

Review: Characterization of alleged mass murderer Anders Behring Breivik as a “Christian fundamentalist”

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## **REVIEW**

On July 22, 2011, there were two violent attacks in Norway: the bombing of a government office in Oslo that killed eight and the mass shooting shortly after at a youth camp on the nearby island of Utoya that killed 69, mostly teenagers.

The confessed perpetrator in both acts was Anders Behring Breivik, a 32-year-old Norwegian, who surrendered to police on the island and has since been confined and charged under several laws related to terrorism.

CBC News responded to the attacks with several reports online and on radio and television that day and beyond. It dispatched staff to Norway but depended initially on news agency text, audio and video to chronicle the attacks and public reaction to them.

Typical of contemporary newsgathering, organizations reported on Breivik’s social media presence once he was identified as the man detained by police. They found he had used Twitter and distributed various texts on the day of the attacks, then pored online to find other documents he had produced in recent years.

The next morning, the deputy police chief in Oslo was quoted as referring to Breivik as a “Christian fundamentalist,” a term that CBC and other news organizations used. The full quote CBC used from Roger Andresen: “What we know is that he is right wing and a Christian fundamentalist.”

The complainant, Dennis Taylor, wrote July 25, 2011, to say there was “absolutely no evidence” that Breivik was a Christian fundamentalist and that the characterization reflects a “left-wing agenda” for which CBC should apologize.

Esther Enkin, the executive editor of CBC News, wrote back July 27 and said CBC had simply attributed the information in the early going to the police official.

“When our reporters do not know something with certainty, when they cannot independently confirm information, we expect that they will attribute it,” Enkin wrote. “That way listeners, viewers or readers know the source of the information and can make their own judgment about its reliability. That is what we did here.” She noted other organizations did the same.

In the hours and days that followed, Enkin wrote, “new information about Mr. Breivik from those who know him, his website, extensive writings and Facebook page helped reporters to develop a clearer understanding of his beliefs and motivations.”

Taylor subsequently wrote that, until there was a retraction or apology, he would continue to “believe this is a result of a particular ideological slant or agenda by the public broadcaster.” He asked for a review by this Office.

[CBC Journalistic Standards and Practices](#) intersect with the issues involved in this review.

On the matter of description: *“We do not mention . . .religious affiliation . . .except when important to an understanding of the subject. . .”*

The policy calls for CBC to *“avoid generalizations, stereotypes and any degrading or offensive words or images that could feed prejudice or expose people to hatred or contempt.”*

When there are errors, *“we do not hesitate to correct any mistake when necessary nor to follow-up a story when a situation changes significantly.”*

## **CONCLUSION**

Fundamentalism involves the strict adherence to theological doctrines. From the perspective of a Christian, a fundamentalist refers to any follower of Christ who believes the Bible is the inspired Word of God and who believes in its literal interpretation and teachings.

At times media have applied the term to those who hold radical views or who have been activists. Some scholars wonder if fundamentalism has been redefined by society and may no longer be an accurate term to describe orthodox Christians. Others see it as pejorative.

As a result, the characterization of Breivik as a Christian fundamentalist was immediately controversial, with many commentators decrying the use of the term as cavalier and inaccurate.

Other news organizations variously referred to him as a “Christian extremist,” a “religious conservative” and a “Christian terrorist.” They based the Christian characterization on Breivik’s self-description online and on his extensive writings. Religious scholars have since evaluated his writing and concluded many of his beliefs do not reflect fundamentalist tenets.

A Norwegian minister in the Church of Norway, who is a former senior editor at a Norwegian newspaper, has since questioned the accuracy of the police official's description and the translation of it. Arne Fjeldstad said police described Breivik as part of a "Christian, fundamentalist, extreme-right environment in Norway" (note the difference between that description and that of a Christian fundamentalist) and a violent opponent of multiculturalism. Fjeldstad said the term "fundamentalist" has no historical context in Norway, that it's an English term liberals in Norway use to describe conservatives in America who value the Bible's authority and defend doctrines on moral issues. In short, he believes the police official didn't quite know what he was saying.

That being said, I concluded that CBC News had little other choice but to convey the information and attribute it to police, just as CBC and other organizations do regularly when there is limited information available. This conforms to the journalistic truism that media do not so much publish the truth as pursue it.

In hindsight, it is clear that a range of officials and organizations interpreted some characteristics of Breivik's writings inaccurately initially. While regrettable in retrospect, I do not believe that the attributed characterization was malignant or indicative of any inherent bias at CBC, which has a strong track record of sensitivity and inclusiveness in its journalism. That CBC refined the description as more information emerged was indicative of its responsible effort to pursue the truth.

Its performance fell within its standards and practices by attributing the information to police and by refining the description as more information emerged.

Kirk LaPointe  
CBC Ombudsman