

MANUAL FOR REPORTING VIOLENT EXTREMISM AND TERRORISM



Albanian Media Institute
Instituti Shqiptar i Medias

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Manual for reporting violent extremism and terrorism

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countering violent extremism

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1

Introduction and context

Reporting on violent extremism and terrorism is a major challenge for contemporary media. While political violence has deep historical roots, in the age of digital communications terrorism is a global phenomenon with huge impact on the lives of individuals and society.

Terrorist “events” make headline news that spreads with dizzying speed through global networks. The transformations brought by the Internet have reinforced the impact of traditional media. The dissemination of news is faster, more explicit and comprehensive, ensuring the impact and influence of terrorism is more powerful, its echo longer. In these conditions, the public purpose of journalism and the role and responsibility of media becomes even more important.

Reporting violent extremism and terrorism is multidimensional. It cannot be reduced just to a debate on ethical and professional reporting standards. The role of the media must also be viewed in the light of the clear intention of terrorists – to seek publicity and propaganda for their violent acts and to raise awareness of their “causes.”

The extremism of the Red Brigades in Italy with the kidnapping of Aldo Moro (1978); the Palestinian massacre and hostage-taking of Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympics (1972); Al Qaeda’s attack on the twin towers in New York

(2001); and the terrorism and bomb attacks in the heart of London and Paris (2015), and many others, was designed to draw global attention to deep-rooted political causes.

For this reason, discussion about media coverage of terrorism is complex. While it includes media responsibilities to report the truth, it also requires a deep understanding of the context and particularly that the spectacle of violence created by terrorists is itself often part of a strategic plan aiming to use and manipulate media coverage.

To publicise their causes and narratives, terrorist networks often establish their own media. For example, Islamic extremists linked to ISIS mobilised some powerful media organisations such as the Al-Furqan Institute for Media Production, Al-I'tisam Media Foundation, Alhayat Media Center, Ajnad Media Foundation, including portals such as Dabiq, Islamic State News, etc.

Additionally, they rely on a wide network of “freelance” propagandists, who produce content, taken from both traditional and new media, which is transmitted through social media networks to wider global or local audiences. The propaganda videos of the Albanian jihadist Lavdrim Muhaxheri, for example, who appeared in images of beheading a hostage, or firing a rocket were spread all over the world through media channels. Muhaxheri intended to reach a wider public audience and, by transmitting these images, traditional media, inadvertently or not, assisted Islamic State’s purpose: the spread of fear and terror.

Additionally, using social media and content sharing platforms terrorist groups have their own channels. The capacity to spread videos of execution by beheading, whether real or fake, is only one example of how communication tools can be used, but it opens a new debate on how Internet media platforms and social media should deal with this content as

they strive to strike a balance between informing the public and unwittingly glorifying terrorism.

In Albania, for example, the videos of Lavdrim Muhaxheri were broadcast several times, becoming amplifiers of his terrorism. The dilemma of how to report on such actions is not confined just to Albania. Indeed exposure to terrorist acts of violence is already part of a wider international debate about the psychological impact of media violence on the public. *“Exposure to violent media content leads to the destruction of cultural and social norms and values and to the incitement of crime and violent behavior to the audiences”* (Newburn, 2007).

The way terrorism and violent extremism is reported should be an object of professional examination and particularly self-reflection within journalism. In Albania, media reports often focus on reporting specific events while failing to provide context and background for understanding the phenomenon of extremism or terrorism.

In addition, in a global context, there is a risk of associating violent extremism and terrorism with the practice of Islam, which is dangerous if it leads to public bias or prejudice against Muslims.

Although political violence may also have roots in ideological, religious, or ethnic differences, reducing the phenomenon of terrorism only to Islamic extremism, may legitimize discrimination and bias against Muslims. In Albania’s multi-religious society this can lead to intolerance and the undermining of religious coexistence.

The Albanian media focus on terrorism increased after the emergence of the Islamic State and the involvement of citizens from Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia in the ISIS campaign of violence. Previously, terrorism and violent extremism had been reported in Albanian media mostly

through news translated from international media. The inability of Albanian media to send reporters to conflict areas or places where terrorist acts were committed had long deprived local media of this type of reporting and the ability to learn from this experience.

Sources in the Heavy Crimes Prosecution, quoted by the Balkan Investigative Reporters' Network noted, *"With the emergence of the Islamic State, more than 100 Albanians have joined jihadist groups in Syria and Iraq, including 13 women and 31 children."* The scale of the involvement of fighters from Albania attracted the attention of media, which focused on identifying people working for ISIS.

While there was increased awareness and media coverage, the quality of reports did not improve and no extra resources were devoted to reporting terrorism, with a few rare exceptions. Specifically, some major questions on the coverage of terrorism remain unanswered in media: who or what are the driving forces to recruit ISIS fighters? Which extremist groups offer young people "the fulfillment of certain basic social, economic and psychological needs," and which of them ideologically indoctrinate these young people in support of totalitarian, ethnic or religious extremist causes?

In November 2016, in the framework of a regional anti-terror operation conducted in Albania, Kosovo, and Macedonia, by the specialized police structures for the fight against terrorism, four Albanian citizens were detained, including two imams, and 16 other citizens were detained, of these five foreigners and 11 Albanians. The detention of these citizens was made as *"they were suspected of collaborating with each other and other citizens abroad, propagating incitement to hatred, recruiting people to go to Syria alongside the terrorist organization ISIS, supporting this terrorist organization with logistics and funding, and could travel to conflict zones in Middle Eastern countries."*

The arrests revealed the existence of recruitment networks, but media, nevertheless, failed to bring to the public additional information about the size and consequences of the network's activity, their methods of recruitment, or the number of people involved.

Albanian media, over the past 20 years has in general lacked a sound foundation for reporting the global story of violent extremism and terrorism. This may be understandable, given the sheer volume and complex nature of these events, but it may also reflect the relatively recent emergence of the supposedly independent media and professional journalism itself inside the country.

As a result, the public often receives reports that are factual, but lack deeper insights into the reality involved that would make some sense of the facts, if any. In Albania media rarely pause to analyze where the success of jihadist propaganda lies and why this propaganda attracts followers; the social background of recruits and their economic and cultural circumstances; and, importantly, their relationship with family and society.

The multi-faith nature of Albania and its history also should be taken into account when looking at media coverage. Politicians, clergy, and others continuously promote the notion of inter-religious harmony as an Albanian success story. Such statements are often repeated in media, especially during religious festivities. However, perpetually waving the flag of harmony, even as part of society engages in terrorist acts, such as the so-called foreign fighters joining ISIS, means we miss a part of the picture of the current Albanian society and we view only the rosy perspective.

The questions abound: why have extremist groups that are part of some communities broken away from traditions of religious tolerance which date back to the times of Ottoman

Empire? What has changed, and, more importantly, what can the government and society do to address this problem? These questions are often missing in the public debate, and this is not just a media problem. This wider discussion needs to involve a much broader circle of actors, from all sections of society.

Contemporary journalists and media are responsible for informing the public, but this is made challenging in the age of disinformation and when citizens are victims of “false” information, sometimes as a result of propaganda produced by extremist or terrorist groups.

This new circumstance requires a new ethical and professional awareness. In this context, the following sections attempt to provide guidelines that media can follow when covering violent extremism and terrorism. These are based in part on international texts, the UNESCO handbook for journalists *Terrorism and the media* and other professional guidelines, as well as on the experience of the Albanian media coverage of violent extremism.

The following sections review current legal regulation that affects media coverage; the basic principles of editorial work and reporting; particular nuances and features to consider when covering terrorism; the role of social media; and the challenge of hate speech that might incite violent extremism and terrorism.

Ethical journalists are rightly wary of being told how to do their job so we recognize that the reality of reporting terrorism cannot be limited by a strict instruction manual. These suggestions are therefore offered as potential guidance, providing reporters and editors who cover these issues with thoughts and ideas that may help them deal with professional challenges they face in their everyday work.

2

Definitions of terrorism

Extremist violence in support of political, religious or other objectives has been a brutal and tragic reality of modern life for decades, but a satisfactory definition of terrorism remains elusive.

Finding a definition that everyone can agree is difficult, not least because views are often based upon different political, religious, cultural or other convictions. For example, while the politically-driven violence that swept Italy or Germany in the 1970s might be considered terrorist, the people perpetrating these acts justified their actions as a legitimate way of advancing their own ideological objectives.

As Jean-Paul Marthoz point out in the UNESCO handbook for journalists, certain phrases have become clichés in this context. Pointing to the complexity involved, he notes, “One person’s terrorist is another person’s freedom fighter,” or “Today’s terrorist is tomorrow’s statesperson.”¹

In addition, the term can be misused by actors that have their own vested interests. For example, while a dictatorship or authoritarian regime might designate a guerrilla group as terrorist, another section of society might regard it as a legitimate resistance movement. Despite the various

¹ Jean-Paul Marthoz, “Terrorism and the media,” UNESCO, 2017.

nanced subtle distinctions in definition, however, it is generally accepted that an act of terrorism usually involves indiscriminate and extreme violence, often committed against civilians, and is a tactic not adopted by other movements.

While the United Nations has no universally agreed definition they generally describe a terrorist act as

“any action, in addition to actions already specified by the existing conventions on aspects of terrorism, the Geneva Conventions and Security Council resolution 1566 (2004), that is intended to cause death or serious bodily harm to civilians or non-combatants, when the purpose of such an act, by its nature or context, is to intimidate a population, or to compel a Government or an international organization to do or to abstain from doing any act.”²

While this is helpful, there is scope for interpretation and ambiguity in national legislation and policies because of the phrase “that is intended”. How does one define “intention”? For example, during the “troubles” in Northern Ireland, which lasted 30 years up to the end of the 1990s, almost 3,000 people were killed, many of them civilians as a result of acts of terrorism on the part of paramilitary groups in the UK and Ireland, but the terrorists themselves sought to excuse their actions and avoid casualties by providing advance telephone warnings to the authorities shortly before bomb explosions.

Along with terrorism, other important definitions, which are frequently used in current narratives include also “extremism”, “radicalization”, and “violent extremism”.³

² Ibid.

³ Introduction to CVE, Hedayah (unpublished), Cristina Mattei and Sara Zeiger.

- **Extremism** can be observed when an ideological goal takes priority over most other considerations. Where it involves over-riding respect for the lives and rights of others, extremism poses little danger from the perspective of anti-terrorism. However, extremism is problematic if it passively or actively promotes the use of violence as a means of accomplishing a goal, or if it creates conditions of fearfulness and uncertainty in which terrorism can thrive.

- **Radicalization** is the process whereby an individual or a targeted group is persuaded to accept and embrace the use of violence or the threat of violence as a means to achieve a particular political, religious or other ideological goal. To radicalize means to become more radical in your own ideological, political or religious beliefs (importantly, ideology in this sense need not necessarily be religious). Therefore, a person who has adopted extreme beliefs is said to be radicalized.
Radicalization leading to violent extremism and a process in which an individual moves towards adopting violence to pursue ideological goals. It is a process that depends on a combination of individual circumstances and external factors such as wider political, cultural or social conditions.

- **Violent extremism**, which may be seen as the final stage of the radicalization process, refers to the actions and beliefs of people who support or use ideologically motivated violence for political, religious or ideological purposes. Violent extremists are not just those willing to accept physical violence, but

also those who actively support, recruit, or advocate a violent extremist ideology. Violent extremism and other elements of radicalization are often fuelled by hate speech.

While these definitions can be difficult to fully agree on, depending on one's perception, beliefs, and the context, it is crucial for journalists to have a good understanding of these terms and concepts. The way journalists and editors frame their reports on terrorism and violent extremism shape the public's perception of events. In providing coverage of such violence they need to be informed and use these terms with care and precision.

3

Legal rules, national policy and influence on media

In Albania, a number of legal and official documents directly address terrorism, violent extremism and radicalism. Each of these strategic or legal texts focuses on specific aspects of terrorism, such as measures against financing, reporting, or combating it. Together, they constitute the comprehensive strategic and legal framework regarding terrorism, which serves as a reference point for the media, for journalists and for civil society organizations.

Documents relevant to the media and journalists include: *the Criminal Code of the Republic of Albania, the Law on Audiovisual Media Services in the Republic of Albania, the National Strategy and Action Plan for the Fight against Violent Extremism*, as well as *the Law on Measures Against Terrorist Financing*.

In the following sections, we focus on each of these texts, providing a brief description and how each of them relates to the work of the media and to the role of journalists.

- **Criminal Code of the Republic of Albania⁴**

The Code was last updated in 2020 and classifies those acts of terrorism, which constitute criminal offenses, in Chapter VII of Section II. Terrorist acts are defined as actions that aim at spreading panic among the population or forcing state bodies, Albanian or foreign, to perform or not to perform in a certain way. In addition, efforts to seriously destroy or destabilize the essential political, constitutional, economic or social structure of the Albanian state, of another state, institution or international organization are also classified as terrorist acts. These acts are punishable with imprisonment for no less than 15 years, or with life imprisonment.

Acts with terrorist intent that might implicate media and journalists are included in Article 230/e:

Dissemination of information that is known to be untrue, endangering the safety of an aircraft in flight or a ship in navigation.

Also, Article 230/c states that “Informing the declared persons or other persons about the data for the verification or investigation of funds and other assets, to which measures against the financing of terrorism are applied, by persons who exercise public functions or who exercise their duty or profession, shall be punished by imprisonment for five to ten years.”

Further, in Article 232/a: Incitement, public calls, distribution of pieces of writing or propaganda in other forms, with the aim of supporting or committing one or more acts for terrorist purposes and for financing of terrorism, if they do not constitute another criminal offense, are punishable by imprisonment from four to ten years.

⁴ Available at: <https://qbz.gov.al/preview/a2b117e6-69b2-4355-aa49-78967c31bf4d>

Meanwhile, in Article 267: Dissemination of false information or news, verbally, in writing or in any other manner, in order to incite a state of insecurity and panic in people, is punishable by a fine or up to five years of imprisonment.

All of these articles should be taken into consideration by media and journalists in order to avoid accusations of support or promotion or involvement, intentionally or otherwise, in what might be legally termed terrorist acts. They need to know how to respond when coming across information related to terrorism and to exercise care and sound judgment about the information or news they publish.

- **National Strategy and Action Plan for the Fight against Violent Extremism**

The National Strategy and Action Plan is an expression of Albania's commitment to fight against violent extremism and radicalization. This strategy aims to cultivate a culture of respect for fundamental freedoms throughout the country, to preserve the values of tolerance and religious harmony, to protect human rights, the rule of law and democracy, as well as to protect Albanian society from violent extremism.

The main objective of the strategy is to strengthen the work of various actors striving to counter violent extremism in Albania, and to promote actions that will address the conditions leading to radicalization. The measures proposed under this strategy, which are relevant to the media and journalists, include:

- a) strengthening cooperation and partnership at the local, national and international levels, between government agencies, non-governmental organizations, the private sector, religious

communities and the media, to define and implement effective actions that will reduce the impact of violent extremist propaganda and online recruitment through, for example, using social media to design and convey positive alternative messages;

- b) Opposition to extremist propaganda, by upholding democratic values, with the aim of countering the messages of violent extremism, in particular their transmission through the materials and messages of online campaigns.

Promoting the National Strategy presents a two-pronged approach to discrediting and weakening the impact of extremist propaganda. The working group on communication, which includes state officials, academics, media and representatives of technology groups, civil society, religious communities and frontline employees, is of paramount importance in carrying out this work

In this regard, civil society and religious communities, as well as the media, seek to design and promote a powerful alternative narrative in support of tolerance, peace, human rights and democratic values. The strategy involves campaigns adapted to social media, radio and television programmes, as well as other types of initiatives that are able to reach and penetrate target audiences. Based on this strategy, media and journalists play an important role in creating and spreading messages against all forms of violent extremism, radicalization and terrorism.

- **Law on Audiovisual Media of the Republic of Albania**

The Law on Audiovisual Media, last revised in 2019, regulates the rights, obligations and responsibilities of people and organizations that provide audio, audiovisual and electronic publishing services, through the electronic communications network, as well as the promotion of media pluralism among other issues, in accordance with international conventions and standards.

The law is applicable to traditional scheduled audiovisual broadcasting, as well as on-demand broadcasting, including their supporting services and electronic publishing. However, it does not apply to print media. In fact, print media is regulated only by a law that states that media is free and prior censorship is forbidden. The regulation of audiovisual media, on the other hand, is rather detailed.

Of particular importance is article 132, paragraph 5, which states that the contents published by the Electronic Publications Service Provider (EPSP) that constitute a criminal offense, are subject to penalties imposed by the regulator, the Audiovisual Media Authority. Content that is considered a criminal offense includes, among others, acts with terrorist intent and violations of national security. Meanwhile, penalties can be imposed for infringement. These include the removal of published content and blocking access to this content and may also include an obligation to place a “pop-up” notice on the portal’s website/domain giving information on the decisions of AMA.

In the spirit of this law, media organizations, journalists and other professionals must be careful in their preparation of content to ensure that, intentionally or not, acts with terrorist intentions are not carried, supported or promoted. Until now

there have been no specific decisions or observations from the regulator on media disseminating content that might be classified as terrorist. At the same time, it's important to recall that, despite an initiative to extend AMA jurisdiction over online media, for the moment the regulator is only responsible only for audiovisual media.

- **Law on measures against financing of terrorism**

This law, in line with the relevant resolutions of the United Nations and acts of other international organizations or international agreements supported by Albania, aims to prevent and crack down on terrorists and on those who finance terrorism, or on those for whom there are reasonable suspicions of having carried out, are carrying out or are intending to carry out such activities. This may lead to the blocking and sequestration of funds and assets.

Article 10, point 2 of this law relates to the role of journalists and the media. It imposes an obligation on anyone who has knowledge of financial acts, transactions, funds or other activities, committed or attempting to be committed, with the intention of carrying out or financing terrorist acts, to immediately notify law enforcement agencies or the General Directorate for the Prevention of Money Laundering.

The notification and the reporting of information must contain data on the identification of funds and other assets, data on ownership and other interests related to them, as well as explanations on the motives on which the reasonable data on terrorist financing are based.

The law also protects of the identity of those giving information (persons, reporting entities, or employees) by the bodies that receive the information. Furthermore, article

12 emphasizes the prohibition of the publication of data. The data provided under this law may be used only for law enforcement, for criminal prosecution purposes or for other purposes specified by the law. Responsible bodies, reporting entities and persons employed by them, who receive data, notifications and reports under this law, may not make public facts of which they have been informed during this process.

4

Basic principles of media coverage of terrorism

The Code of Ethics for Albanian Journalists does not deal specifically with coverage of terrorism, but does contain a section on incitement to crime and violence which: states: *“Violence and brutality shall not be sensationalized. Reporting must take due account of the need to protect minors and vulnerable groups in society. Journalists and media shall not glorify crimes and terrorism or any other cruel and inhuman activities.”*⁵

Avoiding glorification of violence and terrorist acts is a key challenge facing media when reporting on terrorism, and one that must be considered at all times.

The principles of reporting terrorism – to inform the public in a fair, independent, and unbiased manner – are no different from the core values of ethical journalism, but given the complex nature of terrorism and the use of extreme violence, the groups and people involved, the potential for fear and anger in the public at large, and the threat of media inadvertently serving a terrorist purpose, journalists and editors need to be alert to and media coverage in this area needs to be reflective and mature.

⁵ Code of Albanian Journalists, 2018.

- **Seeking the truth.**

A paramount duty of journalism is to report accurately and to use fact-based information. This requires constant fact-checking and corroboration of information to ensure accuracy. Even though this might not always be possible in the heat of reporting fast-moving events, every possible effort to establish the accuracy of facts should be made. In addition, providing background and context and seeking explanation for such acts, and their potential impact are part of the journalist's job. As Marthoz states in the UNESCO handbook "*the brutality of a violent act cannot serve as a pretext to refuse to analyze its causes.*"⁶ But from the first moment, covering terrorism, and especially in early reporting from the field, journalists should focus only on the facts, leaving scope for detailed analysis to be carefully drawn later.

- **Independent reporting.**

In the nature of things terrorism is meant to attract attention, to incite fear and insecurity, and to provoke strong emotions. In this respect, it is natural for journalists to respond to such events in a humane way, showing solidarity with the victims and their own community. Showing empathy and humanity is always important in journalism, but it should not extend to a rush to judgment in reporting. Let the facts speak for themselves, avoid rumour and speculation and provide relevant background and context when the time is right. In this way reporters and editors can stick to the fundamental values of journalism and avoid, even inadvertently, playing into the hands of publicity-hungry terrorists and by doing so make the situation even worse.

⁶ Jean-Paul Marthoz, "Terrorism and the media," UNESCO, 2017.

- **Respecting human dignity and the right to privacy.**

Striking the right balance between public's right to know and the need to respect private life and dignity are also part of a reporter's job. In moments of crisis, media become one of the main trusted sources of information for the public and to ensure the quality of information meets the highest standard, it is important to provide a professional filter so that the people gets the information they need to properly understand the terrorism story. It's also vital to be aware that media coverage also affects the lives of people involved, such as the victims, the local people and communities affected, any hostages, and those involved in law-enforcement or public protection.

There is no simple recipe for determining where to draw the line between the need to inform and the obligation to do no harm, but all editorial choices that may affect the lives of others require time and reflection. Ethical journalism is thinking journalism and to do their job well, reporters and editors need to take time to think. Above all, they need to avoid a rush to publish, even when it is in defiance of the speed-obsessed news cycle.

5

Particular aspects to consider when reporting on terrorism

Reporting terrorism brings with it an emotional as well as a professional burden and with this in mind, the following sections look into potential dilemmas and aspects to consider for journalists, trying to provide information that might guide reporters in their work.

5.1 Sources of information

Acts of terrorism are almost always followed by a period of shock, confusion, and uncertainty. In these moments reporting is a tremendous challenge, particularly for live broadcasting. While reporters will have access to local sources of information, particularly on the spot, it is always important to access and follow official sources of information. This can avoid any panic, confusion, and anger among the public, especially when information provided by other sources cannot be verified. Direct contact with responsible officials and reference to official press releases and statements can be the safest option.

However, when official information is delayed or is insufficient, journalists turn to other sources and it might be tempting for them to hide the identity of such sources.

Sometime journalists may use whistle-blowers or even people speaking on behalf or from within terrorist organizations, but they should only do so in exceptional circumstances. In these cases journalists should be extremely careful and use filters in conveying the information they receive.

In particular, journalists should always be aware of who is their source – even if they protect the identity of the person in their reports. Journalists should be aware of the perils of working with people who have a vested interest and avoid any reporting that could compromise the ensure the neutrality and independence of their work. Information provided by people who wish to remain anonymous should be carefully tested before publication – is it factual? Does it reflect a singular position? Does it create a bias in favor of one side? Does it add to the public’s understanding of events? These are always key questions when considering the use of information from hidden voices that are unknown to the public.

5.2 Coverage of perpetrators

Similarly, it is advisable for media to wait for official confirmation before identifying who is responsible for acts of terrorism. Speculation or rumour regarding who is to blame should not be part of media reporting, as this may lead to public panic and confusion.

Another principle to have in mind is also the presumption of innocence; unless there is official confirmation of the names of those responsible, it is improper for the media to label specific persons as terrorists. For example, many media in the first reports of an incident will refer to acts of violence and refer to suspected perpetrators as “attackers.” Using the term “terrorism” and calling people “terrorists” can cause

unnecessary public alarm. Waiting for confirmation and corroboration of information helps to reinforce public trust in the information they receive.

Even after official confirmation media should take care. Providing people who have committed acts of terrorism with ample space in reporting, or portraying them in a particular good or bad light, or otherwise giving them prominence in the eyes of some members of the public are all traps that the media can fall into, and could lead to inadvertent support for terrorist tactics.

Equally important is for media not to label terrorism as originating from a particular country, ethnic group, or specific religion. Acts of terrorism are committed by individuals or by terrorist organizations and transferring this burden to whole countries, regions, and ethnicities or religions can further escalate tensions and create a climate of mistrust between different communities and different parts of the world. This, of course, is often an objective of terrorism. That is why it is important for media never to refer to “Islamic terrorism” but to be precise when referring to individuals or to specific organizations, such as ISIS, or if appropriate “jihadi terrorism,”

5.3 Coverage of the victims and survivors

Media reporting on terrorism is an exercise in balancing the profession with the ethic of humanity; informing the public on events and phenomena of particular importance, while avoiding causing further harm to the people who are victims or survivors.

The identity of the victims of terrorism should be revealed only after official confirmation, and only after the relatives of the victim have been informed. In the race for spreading the news fastest, Albanian media coverage has sometimes led to

relatives being informed by live media coverage of the deaths of their loved ones (not related to terrorism,). It is evidence, once again, that the rush to publish should be avoided.

There are different practices inside journalism on the policy of news media showing the bodies of victims, whether of terrorism, accidents or humanitarian disaster. While some media prefer not to do this out of respect and to avoid highlighting content that suits terrorist objectives, other media may choose to show the bodies to give the public a sense of the impact of terrorism and to counter conspiracy theories that might arise from hiding such content.

Some media, in the days after tragic events have chosen to humanize the victims' stories. *The Guardian* after terrorism attacks in Paris in 2005 and *The New York Times* after the attacks on New York and Washington in 2001, for example, published individual stories with unrelated photos showing the everyday life of the victims, paying tribute to their lives and further exposing the inhumanity of the terrorists' actions.

It should be noted, and we deal with this later, that in the heat of events, and when terrorism is taking place, social media will often stream explicit images of death and destruction without thinking of the impact. This is not the purpose of journalism which requires filtering and consideration before publication with a constant balancing of truth-telling and the need to consider the impact on victims, survivors and vulnerable groups, such as children, within the society at large.

Survivors of terrorism are rightly entitled to privacy. However, the voice of survivors in media reports can provide good and authentic information that is important to be heard and is in the public interest. But reporters need to exercise care when interviewing survivors. They must not ask questions that may continue the trauma or add to suffering and they must ensure that the survivor agrees to the interview.

It is not just when covering the terrorism story that such care and sensitivity is needed. Media should not, in the immediate aftermath of accidents, misfortunes, or crimes, fall into the trap of seeking only emotional responses from survivors. This type of journalism rarely adds anything to what the public needs to know, and may often only cause further distress.

5.4 Use of images

The dissemination of explicit images or footage from terrorism and acts of extreme violence is a key tactic of terrorists; the more vivid these images and the more people see them, the more it serves their twin objectives – first, to spread fear and uncertainty within society and, secondly, to inspire disaffected young people to become radicalized in support of such violence. This explains also the practice of terrorists having a greater online presence, using social media, or even establishing their own media.

Faced with an increasing sophistication of terrorist methods and means, the media's dilemma is not new, but it is amplified: what images should be shown from terrorist acts and how? Should the images be banned altogether, as some media have preferred, or should they be reported in an ethical and sensitive way taking account of public interest?

Different media take different approaches. For example, one of the most challenging issues has been how to deal with the videos of beheadings disseminated by ISIS. Some media chose to use only still images and not the act itself, while others published simultaneously photos of the victims in normal life, and some media did not publish the video or the links to the content at all.

The risk of becoming a vehicle for terrorist propaganda becomes especially visible with the publication of media-

ready images and videos. This was most dramatically revealed in coverage of the 2019 New Zealand massacre at mosques in Christchurch where a single terrorist live-streamed the killings he carried out and simultaneously uploaded onto the internet a detailed manifesto justifying the killings. Media were faced with hard choices of what to use given that all of the material had been carefully prepared for easy access by media and internet users.

Additionally, reporting the event only through the anchor or reporter might pose doubts or questions on the truthfulness of the report and may limit the capacity to raise public awareness of the acts.

All of these situations pose difficulties for editors and journalists which is why it is often useful to have clear guidelines for how newsrooms, editors and reporters should respond when terrorism occurs and with the sudden appearance of information that comes straight from media-savvy terrorists.

Although media should never follow social media or internet streams which are not bound by forms of professional regulation, information like this cannot be ignored, so journalists and editors need to be skillful in finding ways of reporting that give people the information they need without satisfying the terrorist urge to shock people.

The use of explicit scenes of violence and killing is rarely if ever justified, but still or fixed images that indicate time and place of events may be appropriate. It is impossible to determine how to respond in every case, but editorial discussions on how to deal with such events is always useful and not least to ensure that if images and videos showing explicit scenes of violence are shown, it is according to editorial standards and that the public gets due notice beforehand, signaling sensitive and distressful content.

Particular attention should be paid when the images involve children, whether they are victims, survivors, or witnesses. Protecting the well-being and identity of children is a key ethical and professional requirement. However, given their vulnerability, children may often become the face of the victims or people suffering from terrorism or humanitarian tragedy. The 2015 photo of Syrian child Alan Kurdi lying dead on the beach, for example, became a symbol of the suffering of refugees from Syria and caused a global reaction. Even though its publication was not without ethical dilemmas, most media chose to publish it as a way of humanizing the tragedy of migration and creating public sensitivity to the ordeal of refugees fleeing conflict zones.

6

Challenges when live reporting terrorism

Journalists are among the first persons to show up at a scene of a terrorist attack and with that comes specific responsibility, not least because in moments of emergency and crisis people turn to recognized media brands for reliable information to help them understand the meaning of events. For reporters there is the challenge of trying to provide accurate and genuine information while being on the spot witnesses to tragedy and human suffering.

In these cases it is important that before engaging in any reporting that journalists ensure their own safety and that of people around them. Reporting under fire is often heroic and journalists are forced to take risks, but telling the story in calm and safe conditions is key to good analytical reporting.

When violence is taking place, live media coverage is often delayed by a few seconds, to avoid the broadcasting of shocking violence and so that footage can be reviewed whether it is fit for broadcasting.⁷

Live reporting is fraught with risks and can also create problems and unduly influence hostage situations, which requires careful attention and co-operation as appropriate with the authorities to ensure it leads to no additional security concerns or any impact on life-saving operations.

⁷ Marthoz, 2017.

7

The role of social media

➤ **Social media has transformed communication**

Social media is an undeniable reality that has already transformed societies, causing many professions and processes to change radically.

According to Marshall McLuhan when a new media becomes ubiquitous, we miss the opportunity to understand the transformative effect it has on our lives. When a new media comes into use in society, there is a period of time when we are aware of its novelty. After this period, we simply dive into these media, not being able to maintain the distance that would allow us to critically look at the developments they bring to our world.

Since the early 2000s when the first platforms appeared, social media have increasingly penetrated into our lives, changing the way we communicate, the way we interact with each other and how we participate in public discussions.

The impact of social media on the media industry and journalism has been immense and has had a transformative effect on this sector. Today's journalism, thanks to the opportunities provided by social media, has developed a collaborative approach to news production and distribution, ending the privileges guaranteed by a traditional mass media system. Professional reporters no longer have a monopoly on

finding, producing and disseminating news. Newsrooms are moving towards a co-production relationship with audiences. Social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, but also communication applications such as WhatsApp, are part of every journalist's "tool kit".

The Internet has created a new, direct relationship between people and news, as well as between people and politics. As John Hall (2001) has said, we have entered the phase of pan-mediation (Eugenia, 2018). This constitutes the biggest challenge for journalists in the age of social media.

At the same time, social media challenges many principles of professional journalism, including core values such as verifying facts and sources of information. Information and events first circulate on social media, before professional journalists and media come into play, raising questions of truth and distortion and causing confusion in the public mind over what is to be believed or not.

Information on terrorist events that take place in different parts of the world initially spreads on social networks being consumed by network audiences. Social media turns coverage and reporting of terrorist events into a continuing challenge for professional journalists. The nature of the news on terrorist events means citizens who witness events in real time can report them on social networks. The contribution of citizens, with real-time photos and videos from the ground and often published on social media, can often distract professional journalists and the media themselves. (Beckett, 2016)

In these cases, there is an even greater need to verify information and particularly "fake news" and disinformation. Journalists require the knowledge and skills on how to use the techniques of verifying information which circulates on social media.

A number of tools and techniques have been developed in order to assist journalists in this verification work as we note later. There are also new fact-checking organisations geared to understanding how information can be distorted, and journalists can use search engines such as Google, Yandex, Tin Eye and others to find and verify the origin of information. In particular, reporters and editors can use these technological tools to verify images published on social media, and then include them in their reporting.

Studies show that social media amplifies the scale of communication and the impact of terrorism. Extremist and terrorist organizations, through social media, can communicate directly with unlimited audiences, without encountering editorial filters and media mediation.

Features such as anonymity, which are common on social media platforms, make it easier to spread extremist and terrorist propaganda.

Although the role of social media in the radicalization and extremization of individuals has not been fully confirmed by scientific data, it is thought that they influence mainly through the dissemination of information and propaganda, as well as through strengthening the identification and engagement of a certain category of audience interested in radical messages and violent content. (Alava, Frau-Meigs, & Hassan, 2017)

All of this underscores why core values of ethics, transparency and reliability remain essential in creating respect for journalism as a trusted stream of information. For this reason, reporters and journalists should be very careful in the language they use, avoiding perjorative language and avoiding the terminology of extremist groups. At the same time, it is important that the images or videos that accompany the news come from verifiable sources, thus avoiding the use of materials published by social media accounts or sites, which are promote extremist propaganda.

➤ Ethical dilemmas that accompany reporting terrorism on social media

As this guide illustrates, in their coverage of terrorism journalists often face ethical dilemmas and pressure to adhere to professional principles. These values are even more tested in the age of online and social media. The major test is the dilemma of how to report terrorism without serving the purpose of terrorists and without denying the public access to all the information and by so doing creating a false sense of security. *“Reporting terrorist attacks in a way fulfills the goals of terrorism itself in spreading fear, but on the other hand, limiting coverage promotes public distrust of the media.”* (Abubakar, 2020).

The BBC’s Paul Wood, who covered the conflict in Syria, has raised a number of dilemmas about a journalist covering terrorist events. Citing the case of the kidnapping of several hostages by ISIS, Wood asks

“After witnessing the brutal death of a child, what should be the purpose of journalism - to convey impartial reporting, or to urge the world to act? What images are appropriate for broadcasting in the aftermath of an attack? When should secrets be kept to save the lives of those still being held hostage? What is the balance between ‘cleansing’ the atrocities of war and showing visual details that can encourage others to join ISIS?”⁸

Social media unquestionably increases the possibility of disinformation when reporting on terrorism and journalists often fall prey to unverified sources, inadvertently becoming amplifiers of terrorist groups. Martin Belam, a *Guardian* journalist who dealt with managing some of the newspaper’s

⁸ Paul Wood; “The Pen and the Sword: Reporting ISIS”, <https://shorensteincenter.org/reporting-isis-paul-wood/>

official Twitter accounts, says that reporting of terrorism on social media is an ongoing test.

He recalls a knife attack by an asylum seeker from Syria that killed a Polish woman and injured two others. This was one of the four terrorist attacks of 2016, which ignited a climate of fear in Germany, and leading to increased criticism of the policy of hosting immigrants from the Middle East. On the day of the attack, Belam published the news in *The Guardian's* Twitter account, describing the event as an accident. In a 140-character publication, as far as the platform itself allows, one has little opportunity to give details or the context in which the incident takes place. Following the post, Belam says he received a series of comments and criticisms from Twitter users who accused him of incorrectly reporting a terrorist event by using the word "accident."

He says: *I sometimes press the tweet button with a heavy heart knowing that simply stating a headline is going to unleash a wave of critics. You are trying to tell an uncertain story as succinctly as possible in a limited amount of characters, but you know that every word choice is loaded with meaning for certain sections of the audience. And it is difficult to report calmly in these situations."*

➤ **Reporting on terrorism without amplifying it**

Another dilemma in times of social media is whether to publish the name of the person involved in a terrorist event or the name of the organization involved.. Many media professionals and journalists have differing views on this issue. The 2019 attacks on two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, saw the killing of 51 people. As referred to earlier, the perpetrator directly broadcast the attack through a camera and his account on social networks. The event

sparked a wide-ranging debate in world media over whether or not reporting should include the author's name following the decision of the New Zealand Prime Minister to refuse to utter the name of the terrorist involved. Many media followed her lead.

However, Katharine Viner, editor-in-chief of *The Guardian*, said that not publishing the author's name did not help report the facts. In a response to readers' criticism, she said that *"The role of a media is different from the role of a politician or a political party; our responsibility is to report facts, contextualized events, and work with our readers to understand what is happening. Failure to report the name of the terrorist would undermine these efforts."*

Meanwhile, French media, generally, reacted differently during the 2016 truck attack on the streets of Nice. The media chose not to mention the name of the terrorist when reporting on the event, trying to avoid amplifying the ideology of the organization behind the attacks. For some researchers and media professionals, the decision not to publish the name of the author or organization when reporting a terrorist event, although there is a logical reasoning, cannot apply in the days of social media.

Nevertheless, this is one ethical area where the distinction between unregulated social media information and the value-based professionalism of news media can be observed and many media recognise that not publishing the name at a time when information about the author and the organization circulates on social networks and can be easily found by anyone, may also increase the possibility of spreading conspiracy theories from which the extremists themselves can benefit.

In these circumstances, journalists who face such a dilemma may find guidance in the professional principles and

guidelines or editorial manuals of the media in which they are engaged or international professional norms. Where specific guidelines and handbooks are missing, then professional conscience and the principle of public interest should guide the reporter's decision.

➤ **Verification of facts, humanity, heroism and reflective journalism**

In the age of social networks, journalism still has a duty to verify facts and report professionally including seeking an explanation of the context and the reasons for an act of terrorism. It remains essential for journalists to show restraint and professionalism when covering terrorist events even in the face of the noise and fury being generated on social media and online streams of information. They need to think carefully before publishing disturbing content, especially displaying clear images of violence or human suffering (White, 2019).

By acting professionally and responsibly, journalists can limit the spread and promotion of the attackers' political agenda. Reporters of these events, be they using social media or traditional reporting tools, need to highlight the humanity of the victims and the heroism of brave individuals who put themselves at risk to help others.

A taxi driver transporting injured people to the hospital or a nurse treating victims' wounds could be the heroes of media reporting. In doing so, journalists can undermine the terrorists' strategy by focusing on the human values of solidarity and empathy that bind people to each other. To do that effectively, media do well to consider one of the main recommendations of the OSCE conference organized on September, 2018 in Sarajevo, which called on news media "to

move from a reflexive form of journalism to a reflective form of journalism”.

➤ **Maintaining independence in reporting**

Social media provide an added problem for news organisations when it leads to a plethora of sources. Social networks create an environment where many groups interact, both as consumers and producers of information. From this point of view, journalists sometimes feel under pressure to report without taking account of alternative sources of information which are interested in intervening in the coverage of the event.

How much professional autonomy do journalists enjoy when covering conflict and terrorist events? To what extent can they fall under the control of actors such as terrorist states and groups, or of the audience itself? (Brosse & Holt, 2019). These questions constantly accompany reporters when covering and reporting terrorist acts.

To counter a barrage of opinion and self-interest, reporters need to be careful and maintain a realistic approach while protecting themselves from emotional pressure. The emotional impact of terrorist events on audiences often leads to a pressure that calls into question the independence of journalistic reporting.

When dealing with violence audiences react emotionally and this reaction is even more present on social media, where people are more likely to express their anger about events in ill-tempered, often outrageous speech. The reaction becomes viral through the interaction of network users and because the logic of social networking algorithms favorsthe dissemination of content that generates interactivity.

The climate created by the viral spread of audiences’

emotional reactions, together with the government institutions seeking a unified stance on terrorist organizations, can make it difficult for journalists to maintain the necessary professional distance in their reporting.

In such cases, journalists may divert attention from the responsibility of the authorities when they focus on the consequences of terrorist acts. In the name of a “common stance” on terrorism, journalists seek not turn into the tools of power. They should always stay close to the mission of seeking the truth.

➤ **Fake news, social media and reporting on terrorism**

Although discussions about fake news often focus on the impact of disinformation on areas of politics, diplomacy, media, and economics, it is important to note that “fake news” or disinformation is a phenomenon driven mainly by the spread and growing popularity of social media. Reporters covering terrorism and violent extremism face the challenge of the spread of fake news due to the technological possibilities of social media.

A study by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism focusing on Italy and France sheds light on the extent of the spread of “fake news” and online disinformation in the European information space. The study reveals that the audience’s access to portals that spread fake news is negligible compared to access to popular news sites such as *Le Figaro* in France and *La Repubblica* in Italy. The average monthly level of reach that a fake news site touches does not exceed 3.5% in 2017, a figure that corresponds to less than 1% of online users in France and Italy. (Fletcher, Cornia, Graves, & Nielsen, 2018)

However, the analysis of the data on online users in these two countries shows that despite the low access of users and the little time spent on fake news sites, in relation to serious online news sources, the rate of interactivity that fake news sites generate on Facebook is at a very high level. This shows the role that social media has in spreading fake news.

The authors followed a methodology based on the analysis of data produced by the two international online platforms “comScore” and “CrowdTangle”, for 300 news pages in France and Italy. ComScore provides analytical data on the level of use of home pages in different countries, while “CrowdTangle” is a tool that provides data on the activity of specific accounts on the Facebook network.

Therefore, while social media spreading abusive information may not be the first port of call for users seeking news on terrorist events, they can be “super-spreaders” of disinformation and journalists do well to expand their knowledge about this phenomenon and to stick hard to the basic principles of their profession, such as verifying facts and sources of information.

➤ **Some tools and techniques for verifying information on social media**

Nowadays, journalists have access to various tools to help them verify information published on social media. There are a number of platforms and applications (open source) on the Internet that can help verify photos, videos, profiles or pages on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.

InVID

This is one of the most used applications by journalists. Through this application that can be uploaded to the browser

used for internet browsing, images, videos, and other materials published on social media can be verified. The application analyzes materials by searching for copyright, original source, as well as other elements that assist the journalist in the process of verifying facts.

Tineye

Tineye is another application that helps identify manipulated or doctored images. Some of the profiles and pages of terrorist organizations on social media use technology in a very advanced way to manipulate images and videos, which are then published, fooling audiences and network users. Journalists and media also often fall prey to these manipulated materials and may use them in the news they convey to the public. Tineye helps journalists identify a manipulated image or an image used out of context.

Twitonomy

Twitonomy is a tool for analyzing and verifying Twitter accounts and published content. This tool serves journalists to identify suspicious behavior of some Twitter accounts. In some cases, various accounts on the Twitter platform operate in the form of “bots”, which through computer programs or special algorithms post content in an automated manner. Such techniques are often be used by different groups to spread denigrating messages against an individual, community, religious group, etc. Through Twitonomy, journalists can verify the frequency of posts and other elements of profiles’ activity on the Twitter platform.

8

Avoiding hate speech

Hate speech is the most serious abuse of freedom of expression. It can incite people to violence and undermine respect for rights, cultural pluralism and tolerance. In the age of information technology, hate speech on the Internet can spread rapidly, including through online media. Hate speech causes great harm, but journalists can play an important role in controlling and avoiding its spread.

In recent years, in Albania there have been calls and efforts to regulate hate speech, fake news and disinformation, particularly through online portals, which seem to be the most favorable space for the expression, incitement and spread of these disturbing phenomena.

But what exactly is hate speech? Hate speech does not have a single clear definition because it is an emotional concept, but, in this guide, we rely on its definition provided by the free expression group Article 19, which considers hate speech as: *“Any expression of discriminatory hatred towards people: it does not necessarily entail a particular consequence. Simply put, ‘hate speech’ targets people, as individuals or groups, because of what they are. It can take many forms: written, non-verbal, visual, artistic, etc., and may be disseminated through any media, including Internet, print, radio or television.”*⁹

⁹ Article 19 (2015) Hate Speech explained. A toolkit. <https://www.article19.org/resources/hate-speech-explained-a-toolkit/>

Because journalists have the capacity to influence a wide audience and cover numerous areas of public concern including politics, social, cultural, and economic affairs they have a specific responsibility to avoid the spread of hate-speech in whatever information platform they are using, whether audiovisual, written or online media.¹⁰

The need for care in news reporting is highlighted in the following case of reporting of those Albanians involved in the war in Iraq, where media does not report itself with hate speech, but reflects statements by people that contain hate speech.

The news concerned the profile of two self-proclaimed imams which circulated in Albanian newspapers with the title "*Recruitment network, profile of self-proclaimed imams*". Citing the prosecution testimony, the press portrayed them as radical theologians who promulgated violent Islam, incited hatred against believers and other faiths, incited a spirit of division within the Muslim community, and inspired and organized the recruitment, organization and transport of Albanian Muslim believers to fight in the name of Jihad in Syria.

Although they gave information about the activity of these imams, who "for 6 years practiced illegal religious activity," none of the journalists appeared to be interested in why they had been left to work illegally for so long, although state structures appeared to be aware of this information.¹¹

The presence of hate speech, openly or in a hidden form, is damaging across the public information landscape, but

¹⁰ Mihajllova, Elena, Jasna Bačovska, dhe Tome Shekerxhiev (2013). Liria e shprehjes dhe gjuha e urrejtjes. Shkup: Polyesterday.

¹¹ Skura, G. (2015) Media online dhe "gjuha e urrejtjes". <http://www.respublica.al/content/media-online-dhe-%E2%80%9Cgjuha-e-urrejtjes%E2%80%9D>.

dealing with the problem is not easy. The problem is often apparent on online portals and social media in the wake of terrorist attacks, but holding the media and their management to account for such speech is a challenge. Media cannot simply ignore them, or block them, as this would not stop the spread of hateful information. This form of censorship is counter-productive and, in any case, silence cannot resist the pressure of social networks for long.¹²

Instead, adopting a deconstructive and analytical approach as to what leads to hate speech might be more productive, even though it requires more time and resources.

It should also be remembered that hate speech is often published for commercial reasons and to generate more clicks. In this case, media can come together and suggest a joint response or practice in these cases, even though the existing economic model of online media poses challenges in this respect.

In the end, it will be best to counter hateful messages through promotion of models of reliable, accurate and trusted information that comes from ethical and professional journalism. Building public trust in journalism will not only combat the ignorance and fear generated by terrorism and social media disinformation, it will also help people to better understand the world around them and to navigate the new world of information safely and with confidence.

¹² UNESCO (2017) *Terrorism and the Media. A handbook for Journalists*. UNSECO, page 67

Some Useful Material for Journalists Reporting on Terrorism

BBC Guidelines on reporting crises and emergencies

<https://www.bbc.com/editorialguidelines/guidelines/war-terror-emergencies/guidelines>

Dart Centre for Journalism and Trauma: Reporting Terrorism

<https://www.mediasupport.org/blogpost/the-right-to-know-and-the-duty-to-protect-terrorism-and-the-media/>

OSCE Guidelines for Journalists reporting on violent extremism and terrorism

<https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/9/2/442381.pdf>

Terrorism and Media: A UNESCO guide for Journalists

<https://en.unesco.org/news/terrorism-and-media-handbook-journalists>

Verification Handbook: Guide for emergency media coverage

<http://verificationhandbook.com/>

Media Against Hate: Video of Ethical Journalism Network
5-point test for hate speech

<http://europeanjournalists.org/mediaagainsthate/ejn-5-point-test-for-hate-speech-available-in-17-languages/>

<https://ethicaljournalismnetwork.org/hate-speech>

EJN Report Journalism in the Post-Truth Era: Guidelines for Sources

<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/317411801>

EU Committee of the Regions: Presentation Hate Speech and journalism ethics

https://cor.europa.eu/en/events/Documents/Europcom/T.%20Law_Session%2014.pdf#search=hate%20speech%20journalism

International Media Support: How to Report Terrorism

<https://www.mediasupport.org/blogpost/the-right-to-know-and-the-duty-to-protect-terrorism-and-the-media/>