

GUIDELINES

Guidelines on news coverage of terrorism

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Introduction

According to the European Union, ‘an “act of terrorism” shall mean one of the following intentional acts, which, given its nature or its context, may seriously damage a country or an international organisation, as defined as an offence under national law, where committed with the aim of: (i) seriously intimidating a population, or (ii) unduly compelling a Government or an international organisation to perform or abstain from performing any act, or (iii) seriously destabilising or destroying the fundamental political, constitutional, economic or social structures of a country or an international organisation.’¹

Terrorism may have political, religious or ideological motives. However, it is sometimes difficult to discern the true motives for acts of terrorism, especially when committed by an individual. Notwithstanding, for many aspects of media practice, the recommendations given here are also valid for other types of violence.

News coverage of terrorism is particularly complex because journalists must endeavour to provide the public with truthful, accurate and comprehensive information, while also respecting fundamental personal rights such as the presumption of innocence and the right to privacy. It also entails criteria such as ensuring that events are not glorified in any way, which would reiterate the perverse, destabilising logic of terrorism.

For this reason, in the spirit of the Declaration of Journalism Principles in Catalonia, the Catalan Audiovisual Council and the Association of Journalists of Catalonia have drawn up these **guidelines on news coverage of terrorism**.

The recommendations are aimed firstly at media professionals who have editorial responsibility for the content they broadcast, using any type of technology. However, we would also like to engage all other communication system players,

¹ Council of the European Union Common Position of 27 December 2001 on the application of specific measures to combat terrorism ([2001/931/CFSP](#))

including the internet (video-sharing platforms, social media, servers, etc.), and therefore all those who actively participate in communication processes.

Many of the guidelines are also aimed specifically at the general public, who we encourage to demand high standards from the media and to be aware of their own active (and interactive) role. Connected citizens no longer merely receive news about terrorism but also create and share audiovisual content, so these recommendations are useful for them too.

Guidelines

1. TERRORISTS

1.1 The perpetrator

Notwithstanding the ethical precept of cross-checking information, it is up to the authorities to formally establish the perpetrators of an act of terrorism. The media must avoid speculating or spreading rumours about the perpetrator of a violent act or the possible motives, and report factual information only.

Like the rest of society, the media must always respect the presumption of innocence. This principle also applies to person(s) accused of committing an act of terrorism.

It is up to the media to report, analyse the circumstances and communicate the facts and assessments about the effects and consequences of a terrorist event. The media may also work with the authorities, by communicating messages of public interest, for example.

1.2 Treatment of terrorists' identities

The identity and images of suspected terrorists should be disclosed only after official confirmation. Journalists must be particularly careful in the way they discuss terrorists, to avoid giving them prominence and in particular to ensure that they are not conveyed as heroes from their own perspective. The most appropriate way to describe terrorists is as the suspected perpetrators of a crime.

1.3 Content provided by terrorists

It is important to draw a distinction here between statements or declarations, and audiovisual content created by terrorists showing their own actions.

The informational value of statements and declarations may justify the media reporting the essence of a message. However, particular care must be taken to edit and provide context to such messages to avoid spreading propaganda.

Images distributed by terrorists on the other hand, either edited or uncut, should never be broadcast by the media and certainly not without editing, even if the footage is available in full on social media sites. Not broadcasting also means not providing links to such videos.

1.4 Providing the context

It is important to involve experts who can give opinions and contextual explanations and elaborate on the causes and possible consequences of an act of terrorism.

1.5 Describing terrorism

Acts of terrorism are not committed by countries, ethnic groups or religions but by individuals. It is therefore important not to describe terrorism by reference to a place of origin, race or religion. For instance, the term 'jihadi terrorism' is preferable to 'Islamic terrorism'.

1.6 The perpetrator's relatives

We must respect the intimacy and privacy of the relatives of the perpetrator(s) of an act of terrorism. Family connections should only be reported when essential to the facts.

1.7 Security forces

When reporting on a kidnapping, hostage incident or the search for terrorists, we recommend that the media do not disclose any information regarding security forces' whereabouts and tactics. If necessary, the media can alert the public to an incident.

However, coverage of acts of terror must never hamper police action on the ground or in the air (filming from helicopters or drones). For the same reasons, we recommend not broadcasting telephone or video calls with kidnappers or hostage-takers.

The faces of security force staff must be blurred or pixelated to protect their identities when they appear in footage of law enforcement operations.

2. THE VICTIMS

2.1 Identity of the victims

The identities of the victims of an act of terrorism can be revealed only when the authorities have informed the victims' relatives and officially disclosed the information. Families should never find out from the media.

Distance has no effect on an individual's right to personal and family privacy and image, which must be protected for victims from both home and abroad.

2.2 Privacy of victims killed

We recommend that the media do not show images of bodies after an act of terrorism if the victims could be recognised from their face or any other part of the body. Images of covered bodies may be shown, provided that they meet the editing criteria on use of distressing images.

2.3 Privacy of surviving victims

The surviving victims of an act of terrorism are entitled to privacy.

Broadly, witness accounts by victims should be avoided, particularly in the immediate aftermath of an event. If surviving victims can make a newsworthy contribution to the report, journalists must include only those who give their consent.

A victim is understood to authorise use his/her image if s/he makes statements voluntarily. That said, when people are in a state of shock journalists should refrain from taking statements or filming.

In all other footage showing surviving victims, the images must be edited to ensure that nobody can be recognised.

The right to privacy extends to surviving victims at funerals and demonstrations of mourning. The media should avoid gratuitous interference and speculations about people's feelings.

2.4 Minors and vulnerable people

In news coverage of terrorism, special attention must be paid to protection and best practices regarding minors. Privacy and fundamental rights must be specifically respected.

Likewise, special protection must be ensured for victims with a personal vulnerability (people with sensory or intellectual disabilities, mental disorders, social exclusion, etc.).

2.5 Victims of previous acts of terrorism

The right to privacy for the victims of an act of terrorism does not expire and must always be safeguarded. The media must avoid sensationalism and recreating past incidents unnecessarily.

3. THE AUDIENCE

3.1 Information sources

As a rule of thumb, the media must cite their sources when reporting an act of terrorism. If the authorities place limitations or constraints on information, this must be stated for public knowledge.

3.2 Warnings about distressing images

Use of distressing or shocking images must be editorially justified. It is up to senior editors to decide on which images to broadcast and which to rule out, depending on how distressing or gruesome the images are and whether they provide relevant information.

The public has the right to be informed but also the right not to see or hear violent content about an act of terrorism. This particularly applies to traditional linear media (TV and radio) before the watershed (from 6am to 10pm).

A warning must always be given about distressing images, both in the traditional media and on-demand audiovisual services (internet TV, digital media, etc.), using the mechanisms of each transmission system.

3.3 Sensational audiovisual presentation

Special effects such as zooms, sound effects, background music and similar should not be used when presenting information.

3.4 Sensational language

While expressive, news should never be reported using sensational language that could appear gory, scaremongering and/or incite a violent reaction from the audience.

3.5 Image loops on video walls or video mosaics on magazine and similar programmes

Video walls and video mosaics are used in analysis and debate programmes to enhance televised reporting. They are large display screens behind the studio presenters displaying short, repeated video sequences of an event, and are often a selection of the most dramatic images.

The images used for these should not incite violence or chaos among the audience; neither should they distract the audience from the discussion between the presenters and expert guests. We also recommend avoiding repeated or excessive exposure to certain images.

3.6 Stock images

Stock images from previous attacks that do not have informative value should not be used as they could be misleading. References to other acts of terrorism for no justifiable reason can stir up pain, hatred and anger among surviving victims and the public at large. All stock images used should be as impersonal as possible and should be clearly identified as such.

3.7 Distinction: live coverage - documentary reconstruction - fictional recreation

The distinction between live coverage of an act of terrorism, documentary reconstructions (using pre-recorded sound and images) and dramatised fictional recreations should be made extremely clear to ensure no possible confusion among the audience.

3.8 Media use of amateur material

The social media and video-sharing platforms unarguably provide greater opportunities for communication. They allow the media to engage audiences in participating, and the public to play a proactive, committed role in the communication system. When an act of terrorism is committed, members of the public can become an additional source of information. However, citizen empowerment entails greater responsibility.

The fact that amateur footage is created *for* the media but not *by* the media raises certain dilemmas when it comes to broadcasting.

If amateur content is going to be used, the following precautions should be taken:

- **Check the authenticity:** it is important that the sound and image have not been manipulated.
- **Cite the source:** if known, the owner of amateur footage given to the media should be stated.
- **Assess the social and informative value:** it is vital to analyse if footage is intrinsically newsworthy or biased. The potential for a copycat effect among certain individuals or groups must also be taken into account.
- **Respect the rights of victims and the audience:** the same criteria for professional footage must be used for amateur videos. The rights of victims and the audience are the same in both cases and the recommendations made above therefore also apply.

In addition, members of the public should also bear these recommendations in mind when posting or sharing audiovisual content on social networks.

4. JOURNALISTS

4.1 Post-traumatic shock disorder

Like members of the security forces and health professionals, journalists who are sent to the scene of an incident are subject to a greater impact than the general public. Faced with scenes of terror, reporters - like anyone - can suffer stress and in some cases PTSD.

Therefore, we recommend that insofar as possible, media companies consider this when choosing reporters to give live coverage of an event.

When it comes to selecting reporters, it is crucial to bear in mind that the best way of coping with trauma is being able to talk to colleagues.

Staff and freelance journalists who report on terrorism should be offered professional counselling.

5. THE AUTHORITIES

5.1 Media relations

In a terrorist attack, the authorities and emergency services (police, civil defence, rescue, fire brigade, etc.) assist the media, treating them respectfully, diligently and equally.

The emergency response priorities set down by the authorities must include planning for news reporting requirements (defining media zones and providing information on investigations including proven facts, perpetrators, status and identity of victims (after informing families), precautions taken, and recommendations to give the public).

Although journalists must never hamper surveillance, rescue or emergency operations, it is important that they are given what they need to provide the public with precise, verified information.

These guidelines are necessarily a work in progress that we must continue to develop in line with our changing society and communications system. Therefore, they should be reviewed regularly and updated accordingly.



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