

War, Terror and Emergencies

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11.1 Introduction

The BBC has a special responsibility to its UK and international audiences when reporting conflict including wars, acts of terror, sieges and other emergencies. People across the world access our services for trustworthy news and information. They expect us to provide context and analysis and to offer a wide range of views and opinions. We need to be scrupulous in applying due accuracy and impartiality¹.

We must take care that our journalism does not put individuals at risk of additional harm or cause unnecessary distress.

We must consider our tone and language when reporting matters involving loss of life and human suffering. Some of our audience will have relatives or friends directly involved. We should avoid causing unnecessary offence whilst also ensuring that we continue to convey the reality of events and do not unduly sanitise our reporting. We will ensure, as far as is reasonably practicable, that next of kin do not learn of a relative's death or injury from any of our content. There must be strong editorial justification for the use of very graphic pictures.

In addition to editorial and ethical considerations, the Terrorism Acts place legal obligations on individuals – including journalists – to disclose certain information to the police as soon as reasonably practicable.

Specific guidance on reporting war is issued, as required, on the Editorial Guidelines website.

At times of war, terror, emergency or disaster, we should keep all of our output under review,

¹ The sections of the Ofcom Broadcasting Code that relate to this are 3: Crime, Disorder, Hatred and Abuse and 8: Privacy.

particularly scheduled programmes (including films, drama, comedy and music) and trails, to identify anything which might be thought inappropriate in the light of events.

See Section 3 Accuracy: 3.1, Section 4 Impartiality: 4.1, Section 7 Privacy: 7.3.41-7.3.45 and Section 5 Harm and Offence: 5.3.11 and 5.3.54

11.2 Mandatory Referrals

(Mandatory Referrals are part of the BBC's editorial management system. They are an essential part of the process to ensure compliance and must be observed.)

Referrals to Director Editorial Policy and Standards

11.2.1 Any proposal to attend an event staged by proscribed organisations or groups known for mounting acts of terror, in order to be recorded, must be referred to a senior editorial figure or, for independent production companies, to the commissioning editor. Referral must also be made to Director Editorial Policy and Standards.

See 11.3.9

11.2.2 Any proposal to broadcast material recorded at a staged event in the UK or overseas, where threats are made against UK citizens, must be referred to Director Editorial Policy and Standards.

See 11.3.10

11.2.3 Any request from the police or others for a complete news black-out must be referred to a senior editorial figure, who must consult Director Editorial Policy and Standards.

See 11.3.18

11.2.4 Any approach to or from the Secretary to the Defence and Security Media Advisory Committee² must be referred to Director Editorial Policy and Standards.

See 11.3.20

11.2.5 Any situation where BBC staff or anyone else engaged in content production for the BBC may have obligations under the Terrorism Acts must be referred promptly to Director Editorial Policy and Standards and Programme Legal Advice.

See 11.3.21

11.2.6 Any proposal to approach an organisation (or an individual member of an organisation) designated a ‘terrorist group’ by the Home Secretary under the Terrorism Acts, and any proposal to approach individuals or organisations responsible for acts of terror, to participate in our output must be referred in advance to Director Editorial Policy and Standards.

See 11.3.21

Other Referrals

11.2.7 Any proposal to broadcast material recorded at legitimate events when paramilitary or other groups with a known record of violence or intimidation stage an appearance must be referred to a senior editorial figure, or for independent production companies to the commissioning editor, who may consult Director Editorial Policy and Standards.

See 11.3.11

11.2.8 Any proposal to broadcast content made by perpetrators of a hijacking, kidnapping, hostage-taking or siege must be referred to a senior editorial figure or, for independent production companies, to the commissioning editor and should also be referred to Editorial Policy.

See 11.3.17

² Sometimes also referred to as the D-Notice Committee.

11.2.9 Any proposal to handle material relating to security and intelligence issues that falls, or might fall, within the terms of the Official Secrets Act must be referred to Programme Legal Advice.

See 11.3.19

11.2.10 Any proposal to travel to a country or area classified as a Hostile Environment or where a Travel Advisory applies must be referred to BBC Safety's High Risk Team before departure.

See 11.3.22

11.3 Guidelines

Accuracy and Impartiality

11.3.1 When reporting war, and in the early stages of covering national and international emergencies (including acts of terror, disasters and major accidents), it is particularly important to give the source of information and material from third parties, particularly when there are conflicting claims. First estimates of casualty figures often turn out to be inaccurate. If different sources give different estimates we should either report the range or go for the source which carries the greatest authority and attribute the estimate accordingly.

We should make it clear if our reports are censored or monitored or if we withhold information under duress, and explain, wherever possible, the conditions under which we are operating.

Reporters and correspondents must be aware that comments they make on social media accounts that relate to their BBC work may be perceived as having the same weight as a BBC report, so should bear in mind the requirement for due accuracy and impartiality at all times.

11.3.2 When reporting demonstrations, disturbances and similar events, we should treat estimates of involvement with due scepticism, report wide disparities and name the sources of the figures. We aim to offer a comprehensive and impartial view of events. When it is difficult for reporters located on one side of a confrontation to form a clear overall view, their material should be put into a wider context for broadcast.

See Section 3 Accuracy: 3.1 and 3.3.16

11.3.3 In a UK civil emergency, we aim to deliver essential information in the interests of public safety across our services. We work with the relevant authorities to identify the kind of major incidents requiring a special response. However, we must make the appropriate editorial judgements to ensure accuracy and independence.

See Section 11 War, Terror and Emergencies: 11.3.18

Audience Comment and Moderation

11.3.4 In times of conflict, there are special sensitivities; for example, about the security of operational military plans, avoiding naming casualties until next of kin have been informed, and handling rumours – we need to consider these while continuing to maintain open debate. We may need to consider limiting the online stories that are open to comments and make appropriate hosting moderation arrangements – pre-moderating may be necessary. We should consider whether it is appropriate to publish BBC stories on social media where we have less ability to moderate comments and where moderation may involve a high level of resource.

See Section 11 War, Terror and Emergencies: 11.3.7, Section 7 Privacy: 7.3.41-7.3.45

See Guidance online: User-Generated Contributions

Use of Language

11.3.5 Our reporting of possible acts of terror should be timely and responsible, bearing in mind our requirement for due accuracy and impartiality. Terrorism is a difficult and emotive subject with significant political overtones and care is required in the use of language that carries value judgements. We should not use the term ‘terrorist’ without attribution.

11.3.6 The word ‘terrorist’ itself can be a barrier rather than an aid to understanding. We should convey to our audience the full consequences of the act by describing what happened. We should use words which specifically describe the perpetrator such as ‘bomber’, ‘attacker’, ‘gunman’, ‘kidnapper’, ‘insurgent’ and ‘militant’. We should not adopt other people’s language as our own; our responsibility is to remain objective and report in ways that enable our audiences to make their own assessments about who is doing what to whom.

See Guidance online: [Language when Reporting Terrorism](#)

Identifying Victims

11.3.7 When people have been killed, injured or are missing, next of kin should not, as far as is reasonably practicable, find out from BBC output, but be told by the relevant authorities.

To minimise anxieties we should narrow the area of concern as quickly as possible without identifying individual victims, for example in the case of an air crash, by including details such as airline, flight number, place of departure and destination.

See Section 11 War, Terror and Emergencies: 11.3.4 and Section 7 Privacy: 7.3.41-7.3.45

Disturbances and Riots

- 11.3.8** Comprehensive coverage of disturbances and riots is an important part of our news reporting. However, in addition to the specific guidelines concerning accuracy and impartiality, it is important that:
- we assess the risk that, by previewing likely prospects of disturbances, we might encourage them
 - we withdraw immediately if we suspect our presence is inflaming the situation
 - we must be prepared to collect material for later use or editing, if the level of violence or disorder becomes too intrusive or graphic to be broadcast live.

See Section 5 Harm and Offence: 5.3.11 and
Section 11 War, Terror and Emergencies: 11.3.1-11.3.3

Staged Events

- 11.3.9** **Any proposal to attend an event staged by proscribed organisations or groups known for mounting acts of terror, in order to be recorded, must be referred to a senior editorial figure or, for independent production companies, to the commissioning editor. Referral must also be made to Director Editorial Policy and Standards.**
- 11.3.10** **Any proposal to broadcast material recorded at a staged event in the UK or overseas, where threats are made against UK citizens, must be referred to Director Editorial Policy and Standards.**

- 11.3.11** Any proposal to broadcast material recorded at legitimate events when paramilitary or other groups with a known record of violence or intimidation stage an appearance must be referred to a senior editorial figure, or for independent production companies to the commissioning editor, who may consult Director Editorial Policy and Standards.

Threats and Hoaxes

- 11.3.12** If we receive a bomb warning or other credible and specific threat, the first priority is to pass it on to the appropriate authorities.
- 11.3.13** We must not reveal security details or other sensitive information not widely in the public domain which might assist an attack.
- 11.3.14** We do not normally report threats against named individuals unless they have produced a visible effect, such as the cancellation of a public appearance.
- 11.3.15** We must take care not to identify individuals or organisations, who would not otherwise be in danger, as possible targets unless there is an overriding editorial justification. For example, this may include companies or employees engaged in testing on animals or undertaking work for military establishments.
- 11.3.16** We do not normally report incidents which turn out to be hoaxes unless they have had a serious and evident effect, such as major and highly visible transport disruption.

Hijacking, Kidnapping, Hostage-Taking and Sieges

11.3.17

In cases of hijacking, kidnapping, hostage-taking, sieges, bombings or other similar events, we must be aware that anything we broadcast may be seen or heard, either directly or indirectly, by the perpetrators both in the UK and overseas.

It is important that we report demands in context. We should also consider carefully the ethical issues raised by providing a platform to hijackers, kidnappers or hostage-takers, especially if they make direct contact. We must remain in editorial control of the reporting of events and ensure that:

- we do not interview a perpetrator live on-air

See Section 8 Reporting Crime and Anti-Social Behaviour: 8.3.14-8.3.18

- we do not broadcast live any content provided by a perpetrator
- **we broadcast content made by perpetrators only after referral to a senior editorial figure or, for independent production companies, to the commissioning editor and referral should also be made to Editorial Policy**
- when covering sensitive stories, for example, a school siege or plane hijack, we should bear in mind that the outcome is unpredictable and be cautious about broadcasting live images as we risk showing distressing material that is unsuitable for broadcast
- the existence of social media means that we may have information from alleged victims, eyewitness accounts and images during or very soon after an incident. We need to subject this information to proper journalistic scrutiny to ensure its accuracy before using it.

Where an alleged victim in an ongoing situation puts information into the public domain on social media, we need to weigh up very carefully whether our reporting of their situation creates further danger for them.

11.3.18

When reporting stories relating to hijacking, kidnapping, hostage-taking or sieges we must take due account of advice from the police and other authorities about anything that, if reported, could exacerbate the situation. Occasionally they will ask us to withhold or even to include information. We will normally comply with a reasonable request, but we will not knowingly broadcast anything that is untrue.

Any request from the police or others for a complete news black-out must be referred to a senior editorial figure, who must consult Director Editorial Policy and Standards.

National Security and Counter-Terrorism

11.3.19**Official Secrets Act**

The Official Secrets Act affects our ability to report on some matters relating to security and intelligence issues. Content producers must consult Programme Legal Advice when handling such material that falls, or might fall, within its terms.

11.3.20**Defence and Security Media Advisory Notices**

Defence and Security Media Advisory Notices provide guidance about information which, if broadcast, might damage national security. They cover the publication of material including highly classified codes and ciphers, information not widely in the public domain about key military facilities and installations and information relating to UK Security and Intelligence Services and Special Forces.

The standing Notices can be read on the DSMA Notice System website.

The system is voluntary; it has no legal authority and the final responsibility for deciding whether or not to broadcast rests solely with us. Content producers

should seek senior editorial and legal advice at an early stage when handling material that falls, or might fall, under the Notices.

Any approach to or from the Secretary to the Defence and Security Media Advisory Committee³ must be referred to Director Editorial Policy and Standards.

Terrorism Acts

11.3.21

There is a legal obligation under the Terrorism Acts to disclose to the police, as soon as reasonably practicable, any information which we know or believe might be of material assistance in:

- preventing the commission of an act of terrorism anywhere in the world
- securing the apprehension, prosecution or conviction of a person in the UK, for an offence involving the commission, preparation or instigation of an act of terrorism.

It is a criminal offence not to disclose such information. **Any situation where BBC staff or anyone else engaged in content production for the BBC may have obligations under the Terrorism Acts must be referred promptly to Director Editorial Policy and Standards and to Programme Legal Advice.**

The Acts give the Home Secretary powers to designate UK and international organisations as ‘terrorist groups’, making it illegal for them to operate in the UK. The Home Office website carries a list of proscribed organisations. **Any proposal to approach an organisation (or an individual member of an organisation) designated a**

³ Sometimes also referred to as the D-Notice Committee.

‘terrorist group’ by the Home Secretary under the Terrorism Acts, and any proposal to approach individuals or organisations responsible for acts of terror, to participate in our output must be referred in advance to Director Editorial Policy and Standards.

See Section 18 The Law: 18.4.4

Hostile Environments and Travel Advisories

11.3.22

Any proposal to travel to a country or area classified as a Hostile Environment or where a Travel Advisory applies must be referred to BBC Safety’s High Risk Team before departure.

A ‘hostile environment’ is a country, region or specified area subject to war, insurrection, civil unrest, terrorism or extreme levels of crime, banditry or lawlessness, or public disorder or epidemic disease. It also includes areas with extreme climate or terrain.

A ‘Travel Advisory’ applies to countries or areas where special care is needed.

BBC Safety maintains a list of hostile environments and travel advisories on its own website⁴.

⁴ See BBC Safety Site: Available on Gateway for BBC or via commissioning editors for independent producers.