

Launch of “Terrorism and the Media: A Handbook for Journalists”

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This handbook, developed by independent author Jean-Paul Marthoz, deals with a serious, emotional and increasingly unavoidable subject that impacts on journalists no less than their societies. It is also a subject that is especially delicate – partly over who is identified as a terrorist, by whom, and why. Partly over whether it makes sense to add an adjective like religion X, or nationality Y, before the “terrorist” label, in an attempt to link to a particular cause. And partly over the sensitivities of the victims.

Reporting on violent attacks, particularly on citizens including children, cannot but affect journalists’ sentiments and identities, sometimes overwhelming the sense of professional journalistic identity. Even more than this challenge, however, the coverage issues penetrate right to the heart of journalism and the role that it can play in a society.

These are just some of the reasons why journalists need to think carefully about their coverage, and why they would be well advised to read this handbook before the next crisis hits their society. When a major violent attack takes place, anywhere, no matter if a journalist normally covers sports or entertainment, he or she could well be mobilized to help in covering such a big story. The handbook launched here in Brussels today is a resource to stimulate reflection and to help to prepare journalists in advance. It prompts thinking and discussion about points like the following:

1. The definition of terrorism is highly contested, even if some cases seem clear-cut. Many journalists easily apply the label of terrorist to non-state actors who target civilians. But for the victims of violence from state-based actors, the deadly experience is not necessarily different – no matter who is doing it. Certainly, the laws of war do not justify terrorist tactics and targets. The mental image of who is to be rightly designated as a “terrorist” can vary according to what vantage point is taken. These issues signal that journalists should treat the “terror” moniker as a “red flag”. They should consider closely the consistency with which they brand an event or an actor with it, and even when they quote sources without qualifying or signaling the wording being used.
2. The usage of “terrorism” as a word is also very often instrumentalised for political purposes. Nelson Mandela was branded a terrorist by the apartheid regime, even though the

armed liberation movement he led sought to target the state and not individual members of the ruling white minority. Around the world, journalists reporting on resistance activities are often subject to word creep, whereby legitimate journalism itself is treated as an act of terrorism, notwithstanding that it is an act of speech and not one of physical harm. In other cases, legitimate journalism is attacked under the rationale that it is glorifying terrorism. These unfortunate realities should make journalists highly cautious about the context in which they might spontaneously use the reference.

3. The social functionality of the label of “terrorism” is important: if attacks, both targeted or seemingly random, are intended to strike fear and acquiescence into the hearts of people, the unfortunate reality is that this very goal is often also amplified further by fear-mongers. Terror as reality and as a label can become a football, exploited not only by the perpetrators, but also by other actors who promote themselves as the only viable alternative. The effect of this escalation is to intensify suspicion and to fuel polarization. Making things worse is reportage that embeds the frequently false assumption that attackers are automatically “foreigners” in one form or another. Thoughtless journalism in these contexts can reinforce stress and further inflame tensions.

In short, covering “terrorism” is a minefield. This applies to journalists across all different types of countries and contexts. As this handbook shows, coverage is a legal and an ethical challenge for them. In addition, the basic terminology makes for a particularly complex journalistic challenge.

To compound the picture further, journalists nowadays have to reckon with a much wider communications ecology. Narratives that circulate in society today are driven not only by journalists, nor even by those who manipulate the media to get their information into the public sphere. More and more mass communications are now taking place that bypass the media. Politicians and violent extremists get their messages out directly, sometimes surpassing the media in their resonance with audiences. Media institutions risk being left in a position of looking redundant. Or they come across as lagging the news that everyone already “knows”. In the worst cases, they may appear to be out of touch with populist public opinion. This harms the status of news media, and it is bad for their business model and sustainability. It is also bad for the role of truth and reflection in a society.

Ironically, in relation to “terror”, the importance of respected journalism becomes ever more important in the new communications ecology. It is during times of violent attack that the public, in all its diversity, really needs to know who can be trusted. Trusted to be truthful, to highlight fact from rumour, to be calm amidst emotion. Trusted to provide help in the form of

understanding, and to provide practical tips for helping victims or expressing rejection of violence.

What to do then, when journalists report on “terrorism”? They can do well to focus on the actions being designated – what concrete things are verifiably happening, and which of these lead to some actors define the situation as a particular type of terrorism. In addition, journalism can seek to educate. The resort by some humans to cause-based violence against ordinary people is condemned, but not explained, by labelling the actors as inhuman or barbaric. Media can help provide the understanding. The processes whereby some people come to commit cause-based violence against civilians in particular can be probed, and the lead-up to a given attack can be set out. Remaining in the discourse of “terrorism” – a mid-level abstraction word - can get in the way of journalists either getting closer to the ground, or soaring high above to enable a bird's eye view of background and significance.

It is in the interests of prompting journalists to think deeply before reporting that UNESCO is publishing this handbook. This is part of UNESCO's wider interest in the function of media during emergency and disasters. It is also part of the Organisation's response to the kinds of attacks that are often grouped under the “terror” label. There are four parts to this response:

1. UNESCO rejects violent attacks in general, and also has particular focus on when the victims are journalists. When Charlie Hebdo staff were murdered in their newsroom in Paris, the staff of the Organisation joined the mass street protest under the banner: “UNESCO DÉBOUT POUR LA LIBERTÉ D'EXPRESSION”. Every time a journalist is killed, UNESCO's Director-General issues a statement condemning this form of ultimate censorship, and affected Member States each year are asked to report on judicial follow up to the deaths. There is still a long way to go in order to secure safety for journalists, and justice for those who have been murdered. But some progress has been made under the UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity. This is a movement led worldwide by UNESCO in which journalists and other actors are raising awareness, doing advocacy, and developing mechanisms for monitoring, protection and prosecution. Certainly, it is self-evident that journalists cannot cover terrorism if they are not free and safe to do so. Coverage requires their confidence that they will be protected and respected – and not harmed, intimidated or harassed for doing their job.

2. More broadly, UNESCO is also working with our partners to fight the illicit trafficking of cultural objects that can provide a source of financing for violent extremists. Cultural heritage should never be weaponized in this way, but instead conserved, valued and used for understanding human history. It is a resource for us to draw lessons from the past to inform future progress. The handbook provides further information about this topic.

3. UNESCO is, as part of the UN, a strong participant in the UN Secretary-General's Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism. This participation is through our work in education, youth participation and empowerment, and safeguarding and celebrating cultural diversity all over the world. It is through us championing the right to life, liberty and security of person, and the rights to freedom of expression, freedom of belief and dignity – and indeed, the whole package of human rights.

4. Research is another contribution by UNESCO. Preliminary findings are emerging from a study on the role of the Internet in youth radicalization. These are of interest in this area of the media and terrorism. The research results indicate no definitive evidence to support any simplistic view of cause and effect between the Internet and the phenomenon of radicalization. This has implications for the related view that the problem of radicalization can be effectively dealt with by filtering, blocking and removing Internet content. Further, these are reactive rather than proactive steps. They do not address offline factors and drivers, and content restriction is often used to violate the legitimate right to impart, seek and receive information. Evidence-based, and rights-respecting, policies are needed to combat radicalization for violence, not sweeping and reductionist assumptions that the Internet as such is to blame. Indeed, media has a role to play in elevating the public debate about what informs effective responses to violent attacks.

5. UNESCO further promotes, as part of the solution to countering terror, the vital importance of credible, free and independent journalism. This is key to providing an alternative to social media's emotion-based narratives and myths. Journalism that is unassailable in terms of verifiability and public interest is a way for people's hearts to be brought back into alignment with their heads. It is fundamental if facts are to dispel misinformation and rumour, and if it is to expose the consequences of value systems where the ends are taken to justify any means - irrespective of the rights of ordinary people.

These responses are designed to promote UNESCO's core values of tolerance, understanding and peace, and at an historical time when they are being challenged on a scale not seen in decades.

UNESCO strives to provide enduring responses, rather than kneejerk reactions. Our actions are not easy to identify as newsworthy, but they are about the patient building of peace in the minds of people. They are about encouraging identities of global citizenship, free expression, gender equality and education. They are about empowering people to recognize that neither emotive populism nor violent action offer solutions to the burning problems of our times. At root, UNESCO's work is about developing new responses to achieve shared goals like ending poverty and hunger, combatting climate change and building peace, justice and

strong institutions. These are the hopes of humanity crystallised in the Sustainable Development Goals that were agreed upon by representatives of all countries in the UN General Assembly in 2015. Violence against civilians works directly against this agenda.

So, this book is a complementary intervention to UNESCO's other work in the field. It is a resource that helps journalists to think more deeply and to act with enhanced professionalism in covering this critical topic.

As Frank La Rue, UNESCO's Assistant Director-General for Communication-Information says in his foreword to the handbook, "Not every question posed has a clear and incontestable answer, but will at least encourage self-reflection on the part of media professionals as to how they can avoid contributing to stigmatisation and division."

To do justice to covering "terrorism", journalists will benefit hugely from taking the time to read this handbook. The author has made it highly readable, and has done extensive global research about the debates. The publication will also be useful for journalism students, and for security forces who want to know about the role of the media and freedom of expression in relation to their challenges. Most importantly, discussions triggered by this handbook are vital for the way the media can best serve the public. While the views in the publication are those of the author, UNESCO is pleased to have been able to commission the work, and we thank him for producing a very thought-provoking product.