

GUIDELINES FOR JOURNALISTS ON REPORTING ON TERRORISM AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN UGANDA

(Adapted by Kyetume Kasanga, Secretary to the Media Council of Uganda and Vice chairman of the East African Press Councils)

1. Introduction

Media and journalists are an indispensable cohesion factor between different sections of society and play an extremely important role in the prevention of violent extremism and terrorism. Journalists should, therefore, resist the temptation to sensationalise events in their quest to attract public interest in their publications. Instead, they should focus on the importance of accuracy of information based on facts, independence, impartiality, humanity, transparency and responsibilities, when it comes to media-monitoring of violent extremism and terrorism.

Precision and the use of clear terminology is essential for explaining the seriousness and tragic nature of the situation without misleading readers and viewers and sensationalist approach to events. Carefulness while informing the public on any subject, and especially about such sensitive issues, is of exceptional importance.

Otherwise, the media, even unintentionally, can help the perpetrators to achieve their goal primarily in the spread of fear and divisions. The damage from sensationalism is great, so it is necessary to insist on responsible journalism. There is no use of sensation, especially in the long term. Sensationalism should always be countered by social responsibility.

2. Guiding principles

When reporting on violent extremism and terrorism the following principles should be followed:

- a) Reporting on cases of violent extremism and terrorism must be balanced. To what extent the media should give space to perpetrators and the influencing ideology must be the result of serious editorial assessment, which will avoid any generalisation.
- b) In the first reports from the field, journalists will be led by verified facts, while opinions, perspectives and analyses of the events should be conducted at later stage. This means that field reports should be kept separate from the expert analyses.

- c) Journalists have a responsibility to use the official, credible and trusted sources of information, to check them and, if necessary, protect their identity.
- d) The information should be conveyed as accurately and as unambiguously as possible in order to minimize interpretation.
- e) In qualifying the crime, only official information of the institutions involved in the investigation should be used.
- f) In order to show the extent of the attack, publishing of photographs and videos requires a balance between the protection of dignity of the victims and their families and the interest of the public.
- g) Victims and survivors must be in the focus of media coverage. For publishing their names, extent and circumstances of the attack, the number of the killed and injured, only official sources of information should be used.
- h) Journalists shall not allow eyewitness to interpret and analyse motives of an attack.
- i) In case of spread of hate speech, panic and fear, the media will use available tools on social media and communication channels to suppress them.

3. Basis of reporting sources

The Media should always use official sources of information, through direct contact with the persons in charge of communication with the public or through authorised news platforms such as the official website of the authorities who can provide relevant answers to key questions.

While waiting for official information, journalists should not resort to unverified sources of information and speculation which leads to sensationalism. This can lead to the spread of panic and fear, which is one of the key objectives of violent extremists and terrorists, and thus the media, inadvertently, become their allies.

Social networks are particularly dangerous sources of unverified, inaccurate or partially accurate information. When publishing information that is

circulated on social media and other communication channels, journalists need to confirm the authenticity and credibility of the source of information.

Statements and responses from relevant institutions and persons should be sought in writing or in the form of radio and/or television statements, due to the sensitivity of the event being reported and the importance of accurately transmitting information. The relevant institutions are expected to timely deliver all available information on the event to all media equally, without favour.

It is also desirable to avoid retelling conversations with those responsible, if possible. When it comes to interviewing survivors, care must be taken to avoid further traumatising by the media interview. The interview should be conducted carefully, without leading the interviewee and as much as possible without interrupting and insisting on the details, especially if the person is not ready to share them with the public at that moment.

4. Conducting an interview with a victim of terrorism

Conducting an interview with an interlocutor who has in any way witnessed a terrorist act must be consistent with the condition of the person, which in most cases is a state of shock. It is necessary to show full sympathy and create an environment in which the condition of the person being interviewed will not further deteriorate. This is a type of journalistic task in which patience is especially important and there is no professional distance, as in most other situations.

As in all other situations, recorded material is subject to editing, in line with journalistic standards. In no case will the journalist interfere with the investigation or direct it in a wrong direction.

5. Qualifying the crime

When qualifying a crime as “terrorism”, “hate crime”, “religious”, “ethnic” or “racial intolerance”, etc, it is of utmost importance to use official sources of information, and avoid qualifying the crime, or sharing suspicion regarding the type of crime, until the official announcement of the relevant services. Until then, reporting should be descriptive. For instance, we can talk about “gunshots”, “explosions”, “assaults”, etc without the prefix “terrorist”. At this stage of reporting, the executor of a crime shall be named as an “attacker”, not “a terrorist”.

In addition, journalists should bear in mind the presumption of innocence, according to which everyone is presumed innocent of a crime until the guilty verdict has been established by a final verdict of the court. In these situations, the media should use qualifications as used by the relevant prosecutor's offices or the police, for example, "accused of committing a criminal act", "convicted in the first instance for criminal offence", etc.

6. Use of photos and video material

Displaying photographs, or images of violence, requires extreme caution and judgment. The public expects to see what has happened, and the task of the media is to show the extent of what has been done. However, it is up to the editors to decide whether the material will genuinely contribute and give an additional understanding of the event, or its purpose is merely to satisfy the curiosity of the audience.

It is necessary to take into account the impact that images have on the families of victims and the general public. It is particularly important to preserve the dignity of the victims as well as the dignity of their families, using tools that every newsroom has at its disposal, such as shading of certain parts of the image or video recording, using wider shots, shrouding victims' faces, removing those tones with footage that could further upset families and the public. In addition, in case of recordings, potential consumers must be warned about disturbing scenes of violence.

7. Victims and survivors

Particular care must be taken with the use of the names of victims, that is, all those directly affected by violent extremism and terrorism, including the injured, but also those who survived without physical injury. That part of the story should be coordinated with the official sources of information and the authorities because they are, as a rule, published only after the victims' families are informed.

In reporting, it is necessary to find a balance between personal stories of the victims, their families and survivors, and the stories of the perpetrators and the ideology behind it. This certainly does not mean that equal space should be given to everyone involved in the act, and especially not during the first few days after acts of violent extremism and terrorism were committed, when the victims of the attack must be the focus of reporting. This is not to

say that some space should not be given to the perpetrators, but in no way will that cast victims into other priority.

In such situations, the story about the motives for the act and the ideology of the perpetrator, should be left for the credible analysts who will not use the media space for relativism, minimisation, glorification of the crime, or to exaggerate danger and spread panic.

8. Reporting that involves children

In cases where reporting involves children, any sensationalist approach, abuse and manipulation is unacceptable. Journalists are obliged to treat children with utmost care, respecting good customs and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and taking the best interests of the child into account. It is also important to protect the identity of children under the age of 18 who are involved in criminal cases as witnesses, victims or defendants.

Photographing and interviewing children under the age of 18 that involves questions related to the child's family, without the presence of a parent or without the permission of a parent or guardian is not allowed. When consent exists, they need to be able to see the material before it is published. It is particularly important to consider the possible consequences that the appearance of a child in the media may have on the child and his or her family, including anxiety, fear or damage to their dignity. When reporting on children, suitable vocabulary should be used that will not label or discriminate against children.

9. Analytical reporting

In these situations, when analysing a particular act, space should not be given to those who will interpret a crime in a manner which would lead to finding justification for it and creating an environment in which the perpetrator is proclaimed a hero.

If an organisation assumes responsibility for acts of violent extremism, the public should be informed accordingly. Also, in certain situations, the views of the perpetrator of violent extremism and terrorism, expressed before the act itself or during the trial, as well as the views of the organisation that took responsibility for the attack, may be made public.

A key prerequisite for something like this is a serious editorial assessment of the public interest to have such knowledge. This media approach animated

parts of the academic community, the non-governmental sector, and certainly influenced certain segments of government in different countries, to approach such and similar ideologies more systematically and continuously.

However, even with such an approach, it should not be neglected that the victims are in the first place in the focus of reporting, especially during the first days after an attack. When the media space is given to the perpetrators' ideas, their publishing must not have the characteristics of inflammatory rhetoric, because of the danger of generating hate speech, usually embodied in the comments on the Internet.

Media space should not be provided to those analysts who have no scientific or any other credibility, or those who may abuse the tragedy for their own ideological or political goals.

10. Social responsibility versus sensationalism

The use of the prefix in front of qualifications of a crime that may suggest a common identity, should be avoided. Terrorism cannot be called "Islamic", "Christian", "Jewish", or the perpetrator of terrorist acts may be "a member of Islam", "member of Christianity", "member of Judaism", etc.

One can even call on some of these teachings, but this kind of qualification, given the predominant position of religious sources and their relevant interpretation by which violence is prohibited, is not desirable, nor is there a place for it in responsible journalism. Clumsily formulated qualifications may point to carelessness, ignorance, malice, and thus cause damage on several levels.

Also, such qualifications spread the stereotypes and prejudices against the whole community, and may generate violence, almost as a rule, against the innocent. This way, the whole community is stigmatised simply because they only nominally share a particular value system, skin colour, ethnicity or come from the same or similar cultural and historical circle. On the other hand, journalists should not neglect the impact of reduced and erroneous interpretation of certain teachings. However, their clarification is not the job of journalists, and should be left to the relevant analysts and experts.

There is a real danger that, with the media attention given to self-proclaimed representatives of certain identity, they may present themselves as majority spokespersons or legitimate representatives of particular groups, which does

not correspond to the real situation. In the case of violent extremism and terrorism, which is attributed to religion, the interlocutors should be sought in registered, official religious communities, i.e. credible and relevant interlocutors from these communities.

In these situations, the question of the relevance of the analyst is always raised. Their profile can and should be varied, from security, through political, social and psychological, in order to understand the broader context of violent extremism and terrorism. Reporting on these issues should not be confined to situations in which violence occurs, but rather on its causes and consequences.