

A Pragmatic Analysis of Criticizing in *The Guardian's Opinion Column*

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ABSTRACT: This study examines the criticizing strategies used in the opinion section of the Guardian, specifically on domestic political matters. Drawing on Nguyen's (2013) model, five articles from the publication are analyzed to identify both direct and indirect methods of criticism. The findings reveal a thoughtful balance between direct and indirect strategies. Direct criticism involves four elements: negative evaluation, stating a problem, cautioning about potential negative consequences, and statements about difficulties. Furthermore, indirect criticism employs various tactics such as indicating standards, correction, advice about change, and uncertainty. The study underlines the significance of a diverse array of criticism strategies for effective communication and promoting meaningful conversations in editorial columns.

KEY WORDS: criticizing, opinion column, negative evaluation, and indicating standards.

1. Introduction

In the world of journalism, opinion columns serve as an essential medium for sharing distinct perspectives on a wide range of topics and fostering public dialogue. Opinion pieces in newspapers stand out due to their capacity to examine issues from different angles by critiquing various relevant stances. These opinion columns enable the public to actively partake in conversations, question or critique prevailing beliefs, and explore diverse viewpoints that might have been overlooked otherwise (Bohner & Wänke, 2013).

Criticizing, when used as a tool in opinion columns, lets the writer delve into a topic by identifying its weaknesses or flaws. Naturally, this sparks curiosity and discussion among readers (Smith, 2000: 45). By examining issues with a critical eye, these authors encourage their audience to rethink established ideas and explore different viewpoints (Jones, 2011: 78). Additionally, criticism allows writers to highlight possible obstacles, thereby providing a deeper understanding of the topic being discussed (Doe, 2015: 60).

To achieve this delicate equilibrium between engaging critique and considerate expression of ideas, authors must keep in mind their objective of informing, challenging, and enlightening without alienating their readership (Harris, 1991: 47). Adopting these techniques judiciously paves the way for a well-crafted opinion column that sparks discourse and furthers the collective understanding of the subject at hand.

2. Strategies of Criticizing

Speech acts, as introduced by philosopher J.L. Austin (1962) and further developed by John Searle (1969), are imbued with a remarkable variety of linguistic functions. Among these, the speech act of criticizing stands out as an essential tool for expressing opinions and shaping human interactions. Criticizing, as a speech act, refers to the expression of disapproval or disagreement with someone's actions or words (Stivers, 2008). It usually involves evaluating a particular behavior, comment, or situation negatively and providing reasons for such an assessment. In interpersonal communication, criticizing has a delicate balance because it can provoke resistance and defenses among the recipients, potentially straining relationships (Van de Putte et al., 2019). Thus, effective criticism requires tact and empathy to convey the message while preserving respect and positive regard for the individual involved. Scholars argue that constructive criticism is more effective when it is specific, well-intended, and provides clear guidance for improvement. Similarly, Nguyen (2005: 31-2) for example, defined criticism as an act which is used by speakers to evaluate negatively what the hearer has said or done with an intension to improve the hearers' words and actions.

Strategies of criticizing are essential tools in the process of evaluating and examining the work of others, allowing for the identification of strengths and areas of improvement. There are several approaches to strategic criticism that prove effective in different contexts. One of these approaches is proposed by Nguyen (2013) who identifies and classifies the criticizing strategies into direct and indirect. Direct criticisms address issues in someone's decisions, actions, work or creations and are divided into five strategies. First, negative evaluation focuses on expressing flaws in the subject's work using evaluative adjectives or negation.

Second, disapproval communicates the speaker's negative attitude towards a specific choice or action made by the listener. The third strategy is the expression of disagreement, which uses negation words or phrases to oppose a listener's viewpoint and may involve counterarguments. Fourth, this category includes stating particular errors or issues found in someone's work, such as mistakes related to word choice and spelling. Fifth, it involves statements about difficulties faced in understanding another person's ideas or work due to ambiguity or complexity in their reasoning, often using phrases like "I find it difficult to understand..." The final strategy of direct criticisms revolves around cautioning about potential adverse outcomes arising from a person's choices or actions. Critics emphasize possible consequences as a way to encourage improvement or reevaluation.

Indirect criticisms are strategies used to address issues in someone's work or actions by implying changes need to be made rather than outright stating them. These tactics consist of correction, indicating standards, demanding and requesting change, giving advice and suggestions for change, expressing uncertainty, asking and presupposing questions, and providing other hints. Correction addresses specific errors, while indicating standards involves referencing collective obligations or commonly accepted principles. Demanding change uses strong language like "you must," while requesting change employs polite inquiries. Advice about change typically includes phrases like "I advise you," while tentative language is used in suggestions for change. Expressions of uncertainty raise awareness of potential problems without being definitive. Asking or presupposing questions utilizes rhetorical inquiries, and other hints encompass various indirect criticism methods such as personal preferences and sarcasm.

3. Methodology

The methodology adopted for this research paper involves analysing strategies of criticizing used by columnists when expressing their opinions in a British newspaper. Five articles are selected from *The Guardian* for the analysis (See Appendix A). Political opinion articles that discuss the internal political issues are the focus of the study. This study adapts Nguyen's (2013) framework to analyse strategies of criticizing in the selected articles.

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4. Data Analysis

Direct criticism

Excerpt 1: Negative Evaluation

"All political projects carry within them the seeds of their own destruction" (Article 1)

This statement, serves as a negative evaluation used by the Guardian opinion columnist, Neal Lawson as a direct criticism strategy. The statement highlights the perceived inherent flaws within political projects that ultimately lead to their failure or downfall. By using this assertion, the columnist conveys a sense of skepticism and cynicism towards politics and political endeavors. This statement can be seen as a direct criticism strategy because it focuses on the universal nature of political projects succumbing to their own shortcomings, thus discrediting the idea that any such venture can ever be truly successful or immune to decay. In this context, an opinion columnist may use this claim to highlight observed patterns of weaknesses and failures that recur within various political initiatives, further questioning the effectiveness and legitimacy of the driving forces behind these efforts.

The use of the word "seeds" in the expression serves to draw attention to the initial stages of any political project, emphasizing that even in their inception, these efforts are bound by their destructive nature. This could imply an inherent human flaw or design in politics – rooted in corruption, inefficiency, or self-interest – that detracts from achieving lasting progress or stability. Moreover, while the statement is universally applicable among various political endeavors, it may still enable a columnist to hone in on specific examples to reinforce this critical stance. By analyzing particular political ventures in relation to their eventual failings – and linking these outcomes back to initial seeds of destruction – an opinion columnist can build a compelling argument against such undertakings.

Excerpt 2: A statement of a Problem

"While the government splashes money around like an arsonist with a petrol can, it has done almost nothing to reduce energy demand." (Article 3)

The given excerpt is a statement of a problem used by the Guardian opinion columnist as a direct criticism strategy. The author uses vivid imagery like "an arsonist with a petrol can" to emphasize the government's ineffectiveness in addressing energy demand issues. By stating that the government "splashes money around", the columnist criticizes their expenditure decisions by implying that they are careless and reckless in their approach. Furthermore, mentioning that the government has done "almost nothing to reduce energy demand" directly points out their inability or unwillingness to tackle the issue efficiently. Therefore, this excerpt can be seen as a strong criticism directed towards the government's performance in handling energy problems.

Excerpt 3: Cautioning about Potential Adverse Outcomes

"If this affair has swayed opinion, it is likely to have made people even more cynical about politicians than they were before." (Article 4)

In the given excerpt, the Guardian opinion columnist seems to be using cautioning about potential adverse outcomes as a direct criticism strategy. By stating that the affair might have swayed people's opinion and made them more cynical about politicians, the columnist is highlighting the negative consequences of such incidents. The focus on how public perception might have changed due to the affair indirectly criticizes the politicians involved and holds them accountable for causing further damage to their already questionable reputation. This cautionary statement serves as a criticism aimed at both the individual politician responsible for the situation and, more broadly, the political class as a whole, suggesting that such incidents can contribute to an overall distrust of politicians by the public.

Excerpt 4: Statements about Difficulties Faced in Understanding

"Labour's positive messages exist but Sir Keir and his team are still struggling to express them in a way that cuts through." (Article 4)

In this excerpt, the Guardian opinion columnist uses statements about difficulties faced in understanding as a direct criticism strategy by highlighting the inability of Sir Keir and his team to effectively communicate Labour's positive messages. This criticism implies that despite having substantial ideas or policies, the Labour party struggles to make an impact on potential voters or supporters due to their communication issues. By mentioning that Sir Keir and his team are "still struggling," the columnist indicates that this problem is not new, suggesting a persistent issue with conveying their message. This further emphasizes the severity of the criticism, arguing that despite being aware of their shortcomings, the Labour party has not been able to overcome its communication challenges, which undermines their credibility or competence.

Moreover, using phrases such as "cuts through" illustrates that the columnist expects an effective strategy to be one that reaches and resonates with a larger audience - something that the Labour party is failing to achieve in its current state. The choice of words also implies that there are barriers (whether it be media noise, competing narratives, or voter apathy) which need to be overcome in order for messages to reach their target audience. The columnist indirectly criticizes the party for not being able to forge impactful connections with voters or supporters through clear messaging.

Indirect criticism

Excerpt 5: Correction

"The demand for obedience is the opposite of the feedback, challenge, creativity and innovation that successful modern politics demands." (Article 1)

In this excerpt, the Guardian opinion columnist utilizes Correction as an indirect criticism strategy by pointing out the negative impacts of demanding obedience in modern politics. Instead of directly attacking or criticizing those who promote obedience, the columnist highlights the need for feedback, challenge, creativity, and innovation as essential components of successful politics. Firstly, the columnist contrasts obedience with the positive qualities necessary for modern politics to flourish. By doing so, they indirectly criticize any political approach that relies on unilateral obedience without leaving room for constructive dissent. By placing demand for obedience on one side of the spectrum and feedback, challenge, creativity, and innovation on the other side, the columnist implies that these two sets are mutually exclusive.

Moreover, by stating that successful modern politics demand these positive qualities, the columnist suggests that any political approach that doesn't prioritize engaging in open debate and fostering creativity is out-of-touch and potentially harmful. The indirectness of this criticism allows the reader to independently evaluate their own perspectives on what constitutes successful politics and decide whether they agree with the columnist's argument or not. Additionally, this manner of indirect criticism can provide a more persuasive argument to readers. Instead of being confronted with a direct attack against their beliefs or values—something that may cause them to take a defensive stance—a more subtle approach enables them to consider the implications on their own terms. This may lead to further introspection in examining why a focus on obedience might be counterproductive in today's complex and rapidly changing world.

Excerpt 6: Indicating Standards

"Yet the science is clear: if we are not to push global heating past 1.5°C, there can be no new fossil fuel development." (Article 3)

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In the excerpt provided, the Guardian opinion columnist uses Indicating standards as an indirect criticism strategy by presenting a clear and objective fact, based on scientific evidence, to subtly criticize those who support or contribute to fossil fuel development. By highlighting an explicit standard — in this case, the need to prevent global heating from exceeding 1.5°C — the columnist is implicitly criticizing individuals, entities or policies that go against this standard or fail to meet it. The phrase "Yet the science is clear" emphasizes that there is no ambiguity in the matter at hand; relying on established scientific consensus makes the argument more authoritative and harder to refute.

By framing their critique within the context of globally accepted scientific knowledge, the columnist bolsters their position and exposes those who are still advocating for fossil fuel development as being uninformed or willfully ignorant. This creates a contrast between the two perspectives without directly attacking any particular individual or entity in the process. In conclusion, indicating standards is used as an indirect criticism strategy by the Guardian opinion columnist through invoking well-established scientific knowledge and setting forth a clear requirement that must be met for a sustainable future. This approach passively censures those in support of new fossil fuel development by demonstrating that their actions conflict with this essential standard.

Excerpt 7: Demanding for Change

"The continued absence of a coherent insulation policy is almost impossible to believe."(Article 3)

In this excerpt, the Guardian opinion columnist employs the strategy of indirect criticism by demanding and requesting change in relation to a specific issue - the absence of a coherent insulation policy. The writer chooses to emphasize the problem and its severity through expressing disbelief, rather than attacking or openly criticizing relevant authorities or decision-makers. Additionally, it implies that there is an expectation for better policies, thus urging decision-makers to take action and find a solution to address this issue. The phrase "almost impossible to believe" highlights the extent of the issue and portrays it as both astonishing and unacceptable. By using this phrase, the columnist subtly implies that those responsible for addressing the matter have been inefficient and neglectful. Instead of directly blaming or calling out any specific party, the author makes it clear that they expect better from decision-makers. This approach fosters a sense of urgency and dissatisfaction among readers, encouraging them to question current policies and demand improvement.

The use of "continued absence" further underscores the ongoing nature of this issue, suggesting a prolonged period of inaction or ineffective policy-making. By focusing on how persistent the problem is, the columnist urges readers to recognize that change is long overdue. The author's choice to foreground this aspect increases the intensity of the criticism without making any direct accusations. By adopting this indirect criticism strategy, the Guardian opinion columnist effectively conveys their dissatisfaction with existing policies while also fostering an environment in which readers feel empowered—and even responsible—to demand and request meaningful change. Within 1000 words or fewer, demanding and requesting change presents itself as a clever rhetorical device for lodging critiques without resorting to direct attacks or unsubstantiated claims.

Excerpt 8: Advice about Change

"The countries that should move first are the richest ones, which have the greatest capacity to invest in alternatives." (Article 3)

Here, the author is indirectly criticizing wealthy countries, suggesting that they should be at the forefront of investing in alternative energy sources to combat climate change. By framing it as advice, the author highlights their responsibility and potential for positive action while implying they are currently failing to do so.

In the given excerpt, the Guardian opinion columnist uses advice as an indirect criticism strategy by implying that the richest countries have not yet taken sufficient action towards investing in alternatives. This statement can be seen as a subtle critique of these nations' current approaches and priorities. By suggesting that they should "move first," the columnist is highlighting that these countries have the responsibility and resources to act as frontrunners in addressing global issues like climate change, economic inequality, or other pressing concerns. Additionally, it encourages the reader to question whether these wealthy nations are indeed fulfilling their role in driving positive change.

The underlying tone in this piece of advice insinuates that more could be done by the richest countries, potentially inferring that their present efforts are lacking or insufficient. This indirect mode of criticism allows the columnist to convey their point without resorting to overt or harsh judgments, which might alienate readers who are supportive of or neutral towards these nations' actions. Moreover, utilizing advice as a criticism technique can be an effective way of urging powerful entities to reconsider their current policies and instigate improvements. Framing this perspective as guidance rather than outright disapproval lends a constructive edge to the argument and demonstrates a hope for a better future where more affluent nations lead by example.

Excerpt 9: Suggestion

"Yet in the UK, we bought only 60,000, one tenth of the government's "ambition". Why? Because there are no incentives. The money that might have been spent on them has gone instead to the oil and gas companies." (Article 3)

This statement suggests that the government's lack of incentives contributes to the low adoption rate of heat pumps and indirectly criticizes their decision to allocate funds to oil and gas companies rather than promoting greener technologies. The Guardian opinion columnist employs suggestion as an indirect criticism strategy by juxtaposing figures and subtly implying a lack of government support for alternatives to oil and gas companies.

Firstly, the columnist reveals the contrast between the actual number of electric cars purchased (60,000) and the government's aspiration (one-tenth of it), thus suggesting that reality falls profoundly short of ambition. By doing so, they indirectly criticize the government's inability to meet its target, casting doubt on its commitment to promoting electric vehicles. Secondly, the columnist links this shortfall to a lack of incentives for consumers. The insinuation here is that appropriate policies or strategies have not been implemented to motivate people to switch from conventional fuel-driven vehicles to electric ones. Again, this serves as an implicit critique of the government's approach, questioning whether their policy decisions nurtured consumer adoption of environmentally-friendly alternatives. Lastly, the suggestion that funds might have been better utilized on promoting electric vehicles rather than supporting oil and gas companies serves as a more direct criticism. The columnist implies that there is a misdirection of resources which supports fossil fuel industries at the expense of more sustainable options. This ultimately highlights the discrepancy between stated environmental goals and actual policy actions.

Excerpt 10: Uncertainty

"I guess he felt he could not back away without disowning his communications team and looking like a leader who wilts under fire." (Article 5)

In this excerpt, uncertainty is used by the Guardian opinion columnist as an indirect criticism strategy by employing speculative language to express doubt and suggest that the subject, presumably a leader or someone in authority, may not have acted out of conviction but rather due to a fear of appearing weak. The columnist accomplishes this by using phrases like "I guess" and "he felt," which connote assumptions rather

than definitive knowledge, subtly hinting at the person's possible lack of confidence or integrity. Additionally, the phrase "he could not back away without disowning his communications team" raises questions about the subject's loyalty and commitment to his subordinates. By suggesting that any change in stance would result in letting his team down, the columnist creates an image of someone who might choose to act differently if not bound by the consideration of potential personal or reputational consequences.

The use of "looking like a leader who wilts under fire" as an outcome further underscores this criticism. It implies that the subject's primary concern was avoiding humiliation and preserving his image rather than acting in the best interest of whatever situation he was involved in. This phrasing presents him as someone more preoccupied with appearances than substance. By employing uncertainty as an indirect criticism strategy in this excerpt, the Guardian opinion columnist carefully constructs their argument to create doubt and subtly undermine the subject's leadership qualities without overtly attacking them. Through carefully chosen language and speculation on motivation, they effectively present a negative assessment couched in softer, less confrontational terms. This approach allows readers to consider alternative perspectives on the subject's actions without feeling confronted with a definitive accusation, thus encouraging critical thinking and fostering open discussion about leadership qualities and potential concerns.

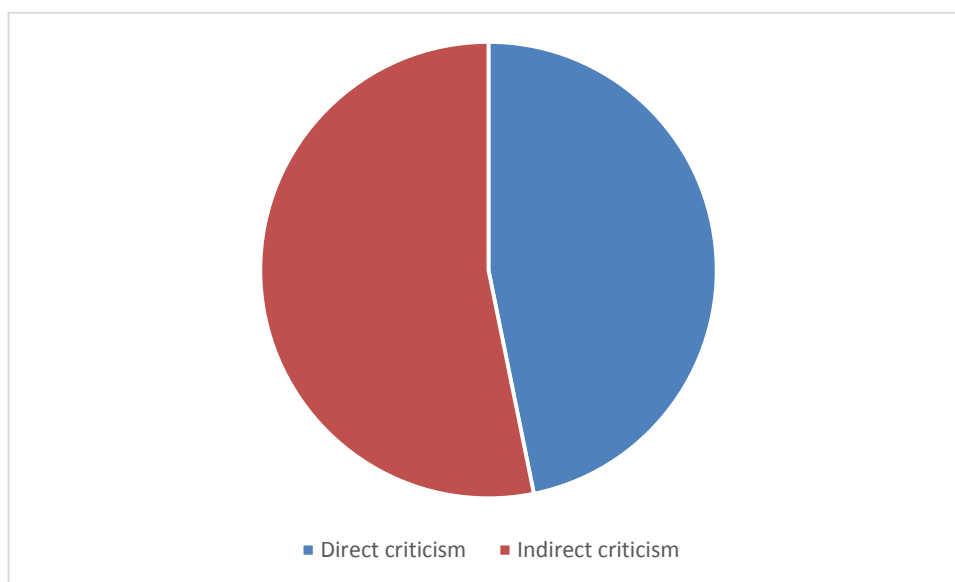
5. Results and discussion

Based on the given data in Table (1) and Figure (1) below, it is evident that criticism strategies employed in the Guardian Opinion Column are primarily distributed into two categories: direct criticism and indirect criticism. Out of the total 94 criticism strategies, 44 (46.81%) were direct criticisms, while 50 (53.19%) were indirect criticisms.

Table (1): The distribution of the criticism strategies in the Guardian Opinion Columns

Criticism strategies	Frequency	Percentage
Direct criticism	44	46.81%
Indirect criticism	50	53.19%
Total	94	100.00%

Figure (1): The distribution of the criticism strategies in the Guardian Opinion Columns



Within the realm of direct criticism, four subcategories, in Table (2) are identified: negative evaluation, statement of a problem, cautioning about potential adverse outcomes, and statements about difficulties faced

in understanding. Negative evaluation constitutes the largest portion of direct criticism at 40.91% (18 instances). This is followed by cautioning about potential adverse outcomes with a frequency of 11 (25%). The statement of a problem is seen as another form of direct criticism, which has a percentage of 18.18% (8 instances). Lastly, statements about difficulties faced in understanding make up the smallest portion of direct criticism with a frequency of 7 (15.91%).

Table (2): The distribution of the direct criticism strategies in the Guardian Opinion Column

Direct criticisms	Frequency	Percentage
Negative Evaluation	18	40.91%
A statement of a Problem	8	18.18%
Cautioning about Potential Adverse Outcomes	11	25.00%
Statements about Difficulties Faced in Understanding	7	15.91%
Total	44	100.00%

Regarding indirect criticism strategies, there are six subcategories found, as shown in Table (3) below, in the Guardian Opinion Column: correction, indicating standards, demanding for change, advice about change, suggestion and uncertainty. Both correction and advice about change have equal frequencies of 9 occurrences each, which corresponds to 18% of indirect criticisms. Indicating standards is the most frequently used strategy within this category with a frequency of 11 occurrences or 22%. Demanding for change is utilized less often with only 7 instances making up 14% of indirect criticisms. Additionally, suggestion stands at an even lower percentage with only five cases accounting for 10%, while uncertainty matches correction and advice about change with its frequency at 9 instances (18%).

Table (3): The distribution of the indirect criticism strategies in the Guardian Opinion Column

Indirect criticisms	Frequency	Percentage
Correction	9	18.00%
Indicating Standards	11	22.00%
Demanding for Change	7	14.00%
Advice about Change	9	18.00%
Suggestion	5	10.00%
Uncertainty	9	18.00%
Total	50	100.00%

To summarize these findings, it can be noted that both direct and indirect criticism strategies are nearly evenly distributed within the Guardian Opinion Column. Although indirect criticisms slightly outweigh direct ones in overall percentage, both tactics serve essential roles in expressing constructive critique within articles published in this column. The specific strategies within both categories provide unique methods in delivering critique, based on factors such as target audience and the complexity of the subject matter.

6. Conclusions

It is revealed that a balance between direct and indirect criticisms employed by the authors. It can be inferred that authors in the Guardian Opinion Column aim to engage their audience through a combination of forthright and subtle approaches. This careful blend encourages readers to critically evaluate the subjects under discussion, ultimately leading to a richer and more thought-provoking discourse. The analysis of direct criticism strategies in the Guardian Opinion Column highlights the prevalence of four main subcategories: negative evaluation, statement of a problem, cautioning about potential adverse outcomes, and statements about difficulties faced in understanding. The prominence of negative evaluation underlines its significance

as a key tool for expressing critical opinions, while the remaining subcategories contribute to a diverse approach to critique.

The analysis also shows that the indirect criticism strategies in the chosen data have a diverse range of approaches to address complex issues. The prominence of indicating standards demonstrates the value of setting benchmarks while fostering constructive conversations. Equal occurrences of correction, advice about change, and uncertainty suggest room for improvement in various aspects but also indicate the importance of adaptability and critical thinking. Less frequent strategies like demanding for change and suggestion emphasize the need for balance in critiques, leaving readers with a deeper understanding of the intricacies involved in effective communication and critical discourse.

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