EDITORIAL POLICY GUIDANCE NOTE
THE USE OF LANGUAGE WHEN REPORTING TERRORISM

(Last updated: October 2010)

EDITORIAL POLICY ISSUES

This guidance note should be considered in conjunction with the following Editorial Guidelines:

- War, Terror and Emergencies

  See Editorial Guidelines Section 11 War, Terror and Emergencies: Use of Language

SUMMARY OF MAIN POINTS

- There is no agreed consensus on what constitutes a terrorist or terrorist act. The use of the word will frequently involve a value judgement.

- As such, we should not change the word "terrorist" when quoting someone else, but we should avoid using it ourselves

- This should not mean that we avoid conveying the reality and horror of a particular act; rather we should consider how our use of language will affect our reputation for objective journalism

- In a digital age, it is no longer possible to assume an easy split between domestic and overseas audiences.

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Introduction

The relevant Editorial Guideline states:

Use of Language

11.4.5 We must report acts of terror quickly, accurately, fully and responsibly. Terrorism is a difficult and emotive subject with significant political overtones and care is required in the use of language that carries value judgements. We try to avoid the use of the term "terrorist" without attribution. When we do use the term we should strive to do so with consistency in the stories we report across all our services and in a way that does not undermine our reputation for objectivity and accuracy.

The word "terrorist" itself can be a barrier rather than an aid to understanding. We should convey to our audience the full consequences of the act by describing what happened. We should use words which specifically describe the perpetrator such as "bomber", "attacker", "gunman", "kidnapper", "insurgent", and "militant". We should not adopt other people's language as our own; our responsibility is to remain objective and report in ways that enable our audiences to make their own assessments about who is doing what to whom.

11.4.6 For similar reasons, it is also usually inappropriate to use, without attribution, terms such as "liberate", "court martial" or "execute" in the absence of a clear judicial process.

Background

Our policy is about achieving consistency and accuracy in our journalism. We recognise the existence and the reality of terrorism – at this point in the twenty first century we could hardly do otherwise. Moreover, we don't change the word "terrorist" when quoting other people, but we try to avoid the word ourselves; not because we are morally neutral towards terrorism, nor because we have any sympathy for the perpetrators of the inhuman atrocities which all too often we have to report, but because terrorism is a difficult and emotive subject with significant political overtones.

We also need to ensure that when we report acts of terror, we do so consistently in the stories we report across our services. We have learnt from the experience of covering such events in Northern Ireland as much as in Israel, Spain, Russia, Southern Africa or the many other places where violence divides communities, and where we seek to be seen as objective by all sides, that labels applied to groups can sometimes hinder rather than help.

As the guideline makes clear, careful use of the word "terrorist" is essential if the BBC is to maintain its reputation for standards of accuracy and especially impartiality. This is especially true when we use the word to describe a person or a group as opposed to an action or event ("the terrorist group", say, as opposed "an act of terror" or "terrorist tactics" or "terrorism"). That does not mean we should emasculate our reporting or otherwise avoid conveying the reality and horror of what has occurred; but we should consider the impact our use of language may have on our reputation for objective journalism amongst our many audiences.

Moreover in a digital age, it is no longer possible to assume an easy split between domestic and overseas audiences. What we do is seen, heard or read everywhere. This further Guidance Note explains the issues that lie behind the Editorial Guidelines on reporting Terror and the use of language, and suggests some issues to bear in mind as you consider what you are going to say.

Definitions

Unfortunately, there is no agreed or universal consensus on what constitutes a terrorist, or a terrorist attack. Dictionaries may offer definitions but the United Nations has again just failed to reach agreement. The obvious reason is that terrorism is regarded through a political prism.

Our approach

The Editorial Guideline focuses on the use of the word "terrorist". It does not ban the use of the word. However, we do ask that careful thought is given to its use by a BBC voice. There are ways of conveying the full horror and human consequences of acts of terror without using the word "terrorist" to describe the perpetrators. And there are a number of important editorial factors that must be considered before its use to describe individuals or a given group can be justified:

Value judgements

The value judgements frequently implicit in the use of the words "terrorist" or "terrorist group" can create inconsistency in their use or, to audiences, raise doubts about our impartiality. For example, the bombing of a bus in London

was carried out by "terrorists", but the bombing of a bus in Israel was perpetrated by a "suicide bomber". Or again, "terrorists" in London bombed a tube train, but "insurgents" in Iraq have "assassinated" the Egyptian ambassador. The use of the words can imply judgement where there is no clear consensus about the legitimacy of militant political groups.

Have we assessed the merits of the different perpetrators' cause, the acts of the different Governments against the perpetrators, or even the value of civilian lives further from home? We must be careful not to give the impression that we have come to some kind of implicit -and unwarranted – value judgement.

Some will argue that certain events are so evidently acts of terror (and, therefore, perpetrated by "terrorists") that those descriptions are reasonable, and non-judgemental. However, the language we choose to use in reporting one incident cannot be considered in isolation from our reporting of other stories. So to use the word in incidents which we may consider obvious creates difficulties for less clear-cut incidents.

As David Spaull, then-Editor of World Service News wrote in 1988:

"Accepting that there are some actions which most people would recognise as a terrorist act- the hand grenade thrown into a crèche, the airport queue machine-gunned – we should still avoid the word. In the first place, our audience is as perceptive as we are, and can make up their own minds without being provided with labels. In the second place, there are actions which are not quite so clearly terrorism and we should not be forced into the position of having to make value judgements on each event". [2]

On a breaking news story, ask yourself, first of all, is the use of the word "terrorist" accurate? Do we know, or do we suspect? It may be better to talk about an apparent act of terror or terrorism than label individuals or a group.

As the facts become clearer we will also wish to describe what has happened as accurately and as clearly as possible. Give as much information as possible. "Bomb attack" conveys more information more quickly than "terrorist attack", similarly "suicide bomber", "bomber", "assassin", "gun man" help fill in the picture.

We also need to ask ourselves whether by using "terrorist" we are taking a political position, or certainly one that may be seen as such.

Consistency

We can no longer isolate the BBC's coverage of the UK from how it reports the rest of the world. With global access to our services, the concept of a "primary audience" is problematic: reports made for News 24 are often

shared on BBC World; UK bulletins are streamed on the internet; and users of BBC Online can compare the words used on global and UK pages with just a few mouse clicks.

Importantly even within the same bulletin on the same service, there can be issues of inconsistency in how we describe who is doing what to whom. "Militants in Gaza launch a rocket attack: terrorists plant bombs in London…" Don't assume that what you write or say is confined to a small part of our audience.

If you do want to use the word, reassure yourself that its use is going to aid rather than hinder understanding wherever it may be seen or heard.

Precise but effective language

Words can be used with precision to make clear what has happened and still convey the awful consequences without needing to resort to labels.

For example, Denis Murray, the Northern Ireland correspondent, reported the wake of the Omagh Bombing in 1998. His commentary shows how to get close both to the reality of what has happened and to the emotions and feelings of his audience without any labels or tags:

"There should have been a carnival here, instead there was carnage. Saturday afternoon shoppers here because it was safe, crowded together away from a bomb scare. Instead the bomb was in their midst. It killed fourteen women and three young girls… It killed five men and four young boys…three of them came from County Donegal, another was a 12 year old boy from Madrid, they were all friends on an exchange scheme. It killed three generations of one family…a 65 year old grandmother, her pregnant 30 year old daughter and her 18 month old daughter. A litany of the dead of the slaughtered innocents". [3]

It is worth asking yourself what the use of the word "terrorist" would have added to that simple but powerful statement of what had happened.

This is an issue of judgement. If you do decide to use the word "terrorist" do so sparingly, having considered what is said above, and take advice from senior editors.

References

[1] Editorial Guidelines, Section 11: War, Terror and Emergencies (Terror)

[2] Newsroom Policy on Neutral Language and Terrorism", David Spaull, (former) Editor, World Service News 1988

[3] BBC One News, 16 August 1998