

Media Literacy Mini-Lesson #8

COMMENTARY

News organizations sometimes do more than gather facts for their audiences. They may also provide opinion pieces and editorial **commentary** about what they are personally thinking about a news story.

News outlets reserve various spaces for commentary. These opinions may take the form of editorials (traditionally opinions written by the editors ahead of a given news story), op-eds (from “opposite-editorial,” referring to the page opposite the editorial page, often including opinion writing from someone not on the news staff), and guest essays or columns. There are also editorial cartoons, which offer political or social commentary through humor and satire.



Commentaries, like editorials or opinion writing...

contain a person’s thoughts or feelings on a particular subject. Commentary primarily functions as a way to interpret facts rather than present them for audiences who don’t have time to sift through the news. They may offer support or criticism of proposed laws. Newspaper editorial boards sometimes endorse political candidates, a practice that is becoming less common.

Editorial sourcing is important.

Note that while newspaper columnists and television commentators might not be responsible for gathering facts, a good argument will be grounded in good sources. Often opinions found on the internet and in many traditional news sources are not fact checked. Whenever you read an opinion piece, be aware that it is up to the audience to ask questions about the sources of information that the opinion writer relied on.



In 1968, the “most trusted man in America,” as legendary news reporter Walter Cronkite was known, delivered a commentary citing why the US should pull out of the Vietnam War. For a journalist famed for his objective reporting, it was notably out of character for Cronkite to express his personal opinion during a newscast. Read Walter Cronkite’s commentary on the Vietnam War in 1968. Go to bit.ly/XXXX to hear Cronkite’s speech and his reflections on it years later via NPR.

It’s about time we started thinking about Vietnam in terms of the Vietnamese and our responsibilities towards them. ... The best that we can do is try to find some way out of a meaningless and destructive war and bring about peace in the country. For my own part, I see no alternative to abandoning the policies which have been disastrous up ‘til now and to begin a policy based on political understanding and negotiations.

We have been too often disappointed by the optimism of the American leaders, both in Vietnam and Washington to have faith any longer in the silver linings they find in the darkest clouds. For it seems more certain now than ever than ever, that the bloody experience of Vietnam is to end in a stalemate.

Source: Parting words from Walter Cronkite: His famous Vietnam commentary, originally aired on a special CBS News broadcast Feb. 27, 1968, via NPR.

Describe what is happening in the excerpt. What did you notice or wonder about?

What makes this an opinion piece? What information do you think informs Cronkite’s opinion of the war?

Why do you think Cronkite begins this excerpt by using the word “We”? Who do you think he is referring to besides himself?