

Guidance Note: Reporting on Terrorism, Violent Extremism and Crisis Events

Broadcast media play a critical role during a crisis. In times of crisis the public seeks information from the media to understand the events that have occurred, to assess their risk and safety and to satisfy their concern for others.

Broadcasting standards apply to guide broadcasters to meet their ethical and societal obligations to avoid harm, as they filter information and exercise their right to freedom of expression through reporting in these crisis events. Real time reporting on terrorism and other violent extremism presents particular challenges to media as they balance the obligation and right to report, with the potential to cause harm. This guidance note has been prepared to assist broadcasters fulfil the reporting role without harm when reporting on terrorism, violent extremism and during crisis events.¹

Weighing the public interest and potential harm when reporting on a crisis or terrorist event

When reporting during an event broadcasters must balance the provision of sufficient information and detail against the need to avoid harm to viewers, exercising care and discretion in determining what to air. The Authority has recognised the challenge of undertaking this balancing exercise as events unfold and as new information comes to hand, particularly in unprecedented and challenging circumstances.² In such situations, broadcasters are encouraged to consider the following:

- Proportionality between public interest and potential harm needs to be carefully balanced
- Is the degree of potential harm greater than the public interest in the content itself?
- High public interest may be outweighed if the harm is also particularly high
- What is actually necessary to give the public a sufficiently comprehensive account of what happened?
- Will repetition, intensity and/or the disturbing nature of clips go beyond what is necessary to keep viewers informed?

Mitigating harm when reporting on terrorism, violent extremism and crisis events

Broadcasters may mitigate harm by considering the following:

- Consider the context of the reporting and potential impact on audiences, ie:
 - Is the broadcast occurring during children's normally accepted viewing/listening times?³
 - Does the broadcast relate to events in New Zealand (which can have a greater impact on New Zealand audiences)?
- Can potential harms be mitigated by:
 - audience advisories (warnings) and signposting?
 - editing or blurring of footage?

¹ It is noted that different considerations may arise in reporting and presentation of post event analysis.

² NT and Television New Zealand Ltd, Decision No. 2019-028

³ Children's normally accepted viewing/listening times are usually up until 8:30pm. See further *Broadcasting Standards in New Zealand Codebook*, page 9.

- Should audience advisories or warnings be repeated, verbal and/or included in an on-screen banner?
- Is the footage of a nature that should not be shown at all (regardless of any steps taken to protect audiences)?⁴
- Is foreign pass through content (which may be provided by foreign affiliates or sources) appropriate for the NZ audience or should it be removed from air?
- Do the images of victims and violence include attempted killing, or disturbing and alarming images of injury?
- Are the violent images gratuitous or sensationalised?
- Will the content cause significant distress to the audience, family and friends of victims?
- Keep a sense of proportion – too much information can cause as much anxiety as too little

Consider the privacy of victims featured in footage

Care is required when showing footage of victims. Victims receiving medical treatment (even in a publicly accessible location) can reasonably expect privacy although in some situations this may be outweighed by the public interest in the footage.⁵

When using footage of victims consider:

- The privacy of victims and whether the footage of victims is justified in the public interest (ie is the public interest high enough to justify any breach of privacy)?
- The purpose of using the footage (ie is it to provide a ‘humanising and sobering account of what was unfolding’ or is it sensationalised or intended to ‘titillate’)⁶?

Do not amplify, glorify or promote the attacker’s message or otherwise incite violence

In real time reporting on potential terrorism and violent extremism there is a risk that the reporting may itself amplify, glorify or promote the attacker or their message. Extremist groups can be strategic in their communication and messaging. While broadcasters will experience pressure to bring news and information regarding such events to the public as quickly as possible, care must be taken and discretion exercised to balance speed and first footage advantage against the risk of being caught in terrorist propaganda.

In a 2019 decision the BSA has observed:

*‘[I]mages are at the core of terrorist acts, with social media networks in particular providing new ways for terrorist groups to disseminate their messages or stage their violent actions. **The critical issue for broadcast media is knowing how to ‘...strike a balance between [the] duty to inform the public... and the need to avoid being used as a vehicle for hateful, ultraviolent propaganda’.**’⁷*

⁴ *UJ and SKY Network Television Ltd*, Decision No. 2019-030 at [86]

⁵ *Grant & Phillips and Television New Zealand Ltd*, Decision No. 2019-013 at [27]

⁶ As above at [39]

⁷ *NT and Television New Zealand Ltd*, Decision No. 2019-028 at [70]

Key considerations when reporting on terrorism, broadcasters

- Does the footage have the potential to:
 - further the attacker's propaganda purpose?
 - promote and/or glorify the attacker's actions?
 - invite or encourage violence?
- Minimise the focus on the individual motivations or personal psychology of the attacker(s)
- Avoid deferring to the attacker's chosen language, explanations or justifications
- Avoid the amplification of original messages and images (eg by the inclusion of subtitles making clear the attacker's words)
- Avoid explicit graphic or violent content
- Take particular care when dealing with material distributed by the attacker(s) themselves – ie does the material include any of the following:
 - deliberate visual or audio cues, cultural or extremist references intended to be recognised by those with extremist views?
 - instructional elements (capable of assisting other extremists)?
 - first person clips (putting the viewer in the shoes of the attacker, potentially glamorising violence and dehumanising victims)?
- Will any footage impact viewers who:
 - might be harmed by the disturbing content
 - might be susceptible and might be encouraged (towards violence or extremist views) by the promotional nature of the material
- Could the content incite, encourage violence or promote serious anti-social or illegal behaviour, in the form of terrorist activity?

What previous decisions of the Authority provide guidance in this area?

When it comes to reporting on terrorism and extreme events, the principles outlined in the following decisions of the Authority (and summarised further in this guidance note) are likely to be of use:

- [Grant & Phillips and Television New Zealand Ltd](#), Decision No. 2019-013
- [NT and Television New Zealand Ltd](#), Decision No. 2019-028
- [UJ and SKY Network Television Ltd](#), Decision No. 2019-030.

Relevant Broadcasting Standards

In addition to the usual principles of accuracy, fairness and balance in reporting, the following standards may also be relevant to reporting on terrorism and extreme events:

- **Good taste and decency:** The purpose of this standard is to protect audience members from viewing or listening to broadcasts that are likely to cause widespread undue offence or distress or undermine widely shared community standards. The broad limit is that a broadcast must not seriously violate community norms of taste and decency.

- **Violence:** The purpose of this standard is to protect audiences from unduly disturbing violent content. Broadcasters should protect audiences by ensuring violent content is justified by context, and by ensuring viewers are adequately informed of likely content and warned if content is likely to disturb a significant number of viewers.
- **Law and order:** The purpose of this standard is to prevent broadcasts that encourage audiences to break the law, or otherwise promote criminal or serious antisocial activity. This standard does not prevent broadcasters from discussing or depicting criminal behaviour or other law-breaking, even if they do not explicitly condemn that behaviour. It does not require broadcasters to promote law and order. It does not prevent genuine criticism – even provocative criticism – of laws or their enforcement by the courts and police.
- **Discrimination and denigration:** The purpose of this standard is to protect sections of the community from verbal and other attacks, and to foster a community commitment to equality. Serious commentary and factual programmes, are valuable forms of speech and are unlikely to breach the standard unless the content of the broadcast amounts to hate speech or a sustained attack on a particular group.
- **Privacy:** The standard is concerned with identifiable individuals who feature in programmes or are directly affected by programmes – not with the general audience. The privacy standard aims to respect, where reasonable, people’s wishes not to have themselves or their affairs broadcast to the public. It seeks to protect their dignity, autonomy, mental wellbeing and reputation. The standard also allows broadcasters to gather record and broadcast material where it is in the public interest. The standard guidelines assist broadcasters to strike the right balance. The standard addresses the interests of individuals in vulnerable situations. In a crisis disclosure of personal information in breach of privacy rights must be proportionate to the degree of public interest.
- **Fairness:** The purpose of this standard is to protect the dignity and reputation of those featured in programmes. Where programmes deal with distressing circumstances (eg grief and bereavement) broadcasters should show discretion and sensitivity.

Other applicable requirements

Other requirements relevant to reporting on such events:

- Is or could the content be deemed or classified as objectionable under the Films, Videos, and Publications Classification Act 1993?
- Would the broadcast interfere with investigative or criminal justice processes?
- Would the broadcast prejudice fair trial rights, the administration of justice?
- Are there any court orders in place restricting reporting?

Further guidance regarding reporting on terrorism (including post event analysis and trial reporting) can be found in the BSA’s [Resource for Broadcasters after 15 March Attacks](#).

Broadcasting Standards Authority

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