GUIDELINE FOR PROFESSIONAL REPORTING ON VIOLENT EXTREMISM AND TERRORISM

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Association of Journalists of Macedonia

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1 INTRODUCTION

Reporting on terrorism and other forms of violent extremism is a major challenge for the media around the world. Access to information is difficult, and journalists face pressure to report on time. They are expected to report in the public interest in the same taking care not to cause any additional damage with their work.

Maintaining professional ethics is difficult, but it is inevitable in reporting such events. The public has the right to accurate and verified information, and the media are the ones who have to strike a balance between the right to information and the duty to respect the basic rules and values of journalism.

Topics of this kind are often reported in a sensational way, there are statements that heat up tensions, and events are given an ethnic or religious connotation. Because of this, there is a need of great care while informing. What is particularly important is that journalists avoid serving the interests of terrorists through the dissemination of graphic content and overly sensitive information.[1] They must avoid, unknowingly or knowingly, serving the perpetrators in the pursuit of their goal of spreading fear and division.

The purpose of the Guidelines for Professional Reporting on Violent Extremism and Terrorism is to offer recommendations to the media and journalists on how to address and report in these topics appropriately. The recommendations are based on the universal ethical principles of independence, balance between freedom of information and responsibility in information, accuracy and responsibility in information. At the same time, it is assumed that the media and journalists are a necessary factor of cohesion between different sections of society and play an extremely important role in preventing violent extremism and terrorism.[2]

We hope that this Guideline will be used as a starting point for reporting on topics related to terrorism and violent extremism and that in the future it will serve to upgrade the ethical framework and ethical standards in reporting in this area.

1 Council of Europe (2005) *Media and Terrorism – Report Committee on Culture*, Science and Education, available at: https://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/X2H-Xref-ViewHTML.asp?FileID=10914&lang=EN

2 OSCE (2017) *Reporting on Violent Extremism and Terrorism – Guidelines for Journalists*, available at: https://www.osce.org/mission-to-bosnia-and-herzegovina/442381

2 RADICALIZATION, VIOLENT EXTREMISM AND TERRORISM – TERMS DISTINCTION

One of the major challenges facing journalists in reporting on radicalization, violent extremism and terrorism is the lack of understanding of these terms. This can lead to misperceptions among the public. It is the media that play a key role in explaining these terms to the public.

2.1. Radicalization

Radicalization has different meanings in different contexts. Some describe it in a broader sense, as a process through which individuals and groups determine far-reaching and dramatic changes and take steps to achieve such changes in society. Van den Bos defines radicalization as a process of increased willingness to monitor and / or support radical change in society (if necessary in an undemocratic way too), which is in conflict with the democratic rule of law or may be a threat to it.[3]

3 Van den Bos, K. (2018) *Why people radicalize,* New York, USA: Oxford University Press

2.2. Extremism

Extremism also has different meanings. It is defined as a loud or active opposition to fundamental values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, and respect and tolerance for different religions and beliefs.[4] Extremism refers to political, religious, or other ideas or actions that are extreme and not normal, reasonable, or acceptable to most people.[5]

The violent extremism is defined as advocacy, involvement, willingness, or other way of supporting ideologically motivated or justified violence to achieve social, economic, or political goals.[6]

2.3. Terrorism

There are a number of definitions of what terrorism is. Some define it as "the use of violence against random civilian targets in order to intimidate or create a pervasive fear of achieving political goals"[7].

The definition of terrorism is thought to have changed over time, but "the political, religious or ideological aims have practically never changed."[8]

4 Gov.uk (2015) *Counter-extremism strategy – policy paper,* available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/counter-extremism-strategy

5 Oxford Learner's Dictionary, available at: https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/extremism

6 GSDRC, https://gsdrc.org/professional-dev/violent-extremism/

7 Yonah, A., (1976). *International Terrorism: National, Regional and Global Perspectives.* New York: Praeger, p. xiv.

8 Sloan, S. (2006). *Terrorism: The Present Threat in Context.* Oxford: Berg Publishers.

3 THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA IN REPORTING ON VIOLENT EXTREMISM AND TERRORISM

3.1. Why media responsibility is crucial?

The media should provide the public with complete, reliable and verified information. But in circumstances where society is threatened by phenomena such as terrorism and violent extremism, such a role is more difficult to handle because of the climate of fear, panic and threats.

Although the aspect of journalistic value story plays a major role in informing, what is primary is to look through the prism of ethics to check the boundaries of reporting. It is not uncommon for the media to allow terrorists to get the publicity they expect. There happens to be a synergy between the media's need for a sensationalist story and the terrorists' desire for publicity.[9]

Most of the standards when reporting on these topics are based on the basic principles of journalistic work: accuracy, independence, balance and responsibility. At the same time, journalists must be aware of the consequences of their reporting and the way they frame these topics, despite the obligation to be punctual, meet deadlines and be objective. One must always think through the

9 Matusitz, J., (2013) *Terrorism and Communication: A Critical Introduction* (London: SAGE).

prism of how reporting affects panic, fears, the process of radicalization and the danger of repeating such acts.

In order to gain trust and show that they are acting in the public interest, journalists need to report not only on the consequences of violent extremism and terrorism, but also on the reasons for their occurrence. This means not only reporting the existing facts, but also giving context to the events, while respecting the top ethical principles and standards of the profession.

3.2. Recommendations for professional and ethical reporting

3.2.1. Verification of information and informing through facts

In the face of extremist and terrorist threats or attacks, misinformation and speculation are spreading rapidly, further increasing anxiety and panic among the people. Journalists should seek accurate, impartial, comprehensive, independent and reasoned information. They should be especially careful about spreading terrorist propaganda, as well as propaganda by other potential actors. At the same time, journalists must oppose any influences arising from political narratives.[10]

The police and security services are usually the primary sources for providing timely and detailed information to the public. On the other hand, it is not enough just to convey information received from institutions, without additional perspectives and information that will reflect the opinion of the expert community, citizens and other relevant sources of information.

10 OSCE Mission in Kosovo (2018) *Guide for reporting on violent extremism*, available at: https://www.osce.org/mission-in-kosovo/375436

Before accepting the claim of the government and institutions about who is responsible for the attack, journalists must investigate the origin of the information and try to provide appropriate evidence. At the same time, it is very important to approach the claims of those who take responsibility for terrorist acts carefully. Sometimes such acts occur for criminal motives and are mistakenly identified as terrorist attacks.[11]

Journalists should also be wary of expert statements, which can be strongly influenced by certain beliefs and aimed at promoting the agenda of individuals or groups that support them. It is especially important that expert opinions are not treated as facts and that multiple sources to be consulted for the sake of balance in reporting and comparing different views.

Insufficient verification of information and reliance on assumptions and speculations carries great risks and incomplete stories. This also endangers the public interest.

Few useful recommendations:

- **Journalists should explain to the audience** what information they have and what they do not.
- **Indicate the sources of information**, as far as possible.
- **Journalists should be as transparent as possible,** at the same time pointing to information constraints. Transparency is the key to trust.
- **Never assume the possible development of events.**
- **Verification of information is the most important.** The pressure to be informed quickly must not jeopardize the public's right to receive accurate information. As the volume of the latest information increases, a precise check of the information is required.

11 Internews (2019) *Handbook – A conflict sensitive approach to reporting on conflict and violent extremism*, available at: https://internews.org/sites/default/files/2020-01/Handbook_Reporting_Violent_Extremism_eng2020.pdf

3.2.2. Balanced and independent information

The duty to inform implies a critical distance between the media and the reactions of the public, the statements and actions of the government and other sources of information, whether they are opposition political parties or associations and public figures.[12] Such an approach is not easy, given that the media run the risk of being accused by the public and the government of disloyalty in the face of a common threat. But, in the long run it protects their integrity and democratic function.

Good journalism should be independent, balanced and responsible or, more simply:

Accuracy + independence + responsibility = confidentiality.

Journalists should report in a balanced and neutral way and allow the audience to judge for themselves who did what.

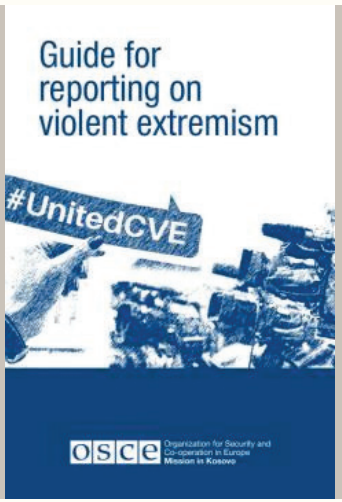
12 UNESCO (2017) *Terrorism and the Media – Handbook for Journalists*, available at: https://en.unesco.org/news/terrorism-and-media-handbook-journalists

3.2.3. Using appropriate vocabulary and terminology

Vocabulary should be specific and consistent. Extremism and terrorism are difficult topics and care should be taken not to use a dictionary with value judgments and assessments. The consequences of what happened should be conveyed to the audience in an appropriate way. It is necessary to use words that accurately and concretely describe the perpetrator, such as "bomber", "attacker", "gunman", "kidnapper", "militant", etc.[13]

The tone and choice of words not only helps to avoid panic, but also to prevent acts of revenge against individuals and groups who, according to the perception of the audience, are the perpetrators of the attack.[14]

Before reporting on radicalization, violent extremism and terrorism, it is necessary to have a good understanding of what they mean. This will enable the audience to understand them properly. Awareness of audience perceptions and appropriate contextualization are important for professional and independent reporting.[15]



13 BBC Editorial Guidelines, Section 11: War, Terror and Emergencies – Guidelines, available at: https://www.bbc.com/editorialguidelines/guidelines/war-terror-emergencies/guidelines

14 UNESCO (2017) *Terrorism and the Media – Handbook for Journalists*, available at: https://en.unesco.org/news/terrorism-and-media-handbook-journalists

15 OSCE Mission in Kosovo (2018) *Guide for reporting on violent extremism*, available at: https://www.osce.org/mission-in-kosovo/375436

3.2.4. Avoiding sensational reporting

When reporting on violent extremism and terrorism, the media will be extremely careful and avoid sensational headlines and unverified information, taking care not to create additional anxiety and panic among the public.

In doing so, the media should carefully assess whether the public interest is stronger compared to the potential damage they would cause by reporting on the crisis or terrorist event.

In such circumstances, the media should consider the following:[16]

- **To balance** the proportionality between the public interest and the potential damage
- **To determine** whether the degree of potential damage is greater than the public interest in the content itself
- **To determine** what is, in fact, necessary to offer the public a sufficiently comprehensive report on what happened
- **Assess** whether the repetition, intensity and / or disturbing nature of the content will go beyond what is necessary to inform the audience
- **Assess** whether the publication of the content will cause anxiety and stress to the audience, family and friends of the victims
- **Be wary** of explicit visual and graphic content, etc.

Shocking images of human suffering and terrifying sights are not uncommon when reporting on terrorism. The media should protect the audience and the victims and their loved ones. They owe it to the audience, but also to those they inform about.

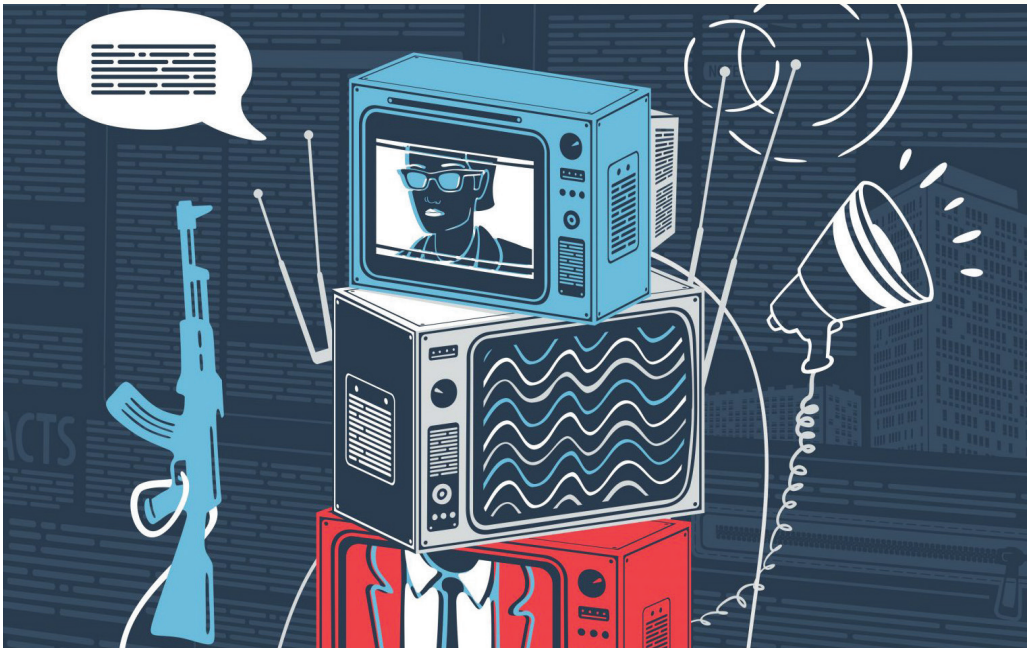
16 Broadcasting Standards Authority (2020) *Considerations for reporting on terrorism, violent extremism and crisis events*, available at: https://www.bsa.govt.nz/assets/9c2e22b0b8/BSA-Guidance-Note-on-Reporting-on-Terrorism-Short-Final.pdf

3.2.5. Using an appropriate context

Together with reporting through facts, the audience expects analysis and appropriate context around the events. The media should not only report quickly, but also create better context and clarity in the content they place. Good journalism means in-depth information, providing a broader picture, explaining the specific context in which events take place, considering the potential consequences, possible solutions to problems, and so on.

The media should focus on the circumstances and context in the reporting community and assess the consequences of published information, especially in the context of social cohesion.

Context is often well represented through data visualization. When equipping the contents, special attention should be paid to the use of photos and / or recordings. Using archival footage of other events and incorrectly linking them to the topic and context in question can have detrimental consequences.



3.2.6. Information sources protection

A key factor is to ensure consent to the disclosure of information resulting from the conversation / interview with the sources of information. Interlocutors must know how the material will be used and should be able to assess the consequences. At the same time, it must be borne in mind that people who have been exposed to trauma and shock may not think rationally and may not be able to consent.[17] Conversations with witnesses of accidents and disasters, with injured and sick people, will be conducted by the media with attention, compassion and full understanding of the physical and emotional condition of those people.

The media should be especially careful when reporting on witnesses of crimes who have been granted the status of protected witness by law. The duty to guarantee the confidentiality of information sources implies that journalists will take care not to have their identities identified. The consequences of recklessness can be devastating.

3.2.7. Non-disclosure of sensitive information and disturbing and explicit content

The media should avoid publishing content (footage, photographs) depicting crimes and violence, unless it is particularly important in the public interest. In that case, they will post a warning that content may upset the audience.

The BBC editorial states that "journalists must not disclose security details or other sensitive information that could be used in an attack.[18] Furthermore, the identities of individuals or organizations that would not otherwise be endangered as possible targets should not be disclosed unless the editorial board justifies it.[19]

17 Internews (2019) *Handbook – A conflict sensitive approach to reporting on conflict and violent extremism*, available at: https://internews.org/sites/default/files/2020-01/Handbook_Reporting_Violent_Extremism_eng2020.pdf

18 BBC Editorial Guidelines, Section 11: War, Terror and Emergencies – Guidelines, available at: https://www.bbc.com/editorialguidelines/guidelines/war-terror-emergencies/guidelines

19 Ibid

In cases of kidnapping, hostage-taking, sieges, bombings and similar events, the media must ensure that everything they publish can be seen and heard by those who carried out the action, no matter where they are. The media should not publish critical information about current hostage situations unless the safety of the hostages is no longer threatened or, unless the cessation of the crisis has been confirmed by official sources.[20]

Ongoing police interventions should not be shown.

The media must not serve as a platform for promoting the ideas of terrorists and extremists. The demands of terrorists / extremists should not be broadcasted live.

The newsrooms should carefully evaluate how they will deal with the materials that are broadcasted live on social networks. For example, CNN has turned off the option to automatically display video on its Facebook pages about certain terrorist attacks and regularly warns of potentially disturbing content.[21]

The main reason for not broadcasting live terrorism scenes is to avoid putting people at risk. At the same time, it will prevent theorists from receiving useful information about the deployment of security forces and the measures currently being taken.

20 Benhamou, J. (2020) *What guidelines should the media follow in its coverage of terrorist acts, The International Counter-Terrorism Review* —policy paper #1 (ICTR), available at: https://www.ict.org.il/images/Paper1_ThinkOutsideTheBox.pdf

21 Beckett, C. (2016) *Fanning the flames: Reporting on terror in a networked world*, Columbia Journalism School – Tow Center for Digital Journalism, Democracy Fund Voice, available at: https://www.cjr.org/tow_center_reports/coverage_terrorism_social_media.php

3.2.8. Respect victims and their loved ones

The media must take care to protect the dignity of victims, their families and those affected by traumatic events.

In ethical terms, there are dilemmas and concerns about how appropriate it is to approach people who are in a state of shock and deep grief. It is natural to respect their privacy, pain and grief and to help them in such circumstances.

Regarding the use of footage of the victims, the following should be taken into accounto:[22]

- **The privacy** of the victims and whether the publication of the recordings they show is justified by the public interest (i.e is the public interest strong enough to justify the invasion of privacy)?

- **What is the purpose** of the recordings (i.e is it done to offer "humanizing and awareness-raising information" about what happened or is it done for sensationalism or to stimulate curiosity).

3.2.9. Reporting on ongoing investigations and trials

The media must not report in a way that would compromise justice. Their role is to prevent trials from becoming spectacles and to prevent terrorists from gaining publicity for their actions. At the same time, the media should be aware that the government can undermine the integrity of the judiciary by orchestrating a drama for political scoring.[23]

22 Broadcasting Standards Authority (2020) *Considerations for reporting on terrorism, violent extremism and crisis events*, available at: https://www.bsa.govt.nz/assets/9c2e22b0b8/BSA-Guidance-Note-on-Reporting-on-Terrorism-Short-Final.pdf

23 UNESCO (2017) *Terrorism and the Media – Handbook for Journalists*, available at: https://en.unesco.org/news/terrorism-and-media-handbook-journalists

In reporting on investigative and court proceedings, the media will refer to information from official investigative and judicial institutions, without a sensationalist approach to information. In doing so, they shall pay particular attention to the terms they use for the status of persons in the proceedings of which they report, in order not to infringe on their right to the presumption of innocence.[24]

The media will not report with prejudice and bring hasty courts for the guilt of the suspects, nor will they prejudge the outcome of the court proceedings, so as not to influence the judicial bodies and the course of the proceedings.

3.2.10. Creating a space for dialogue

Violent extremism develops in circumstances of division in society and where there is insufficient dialogue. In this context, journalists can play a very important role in providing space for the opposing parties to get closer and to express their views.

It is especially important to hear the messages that marginalized communities want to send to the government and the public. At the same time, journalists should monitor whether the government and institutions are doing anything to improve the position and address the needs of these people.

Journalists should ensure a balanced representation that will largely reflect the opinions of the group or community, by diversifying and increasing the representation of information sources.[25] The way in which this will be done will result from the analysis of the way in which the stories on these topics are framed, and especially the diversity of the parties consulted. It is especially important to consider the social impact of reporting, not just to think through the prism of facts, statistics and the drama of events. The media also has a mediating role in the emotional impact on the audience.

24 CEMM (2020) *Guidelines for ethical reporting in online media*, available at: https://semm.mk/dokumenti/korisni-resursi/kodeks/850-nasoki-za-etichko-izvestuvanje-na-onlajn-mediumite

25 OSCE Mission in Kosovo (2018) *Guide for reporting on violent extremism*, available at: https://www.osce.org/mission-in-kosovo/375436

3.2.11. Using social media content cautiously

Social media is one of the most commonly used resources for information related to terrorist events. It is there that terrorism is often reported, which may affect the further flow of information. The audience itself has unlimited and direct access to a large amount of information from a wide range of sources. The public can get information directly from the citizens, the government, and even from the terrorists themselves.[26]

In the age of social media, everyone wants to be first, but if the content is not verified, the purpose of quickly publishing information is lost. Just as content is checked from other sources, so should social media. They can be a valid and important source, but the information must be verified and put into context. There are many situations in which the content and photos on social networks are not checked, can be taken out of context or tendentiously created to achieve certain goals.

Journalists have access to a number of online content verification tools (for example, TinEye7, Google Reverse Image, etc.).

26 Beckett, C. (2016) *Fanning the flames: Reporting on terror in a networked world*, Columbia Journalism School – Tow Center for Digital Journalism, Democracy Fund Voice, available at: https://www.cjr.org/tow_center_reports/coverage_terrorism_social_media.php

www.znm.org.mk