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Motti Neiger

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Media oracles

The cultural significance and political import of news referring to future events

■ **Motti Neiger**

Netanya Academic College, Israel

ABSTRACT

As noted by Jaworski et al. (2003a, 2003b, 2004), a significant amount of news items refer to future events. This article examines the 'discourse of the future' in order to identify its extent and different types. The research examined headlines in Israeli newspapers over a period of 18 years (1985–2003) and found that approximately 70 percent of the main headlines deal not only with past events but with future ones as well. Thus, contrary to the conventional perception of journalism, this type of journalism does not report what has already happened, but speculates on future events, whether directly or by quoting military or political figures.

The qualitative analysis suggests four types of discourse of the future: Predictable Future, Informed Assessment, Speculative Assessment, and Conjectured Future. During the last two decades, we can witness a gradual rise of speculation levels.

'The discourse of the future' carries cultural significance and political import. From the cultural standpoint, journalists encourage us to raise questions regarding the future of the community: What will happen next? Where do we go from here, in the short, medium and long term? What are our hopes? What do we fear most? Nevertheless, in the highest levels of speculation, such discourse bears political import because it provides fertile ground for releasing trial balloons, magnifying threats, creating solidarity, and justifying acts of government.

KEY WORDS ■ Israel ■ journalism practice ■ news media ■ rhetoric
■ speculations

All men are deeply affected by their expectations as well as by their desires. We time our specific wants and efforts with some regard to what we reasonably hope to get. Hence, when we act rationally, we consider alternative versions of the future that are so often buried in the realm of hunch. In the practice of social science, as of any skill in society, we are bound to be affected in some degree by our perceptions of future development (Harold D. Lasswell, 1941)

Challenging concepts: news and journalism

As noted by Jaworski et al. (2003a, 2003b, 2004), a critical observer of the ins and outs of news in the media will perceive a striking phenomenon: many of the news items deal with questions such as 'What will happen?' or 'What is likely to happen?' rather than 'What happened?'. Such a scrutiny of the media will lead to the conclusion that the definition of the concept of 'news' and, consequently, the concept of 'journalism', are up for revision.

This article examines the 'discourse of the future' in order to identify its extent and its different types and to explain its various performances.

A case study of the front pages of Israeli daily newspapers in the last two decades demonstrates that approximately 70 percent of the main headlines deal not only with past events but with future ones as well. An examination of other headlines in the front pages shows that approximately 20 percent of these are concerned with predicted or impending, looming events. Thus, contrary to the conventional perception of journalism, this type of journalism does not report what has already happened, but speculates on future events, whether directly or by quoting military or political figures.

This phenomenon is one of the prominent outcomes of the evolution of press into 'new long journalism' (Barnhurst, 1994; Barnhurst and Munz, 1997), i.e. from reporting the details of events to an emphasis on analyzing the importance of those events. This article examines the various manifestations of the discourse of the future in the media, their motivations and their political and cultural significance.

The discourse of the future is varied. At one pole are reports of the future at the most trivial and commonplace level (e.g. weather forecasts) while at the opposite pole there are apocalyptical visions whose actualization would have the direst consequences (headlines such as 'The SARS epidemic is going to get out of control' or 'Danger: Chemical Missiles'). In between these, there are varying levels of speculation (e.g. 'The foreign minister will meet today with the American ambassador' or 'Government ministries to be eliminated after the elections').

The use of the future tense has significant political and cultural consequences in the triad of democracy – government–media–public. Particularly when the speculation level is high, it provides a fertile ground for media spinning, scrambling for resources, political trial balloons, scaring the public, creating solidarity, and diverting attention from unsavory acts of government.

Theoretical background

Communication scholars assume that the media construct reality for the society. Although they may differ in their perception of the power of the media, most scholars are agreed that in today's politics, mass communication plays a central role in framing the limits of the discourse and acts as an index of the range of opinions accepted by the élite (Bennett, 1983); in selecting the narrative and media frames that shape the political arena (Schudson, 1982; Hilgartner and Bosk, 1988; Gamson and Modigliani, 1989; Wolfsfeld, 1997, 2004); in the way they serve as pawns in the hands of politicians (neo-Marxist critical approaches) or, alternatively, in portraying politicians in a light that provokes a cynical view of politics (Patterson, 1994; Cappella and Jamieson, 1997).

At the end of the day, communication scholars are in agreement that the elusive concept of 'public opinion', those 'pictures inside people's heads' (Lippmann, 1922), is influenced by the way events are presented in the symbolic reality of the media. The role of mass communication, however, is more complicated when it deals with *events that have not yet occurred*, that is, news of future developments. In such cases, the role of mass communication as a constructor of reality and a storyteller is even more evident (Roeh, 1989).

Here, contrary to the perception of journalists as chroniclers of their epoch, recorders of annals, and thus distinct from poets (according to Aristotle's classical distinction in Chapter 9 of the 'Poetics'),¹ we meet journalists in their full might as creators of texts of 'reality' that has not yet occurred and may never come to be. That is, this 'reality' – which journalists report – happens only on the pages of the newspaper or on the air: from meetings that never take place, through strikes called off at the last moment, to chemical missiles that never leave their launching pad.

Groundbreaking research focusing on the importance of news referring to future events was published recently by Jaworski et al. (2003a, 2003b, 2004). This research, investigating the temporal organization of news items, suggests that a better understanding of journalism requires observation of the way it defines news and newsworthiness. Referring to the future might increase the news value of an item and lend legitimacy to broadcasting it. Jaworski et al. show that a large degree of uncertainty and speculation is involved in news making.

Nevertheless, Zelizer (2004) brings up numerous definitions of the concepts of News and Journalism as characterized over the years (Tomalin, 1997[1969]; Adam, 1989, 1993; Mattellart, 1996; McNair, 1998; Schudson, 2002). The definitions of these concepts are very broad, indeed, but all of them indicate that journalism and the collecting of news are the product of reporting and interpreting contemporary events, i.e. to summarize the many definitions, recording and

reacting to the chronicles of the day. Journalists (reporters and editors), but also researchers, find it difficult to define news, which is 'more easily identified than defined', according to a journalist quoted in a research from the 1940s.² This article proposes that any definition of the terms 'news' and 'journalism' should include the idea that mass communication is also a channel through which the community can cope with its future in the short, medium, and long term, and deal with its darkest fears and wildest fantasies.

Research questions, corpus and methodology

The above leads to a focus on two research questions:

- 1 To what extent is the 'discourse of the future' widespread in the press?
- 2 How do we classify the various manifestations of the 'discourse of the future'?

This research utilized quantitative and qualitative methods. In order to answer the first research question, we examined the main headlines, headlines and sub-headlines on the front page of the three main Israeli newspapers (*Yediot Aharonot*, *Ma'ariv* and *Ha'aretz*) from the first 10 days of a randomly chosen month (May) on every other year between 1985 and 2003 (1985, 1987, 1989, etc.).³ Overall, the sample included 240 main headlines and 1745 headlines and their sub-headlines (headline and sub-headline were counted as a single text unit). These headlines were classified in two phases.

In the first phase, a differentiation was made between headlines relating to the future, as opposed to those that do not deal with future events. The coders were instructed to look for verbs in future tense, propositions regarding future events and items referring to events yet to happen. This stage was conducted manually and paved the way for the second phase. After several hundred samples of 'discourse of the future' were collected, it became apparent that the second research question (classification into types) could be answered by analyzing the level of speculation entailed: low, medium, high, and very high (discussed further on).

Findings: the discourse of the future – how much, in what way and why it appears

Discourse of the future – quantitative and qualitative analysis

Out of the main headlines ($N = 240$), over a period of 18 years (1985–2003) approximately 70 percent made a reference to the future. Interestingly enough, there was no variation over the years, and throughout the entire

period, similar proportions can be seen. An analysis of all of the headlines and sub-headlines in the sample ($N = 1745$) indicates that over the years there has been no change in the proportion of headlines relating to the future, which consistently ranges around 20 percent.

This data – regarding the main headlines and other headlines – can be deemed surprising, because it might have been expected that, for dramatizing and rating reasons, over the years more headlines relating to the future would be found. The findings, as mentioned, do not sustain this assumption. Taking this data into consideration and following Jaworski et al. (2003a, 2003b, 2004) it might be claimed that one of the main roles of journalism is to refer to future events.

Nevertheless, these findings concur with the conclusions of Barnhurst (1994) and Barnhurst and Munz (1997) that the press has shifted from ‘event-centered’ coverage to analyzing the broader significance of the events. These researches suggested that the line between current events and history is blurred, while we would add that the dividing line between current and future events is fading. This is also a result of the ‘new long journalism’: the discourse of the future means reporting the outcome of events and predicting their development is a major role of modern journalism.

Qualitative analysis of the types of discourse of the future

The finding that over an 18-year period there was no change in the manifestation of the discourse of the future led us to perform a qualitative analysis of this discourse. Following Jaworski et al. (2003a, 2003b, 2004), this study argues that the component differentiating between the various manifestations of the future is the degree of speculation and uncertainty. Writing about the future is an inherently speculative act. Even if all the actors in the political scene are sure that a certain event is going to happen (a strike, a vote), things can always change at the last moment. Yet some future events can be predicted with a relatively low level of speculation, while others are set on a higher speculative level. Those levels of speculation are derivated from/connected to modality in general and to the epistemic modality in particular, i.e. a modality (speaker’s degree of commitment) that connotes how much certainty or evidence the speakers have for the proposition expressed by the utterance.

The epistemic modality or the level of speculation is a function of two components:

- 1 The scope of time involved (short, medium or long term, or an undetermined future).
- 2 The sources on which journalists base their stories: official announcements about scheduled events, the journalists’ own assessments and interpretations based on

similar past cases, and the sources themselves – parties at interest such as media advisors, politicians, and the military as quoted in the text.

Combining these two components, we concluded that the discourse of the future can be classified into four types, according to levels of speculation:

- 1 Predictable Future (short term or/and solid sources such as measurements and time schedules).
- 2 Informed Assessment (short/medium term or/and reliable sources).
- 3 Speculative Assessment (medium/long term or/and sources of interest; journalists' own interpretations; unreliable sources, e.g. 'the man in the street').
- 4 Conjectured Future (uncertain future and sources of interest/'worst case scenarios').

First level: predictable future – low level of speculation

On this level, the most trivial forecasts are found, such as 'rain can be expected in the mountain areas' (based on measurements) or 'the prices of European cars will increase following the strengthening of the Euro' (based on experience and logical conclusions), but also well-founded news about official announcements or known schedules, such as: 'Schultz expected to visit Israel tomorrow'. The level of speculation is low because it is based on measurements, on experience in similar circumstances, on official information from authorized sources, or on past occurrences of whose practical consequences the press is informed (strengthening of the Euro = increase in the price of European cars). The prominent term in these types of headlines is 'expected' (sometimes as an ellipsis: 'PM to meet UN secretary general').

Second level: informed assessment – medium level of speculation

This level relates to the near future. An 'informed assessment' does not rely on measurements or officially published agendas, but on declarations of knowledgeable political insiders whom the reporter trusts, and on experience showing that this will be the course of events. Such headlines are: 'The educational system to strike tomorrow', 'All Coalition members to reject today the non-confidence motion'. Obviously, strikes can be called off at the last moment and votes can change because of a sudden caprice; nevertheless, headlines phrased along these lines convey confidence, indicating that reporters implicitly trust their sources. Furthermore, these headlines relate to the immediate future (tomorrow). For the newspaper, such a short term minimizes the level of speculation and risk regarding the predictive statement. Whether explicitly or implicitly, the prominent term in these types of headlines is: 'assessment'.

Third level: speculative assessment – high level of speculation

In any event, reporting and commenting on events about to happen allow journalists to be fresh and original. When journalists write with a high level of speculation and their conjectures eventually prove true, the use of the future also affords them a marketing edge and subsequent headlines will read: 'As first published in our paper'.

This level is generally concerned with the medium and long-term future, and it is published despite the fact that reporters and readers both know that many factors can prevent the actualization of the scenario. Sometimes headlines are phrased in a restrictive language, indicating that the medium understands that this is only an option of possible reality. In the political sphere, such presumptive headlines very often originate from political advisors. Thus, for example, the large headline of *Ma'ariv* on 23 December 2002, over a month before the elections, announces: 'five government ministries will be eliminated after the elections'. In smaller print, the super-headline above this headline clarifies that these are 'assumptions in the wake of a special report ordered by the Prime Minister'. This item refers to the far future (after the election) and the source was the PR team working with the Prime Minister. The combination between the long term and the interest of the sources creates the high level of speculation.

Another sub-type consists in quoting the predictions of 'the man in the street'. A prototype of this sub-type is the headline 'We will meet in Baghdad in two weeks', which was the main headline on *Ma'ariv's* front page, in the days before the start of the war in Iraq (2003). From the story in the inside pages, readers learn that the quotation belongs to Nick, a soldier with the American forces in the Gulf. That is all. No rank, no last name. His forecast came after months of military preparations and diplomatic foot-dragging, yet what seemed to be a groundless prediction, a fortnight later proved to be quite close to the truth.

Yet another type of discourse of the future on this level is concerned with the future inquiry into (alleged) wrongdoings and misdemeanors exposed. In such cases, after an event is revealed that presents the community, its representatives or its institutions in an unfavorable light, the media announces: 'the event will be investigated'. In language designed to favor the system, the media informs us that 'the Armed Forces will open an inquiry'. This type of discourse usually refers to a distant future in which conclusions will be published and, frequently, the public hears that an inquiry will be opened and suspicion is initially laid on some person or organization, but seldom anything is written about the outcome of the inquiry.

From the point of view of social order, this type of discourse has great value, because it makes it clear that offenses and offenders are condemned, it bolsters faith in the norm enforcing system, and society cleanses itself (such as in the case of Timothy McVeigh discussed by Jaworski et al., 2003a).

Fourth level: the conjectured future – very high level of speculation

For political, economic and cultural reasons the media sometimes choose to use dramatic speculations regarding the medium and long-term future. At times, however, it goes farther than that, to a conjectured, uncertain future in which worst-case scenarios could become reality. This level is comprised of two different phases of the future:

- 1 Worst-case scenarios – these are news items dealing with dramatic events that may happen in an unknown future and involve an intangible menace ('Iranian Shehab missiles can hit the heart of Israel').
- 2 'What would have happened if ?' – some reports relate to past events, but are phrased in terms of an 'averted future' to ask questions about dangers and threats. What would have happened if the security forces had not destroyed/warded off a 'ticking bomb', what would have happened if a boat carrying weapons had not been captured ('The Katyusha missiles *could have* threatened Ashkelon from Gaza, Tel Aviv from Qalqiliya, Jerusalem from Ramallah'). Even though the hypothetical question of 'what would have happened if' deals with past events, in fact it poses questions about future perils and the ways to forestall them. Therefore, the discourse of the future becomes a means to justify future actions (as in the case of 'targeted killings') and expands the power of the branches of government and the armed forces.

The press makes relatively little use of these two phases of conjectured future, because they are closer to science fiction than to purportedly factual reporting.⁴ Nevertheless, this type can certainly be found in times of crisis (Dunmire, 2005) and a critical approach is required (Alessandrini, 2003).

An effect of discourse of the future on this level is the 'Wolf! Wolf!' effect. In this form, the military and politicians, who deal with threats, fail to generate trust (either amongst the media and the political system or within the general public) when they deliver warnings which have a high probability of being realized. This is what happened in the October 2004 terrorist attacks on Israeli tourist destinations in Taba and Ras Shitan, in the Sinai, when the warnings issued by Israel's Anti-terror Task Force turned into reality.

This is the most menacing of all the types. It includes headlines in the style of 'SARS epidemic more dangerous than AIDS' and vivid items describing how the whole world will become quickly infected. Here, also, we find discussions about the reach of enemy missiles, complete with maps showing the alarming ranges. This is where headlines such as 'The Kassam [rocket] very nearly killed

a family' show up – meaning that this is what it could have done and what the next rocket perhaps will do (this is how Kassam rockets became an 'existential threat' to Israel and why people fret about the range of Iranian missiles).

This type of information is of little use to the individual. There is nothing people can do about it, except rely on the military and the politicians. Thus, for example, the main headlines in the front page of *Ma'ariv* on 24 December 2002 proclaim: 'The menace: the IDF fears that Iraqi aircraft may attempt to penetrate the air space of Israel and deliver chemical or biological ordnance. The alert: Fears that Saddam may have sent dormant terrorist squads with unconventional weapons to Israel.' A possible effect of such headlines is to create social solidarity among the members of the community, who are driven by terror to seek refuge under the wings of politicians and generals. Consequently, two higher levels are the most interesting to research.

Quantitative analysis of the types of discourse of the future

In accordance with the shift from event-centered journalism, no significant change can be seen in the use of the 'discourse of the future' type in the press over a period of 18 years. Still, the categorization of the headlines into types reveals interesting trends. An analysis of the discourse of the future in the categorized headlines shows a slow decrease of the lower levels of speculation throughout the years (Figure 1). In 1985, these levels represented 83.3 percent of the overall discourse of the future in the headlines, compared with only 58.8 percent in 2003. For the same time span, a 16.7 percent increase can be observed in the higher levels of speculation (levels 3 + 4), to 41.2 percent.

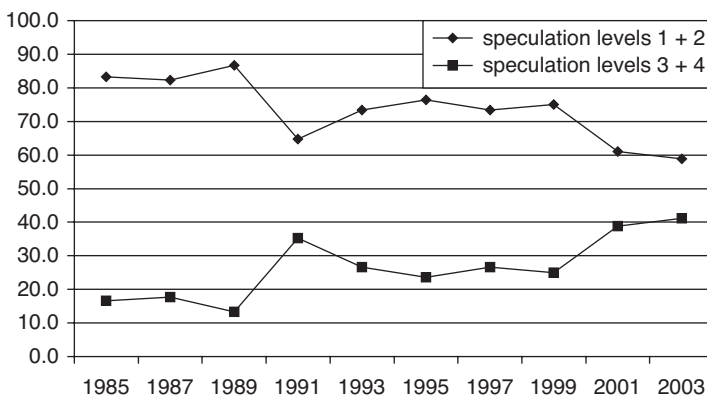


Figure 1 Levels of speculation in main headlines

The graph shows that the rise of speculation levels over the years was gradual, except in 1991, when a sharp incline can be observed (from 13.3% to 35.5%). This change can be explained by the Gulf War, which gave rise to highly speculative headlines. After 1991 there is a slight decrease, but not to pre-war levels. This research argues that the advent of the commercial TV and radio era in Israel, in 1993, contributed to that fact. Violent conflict situations also contribute to higher levels of speculation, and, indeed, this is what happened in the years of the Second *Intifada* (2001 and 2003). In conclusion, the political-security context of violent war entails high levels of speculation.

Conclusions – the political import and cultural significance of the discourse of the future

In April 2004, the Israeli media predicted prime minister Ariel Sharon's victory in his own party (Likud) poll about the Disengagement Plan – and they were proved utterly wrong. The political commentators, who based their assessment on the atmosphere prevailing among Sharon's immediate entourage, failed to correctly assess the strength of the opposers of the plan, and the power of the face-to-face communications they used in their grassroots campaign. This failure puts into proportion the myth regarding the power of the media. Despite the media's prediction of Sharon's victory, his opponents did not throw up their hands in surrender to jump onto the prime minister's bandwagon (the Bandwagon Effect) and they did not lapse into silence (the Spiral of Silence).

Nevertheless, as mentioned earlier, the discourse of the future has a deep cultural significance and political import, since it is so widespread and because of its various repercussions and roles.

From a *cultural standpoint*, the 'discourse of the future' journalistic phenomenon redefines the term 'news'. Much has been written about the status of the press in the age of electronics and its endeavor to visually compete with television (Nerone and Barnhus, 2001). Some have actually declared it dead (Katz, 1992). Most of these writings stress that in such an age the concept of 'news' gets a new meaning. If before the telegraph was invented 'news' could be even several months old, in the age of the world wide web – which combines the pictorial advantages of newspapers and television with the swiftness of reaction of the radio (and even betters it) – an event is deemed 'new' for an extremely short time.

Indeed, 'immediacy' is a key element in newsworthiness (Schlesinger, 1978; Richardson and Meinhof, 1999). Whenever something unexpected happens, it can be found within minutes on the internet, a first report will be shortly broadcast by the radio (Clayman and Heritage, 2002), and the 'breaking news' will

appear on television. Therefore, to stay relevant any news vehicle in the saturated arena has to be able to say something new about the event, and when new information on the event itself is no longer available, only its future outcomes can be deemed new.

Combining the cultural view of communication (Carey, 1989) with the definition above, we strengthen the notion that the role of journalism is not merely to convey information but to encourage us to raise questions regarding ourselves and who we are as a community. Journalism offers us anchors to a faceless world. Thus, in this context, the press offers us not only an investigative vision of the past (in order to define the present) but mainly invites us to ask: What will happen next? Where do we go from here, in the short, medium and long term? What are our hopes? What do we fear most?

From a *political standpoint*, the discourse of the future generates events rather than reporting on them – especially in the higher levels of speculation. Generating events provides fertile ground for media spin-doctors, releasing trial balloons, presenting an image of activity, covering up embarrassing mishaps ('the incident will be investigated'), presenting threats to the community (and some will say – magnifying them, if it sells), justifying acts of government (the action prevented terrorist suicide-bomber), and creating solidarity (Zandberg and Neiger, 2005). On certain levels, the discourse of the future serves to help individuals control their surroundings and feel secure knowing they understand what faces them and how they can make ready for it. But as the level of speculation rises, this functionality fades, even though it does not completely disappear ('the missiles will reach Tel Aviv').

In the highest levels of the discourse of the future, in which politicians and the military exploit the discourse of the future for their own purposes (Dunmire, 2005), it becomes evident how the 'democracy without citizens' (Entman, 1989) can emerge. Society becomes an environment in which rational, well-informed citizens vanish from the public sphere, and their place is taken by emotional media consumers. Horrified, these watch the visions of the future voiced by the media – 'the oracle at Delphi' blindfolded by the scarf pulled over its eyes by politicians and generals.

Notes

- 1 According to Aristotle's *Poetics*, poets relate possible realities, whereas historians recount what has already happened: 'What Alcibiades did or had done to him'.
- 2 Quoted by Johnson and Harris (1942: 19). Glasser and Ettema (1989) found that various journalists gave diverse definitions of the concept of news: 'news is what sells newspapers'; 'news is what the public want to read'; 'news is what makes people raise an eyebrow'.

- 3 The research begins in 1985, because at that point Israel had only one public television channel and two public radio news channels; four years later cable TV entered Israel and it took another four years for commercial TV and radio stations to start broadcasting. One of the research questions speculated that the new commercial-saturated media era would affect the level of speculation.
- 4 The ideals of western journalism are: factuality, neutrality, and balance (or, briefly, the ideal of objectivity). Impossible as it is to accomplish this standard, these are the aims presented by various researchers (Roeh and Cohen, 1992; Berkowitz, 2000).

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Biographical note

Motti Neiger (PhD) is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Mass Communication at Netanya Academic College and the chair of the Israel Communication Association (ISCA). His research interests include journalism practices during conflicts, and popular culture.

Address: School of Mass Communication, Netanya Academic College, 1 University St., Netanya, 42365, Israel. [email: mottin@netanya.ac.il]