

**VIEW POINTS AND FACTS IN
AMERICAN NEWSPAPER EDITORIALS**

Firas Awad Marouf - Assistant Professor
Department of English
Al-Turath University College

ABSTRACT

Many discourse analysts of argumentative texts in general and newspaper editorials in particular claim that writers in the West generally abide by the rules of writing such texts, i.e. following a balanced and logical presentation of facts and opinions, being unbiased and showing genuine interest in the welfare of peoples.

The present study attempts to find whether these claims are true or not, first by surveying the findings of some well-known linguists like Noam Chomsky, George Lakoff, Teun van Dijk and others, who have studied the traditions of writing argumentative texts in Britain and the United States; and second, by subjecting a typical editorial, published in an American newspaper to a thorough discourse analysis.

The conclusions of the theoretical and applied parts of the study clearly indicate that the description and interpretation of political events and issues in the editorials is usually consistent with the writers' evaluations, i.e. either they present their viewpoints as if they were facts and common knowledge or they distort the facts they use in support of their arguments. Their ultimate objective is to give boost to opinions and ideologies that serve the interests of the parties, governments or institutions which finance them rather than serve the causes of justice and freedom.

الآراء والحقائق في المقالات الافتتاحية للصحف الأمريكية

المستخلص

يزعم العديد من محلي النصوص الجدلية عموما والمقالات الافتتاحية خصوصا أن كتاب الافتتاحيات الغربيين يلتزمون بقواعد كتابة مثل هذه النصوص, أي أنهم يقدمون عرضا منطقيًا ومتوازنًا للحقائق والآراء, وإنهم غير متحيزين و ينصب جل اهتمامهم في مصلحة الشعوب.

نحاول في هذه الدراسة أن نتبين فيما إذا كانت هذه المزاعم صحيحة أم لا, أولا من خلال استعراض ما توصل إليه أشهر اللغويين من أمثال نوم جومسكي وجورج لايفوف وتيون فان ديك وآخرين ممن درسوا تقاليد كتابة النصوص الجدلية في الصحف البريطانية والأمريكية, وثانيا من خلال تحليل نموذج لمقالة افتتاحية منشورة في عدة صحف أمريكية.

تبين نتائج الدراستين النظرية والعملية بصورة واضحة أن استعراض الأحداث والآراء يعكس وجهة نظر الكتاب حيث إنهم إما يقومون بعرض آرائهم كما لو كانت حقائق يتفق عليها الناس, أو يشوهون الحقائق التي يسوقونها دعما لآرائهم, هدفهم من ذلك تسويق الأفكار التي تخدم مصالح الأحزاب أو الحكومات أو المؤسسات التي تملك صحفهم أو تمويلها بدلا من خدمة قضايا الحرية والعدالة.

1. The Nature and Impact of Editorials

Editorials are argumentative texts that express the opinions of the senior editorial staff or publishers of a newspaper. They are generally institutional and not personal, *i.e.* they represent the attitude of the party or institution to which the newspaper belongs regarding major political, economic and social events and issues, be they local or international.

Editorials have a significant impact on the formation and manipulation of public opinion, in setting the political agenda and in influencing decision making and other forms of social and political action. van Dijk (1995: 19) believes that members of parliament, cabinet ministers, corporate managers and other leaders follow the opinions of the most respected newspapers. For more information on

the influence of editorials , see (Gruner, 1989; Alvarado, 1990; Krueger & Fox, 1990)

2. Style and Rhetorical Structure of Editorials

Being impersonal and addressed mainly to the elite, editorials tend to be quite formal in style. Hence, first person pronouns and stories about personal experiences or emotions are quite rare in quality newspaper editorials. Besides, lexical items, syntactic structures and logical modes of argumentation are carefully selected.

The rhetorical structure of editorials (the sentences, sequences and paragraphs which combine together to serve an overall rhetorical purpose) cannot be identified in a precise manner. However, there are some general features that most quality newspaper editorials are supposed to share. These include:

- a. An explanation of the event, situation or issue at hand, sticking to facts and objective reporting. In stating the facts, the writer should avoid using evaluative words and expressions.
- b. Opinions from the opposing viewpoint regarding the same issues that the writer addresses.
- c. The opinions of the writer delivered in a professional manner. Good editorials refrain from name-calling or other petty tactics of persuasion.
- d. Alternative solutions to the problem or issue using constructive criticism and suggesting actions that lead to solutions.
- e. A solid and concise conclusion that powerfully summarizes the writer's opinion.

It is believed that the tradition of writing argumentative texts in the West originated in the Greek and Roman cultures and was developed and refined in modern times. It is also claimed that this tradition differs from the way argumentative texts are organized and presented in other parts of the world, such as the Far East, Russia and the Arab World.

The linguist John Hinds (cited in Connor, 1996: 198) states that patterns of organizing texts vary among languages and cultures. A similar point of view is expressed by Mauranen (1993: 1-2) who maintains that writers "differ in some of their culturally determined rhetorical practices, and these differences manifest themselves in typical textual features".

Some scholars and linguists go further to claim that in Anglo-American frameworks, vagueness and ambiguity are viewed negatively; explicit argumentation is considered more effective and concrete support for most points is expected (Hinds, 1983; Winteler and McCuen, 1984). In contrast, argumentative texts written outside the western or Anglo-American tradition are said to follow types of rhetorical structures which do not appeal to western readers. For instance, Oliver (1971: 98) claims that "...in Chinese writing, the need for explication is not self-evident while the need to maintain harmony is". Similarly Allan (1970: 40) observes that "Arabic organization is circular and non-cumulative. Arabic writers come to the same point two or three times from different angles to the effect that the native English reader develops the curious feeling that nothing is happening"

Recently, new attempts have been made to transform the rhetorical and discourse analysis of argumentative texts, particularly editorials and opinion columns, from commentary based on limited and inadequate samples to the close investigation of a range of texts. Prominent researchers, especially linguists and political activists like N. Chomsky, G Lakoff and F. van Dijk, among many others, have undertaken meticulous and thorough analysis of extensive data to find how contemporary writers

use language to shape and manipulate readers' opinions and attitudes towards local and international events and issues in a way that serves

the interests of institutions, parties, government and business corporates in the West, especially in Britain and the United States.

Noam Chomsky has written a great number of books, articles and re- search works on mass-media in the West. In most of his works, he criticizes the way American media cover and tackle economic, social and political issues. In the book *Manufacturing Consent: The political Economy of the Mass Media* written jointly with Edward Herman in 1988, the authors present the conclusions they arrived at through case studies of the way reports and editorials are written in leading American newspapers: the coverage of certain issues and events rather than others; the systematic bias that marks editorials and opinion columns and the influence of financing institutions on distorting facts and viewpoints. In an often-quoted remark, Chomsky states "propaganda is to a democracy ,what the bludgeon is to a totalitarian state".

Since the publication of *Manufacturing Consent*, Chomsky has adopted and developed the views expressed therein and has given them a prominent role in his writings and lectures on a wide array of issues including the Middle East problem, the invasion of Iraq in 2003, global warming and human rights.

George Lakoff, an American cognitive linguist and professor of linguistics at the University of California, is most famous for his ideas about the centrality of metaphor to human thinking and social and political behaviour. His original thesis on conceptual metaphor was expressed in the book *Metaphor We Live By* written jointly with Mark Johnson in 1980. In this book the authors argue that writers of newspaper reports and editorials lead their readers to adopt certain views and reject others through the use of positive and negative metaphors, such as comparing the government to *nurturant parents* who keep their children from *corrupting influences* (pollution,

injustice, poverty, *etc.*) or talking of immigration as a "flood" to emphasize its dangers in the mind of readers.

Lakoff has recently distributed many of his ideas via the Internet, in which he shows how leaders and famous newspapers shape their readers' opinions through the use of metaphor. In one of his articles, *Metaphor and War*, he shows that the use of particular metaphors by the first Bush administration to justify American involvement in the Gulf War ended up either "obscuring reality or putting a spin on the facts that was accommodating to the administration's case for military action".

Another famous critic of the way the Western mass-media manipulate their readers' views is Teun A. van Dijk, a Dutch linguist whose main interest is in the fields of text linguistics and critical discourse analysis. Since the 1980s, his works have focused especially on the study of the discursive reproduction of racism by what he calls the *symbolic elites* (politicians, journalists, scholars, writers), the study of news and opinions in the press and on the theories of ideology and context.

In almost all his studies of American newspaper opinion columns, van Dijk tries to identify the numerous argumentative fallacies used by powerful writers to manipulate their audiences. He shows, for instance how writers often confuse *facts* and *opinions* and how they use *evaluative* terms in their supposedly *factual* explanation of facts and events. In his opinion, writers state their personal opinions or the opinions of the institution they support in such a way that makes them sound like facts or common knowledge.

Many other scholars, political activists and linguists have published books and research works that confirm and support the conclusions arrived at by the above-mentioned famous linguists. Prominent among these are Gitlin (2003: 254) who notes that "in liberal capitalist society,

no institution is devoid of hegemonic functions". He considers influential media such as the networks and the major print media organizations as part of the corporate elite, committed to the maintenance of existing systems. He adds that this hegemonic process is subtle and indirect:

Every day, directly or indirectly, by statement or omission, in pictures and words in entertainment, news and advertisement, the mass media produce fields of definition, symbol and rhetoric, through which ideology becomes manifest and concrete (ibid: 4)

"Far from being neutral agents", the media, according to Oktar (2001: 320) "perform a function that is both ideological and political". Moreover, the idea that media criticism is limited by boundaries acceptable to the ruling elite receives substantial empirical support in many other research works. See for instance (Bennet, 1990; Entman, 1991, 2004; Lee, 2003; Said, 1978, 1981, 1994)

3. An Example

In order to substantiate the views and conclusions of the linguists cited above, the researcher has randomly chosen an editorial published simultaneously in several quality newspapers in the United States, and subjected it to close discourse analysis. The aim of this analysis is to examine in some detail how facts and viewpoints are typically formulated in American editorials in order to demonstrate the preferred models which writers use in their persuasive editorial discourse.

In our analysis, we will avoid commenting on the viewpoints expressed in the editorial because writers have every right to adopt any attitude that serves their interests. The analysis will, therefore, be exclusively concerned with the *facts* stated in support of those viewpoints.

The editorial chosen appeared on the 31st of January 2011 during the uprising in Egypt in *the Dallas Morning News* under the heading:

Editorial: U.S. must help fill Egypt's leadership vacuum



Published 31 January 2011 03:52 PM

For all the billions of dollars that Washington has funneled to Egypt over three decades, its influence seems minimal in shaping the revolutionary fervor consuming the Arab world's most populous country. That's because the "Made in America" label is on far too many items — tanks, weaponry and tear gas canisters — that have made the United States synonymous in Egyptian eyes with the dictator they're trying to oust.

Today's expected protest, in which 1 million people are being called into the streets, could push tensions to the breaking point, and

Washington would be mistaken to sit watching idly. Egyptians still care deeply about what the U.S. government says and does.

President Barack Obama must stop equivocating and looking for ways to gradually nudge President Hosni Mubarak from power. The longer the dictator stays, the more dangerous Egypt's protests will become. Mubarak must go soon, and it's time for Obama to state it clearly. Whatever credibility Obama holds on Egyptian streets can only diminish the longer he occupies a neutral middle ground.

In the past, Arab revolutions have tended to unfold in three acts: I. Ouster of the old regime by coup. II. Installation of a promising reformer. III. Evolution of the reformer into an even more authoritarian figure than his predecessor.

This pattern is doubly tragic because the people's dreams of true reform and prosperity almost always get dashed, and they remain mired in the kinds of abject poverty that have pushed Egyptians and Tunisians to their current points of revolt. It's a situation ripe for Islamist exploitation because, for Egypt, the "promising reformer" in Act II could emerge in the figure of the anti-Western Muslim Brotherhood.

The last time the Arab world witnessed such chaos was Iraq in 2003, immediately after dictator Saddam Hussein fled the advance of U.S. troops. The streets went wild with looting, and not even a heavy U.S. military presence could restore order.

Government-run services — from electrical generation and water treatment to bus terminals and bread bakeries — collapsed and didn't resume operations until imams in major mosques got people back to

work. The imams' empowerment gave a crucial boost to Islamist insurgent groups.

Rather than easing Mubarak out, the more pressing U.S. concern should be minimizing Islamist influence by moving quickly to support a moderate as interim leader, such as Mohammed ElBaradei, the former International Atomic Energy Agency chief.

With food and fuel shortages growing in Egypt, the United States would be smart to take a high-profile lead in dispatching emergency supplies and helping ensure that Egyptian ports and services keep running.

The lessons of Iraq should serve as a cautionary tale. Power vacuums are never good. Even worse is leaving them for America's foes to fill.

On top of the editorial, there is a picture of a tank with an Egyptian soldier kneeling on the back of an Egyptian protester, whose arms are tied to his back.

The first question that can be raised is obviously: Why have the editors selected this particular picture out of the thousands of other pictures that the whole world saw on TV channels, which show the friendly and sympathetic attitude of the Egyptian army towards the protesters? Is this the neutral, objective and logical presentation of *facts* as they happened in Egypt? Or is it an attempt to give a distorted picture of the behavior of soldiers and people in developing countries?

The title of the editorial is not less biased than the picture; it talks about *Egypt's Leadership Vacuum* at a time when the Egyptian leadership and the government were still in power (six days after the beginning of the uprising). Note also the use of the word *help* giving

the impression that the U. S. is willing to *help fill the vacuum* rather than simply *fill the vacuum*.

1. *For all the billions of dollars that Washington has funneled to Egypt over three decades, its influence seems minimal in shaping the revolutionary fervor consuming the Arab world's most popular country. That's because the 'made in America label is on far too many items...that have made the United States synonymous in Egyptian eyes with the dictator they are trying to oust*

The schematic function of these sentences is, as stated in our theoretical survey, to give a summary and background of the event under discussion. This summary, however, is not limited to a brief description of events, but is rather loaded with evaluative and purposefully selected statements. The writers fail to mention that *the billions of dollars* were not given to Egypt in economic aid or for building the Egyptian infra-structure but was in the form of old military equipment that Washington wanted to get rid of.

Note also the use of the words *fervor consuming* the country. Is this a fair way of describing the protests and their purpose? Then, *the made in America label is on far too many items* gives the impression that all that Egypt has is from America, who ought to be thanked for it. Finally, comes the word *dictator* to describe President Husni Mubarak. I do not think many American newspapers referred to him as *dictator* before that date. This again is an evaluative term used to suit the occasion.

2. *Today's expected protest, in which 1 million people are being called into the streets, could push tensions to the breaking point, and Washington would be mistaken to sit watching idly. Egyptians still care deeply about what the U.S. government says and does.*

The writers have the right to express their opinion about what Washington should be doing, but saying that *Washington is watching idly* is far from telling the truth about the American stand towards the course that the events were taking. The sentence: *Egyptians still care deeply about what the U.S. government says and does* is another statement that the editorial fabricates. How have the writers arrived at this conclusion? (Note the use of the word *deeply*). The researcher, along with the millions of people who were glued to the TV channels at the time did not observe any such feelings on part of the Egyptian protestors.

3. *The longer the dictator stays, the more dangerous Egypt protests will become*

Dangerous for whom and how? The editorial does not specify. Implicitly, however, the most probable interpretation is that it will be dangerous for American interests in Egypt.

4. *In the past, Arab revolutions have tended to unfold in three acts: I. Ouster of the older regime by coup. II. Installation of a promising reformer. III. Evolution of the reformer into an even more authoritarian figure than his predecessor.*

This sweeping generalization about all Arab revolutions is not supported with a single example. It might be true of some of the

revolutions that have taken place but it is certainly not true of all of them. This is an example of stating a controversial issue as if it were common knowledge.

5. *...They [Arab people] remain mired in the kinds of abject poverty that have pushed Egyptians and Tunisians to their current points of revolt. It's a situation ripe for Islamic exploitation because, for Egypt, the "promising reformer" could emerge in the figure of the anti-western Muslim Brotherhood.*

Here, again, no evidence is cited to prove that it is "poverty" that has pushed the Egyptians and Tunisians to the point of revolt.
Correspondents

from all parts of the world, who covered the protest mention things other than poverty: abolishing the state of emergency, democracy, free and fair elections, freedom of expression, independence of the media, fighting corruption, limited terms in power were the major demands of the protesters. But probably the writers want to imply that the people in the Middle East care for nothing but food and shelter. It does not cross their minds or probably they do not want to admit that the peoples in this region care about freedom, justice and democracy.

6. *...The streets [of Iraq in 2003] went wild with looting and not even a heavy U.S. military presence could restore order.*

The implication here is that the U.S. army tried to restore order and prevent looting but failed, whereas everybody knows that the American troops stood idly watching gangsters looting places like the Iraqi Museum, the National Library and hundreds of other institutions. If the U.S. army were really keen on preventing the destruction, burning and looting of major Iraqi public buildings and infra-structure, it could have ordered a curfew or taken some measure to stop that.

7. *Government-run services didn't resume operations until Imams in major mosque got people back to work. The Imams' empowerment gave a crucial boost to Islamists insurgent groups.*

Again, this is the viewpoint of the writers of the editorial rather than a statement of what actually happened in Iraq at that time. The writers do not tell us where and how they got this information.

Finally, there is a lot of evidence in the article that proves the writers' exploitation of George Lakoff's theory of conceptual metaphor. Throughout the editorial, negative metaphors are associated with Egypt, Iraq, Tunisia and the Arab world as a whole, while positive metaphors are associated with the United States. Examples of negative metaphors are *Egypt leadership vacuum, fervor consuming Egypt, push tensions to the breaking points, they [Arabs] remain mired in the kinds of abject poverty, ripe for Islamists exploitation, the streets went wild with looting.*

Examples of positive metaphors associated with the U.S. include: *help fill vacuum, funneled to Egypt, occupy a neutral ground, to take a high-profile lead in dispatching emergency supplies, help ensure that Egyptian ports and services keep running.*

An overall discourse analysis of the editorial gives a clear impression that the editors are keen on improving the image of the United States in the minds of the Arab peoples, and on the protection of the interests of the corporates and institutions for which these writers work.

There is certainly no mention of the interests and welfare of the people of Egypt, Tunisia or Iraq anywhere in the editorial. This is exclusive evidence in support of Chomsky's thesis that the media in the U.S. serve those who finance them rather than serving the causes of justice, freedom and democracy.

4. Conclusion

The theoretical and applied parts of the study clearly indicate that the description and interpretation of political events and issues in the editorials is usually consistent with the writers' evaluations, i.e. either they present their viewpoints as if they were facts and common knowledge or they distort the facts they use in support of their arguments. Their ultimate objective is to give boost to opinions and ideologies that serve the interests of the parties, governments or institutions which finance them rather than serve the causes of justice and freedom.

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