

Review: The terms used to describe those in violent conflict

April 15, 2011

REVIEW

The complainant, Gary Gerofsky, wrote CBC January 4, 2011, to express concerns about a report December 26, 2010, on CBC News Network. The story in question involved the killing by Israeli soldiers of two Palestinians CBC described as “militants.”

Gerofsky wanted to know why CBC referred to them as “militants” and not “terrorists.” He said the description minimized the impact of violence on Israel and reflected a systematic bias.

The executive editor of CBC News, Esther Enkin, wrote back January 18, 2011, to outline CBC policy on language use.

“It is the CBC's practice – and it has been the practice in CBC newsrooms for over 30 years now – to try to avoid using the words ‘terror’ and ‘terrorist’ on their own as a form of description without attribution,” Enkin wrote. “I think you will find many of the leading news organizations in the western world follow a similar practice.”

Enkin added: “Given the often political and premature use of these words, our preference is to describe the act or individual, as ‘bomber’, ‘militant’ or ‘gunman’, for instance, and let the viewer or listener make his own judgment about the nature of the event.”

The aim, she said, is to give the audience enough information to reach its own conclusion.

Gerofsky was not satisfied with that response and requested a review.

CBC Journalistic Standards and Practices do not directly address the matter, except through provisions that call for fairness and accuracy in reporting and the need for disciplined language in it.

But CBC's language guide for journalists offers insight into the issue. It counsels journalists to *"exercise extreme caution before using the words terrorist and terrorism."*

It notes *"terrorism generally implies attacks against unarmed civilians for political, religious or some other ideological reason. But it's a highly controversial term that can leave journalists taking sides in a conflict."*

It adds: *"By restricting ourselves to neutral language, we aren't faced with the problem of calling one incident a 'terrorist act' (e.g., the destruction of the World Trade Center) while classifying another as, say, a mere 'bombing' (e.g., the destruction of a crowded shopping mall in the Middle East)."*

The guide says *"the long-standing CBC News preference is straightforward: Don't judge specific acts as 'terrorism' or people as 'terrorists.' Instead, describe the act or individual and then let the viewers, listeners or readers make their own judgments."*

It suggests journalists summarize what happened and not reach *"for a label ('terrorist' or 'terrorism') when news breaks."*

Instead, it suggests calling assailants *"bombers, hijackers, gunmen (if we're sure no women were in the group), militants, extremists, attackers or some other appropriate noun."*

That being said, there is no ban in place. *"It's not practical to draft a list of all contexts in which the words terrorist and terrorism are appropriate in CBC News stories,"* the guide says.

It concludes: *"Use common sense."*

Other major news organizations take similar approaches.

Reuters, the world's largest news agency, only uses the term "terrorist" when it is attributed to someone in direct speech. *"We may refer without attribution to terrorism or counter-terrorism in general but do not refer to specific events as terrorism. Nor do we use the word terrorist without attribution to qualify specific individuals."*

Reuters says the policy is part of a wider approach that avoids *"the use of emotive terms. . . We aim for a dispassionate use of language so that individuals, organizations and governments can make their own judgment on the basis of facts."*

The British Broadcasting Corporation notes there is no consensus on what constitutes a terrorist or a terrorist act. *"As such, we should not change the word 'terrorist' when quoting someone else, but we should avoid using it 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."

The value judgments in the use of the words *"can create inconsistency in their use or, to audiences, raise doubts about our impartiality."* The language used in one story cannot be considered in isolation from language in other stories, the BBC policy notes. *"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."*

CONCLUSION

The basic challenge of this complaint is that there is no clear definition of the terms "terrorism" and "terrorist." There is immense subjectivity in those terms, depending on personal and often national perspective.

This challenge has been evident since the introduction of a code on the laws of war in the late 19th century. The international community, including the United Nations, has never been able to agree upon a single definition of the terms in order to mobilize countermeasures. It has focused on denouncing the nature of the incidents, rather than defining their intent.

One of journalism's challenges is to ensure the audience trusts the fair-minded quality of the gathering and presentation of information. The problem with identifying terrorism and terrorists, one journalist once noted, wasn't where to start but where to stop. Even when atrocities are committed, some argue that the reflexive use of the terms is adding little information while sending a signal to a constituency that a journalist is on a particular side. That undercuts the credibility of reporting, present and future.

In calling someone a terrorist, he is in effect "an enemy of all civilized people, and his cause is less worthy of consideration," wrote Clark Hoyt, then the public editor of the New York Times, in 2008. Hoyt was identifying in the Times many of the same challenges CBC faces. Interestingly, the Times does not have a formal policy on using the terms.

Still, some argue that conscious avoidance of the terms is itself a subjective act and a political statement, that there are occasions in journalism when moral judgment is not misplaced.

I think CBC pursues the correct approach. It does not attempt to settle the semantic dispute. It recognizes the need for prudence in journalism involving politics, religiosity and ideology. Its language is descriptive but not subjective or judgmental; its moral reasoning views those latter two qualities as the domain of the audience, at its

discretion on the basis of accurate and fair information provided. An important principle in its practice is the consistent application of terminology, and I am satisfied that CBC uses its descriptors uniformly.

There was neither a violation of CBC Journalistic Standards and Practices nor a violation of other CBC policies.

Kirk LaPointe
CBC Ombudsman