Propaganda, Disinformation, and the Power of Words: Media and Language Use

A Guide For Journalists

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Introduction

In the past years, the world has witnessed the global rise of propaganda and disinformation. This development poses a significant challenge both for journalists and media consumers. To counter this trend, valuable projects and publications have been launched with the aim of assisting those who would like to distribute or receive accurate information in the new media environment. Most of these initiatives, however, focus on content-related or technological issues, and generally overlook the key role that language plays in the spread of manipulative or misleading messages.

Are we immune to the linguistic means of manipulation? What happens in our minds when we hear a word? How do various rhetorical devices influence our thoughts, feelings, and actions?

This guide for media workers highlights some of the ways in which words shape human thinking and behavior. The document offers practical skills that journalists can utilize in their daily work.

Our summary introduces 10 linguistic tools that are commonly used in propagandistic and manipulative political and media discourses. The reader should not be misled if he or she is familiar the rhetorical mechanisms we mention. The aim of this summary is to make journalists and media professionals *aware of* those recurring linguistic devices that may serve the goal of manipulation. In other words, this supplementary guide helps journalists to be able to identify and handle the rhetorical techniques in question easily, quickly, and confidently.

The summary focuses on linguistic devices that are widely used today, both in local and global contexts. Therefore, instead of concrete political and media discourses, we will introduce the relevant rhetorical mechanisms through examples that are lifelike but not real.

Content

Frames

Framing is an extremely important phenomenon and it is crucial for every journalist to understand how it works. In social science, various conceptualizations of framing exist. One of the most influential theories of framing was developed by the American cognitive linguist, George Lakoff.[*1] According to him, frames are mental structures that can be activated by words.

The process is simple: if we hear a word, it evokes a frame or a group of frames in our mind. This is largely an automatic process: it is very difficult — if not impossible —, to resist frames. To highlight the power of framing Lakoff refers to Richard Nixon's notorious fiasco. In the midst of the Watergate scandal, the former American president gave a speech in which he famously said: "I am not a crook." As Lakoff stresses, for Nixon the word "crook" could have been an unfortunate choice. In this critical situation, when society's trust in him had already been severely eroded, the term inevitably activated the frames of dishonesty, fraudulence, and criminality in people's minds.

As frames can automatically shape human thinking, politicians, communication experts, and the mass media can effectively influence people through framing without most of us being aware of it. Imagine, for example, that a tax regulation is presented by a government to the population as "prosperity package". Regardless of the actual measure and its economic context, the previous term may evoke quite pleasant frames in the public's mind, including the frames of relief, well-deserved support, efficiency, and fairness.

It is important for media workers to realize that everyone evokes frames. If journalists are conscious of this, they will be able to identify and decode important frames that emerge in the discourses they come across during their work. This skill can assist them significantly in better understanding and analyzing the motivations and world views of the actors who evoke those particular frames through language.

*1 Lakoff, George. 2004. *Don't Think of an Elephant! Know your Values and Frame the Debate: the Essential Guide for Progressives*. White River Junction, Vt.: Chelsea Green.

With this background, media workers can, for instance, consider whether they adopt a certain expression or not. Such decisions can have a huge impact. Often, by being unaware of the influence framing, independent media outlets take over terms that were strategically invented by powerful political parties or governments. For instance, media workers can adopt the vocabulary of a government and refer to a tax regulation as "prosperity package". In such cases, journalists treat ideologically loaded political catchphrases as if they were neutral, descriptive terms. This way, they may involuntarily — and, most of the time, despite their best intentions — popularize a political party's agenda.

Journalists who work in environments in which political propaganda has a significant influence, should pay particular attention to framing. By nature, the language of propaganda strategically activates many frames designed to shape the thinking and behavior of the public. By automatically adopting its vocabulary, journalists may, therefore, unintentionally support the spread of propaganda messages.
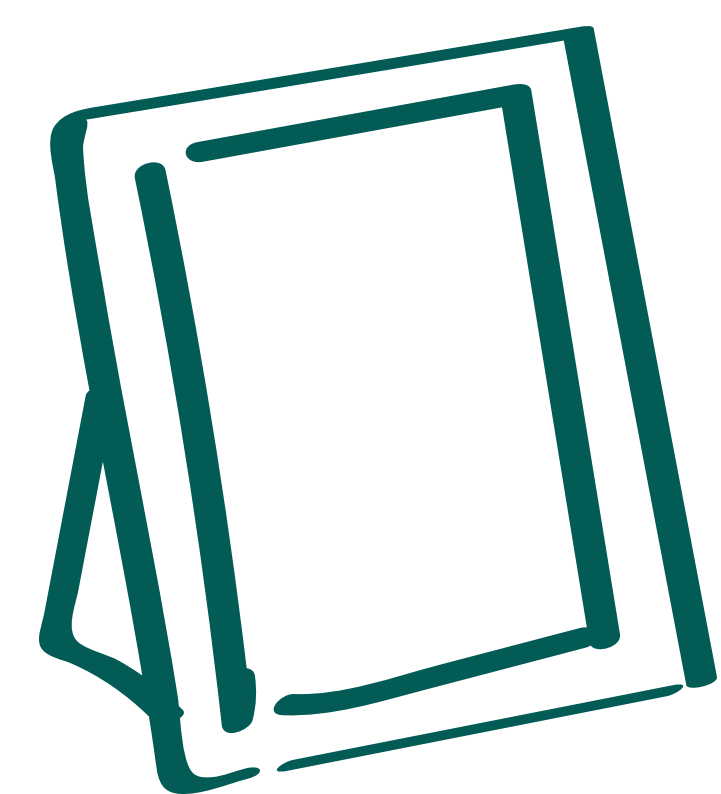
On some occasions, political actors may also "reframe" particular terms in accordance with their interests and programs. Reframing can occur because words do not have a given, fixed meaning. With systematic efforts, positive or negative frames can be attached to any expression. The term "middle class", for example, can function as a neutral, sociological or economic term in various languages. Nonetheless, if a country's influential political party or government decides to construct people who belong to the middle class as enemies, consistently using negative terms in their context (e.g. "lazy", "spoiled", "exploitative"), the word's meaning can change. So much so, that the technical term "middle class" may transform into a widely used derogatory label as a result.

It is common that media outlets continue to use an expression in its previous sense, after it was reframed. By ignoring the process of reframing, the press may also reinforce propaganda messages. To use the previous example: in a context in which the term "middle class" was reframed, the media can activate a party's or government's hostile agenda by utilizing this expression, even if they aim to use the word in the original, neutral sense it had before reframing.

Besides the language use of others, it is vital for media workers to pay careful attention to their own discourses as well. This is a tall order, since journalists aim to have an impact through the pieces they produce. However, it is important to stop for a second and ask themselves a few questions. What kind of ideas can this word activate in people's minds? Is this word or frame sufficient enough to describe complex realities? By using this word, will I or someone else contribute to more or less knowledge?

Journalists have great responsibility as the words that they use activate frames in other people's minds. This is the reason why it is crucial to assess all media content from the perspective of framing. Journalists should not accept the "ready-made" frames that emerge in political and media discourses. If a journalist senses that a particular term activates inappropriate, unrealistic, or unethical frames in the context of a topic, he or she should look for expressions that evoke alternative frames.

Metaphor

A metaphor is a rhetorical device that helps us to describe one kind of experience in terms of another. Many people assume metaphors are used primarily by writers, poets, and public speakers to amplify their messages. However, in reality, we all use metaphors, almost every time we speak. Here are a few examples: "I feel so *low*"; "She *dumped* me"; "He *fell* asleep late yesterday."

It is important to stress that metaphors not only concern use of language. In fact, as Mark Johnson and George Lakoff have highlighted, our whole thinking is metaphorical in nature.[*2] In other words, we do not simply talk in metaphors, but we also *think and feel* in terms of them. This also means that when we come across a metaphor, it can shape our ideas profoundly *without us being aware of it*. Considering this, it comes as little surprise that metaphors play a pivotal role in political rhetoric.

If a politician declares that "we will launch an attack on poverty", then he or she will activate military metaphors in the audience's mind. Regardless of the reality, military metaphors can present politicians, parties, and governments in a favorable light, as brave, tough, efficient, and goal-oriented.

If a political actor states that "globalization is a virus" then he or she will metaphorically present a complex political, economic, social, and cultural process in terms of illness and disease. This way, the speaker may evoke bodily fear and instinctive resistance in the audience.

Journalists should be able to identify and assess the metaphors that politicians and other media workers use. By decoding these metaphors, they may have a more complex understanding of the less salient ways in which language influences us. Additionally, journalists will be able to assess what kind of impact an utterance can have on other people and themselves.

[*2]   Johnson, Mark and George Lakoff. 2003. *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Media workers should also pay attention to the metaphors they themselves use. It is common that a metaphor or metaphor "family" becomes popular in political and media discourses, being employed almost automatically in the context of certain topics. Metaphors of physical abuse and catastrophes are frequently utilized, for example, regarding economic recessions: financial crisis and stagnation "hits", "destroys", "tears apart" and "suffocates" societies.

Metaphors that are commonly used can easily determine how people think about a particular issue. Therefore, foremost, it is important to instinctively resist these popular constructions straight away. Then, if a journalist still considers them appropriate in a particular context, he or she can make an informed decision to use them.

Metaphors enable media workers to express themselves in a more compelling fashion. However, it is of vital importance to handle metaphors carefully. Metaphors can have a significant influence on people's thinking and behavior. This is not a problem in itself, but it is still essential to understand in what ways a metaphor can influence the public. Otherwise, journalists may have a little control over the impact of their words.

Metonymy

Metonymy is similar to metaphor. However, while metaphor can connect anything with anything, metonymy builds upon existing relationships between two entities.

Metonymy has various subtypes. Politicians and media outlets, for example, often refer to foreign powers by capital cities. In these cases, the metonymy are based, obviously, on a geographical connection. The "capital city-metonymy" is widely utilized in the context of international politics: local media can use "*Washington*" for the American, "Berlin" for the German, "*Beijing*" for the Chinese government, while "Brussels" stands for the European Union in national media discourses about international politics.

Though it is common to replace countries with capital cities in the media, this metonymy can be misleading as it highlights the remoteness, foreignness, strength, and power of the countries and institutions in question. Therefore, through such metonymy, media workers can generate antipathy towards other countries and international, supranational or intergovernmental organizations. If, for instance, the local media refer to the European Court of Human Rights as "Strasbourg" in the context of a ruling that is not favorable for their country, they may imply the "superiority" and "foreignness" of the institution, even if the state in question is a member of the Council of Europe, and hence, part of "Strasbourg" itself.

The "capital city-metonymy" is used in the national context as well. On such occasions, the metonymy can also function as a tool that creates division, evokes hatred, and alienates groups of people from each other. By using the "Washington", "Moscow" or "Berlin" metonymy, a political speaker can set people who live outside of the capital against the residents of the city: "Washington is doing well, but not the rest of us."

It is important for journalists to be able to distinguish between metonymy that are used as neutral references and those that construct enemies of states, institutions and citizens.

The "Collective Singular"

There is a particular form of metonymy that is also known in linguistics as the "collective singular". This rhetorical device is used when one refers to an individual in terms of the person's real or assumed group belonging, and utilizes the indefinite ("a" and "an") or the definite ("the") article in front of the reference (e.g. "a Chinese", "the Chinese"/"a Jew", "the Jew"/ "a Muslim", "the Muslim", "a migrant", "the migrant"). Though the articles ("a", "an", "the") together with the singular nouns may give the impression that speakers are referring to individuals when, actually most of the time, the collective singular concerns groups of people.

One should use these references cautiously as they imply that everyone who belongs to a particular group is the same. This also means that through presenting a person negatively, "the collective singular" can actually activate and foster prejudice against a whole group of people, portraying them as enemies.

In political and media discourses, "the collective singular" frequently emerges in criminal contexts. Again, though in such cases, the reference seems to concern a person, it actually stigmatizes a whole group. This happens in the following headline: "An Italian robbed the couple!"

Considering its generalizing and discriminatory character, it is better for media workers to avoid "the collective singular".
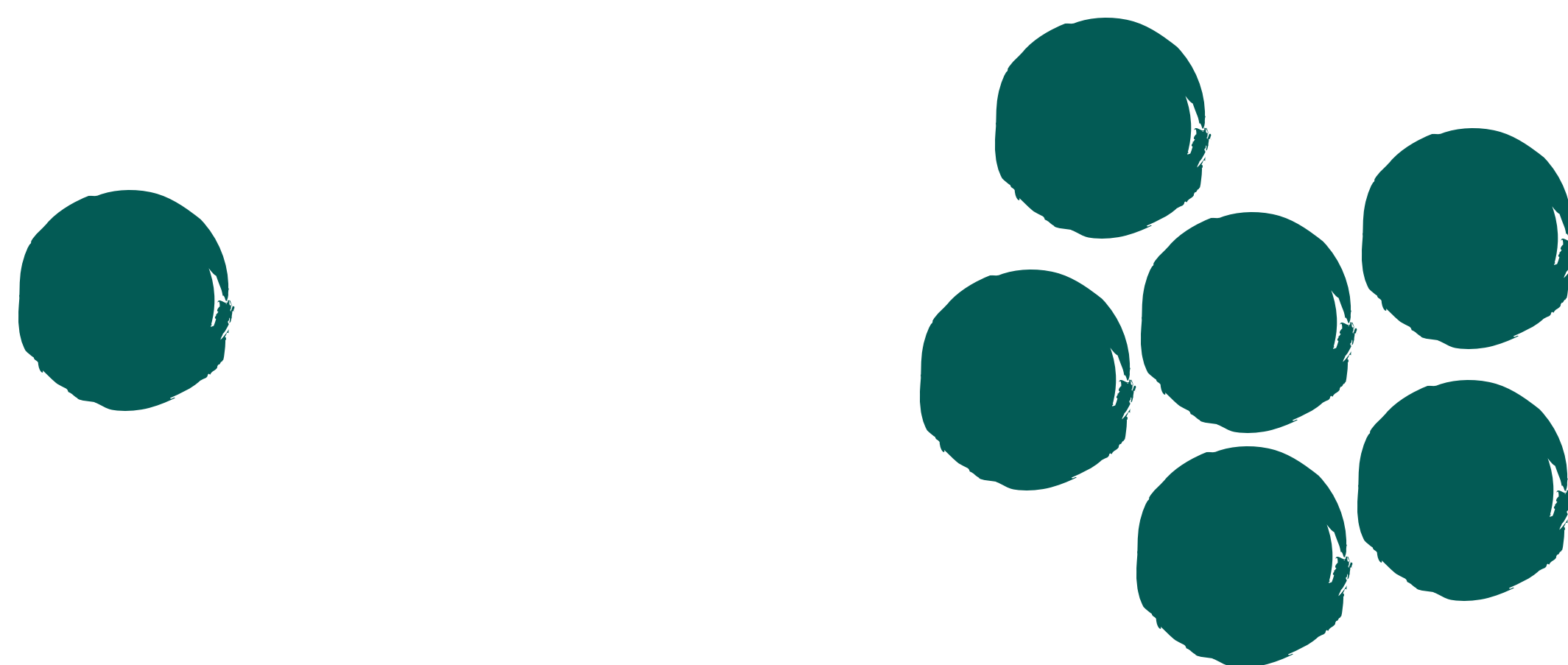
Instead of repeating names all the time, speakers often refer to people by a special group of words, called personal pronouns. Some of them — like "I", "you", "she", or "him" — refer to a person. Other pronouns — like "we", "us", "they", or "them" — are used in place of people. Since there is nothing unusual about using personal pronouns, normally we do not pay attention to the whole process at all. Yet, this also means that we may overlook cases when personal pronouns are used in misleading or manipulative ways.

In the language of propaganda, pronouns play a key role. Despite their simplicity, personal pronouns can foster the polarization and division of societies and communities in powerful ways. Using the first person plural pronoun "we", a political speaker can arbitrarily equate his or her supporters to the whole nation, excluding from the community all those groups whom he or she identifies as "they" or "them".

In so doing, the speaker will inevitably reduce diverse communities to homogeneous groups to which various character traits can be assigned. Most often, it serves the goal of enemy construction, if the group that is identified as "we" is consistently constructed as positive, while the communities that are referred to as "they" or "them" are portrayed as negative. By understanding the significance of personal pronouns in political rhetoric, journalists can effectively detect the use of discriminatory language.

Collective Nouns

In political discourses, especially in propagandistic ones, one can often come across collective nouns ("family") or plural nouns that refer to groups of people ("women", "pensioners", "youth"). Sometimes, the usage of these nouns can reflect the reality. It is appropriate, for example, to talk about "pensioners" in the context of pension reform, as such regulation may indeed affect all pensioners of a society.

However, collective nouns or plural nouns can be used in misleading ways as well. Such nouns can create false impressions that certain groups in society are homogeneous, sharing the same values and interests. After a pension reform veto, a politician may declare, for instance, that "pensioners do not want change". Besides suggesting that pensioners share the same opinion, this statement also implies that the decision makers consulted all of them before rejecting the reform.

Journalists can train themselves to identify and resist manipulative usage of collective and plural nouns. It is relatively easy to detect these nouns in political rhetoric. If it is necessary, instead of taking over a collective or a plural noun, journalists can decode it, explaining to the audience that they are dealing with a vague reference.

It is equally important for journalists themselves to avoid the misleading usage of collective and plural nouns. Before talking about "nation", "people", "women", "pensioners" in articles and commentaries, they should think about the accuracy of these references. If they seem to support generalizations, it is preferable to replace such terms with more specific expressions.

It could be beneficial for journalists to be able to identify certain linguistic characteristics that foster the spread of disinformation. As producers of disinformation aim to reach as many people as possible, they primarily adopt the language of the tabloid media and the vocabulary of "breaking news". Accordingly, in their headlines, sensationalist terms are often utilized, including "wow", "you won't believe this", "breaking news", "just in", "official news", "OMG", "This is the news of the millennium!" These examples show exactly how the power of words work: the previous phrases generate interest in disinformation purely through language.

In order to emphasize the "sensational" character of the content, particular words can also be capitalized in the headlines of manipulative media content. Other times, the headline may feature one or more exclamation marks. These typographical solutions also aim to grab attention.

If media workers come across such headlines, they should be very careful and run thorough fact-checks.
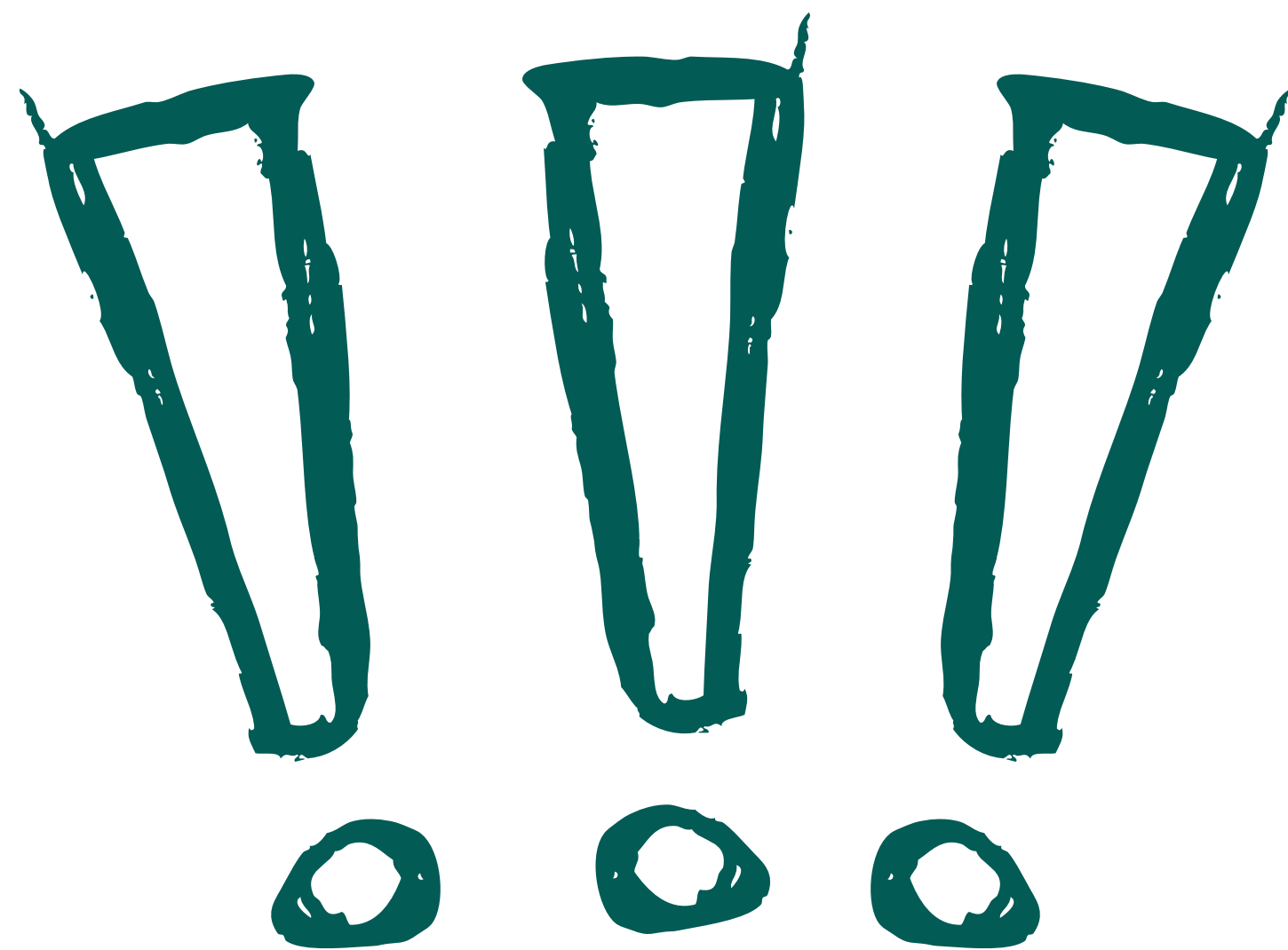
Dramatic Vocabulary

Sensationalist language use may also affect the vocabulary of the media. Instead of descriptive or neutral terms, disinformation and propaganda tends to utilize dramatic expressions.

For instance, the fact that a person shared something with the public can be presented (framed) as a "confession", "disclosure", or "proclamation". Dramatic adjectives (e.g. "fascinating", "phenomenal", and "incredible") also frequently emerge in the language of disinformation and propaganda.

The sensationalist speech style that commonly characterizes tabloid media, can also be used to deliver misleading and manipulative political messages quickly and effectively.

Superlatives

Superlatives play a key role in sensationalist speech as well. Actual superlative forms (adjectives and adverbs with "-est" on their end or "most" in front of them, e.g. "best", "most beautiful") may emerge frequently in media texts. However, disinformation and propaganda also often employ adverbials and pronouns ("never", "everyone", "nobody") that can be characterized as superlative discourse. In the language of propaganda, such adverbials and pronouns aim to present subjective statements as absolute truth: "Everyone knows the government made the best decision."

As for disinformation, most of the time, superlative language is used to generate automatic interest in an article and any other piece: "Nobody ever heard the politician talk like that."

References to Ambiguous Sources

Journalists should be cautious, if they come across news which refer to a vague source while presenting crucial information. Instead of mentioning particular sources, those who spread disinformation and propaganda often use phrases like "some say", "allegedly", "according to some".

Such formulas enable the providers of disinformation and propaganda to share false information or arbitrary statements, with impunity. Indeed, by adopting the speech strategies mentioned previously, almost any content can be shared with the public. The impact of the content will be significant in any case and the providers can always say that they indicated the vagueness of their reference.

In reliable, quality forms of journalism ambiguous references are used only with good reason.

Summary

This short guide equips journalists with crucial linguistic skills in the hope that with this help they can work in the complex political and media reality of our era more efficiently and ethically. Language is a fluid phenomenon of which components can become meaningful only in wider economic, cultural and social contexts. Because of this, the descriptions of the rhetorical devices introduced in this guide cannot be treated as absolute and universal. Nevertheless, they may help media workers to responsibly assess the meaning, significance, and impact of the language they and their environment use.

This guide was developed to be used as part of the *Get The Trolls Out!* Project