THE CENTER FOR THE PROTECTION OF DEMOCRACY IN ISRAEL

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Table of Contents

Introduction.....	4
A. Placement.....	7
B. Graphic Saliency	9
C. Headline-Text Factual Correspondence.....	10
D. Headline Rhetoric and Lexical Selection.....	13
E. Formulation of Responsibility.....	15
F. Epistemic Framing.....	17
G. Visual Semiotics.....	18
Conclusion.....	19

Introduction

This CD is the first in a series of eight CDs that form a practical guide for teaching critical consumption of news material, such as the news pages of newspapers and television news broadcasts. The CD describes various techniques for critical reading and contains examples for practicing these skills. Subsequent CDs in the series will demonstrate how to implement these techniques and will offer exercises for honing critical media consumption skills that are based on recent comprehensive research on subjects such as the Gaza Disengagement, the second Lebanon War, and more. This series of CDs is designed to serve as an instructional aide for lecturers in communications, students, media professionals and the general public.

The techniques elaborated in the CD and its accompanying handbook are all based on one basic fact: The final news products that we receive – newspaper editions and news broadcasts – are the results of a long and complex production process that is influenced by relations between reporters and their sources, reporters and editors, and editors and management. The news production process is also shaped by professional work procedures, complex perspectives, political pressures, and so on. The CD and handbook aim to help the user identify the tell-tale signs of these components, to understand their significance and to learn from them how to read the news in a more profound way – to "read between the lines".¹

Two parallel goals have guided the creation of this series of CDs. First, they are designed to instill skills for critical reading, in the full sense of the term. A second goal is to promote critical media consumption in the specific context of the Israeli-Arab conflict. Over the years the Israeli media has played a complex role, not always a positive one, in the conflict's development. The media has helped define the conflict and its significance for the Israeli public by defining our side in the conflict – our aspirations, hopes and fears and actions – and by defining the other side. Critically reading the messages contained in news coverage can neutralize to some extent the media's ability to shape consumers'

perspectives according to short-term media interests and can also neutralize the influence of those elements that exert pressure on the media. It is our hope that the CD and handbook will enable media professionals to develop new means of self-criticism that will allow them, in time, to create news coverage that does not perpetuate the conflict, but which might actually contribute to its resolution.

The techniques for critical media consumption that appear in these CDs focus on the distinction between two major stages in the news making process – the writing stage and the editing stage. In the first stage, reporters, commentators and columnists write their texts and send them to the editors. The editors receive additional texts as well, from press agencies, public relations firms and so on. At the second stage the editors produce the final product: They determine which texts will appear (only a small share of all the material gathered appears on any given day) and how it will appear in the newspaper or broadcast. The editors determine the placement of the text (on the front page or on page 17, at the beginning of the broadcast or after a commercial break), they select the photographs that go with each item, they determine the sequence of items in the broadcast and they compose headlines (including sub-headlines and photo captions in newspapers and words spoken by the anchors in television news).

In the view of most news producers and news consumers the second stage, the editing stage, is mainly technical. According to most popular perceptions, the truly important work is done in gathering and writing news material. Editors merely "prepare" this material for print or broadcast. This perception is wrong, for two parallel reasons: First, editorial work determines news messages no less than the work of the reporters, and in some ways even more so. Second, in reading the news media consumers rely on material produced by editors much more than on material produced by reporters. The placement of an article on the front page and not on page 17, the phrasing of a particular headline, the appearance of a photo beside an article, the words spoken by a news anchor before an item is broadcast – all these factors have a decisive influence on consumers' understanding of the news. Furthermore, many studies show that media consumers often limit themselves to reading headlines (or

viewing the headlines of a news broadcast) and in many cases consumers do not even get to the texts of the news items (or the rest of the edition). In such cases, perception of the news is determined almost exclusively by the editors' work.

This fact has far-reaching significance, since a meticulous review of news material at both stages of the process – writing and editing – reveals that the materials produced at each stage are not comparable. The headlines of newspapers and television newscasts are not merely short neutral summaries of the news. In most cases, the headlines tell a very different story than that which is told by reporters. Along with the placement of an item, its graphic saliency and the accompanying visuals, the headlines modify the message of a news story and thus significantly influence news consumers. To be clear – the problem is not limited to the fact that once in a while the results of editorial work do not reflect the contents of the articles themselves. The point is that the gaps between headlines and texts are systematic. A meticulous review of newspapers and television news broadcasts reveals that certain components of reality, which appear in the articles themselves, are systematically marginalized by editors, while others are systematically highlighted.

The techniques presented in the handbook and CD enable critical readers to reveal these systematic gaps by referring to a set of criteria and learning from them about the complexity of news coverage. The criteria include the following:

A. Placement

When we read a news article or view an item on the television news the first question that we should ask ourselves is: Where is the item placed in the newspaper edition or the broadcast? Is it on the front page, the opening of the broadcast, the back news pages, the end of the broadcast, in the newspaper's daily supplement, in the weekend supplement?

This is important because placement indicates importance. Most newspaper readers regard material that appears on the front page and in the front news pages as important or "hard" news, based on "facts". This is where we read about what happened yesterday. The material that appears in the back sections of the newspaper – the back news pages, the daily supplements and the weekend supplements – is perceived as "soft" news that is less "important" or "newsworthy". This distinction is also valid with respect to television news broadcasts. What appears in the broadcast headlines or immediately afterwards is deemed more "important" than what appears toward the end of the broadcast. To be clear, the placement of an item in a newspaper or a news broadcast is entirely the result of an editorial decision. The exact same item, if placed somewhere else, could be interpreted as having altogether different importance.

The following example illustrates the point: On August 7, 2005, shortly before the Disengagement, the main headline on the front page of *Ha'aretz* proclaimed: **ESTIMATE: 4,000 EVACUATION OPPONENTS HAVE INFILTRATED INTO KATIF BLOC**. The next day, August 8, the newspaper published a story that refuted this threatening forecast. But that story was published on page 5. Its headline read: **IDF: ESTIMATES OF INFILTRATORS IN THE BLOC – BASELESS**. The difference in placement plays a critical role in this example. The main headline on the front page suggests a news item of the utmost importance. The item on page 5 is perceived as being much less important. As a result, the threatening forecast is perceived as being more significant than the reassuring one. Nothing in the two items justifies this gap. It is created by the items' placement and one can easily imagine a situation where the placement of the items could be switched.

The first technique for practicing critical media consumption, then, focuses on the ability to neutralize the influence that an item's placement has on how we interpret the news. Where a given item is placed is rarely coincidental. Keshev's report on the Disengagement (*Disconnected*, January 2006), for example, found that headlines that alluded to possible violence by settlers appeared closer to the front page than headlines that described moderate settlers – which suggests that a systematic pattern of bias underlay the editing of these news items.

B. Graphic Saliency

This criterion complements the one regarding placement. The relevant question here is: How prominent is an item within the page (or the broadcast) where it appears? Where is it positioned on the page (top, bottom)? What is its size in comparison with other items on the same page? How large is its headline? Does the anchor in the studio set-up the item with a long introduction? And so on. Graphic saliency, like placement, suggests importance, factualness, and significance. The refuting story, offered above as an example, was not only published on page 5, it was also published as a small item at the bottom of the page. The following example shows an item that was clearly marginalized:



▲
 ABU MAZEN: WE'LL TAKE CARE OF TICKING BOMBS
Ma'ariv, April 20, 2005



Here too, what is important is the pattern that comes to light from systematic investigation of this criterion. Which is to say that if we were to discover – as revealed by Keshev's research – that Abu Mazen's moderate statements are systematically consigned to non-prominent places while his threatening statements are given greater prominence, we can gain an important insight about systematic editorial bias in the news.

C. Headline-Text Factual Correspondence

The question here is simple but critical: To what extent does the headline reflect what is said in the article? News producers and news consumers traditionally regard headlines as short summaries of articles: What is said in hundreds of words in an article is shortened to a few words in a headline. But, in fact, this is not the case. In most instances, headlines refer to a certain component of an article and they highlight that component over others. The editors thus signal to readers and viewers what is more important and what is less important. In most cases this sort of signaling has a crucial influence on how consumers interpret the news. A meticulous investigation of the material, however, reveals that editorial choices about which components to promote to headlines are not necessarily obvious. Other components could just as easily be promoted to the headlines and then the news would be perceived quite differently. Moreover, in many cases headlines distort what is said in an article. In more than a few cases the link between a headline and an article can seem almost coincidental. The fact that most news consumers "scan the headlines" and do not read every word in an article underscores the significance of this criterion.

In the next example, the prominence given to one component in the article gives an imprecise picture of what is said in the article itself:

The main headline of *Yediot Aharonot* on May 8, 2006, asserted: **PERETZ ASSOCIATES: THE GOVERNMENT WON'T LAST TWO YEARS.** The headline above the article on page 2 read: **PERETZ ASSOCIATES: THE GOVERNMENT WON'T COMPLETE ITS TERM.** While these sentiments are indeed expressed in the article itself, a more fastidious reading of the article uncovers that not all of Peretz's "associates" held the same opinion:

At the same time other sources around Peretz claim that it is too early to estimate how long the government will last. One close advisor to the Labor Party chairman said yesterday, "this government faces many problems but the glue that holds Olmert and Peretz together right now is stronger than the conflicts that will occur down the road.

The two leaders are at a stage where the burden of proof is on them and they therefore have an interest to cooperate" [...] Former MK Yossi Katz, who served as a member of the Labor Party's negotiating team and is considered a Peretz associate, said yesterday, "This government will last a lot longer than is thought. In my estimation, it will survive at least three years. This is a stable government although one needs to bear in mind how the actions of the Palestinians will affect the political system in Israel".

In other words, according to the article, Peretz's advisors and associates are divided in their opinions about the future of the government, which is a different assessment than the one that appears in the headline.

The following example demonstrates a clear contradiction between headlines and the factual components of the articles to which they refer. The banner headline on the front page of *Yediot Aharonot* on April 13, 2005 asserted:



PM: ABU MAZEN WILL NOT SURVIVE ATOP THE PALESTINIAN LEADERSHIP

The sub-headline of the article to which this headline referred, on page 4, was less resolute:



SHARON ALSO ESTIMATED THAT ABU MAZEN IS IN A STRUGGLE FOR SURVIVAL

Within the article itself, by contrast, was written:

Sharon also referred to the Palestinian arena and said that the Chairman of the PA is in the height of a struggle for survival [...] Nevertheless, Sharon was cautious not to take an adamant stance on this issue.

The article reports that the Prime Minister was careful to refrain from taking a clear stance on the question of Abu Mazen's future, but the headline tells a completely different story. In the vast majority of cases the ordinary reader, who has not been trained to read critically, will not identify the contradiction and will naturally reach the conclusion that the Prime Minister already determined that Abu Mazen will not survive atop the Palestinian leadership. Moreover, the article text, which was sent in by a reporter who interviewed the Prime Minister, was the source material that provided the basis for the composition of the headline, but its message was ultimately concealed from the reader.

D. Headline Rhetoric and Lexical Selection

Headlines can differ from articles not only in their factual basis but also in various rhetorical aspects. Frequently, for example, headlines are more dramatic, more sentimental or more impassioned than the texts of the articles. For this reason, too, headlines' influence on readers can be far-reaching. Often, headlines leave out certain elements of the story and convey emotion instead. Thus, for example, some newspapers that appeared at the time of the implementation of the Disengagement were full of emotional headlines about the suffering of evacuated settlers. These headlines colored the coverage in ways that did not always reflect what was said in the articles. Sample headlines from that period include: **LAST EMBRACE, IN TEARS, GOODBYE GAZA, CHILDREN FACE THEIR PARENTS AND ASK FOR ANSWERS – BUT THERE ARE NONE, WALL OF TEARS, SEPARATION PANGS, HURTING TOGETHER, DAYS OF DESTRUCTION, THIS WAS MY HOME, CHILDHOOD ENDS.** Part of being able to read critically includes the ability to identify and neutralize this type of emotional rhetoric and to understand that it, too, is the result of an editorial decision.

Quite often, editors add certain words, images or metaphors that help create an emotional effect. It is important to know how to identify these, too. For example, when Palestinian Authority chairman Yasser Arafat lay terminally ill the media focused on the tension between his wife Suha and senior figures in the PA leadership. On November 9, 2004, *Yediot Aharonot* published this headline, loaded with metaphorical meaning: **ARAB MOVIE.** The sub-headlines continued:

THIS STORY HAS ALL THE ELEMENTS OF A PALESTINIAN SOAP OPERA: A DYING LEADER, CRONIES FIGHTING FOR HIS POSITION AND HIS YOUNG BLONDE WIFE WITH HER EYES ON THE MILLIONS IN THE INHERITANCE * IN THE LAST CHAPTER: SUHA – THE WOMAN WITH HER FINGER ON THE RESPIRATOR BUTTON – PLOTS FIERY VENGEANCE ON ABU-MAZEN, THE MAN WHO HUMILIATED HER * HOW THE “FIRST LADY” BECOME THE WOMAN THAT PALESTINIANS LOVE TO HATE.

It goes without saying that these headlines do not “objectively” represent the reality of Arafat’s last days. Suha Arafat is not the “young blonde” of soap operas and even if she quarreled with Abu Mazen it is hard to imagine her “plotting fiery vengeance” on the man “who humiliated her”. These headlines give the story a certain color that comes from editorial decisions and not from reality.



▲ Yediot Aharonot, November 9, 2004, pp. 14-15.

E. Formulation of Responsibility

Media coverage does not only include description of facts, it also makes determinations about responsibility for events: Who caused something to happen as it did? Sometimes, the composition of headlines assigns responsibility by various means, for instance, by using an active or passive voice. In other instances, where the question of responsibility is controversial (a controversy that emerges from the material that is sent in by reporters), editors may present the controversy itself in the headline. The materials that reporters send in typically provide different perspectives on the question of responsibility, but headlines often tell a one-sided story. For example, after the failure of the Camp David summit in July 2000, reporters sent in various materials in which different sources lay the blame for the failure of the talks on various actors – the Palestinians, the Israelis, the American administration, and on all of them together. But the headlines chosen by the editors focused exclusively on Arafat's responsibility. Here, for example, are the lead headlines from *Ma'ariv*, on July 26, 2000:

Front page:

**FAILURE AT CAMP DAVID * BARAK TO PALESTINIANS: DON'T
DARE IGNITE FIRE IN THE TERRITORIES (banner headline)**

A BLOW TO PEACE (main headline)

**REASON FOR THE BLOW-UP – BARAK ACCUSES: ARAFAT
DEMANDED SOVEREIGNTY OVER THE OLD CITY; THE
CONCESSIONS THAT WERE MADE – BARAK AGREED:
PALESTINIAN SOVEREIGNTY OVER NEIGHBORHOODS IN
JERUSALEM (sub-headline)**

Page 2-3 broadsheet:

**THE BLOW-UP: ARAFAT INSISTED ON THE OLD CITY (main
headline)**

Page 5:

BARAK WARNS ARAFAT AGAINST DECLARING AN INDEPENDENT STATE (banner headline)

“WE DID EVERYTHING TO AVOID A CONFRONTATION” (main headline)

“WE WILL BE ABLE TO LOOK OUR CHILDREN IN THE EYES AND SAY WE DID EVERYTHING” (sub-headline)

Pages 6-7:

CLINTON: BARAK WENT FURTHER THAN ARAFAT (main headline)

Page 11:

HIGH LEVEL OF READINESS IN ANTICIPATION OF POSSIBLE RIOTS IN THE TERRITORIES AND ON THE NORTHERN BORDER (banner headline)

“THE KEY IS IN ARAFAT’S HAND – HE WILL DECIDE IF THERE WILL BE VIOLENCE” (main headline)

SECURITY SOURCES SAID * CHIEF-OF-STAFF AT FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND SECURITY COMMITTEE: THE IDF ORDERED ITS UNITS TO USE FIRE TO PREVENT INFILTRATIONS BY PALESTINIANS INTO SETTLEMENTS * CONCERN: ATTEMPTS TO EXPLOIT THE SITUATION “IN ORDER TO BLOW-UP THE PROCESS” (sub heading)

F. Epistemic Framing

Rarely, if ever, does the news report facts that are accepted unequivocally by all sides. In most cases, information is presented as a claim, forecast, assumption, hypothesis, and so on. Therefore, there is great importance in how editors frame the epistemic standing of the material: Is it presented as fact, hypothesis, lie, disinformation, claim, etc...? Framing is important because it helps readers and viewers determine whether they should believe certain information or regard it with skepticism.

An interesting example that illustrates this criterion could be seen, once again, in coverage of Yasser Arafat's illness. In the November 2, 2004 edition of *Yediot Aharonot* two items appeared concerning the condition of Arafat's health. In one, based on Palestinian sources, reporter Sefi Hendler ridiculed the Palestinian spokespersons' assessment of the chairman's health:

The Palestinians yesterday continued their wave of optimistic declarations concerning the health of the Ra'is. After claiming that he "joked with his doctors", the Palestinian representative in Paris, Laila Shahid, reported yesterday that "Arafat slept well at night" and that "his condition is improving".

On the exact same broadsheet, however, appeared another assessment of Arafat's condition – from Western sources. Here the subject was treated completely differently. The article headline read: **RELIABLE WESTERN SOURCES DETERMINE: 'ARAFAT'S CONDITION IS LESS SERIOUS THAN SEEMED EARLIER'**.

G. Visual Semiotics

Editing does not only deal with verbal components. Editing also includes choosing pictures, colors and graphic design – factors that also have a decisive influence on readers. An illustrative example that shows the significance that visual factors have in framing the news message can be seen in the October 29, 2004 edition of *Yediot Aharonot*. In the bottom half of page 6 there appears a photomontage in which a picture of Yasser Arafat in uniform and pointing is superimposed over a picture of a long line of body bags. The headline under the picture declares: **BEREAVED PARENTS: 'IF ONLY HE WOULD DIE'.**



Conclusion

These are the major criteria for reading the news critically – reading in a way that focuses on the gap between the work produced by reporters and that of the editors. It is important to note, however, that recognizing the criteria themselves is just the first step in the process. Critical reading is not limited to identifying isolated examples of reporting and editorial work, irrespective of the larger context. In the final analysis, the significant question is: *Are the biases in editing arranged according to a more general pattern?* For example, when reporters send in material that suggests a controversy on the question of responsibility (criterion E) do the headlines systematically attribute responsibility to one side? When reporters send in material that indicates differences of opinion regarding the facts (criterion F) do the headlines systematically adopt one version of events (such as the IDF's version) and present it as factual, on account of other versions that are presented as falsehoods?

Meticulous examination of editing patterns in Israeli media, as shown in books by Dr. Daniel Dor and in reports by Keshev – The Center for the Protection of Democracy in Israel reveal that such systematic patterns indeed exist. They play a key role in influencing Israeli public opinion on the Arab-Israeli conflict. Identifying and analyzing the criteria for critical media consumption, using the exercises in the CD series, can enable readers to uncover these patterns and neutralize their influence.

¹ The methods of reading and viewing are based on the research methodology developed by Dr. Daniel Dor and utilized by Keshev – The Center for the Protection of Democracy in Israel in its research. See Daniel Dor, *Newspapers under the Influence* (Babel, 2001) (in Hebrew), Daniel Dor, *Intifada Hits the Headlines* (Indiana University Press, 2004) and Daniel Dor, *The Suppression of Guilt* (Pluto, 2005).

Keshev Publications

- "A Moment of National Pride – Israeli Media Coverage of the Takeover of Jericho Prison", April 2006.
- "Liquidation Sale – Israeli Media Coverage of Events in Which Palestinians Were Killed by Israeli Security Forces", March 2006.
- "Disconnected – The Israeli Media's Coverage of the Gaza Disengagement", January 2006.
- "Quiet, We're Disengaging! – Israeli Media Coverage of the Tense Ceasefire between Israel and the Palestinian Authority following the Sharm e-Sheikh Understandings", August 2005.
- "Channel Two's Virtual Reality – Coverage of Events around the Sharbaty Family Home in Hebron", April 2005.
- "A Dog's Life – Whose Blood is Worth More: That of Palestinian Civilians or a 'Jewish' Dog?", March 2005.
- "Bush: Territorial Contiguity for the Palestinian State", February 2005.
- "The Palestinian Prisoner Release Issue in the Israeli Print Media". February 2005.
- "When Thy Enemy Falls – Coverage of Arafat's Death in the Israeli Media", January 2005.



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