The Language of Dehumanization: How Journalists Aid In The 'Othering' Of Their

Subjects

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Genocide begins with dehumanization. For Adama Dieng, the United Nations Secretary-General's Special Advisor on the Prevention of Genocide, this is a fact. In his 2014 address commemorating Human Rights Day, Dieng spoke on how language played a vital role in establishing consent for both the Holocaust and Rwanda, and emphasized the way in which media promotes the dehumanization of peoples (UN News, 2014, para. 4). The dehumanization of an individual or group in the media gives the audience the ability to emotionally detach from the experiences of the subject, and can lead to them being viewed as 'less than', providing the unconscious justification of the events experienced by the individual or group (Utych, 2018, p.441). While the Holocaust and Rwanda remain as historical lessons, the world is currently watching what may become this generation's genocide, Palestine. Western journalists have continuously employed methods of coverage that have influenced public opinion of both Palestine and Israel; since 2021, support for Palestinians has dropped significantly, while the rate of individuals aligning themselves with Israel has rapidly increased. At the same time, general knowledge of the conflict has risen (Quinnipiac, 2023, p.2), implying that the difference in public opinion is tied with the ways in which the media chooses to report on events. In order to ensure that they are not contributing to the dehumanization of peoples, journalists must be aware of their application of passive and active voice, adopt person-first language, and refrain from using inflammatory language in their headlines.

Passive and active voices are grammar decisions employed by authors in order to convey a specific tone or message within their writing. Passive voice focuses on the action occurring with the subject, while active voice focuses on the subject performing the action. The use of passive voice in reporting emerges as a seemingly unique phenomena to coverage of political

events and controversial conflicts, a way for journalists to center the subject and avoid accusations of blame or perpetration (Gibbs, 2020, para.12). However, this is not always applied equally, and often results in dehumanization and othering, as it draws attention to the action being performed, rather than the subject. This discrepancy is evident in a Global News article published on November 16 2023, which states, "Israeli officials say militants killed over 1,200 people…. More than 11,200 Palestinians have been killed" (Jobain & Chehayab, 2023, paras. 5,6). When reporting on the number of Israeli casualties, the journalist has chosen to center the perpetrators, adopting the use of active voice, and highlighting that these deaths were caused by Hamas militants. Coverage of Palestinian casualties however, employs passive voice, centering the subject, and makes no mention of a perpetrator. In 2021, MIT analyzed over 33,000 articles published by the New York Times that covered the First and Second Intifadas that occurred in Israel-Palestine. The study found that when referring to Palestinians, the passive voice was used 15.7% of the time, yet only 6.4% of the time when discussing Israelis (Diwakar, 2020, paras.15,18). This journalistic decision, while potentially unintentional, leads to the dehumanization and othering of the Palestinian experience, as it suggests that the identity of the perpetrator - Israel - is unimportant.

Person-first language is a linguistic style intended to emphasize the identity of a subject, instead of reducing one down to an experience or circumstance. It first emerged as a way for individuals with disabilities to ensure their existence was not tied to a disability, and allow them to be seen as people with complex and unique identities. The National Institutes of Health (2023) published a style guide for journalists and reporters adopting person-first language beyond the scope of disability coverage, highlighting how such practices help ensure the focus of a story is

directed at the subject, rather than attributing the subject to experiences (para.1). These shift the reader's attention to the individual, rather than their circumstances, while also emphasizing that one's current situation is not the entirety of their character. Unfortunately, many news outlets continue to abstain from person-first language, often choosing identity-first language, which erases the subject's humanity. On December 2, 2023, CityNews Toronto published an article providing updates on the current Israeli offensive attack in Gaza. The article leads with describing the actions of Israel as "pounding targets in crowded southern Gaza" (Jobain et al., 2023, para.1) which they attribute to the rising number of casualties. The word choice by the journalists seemingly establishes a connection between military targets and casualties, implying that those that were killed were military targets, rather than individuals. The article does not specify the total number of Hamas targets neutralized in Israeli operations, and makes no distinction between targets and civilians. By choosing to apply identity-first, rather than person-first language, the article and its journalists push the assumption onto the audience that the majority, if not all, of those killed in the recent attack on Gaza were militants, and thus undeserving of recognition or sympathy.

Within journalism, there is a widely accepted understanding that the headline of an article is the most important. The 80/20 Rule reminds reporters that while 80% of viewers may read a headline, only 20% will continue to read the article itself (Barron, 2019, para. 3). Because of this, journalists need to ensure that their headlines capture audience attention, and provide incentive to keep reading. Often, journalists will employ tactics of sensationalism and the use of inflammatory language in their headlines to attract attention to an article, which often leads to the dehumanization of the subject, especially when many will not read further. On November 6,

2023, BBC published an article providing updates on the number of Palestinian casualties, with the headline, "Israel Gaza war: Hamas-run health ministry says Gaza death toll passes 10,000" (Wright, 2023). The headline itself is accurate in providing the reader with an idea of what the article discusses, however, it chooses to use the title "Hamas-run health ministry", when citing the source of the data. Despite multiple international human rights organizations verifying counts and acknowledging that the health ministry has a precise track record of reporting, media outlets like the BBC continue to attribute any numbers to the "Hamas-run Health Ministry". A clear attempt to create doubt in the reader's mind that the number of casualties is accurate, this pushes the belief that Palestinians are lying, and thus undeserving of the level of sympathy and global support received.

Media is designed to be a source of knowledge and education for the public, and provides critical context when needed. Unfortunately, journalists often resort to acts of dehumanizing their subjects, creating audience bias and apathy towards those in need. In order to ensure the subject is portrayed in a way that does not allow for them to be "othered", it is critical that journalists and reporters maintain equal applications of active and passive voice, employ person-first language, and refrain from using intentionally sensational or inflammatory headlines in their coverage. The role of the media in facilitating dehumanization during both the Holocaust and Rwanda serve as a stark reminder of journalism's influence in public opinion. In the years to come, how Western media and its journalists contributed to the mass consent of Palestinian suffering should be considered, even if enacted unintentionally.

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