

3-2003

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Recommended Citation

Jeffrey A. Dvorkin, *Reporting on Terrorism: Choosing Our Words Carefully*, 37 U. Rich. L. Rev. 811 (2002).
Available at: <https://scholarship.richmond.edu/lawreview/vol37/iss3/7>

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REPORTING ON TERRORISM: CHOOSING OUR WORDS CAREFULLY

Jeffrey A. Dvorkin *

Terrorist? Freedom fighter? Guerilla? Gunman? Militant? The choice for journalists, broadcasters, and even legal academicians has never been easy. Since 9/11, Americans have found that descriptions employed by such authors have a new immediacy. The wrong choice also provokes strong letters to Ombudsmen and women everywhere.

Most authors try to walk a middle road on the use of words such as “terrorist.”¹ While the attack on the World Trade Center is universally described by American journalists as a terrorist attack,² journalists are more restrained when it comes to describing events in other parts of the world.³

Recently, the esteemed news agency Reuters refused to describe any perpetrator of a terrorist act as a “terrorist,” whether in relation to the Middle East or 9/11.⁴ Most media organizations

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1. Fellow symposium contributor Jeffrey F. Addicott traced the etymology of “terror” in *Legal and Policy Implications for a New Era: The “Way on Terror,”* 4 SCHOLAR 209, 212–18 (2002).

2. See, e.g., *A Day of Terror: Bush’s Remarks to the Nation on the Terrorist Attacks*, N.Y. TIMES, Sept. 12, 2001, at A4.

3. Some legal commentators criticize the use of “terror” as a descriptor in either context. See Aliya Haider, Article, *The Rhetoric of Resistance: Islamism, Modernity, and Globalization*, 18 HARV. BLACKLETTER L.J. 91 (2002) (“‘Terrorism,’ as a word, quickly becomes a bloated idea that ceases to communicate very much.”).

4. See Reuters, *Reuters Editorial Policy: Frequently Asked Questions*, at <http://www.about.reuters.com/aboutus/editorial> (last modified Jan. 2003). The news agency

do not go as far as Reuters in including the 9/11 events. Nor are media organizations as bold as Reuters about making their policy public. But most of the major media organizations—CBS, NBC, ABC, CNN, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post* and National Public Radio (“NPR”)—have roughly the same policy.⁵

Many consumers of journalism in all its media forms think that even after 9/11, journalists still don’t get it. Journalists are accused of hiding behind their professional obligations and avoiding any involvement. To their critics, they have become amoral voyeurs.

But most journalists—in my experience—see themselves differently. That is because many people get into the business of journalism for various reasons: idealism, a desire to inform and illuminate the public discourse, curiosity, and even adventure. A few even think it’s glamorous.

Journalism is not only about getting the story, however, it is about getting it correct and getting it without upsetting your budget. It is about using the right ideas, the right sounds, and the right pictures to tell the story in the most reliable way possible.

But it is mostly about the use of language. Words are in every conflict as part of the ordnance that one side or the other employs. The use or ownership of language is key to reporting in all issues where there is controversy. If NPR is to have any role in providing non-partisan, explanatory journalism, then nouns and adjectives must be chosen with care and with nuance.

Sadly, nouns and adjectives are also weapons in the wars: journalists are urged by their critics to describe acts and the people who commit them, as “terrorist acts” perpetrated by “terrorists.” Or conversely, we are urged to describe some state actions

states that

[a]s part of a long-standing policy to avoid the use of emotive words, we do not use terms like ‘terrorist’ and ‘freedom fighter’ unless they are in a direct quote or are otherwise attributable to a third party. We do not characterise the subjects of news stories but instead report their actions, identity and background so that readers can make their own decisions based on the facts.

Id.

5. For a discussion of various policies regarding the use of “terrorist,” see Norman Solomon, *Media Spin Revolves Around the Word “Terrorist,”* Global Policy Forum at <http://www.globalpolicy.org/wtc/terrorism/1005media.htm>. See also Michael Francisco, *Hijacker or Terrorist: Why What You Call Them Matters*, HILLSDALE COLLEGIAN ONLINE (Oct. 4, 2001), at <http://www.hillsdale.edu/collegian/articles/2002/october/hijackeror.html>.

as “state terrorism.” While the use of the “t-word” (“terrorist”) may be accurate in many cases, it also has a political and extra-journalistic role of delegitimizing one side and enthroning the views of the other. This is not the role of responsible journalism, which is and should be to describe with accuracy and fairness events that listeners may choose to endorse or deplore.

So journalists are often left with few satisfactory choices; many try to hide behind the aura of neutrality, which can often be an excuse for a kind of amoral reporting. Or they can be partisans, pleasing some, antagonizing many more, and creating doubt about the accuracy or neutrality of other reporting.

I have written about the problems of accuracy, neutrality, and the “t-word” in my column on the NPR Web site.⁶ It is my opinion that NPR has been inconsistent.⁷ But inconsistency may be an accurate reflection of a political story that evokes great emotions and provides few easy answers or journalistic shortcuts.

Let me give some examples.

The British Broadcasting Corporation (“BBC”) was expected to follow the policies of the Thatcher government when it came to the wars against the Irish Republican Army (“IRA”) in Northern Ireland and the Argentineans in the Falklands.⁸

6. Jeffrey Dvorkin, *Using Words for Effect: “Bioterror” and “Terrorist”* (Oct. 5, 2001), at <http://www.npr.org/yourturn/ombudsman/011005.html>.

7. *Id.* In the column I state that

NPR has been inconsistent on the use of the word “terrorist.” NPR has referred to the “terrorist attacks in N.Y. and D.C.”

But NPR continues to avoid the word in reference to Israel and the Palestinians, for much the same reason as do Reuters and other news organizations, notably CNN: using emotional adjectives may tend to make a news organization appear “on side.”

So here’s what I think: NPR needs to use appropriate and accurate radio language.

The destruction at the World Trade Center, the Pentagon and the downing of the plane in Pennsylvania were acts of terrorism done by terrorists. So was the blowing up of a pizza parlor and a disco in Israel. To describe those who did that as “militants” or “activists,” as NPR has, makes the reporting sound politically correct.

Partisans in the Middle East conflict may criticize NPR for using language that has been “tainted” by its use by one side or the other.

But NPR’s reporting should be aimed at more than the partisans.

Id.

8. See Corporation “*Under Siege*” During Thatcher Years, *GUARDIAN* (London), Aug. 7, 2000, at 5, available at http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk_news/story/0,3604,351355,00.

In the former, the BBC went through a period of about six years when it was not allowed to air the voices of the IRA leadership.⁹ This included Sinn Fein president Gerry Adams, a regular and welcome guest at the Clinton White House.¹⁰ This meant that BBC reporters who often filed for other English-language news services—including NPR—could not be trusted as once they might have been.

We knew that BBC News was under tremendous pressure to report from Northern Ireland in a manner that gave no journalistic exposure or credibility to the IRA. The result was that other news organizations—NPR, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (“CBC”), and other broadcasters—dropped their reliance on the BBC, at least for that story. This was not entirely a bad thing for news organizations since it allowed for North Americans to have the experience of reporting from Belfast. But it weakened the BBC in the eyes of its foreign colleagues.

When I worked as managing editor at the CBC, we were also under considerable governmental pressure to report on the independence movement in Quebec in a way that would reaffirm the Canadian confederation. Since 1976, Quebec has had a series of nationalist provincial governments.¹¹ Their stated purpose was to lead Quebec out of Canada through a referendum that would give the Quebec government a mandate to negotiate separation with the government in Ottawa.¹² Since the CBC is a federally funded public broadcaster, the use of language by the news department became critical: does the CBC refer to the Quebec party as “separatists”? Too negative said the Quebecers. As “nationalists”? Too positive said the Ottawa government.

As Canadians believe they have a genius for political compromise, so CBC employed a French word, “*independentiste*” and

html (last visited Jan. 22, 2003).

9. *Id.*; see also Michael Foley, *Dubbing SF Voices Becomes the Stuff of History*, IRISH TIMES, Sept. 17, 1994, at 5.

10. Foley, *supra* note 9; see also Derek Brown & Jonathon Freedland, *Clinton Rebuff Deepens Anglo-US Crisis*, GUARDIAN (London), Mar. 14, 1995, at 2.

11. See Alan C. Cairns, *Why Is It So Difficult to Talk to Each Other?*, 42 MCGILL L.J. 63, 71–78 (1997) (describing the “[c]onflict of [n]ationalisms” resulting from Quebec separatist referenda campaigns following the Parti Quebecois election victory in 1976).

12. For a brief history of organized nationalist movements in Quebec since the 1960s, see Edward T. Canuel, Note, *Nationalism, Self-Determination, and Nationalist Movements: Exploring the Palestinian and Quebec Drives for Independence*, 20 B.C. INT’L & COMP. L. REV. 85, 109–11 (1997).

pronounced in the English manner: "independentist." Sometimes, for variation, we would use "*souverainiste*"; or in English, "sovereignist." It was neither English nor French, but among the Canadian political classes, everyone understood the meaning. If you were a hard-line anti-Quebec type, you just called them "separatists." If you were a hard-line Quebec nationalist, you called them "*negotiationistes*." It sounds silly now, but the pressure at various times was intense.

But nothing is as intense as the issues around language and the Middle East. More recently, journalists stand accused of creating an atmosphere of "moral equivalence" in their reporting from that region.¹³ The pro-Israel critics believe that the Palestinian tactic of suicide bombing has removed any legitimacy to their claims.¹⁴ Journalistic attempts to "tell both sides" is rebuffed as giving murderers and victims an unfair comparison; they believe that "balance" is a code word for "bias," because the Palestinians have been incapable or unwilling to stop the violence against Israelis.¹⁵ Some insist that "fair reporting" ultimately legitimates anti-Semitism.¹⁶

The pro-Palestinian advocates believe American journalism is systematically biased against their cause.¹⁷ While Arab-American leadership has denounced the bombings as well, many believe it has gone unnoticed in the U.S. press. Palestinians say their cause has been demonized by strong anti-Arab and anti-Muslim sentiment in the American media.¹⁸

American journalism has a long tradition of even-handedness in presenting both sides. The domestic political tradition of bipartisanship in Congress has produced a journalistic culture that instinctively looks to see both sides of the debate. When it comes to the Middle East, however, that may not be enough. Some critics have told NPR that the war against terrorism means that the

13. See, e.g., Jessica Hodgson, *No 10 Warns Media over "Moral Equivalence,"* MEDIAGUARDIAN (London) (Nov. 9, 2001), at <http://media.guardian.co.uk/attack/story/0,1301,590823,00.html>; Andrea Levin, *The Problem with Peter Jennings,* JERUSALEM POST, June 1, 2001, at 21.

14. This correspondence is on file with the author.

15. *Id.*

16. *Id.*

17. *Id.*

18. *Id.*

rules have changed.¹⁹ Journalists have to “get it”; they must now be “on-side” whether it is against the Taliban, al-Qaida, or Hamas.²⁰

While any fair-minded person inside or outside a newsroom can only condemn terrorist attacks against civilians, Americans need to understand that there is still a context to these events. Journalists need to help Americans understand why this has happened and what might happen next. But many American journalists are ill-prepared to tell this story. At the end of the Cold War, many news organizations decided that foreign news was unnecessary in the quest for high ratings, big audiences, and massive profits. American news organizations increasingly relied on British, Canadian, and Australian journalists to do that reporting. The result is that today, many news organizations are struggling to tell this story with inexperienced American reporters. Many of them, in the field or back in the newsrooms, have an insufficient knowledge of history or languages. The result is a thinner layer of coverage than Americans need or deserve. In my opinion, that lack of historical perspective means that “fairness” as a journalistic value becomes increasingly prominent and may ultimately distort the reportage.

There are some solutions.

News organizations, NPR included, must recruit and train journalists who come from Academe, not just from journalism schools. While “J-schools” produce technically adept graduates, it is that curiosity about the world that needs to be deepened and nourished.

The public must be made aware that news organizations are not there to be “on their side.” That may work for local television news, but serious news organizations must remain non-partisan in their search for explanatory journalism.

Calls for media boycotts and blackouts are on the rise. This is a dangerous tendency in American civic discourse. Boycotts must be opposed. Media organizations must do more to be more accountable to their listeners, readers, and viewers. But boycotts have historically had a pernicious and segregating effect on the

19. *Id.*

20. *Id.*

groups that choose them. During the civil rights struggle, boycotts were used for good effect. They were an exception, however. Today, in this rapid Internet-obsessed culture, any group that proposes a media boycott immediately places themselves on the outside of this country's civic discourse and removes any chance to achieve common ground.

Edward R. Murrow once described the role of broadcasting in this way: "Communication systems are neutral. They have neither conscience nor morality; only a history. They will broadcast truth or falsehood with equal facility. Man communicating with man poses not a problem of how to say it, but more fundamentally, what he has to say."²¹

In recording the history of September 11, we as journalists must continue to choose our words carefully, as our words compose the text that legal scholars may rely upon in fastening answers to the lingering questions of this symposium.

21. A.M. SPERBER, *MURROW: HIS LIFE AND TIMES* 687 (1986).
