

The terrorist threat to journalism

Don't let reporting standards slip

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I'm a reporter for a paper, website or broadcasting station. Local police have raided various premises and arrested a number of men on suspicion of terrorist activity. They hold a media briefing but give little information, arguing that national security is at stake.

What questions should I ask, and what should I report?

This is a story that has come up, amid a blaze of police publicity, quite a few times. The NUJ Ethics Council has been discussing how to handle it. Turn the page for its advice.

NUJ ETHICS COUNCIL GUIDELINES ON REPORTING TERRORISM

When reporting official claims (by police, government or security services) about terror suspects or terrorist threats

- Request evidence for the claims and report any failure to provide meaningful information.
- Ask why the ordinary criminal law does not suffice to counter threats of violent activities.

When reporting official claims about 'anti-terror' legislation and its role in protecting society

- Be careful not to present claims as fact; qualify them as alleged or suspected. Otherwise you may be complicit in inciting racial and religious hatred, or in smearing specific individuals if the claims are false.
- Remind readers that 'anti-terror' laws authorise police action against non-violent activities, so that individuals may be suspected for their religious practices or beliefs, for the people they associate with, the organisations they belong to or the websites they visit.
- Remember that only 20 per cent of those arrested under terrorism laws are charged with a terrorism-related

offence, that only 5 per cent are convicted – and again that the offences include a broad range of non-violent activities, for instance organising or taking part in legitimate public protests.

- Avoid implying that terror suspects are terrorists, or that a 'terrorist conviction' involves planning or taking part in violent activities.

When presented with an 'expert' on terrorism or related subjects

- Ask about the expert's qualifications and why their opinion should be given particular weight.
- Check how the expert's work is funded.
- Try to ensure a political balance with different expert views.



The union's advice is always based on its Code of Conduct that sets the standards for good professional practice. Turn the page.

NUJ CODE OF CONDUCT

A journalist

- 1** At all times upholds and defends the principle of media freedom, the right of freedom of expression and the right of the public to be informed
- 2** Strives to ensure that information disseminated is honestly conveyed, accurate and fair
- 3** Does her/his utmost to correct harmful inaccuracies
- 4** Differentiates between fact and opinion
- 5** Obtains material by honest, straightforward and open means, with the exception of investigations that are both overwhelmingly in the public interest and which involve evidence that cannot be obtained by straightforward means
- 6** Does nothing to intrude into anybody's private life, grief or distress unless justified by overriding consideration of the public interest
- 7** Protects the identity of sources who supply information in confidence and material gathered in the course of her/his work
- 8** Resists threats or any other inducements to influence, distort or suppress information
- 9** Takes no unfair personal advantage of information gained in the course of her/his duties before the information is public knowledge
- 10** Produces no material likely to lead to hatred or discrimination on the grounds of a person's age, gender, race, colour, creed, legal status, disability, marital status, or sexual orientation
- 11** Does not by way of statement, voice or appearance endorse by advertisement any commercial product or service save for the promotion of her/his own work or of the medium by which she/he is employed
- 12** Avoids plagiarism.

The NUJ believes a journalist has the right to refuse an assignment or be identified as the author of editorial that would break the letter or spirit of the code. The NUJ will fully support any journalist disciplined for asserting her/his right to act according to the code.