Opinion

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Your headlines are misleading you about Iran

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Two weeks ago, the United States and Israel launched missile attacks into Iran's capital, Tehran, during active negotiations surrounding the country's nuclear program. The move ignited the U.S.'s fourth war in the region since the turn of the century. Media coverage was swift; just three days into the conflict the BBC published the headline "At least 153 dead after reported strike on school, Iran says." Almost simultaneously, The New York Times ran a near-identical headline: "Iran says dozens are killed in strike on school." Both articles were in reference to the reportedly accidental bombing of a school by U.S. armed forces, who were meant to be targeting a nearby military base. Yet in their description of the attack, both publishers failed to use impartial language. Instead, their biased rhetoric served only to warp reader perception on the issue.



An airstrike hits building in Iran. The United States in tandem with Israel have begun launching strikes on Iran with the aim of toppling their regime.

PHOTO COURTESY OF AFP NEWS AGENCY ON FACEBOOK

The symmetry of language between these two headlines is no coincidence: both contain diction designed to warp reader perception on the issue they cover. Consider the shared emphasis on "Iran says." Both articles use this phrasing in such a way that it detracts from the validity of the claim. At the time of publishing, the tragedy had already been confirmed by multiple sources, including the UN. Despite this, the language introduces doubt: can the reader trust Iran? The BBC builds on this skepticism. Their use of "reported" underlines that it is a claim by a foreign country, one that is villainized in their position as the U.S.'s enemy. For their part, the NYT introduces "Iran says" as a separate clause, disengaging it from the rest of the headline as a way of separating the victim from the crime.

Both headlines also leave the perpetrator of this potential war crime unknown — despite U.S. involvement being mentioned in the ensuing articles. This omission shifts blame away from the U.S. in the minds of the audience. The tragedy is allowed to be alluded to as a vague misfortune — rather than a critical turning point in a rapidly-escalating war. The reporting of the deaths adds to this. The BBC's article introduces the death toll in the middle of a clause and fails to specify the victims of the attack: the teachers and children who would have been in the school. The NYT's ambiguity is even more heinous in their referral to the death toll being in the "dozens." This vague and unprofessional quantification is highly inappropriate in a scenario which had by then already reached 153 civilian casualties.

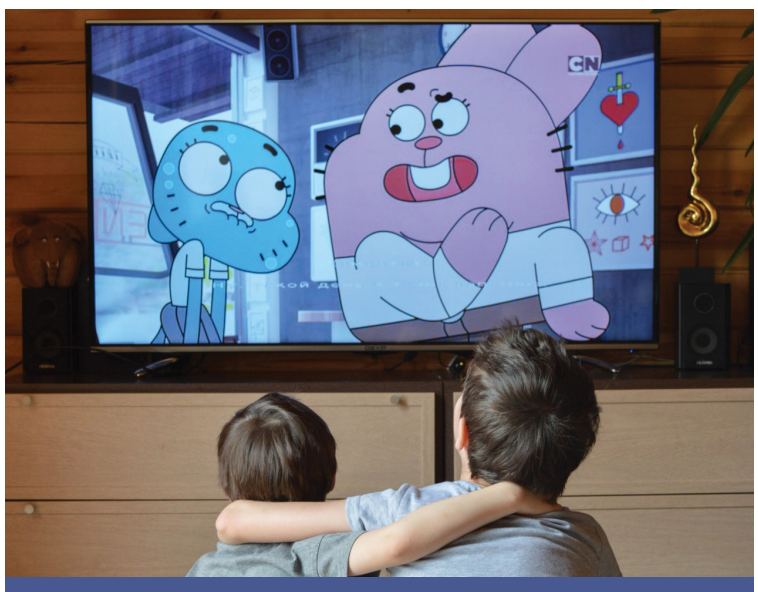
The rhetoric of these headlines is even more shocking when compared to two other headlines put out by the same news agencies on the same day: The NYT's "9 Killed in Israeli City near Jerusalem after Iranian Missile Strike" and The BBC's "Nine Dead in Missile Attack on Israel as Iran Strikes Region." Both of these articles go out of their way to name the actor, Iran, with the victim, Israel. Both provide strong action nouns and verbs, with "strike" and "missile" being specified to provide a factual and emotional feel, creating a sense of loss and sympathy which is not present in their headlines covering similar civilian deaths against Iran. The NYT goes on to specify the death toll in this article, further underlining a difference between their coverage of two different tragedies occurring on two different sides of the war. The NYT also labels Beit Shemesh — the "Israeli City" mentioned in the article — as being near Jerusalem, a UNESCO world heritage site home to the Jewish and Christian faiths. This detail was almost entirely irrelevant to the article, and Jerusalem was never under real threat. Instead, this addition acts as inflammation in the eyes of the audience — creating the sense that Iran poses an aggressive moral and religious threat to the rest of the world.

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> It is our responsibility to recognize misleading narratives and to hold those that publish them accountable.

This uneven and partisan coverage finds its roots in the western media's long depiction of Iran and the rest of the Middle East as an inferior people, and a threat to the western world — a bias known as orientalism. In his book titled after the same issue, Edward Said notes that in almost all media "the Arab is always shown in large numbers," with most depictions representing "mass rage and misery, or irrational gestures." These depictions reached a peak during the invasion of Iraq, when the nation was falsely depicted as holding a threat over the western world with weapons of mass destruction. As a result of these portrayals, the U.S. rushed into a costly foreign conflict, only to discover that the weapons it had sought to destroy never existed at all. 20 years later, the U.S. is again lashing out in fear of the nuclear capabilities of a Middle Eastern nation. Once again, this claim is largely substantiated by the media's appeal to the U.S.'s oriental bias.

As the war on Iran continues to escalate, oriental accounts of the war are likely to rise in prevalence as a convenient tool of propaganda. The BBC and NYT are not alone in their bias, whether purposeful or not. CNN, Fox News and many more news agencies have shown the same use of language in their headlines. News agencies must remember their obligation to publish fair and unbiased reporting. As for readers, we must remain conscious of the rhetoric we consume. It is our responsibility to recognize misleading narratives and to hold those that publish them accountable.



Children watch "The Amazing World of Gumball." This children's show can be viewed as entertainment rather than educational. PHOTO COURTESY OF CREATIVE COMMONS

How diverse sources of media still teach us life lessons

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Think about your favorite character; it could be one such as Indiana Jones, Obi-Wan Kenobi, Kurt Wagner, SpongeBob, Rango or any other character. Now, think of the storylines, side characters and villains that follow them. All these characters face problems that can be mirrored in our own lives. We can learn a lot from viewing diversities of media with a bit more nuance just by being open to it.

When someone views media that has been deemed non-educational, based on the notion that educational TV directly teaches people facts, motor skills or socializing, many are quick to dismiss the entire thing as mindless without realizing that there are messages behind it. Take for example the first SpongeBob movie. To many, it is just another story about SpongeBob going on an adventure, but if we take a closer look, we can pull out themes such as self-discovery, what it means to block out naysayers and the power of having each other's backs. These can be pulled out because they are prevalent throughout the entire media from beginning to end. It does not matter that SpongeBob is a children's cartoon or that he is not real; it is important for people to see that their favorite characters also go through the same struggles as they do.

This is important for young children especially. People will put on PBS Kids or National Geographic and think that children will be interested in characters or shows they really aren't. I say, that if kids show interst in a show that is deemed un-educational, it is important for parents to watch the show as well and to help pull out and relay the show's valuable life lessons to their kids. Take for example the original 90's X-Men TV show. Many children who had interest in the X-Men would prefer to watch that show rather than a something on National Geographic in order to see their favorite characters. If parents sat with their children to watch, they could see various lessons throughout the show. A parent could pull out Nightcrawler showing forgiveness to Mystique and summarize the importance of forgiveness that would otherwise not get through to the child. It also creates a bonding experience between a parent and child because that child will look forward to watching their favorite show and being comfortable discussing it with their parents. This can lead to a better bond that is often lost today as everyone gets increasingly divided by work, school and countless other distractions brought about by everyday life.

Another important thing is for parents to help teach their child the ability to disect deeper messages in media. If a parent shows their child "Indiana Jones" they can highlight that not only is Dr. Jones a cool protagonist, but he can help a child understand problems. If a child can see how Dr. Jones deals with having an absent father, then they can have the confidence to deal with major problems they may face in addition to sympathizing with others. If their favorite character suffers from a certain problem, a child will be more sympathetic towards others who also may struggle with the same problems. Having a role model that is not invincible from their surroundings can provide the necessary perspective to overcome challenges in the world.

The next time you are at the movies or at home watching TV, remember to be on the lookout for the lessons of life because they can come from just about anyone. Even if that person is a young sponge, a blue guy who smells like sulfur or a college professor who is secretly a treasure hunter, never let those life lessons be lost.