

COLUMBIA JOURNALISM REVIEW

Opening Shot



CHARLES DEGAULLE ADDRESSING A CROWD IN PARIS, 1964. One can imagine DeGaulle employing some French Newspeak to galvanize the crowd on the twentieth anniversary of Paris's liberation. Find some examples of Newspeak in recent pronouncements by President Bush or other prominent politicians. What is your responsibility as a journalist when government states its case in phrases meant to obfuscate and not educate?

THE WAR EXPERT, PP. 18-20: Find the July 30 op-ed article by Michael O'Hanlon and Kenneth Pollack. Is it persuasive? Explain. Should the *Times* have informed its readers that the authors followed an itinerary arranged by the Defense Department? Why or why not? Massing writes that he was disappointed with the *Times's* decision to use Pollack as an expert after he had been proven wrong about Iraq. Why do you think the *Times* did continue to publish his articles? What impact, if any, do you think Bill Keller's support for the war (p. 18) had on the paper's decision to publish Pollack's op-ed articles? Are you persuaded by Pollack's argument that he was a critic of the Bush Administration's Iraq policies? Why or why not? Do you agree with his comment about Gallipoli? Explain. **ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES:** List the major points the authors make in the July 30 article. Use any sources you can to see if their facts and observations check out.

ORWELL ABUSE, PP. 28-29: If you haven't already, read selections of Orwell's fiction and nonfiction. Why do you think his work is still relevant nearly sixty years after his death? What do your selections reveal about Orwell's world view when they were written? Rieff writes that today, Orwell is appropriated by voices on both sides of the political spectrum. Why is that? What does that say about his work? Find examples from your reading that could be seen as supporting both the left and right. Would Orwell be a man of the left or right if he were alive today, or do you agree with Rieff that neither side can properly claim him as its own? Explain. **ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES:** If it wasn't one of your picks, read a few chapters of *Homage to*

Talking Points

IN THIS ISSUE, CJR looks at the power of words. If there's any doubt about the immense power of language, just look back at the aftermath of 9/11 when the Bush Administration defined the attacks as an act of war, freeing it to pursue a policy of reprisal.

In 1946, George Orwell wrote his authoritative essay, "Politics and the English Language," about the corruption of language for political gain. The events that followed 9/11 are only one example of why Orwell is considered so prescient. Whether it was Orwell the essayist, Orwell the novelist or Orwell the reporter, his influence is still felt.

As David Rieff points out, the right and the left both claim Orwell's words as inspiration and justification, while Nicholas Lemann and Geoffrey Cowan report that Newspeak — or variations of it — is alive and well in 2007. In fact, Brent Cunningham suggests the parsing of what the government is actually saying is so important that newspapers should set up a rhetoric beat to keep their readers properly informed.

Was Orwell correct? Can language be the difference between war and peace? What can you do as a journalist to root out not only corruption in government but in language as well?

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Catalonia (if it was, read a few more). As a young journalist, what lessons can you learn from Orwell's reporting?

THE LIMITS OF LANGUAGE, PP. 31-34: Lemann writes that there are two kinds of bad political writing: "the overcomplicated, unclear kind, and propaganda." Come up with examples of both. Go to the Web sites of the leading candidates of both parties for the White House and view their ads. Find examples in the ads of what Lemann would call bad political writing. When covering politics, what can you do when you come across misleading political language? Should journalists keep dishonest political language from their readers? Can they? Lemann says the corruption of information is more important than the corruption of language. Do you agree? Can you give some examples of how the government corrupts information? Again, what can or should journalists do about it?

ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES: Read Orwell's "Politics and the English Language." What about it makes sense to you? Where, if any place, do you feel he is either overly critical or just wrong? Boil down the rules that Orwell lays out for good writing. Get a copy of any leading national newspaper and read it with Orwell's rules in mind. Find examples of what Orwell would think was good writing and suggest edits to improve the poor writing.

THE RHETORIC BEAT, PP. 36-39: Did journalists fail in their

Between the Lines

- 1) Research the print and Web coverage of the Iraq "surge" and its impact on the war. Who do you think offered the best coverage and analysis? Why?
- 2) Read the letter about *Men's Health* magazine (p. 8) and the article about it in the September/October issue of CJR by Christopher Hanson. Then get a copy of the magazine, read through it and decide whether Kate Dailey's criticism of Hanson's piece is justified. Explain.
- 3) On page 13, Edward R. Murrow is quoted as saying, "I cannot accept that there are two equivalent sides to every story." Do you agree or disagree? Cite examples to support your response.
- 4) Why do you think so many people distrust the "media" but have faith in the work of individual reporters?

coverage of 9/11? How might the Bush Administration's response to 9/11 have been different if journalists had been more intent on questioning whether the 9/11 attacks were really an act of war? Why weren't they? Is there a need for a rhetoric beat? Why or why not? The author discusses how the Administration may try to frame a possible defeat in Iraq. If you were a reporter covering the withdrawal of American troops, how would you accurately frame the story? **ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES:** Go through several editions of a local and national newspaper. Create a chart listing examples of political language euphemisms in one column and the more straightforward terms for which they are being substituted on the other. Imagine you are the reporter on your newspaper's rhetoric beat. After reading your local or national newspaper, write your first column on the rhetoric you've read along the lines suggested by the author.

IF YOU BUILD IT..., PP. 40-45: Read the glossary on page 43. What would George Orwell say about the terminology? How does Julia Wallace use Orwellian language to explain the newspaper's reorganization and staff cuts? Was the staff at the AJC treated fairly by management? Will the changes at the paper benefit the readers in the long run? Why or why not? How would you like to be a reporter at the AJC in the wake of the reorganization and changes in the working environment? What effect does imposing story quotas have on reporters and reporting? **ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES:** Go to www.ajc.com and give a comprehensive critique of the site.

MUSHARRAF'S MONSTER, PP. 46-51: Can there be a truly free press in an authoritarian country? Why or why not? If you were the head of GEO-TV, and were determined to accurately report the story of the mosque assault while being mindful of your viewers' sensibilities and expectations, how would you have done it? Are US broadcasters immune to having their licenses revoked? Find out how broadcasters here are regulated, citing examples of American broadcasters either losing their permits or nearly losing them and the reasons behind the government's action.

Quick Takes

- 1) Read through the offerings at MinnPost (www.minnpost.com) and voiceofsandiego.org. Compare and contrast them, critiquing their strengths and weaknesses. Outline a plan for successfully adapting the best of each site to cover your hometown.
- 2) Pick two films about journalists or journalism and watch them. How are the reporters and/or editors portrayed? How do the films reflect attitudes about the profession in the period when they were made?
- 3) Research how health care was covered when the Clinton Administration attempted to reform the system in 1993. Was the coverage fair? Why or why not? If you were an editor assigned to cover the issue today, how would you do it?
- 4) Read a sample of Marshall Frady's work. Select an aspect of his writing or reporting that you think is especially well done and explain the reasons for your choice.