

# 12

**War, Terror and  
Extreme Violence,  
Disaster and Disorder**



# War, Terror and Extreme Violence, Disaster and Disorder

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## 12.1 Introduction

The BBC has a special responsibility to its UK and international audiences when reporting conflict including wars, and extreme violence including extreme violence for political or ideological ends, and sieges<sup>1</sup>. People across the world access BBC services for trustworthy news and information. They expect context and analysis and a wide range of views and opinions. Being scrupulous in applying due accuracy and impartiality is of the utmost importance.

Care should be taken that BBC journalism does not put individuals at risk of additional harm or cause unnecessary distress.

Tone and language matter when reporting loss of life and human suffering. Some of the audience may have relatives or friends directly involved. Unnecessary offence should be avoided whilst also ensuring that the reality of events is conveyed and reporting is not unduly sanitised. There must be strong editorial justification for the use of very graphic images. As far as is reasonably practicable, next of kin should not learn of a relative's death or injury from any BBC content.

In addition to editorial and ethical considerations, the UK's terrorism legislation places 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 or disaster, services should be kept under review, particularly scheduled output and trails including films, drama, comedy and music, to identify anything which might be thought inappropriate in the light of events.

See Section 2 Impartiality: 2.1, Section 3 Accuracy: 3.1, Section 5 Harm and Offence: 5.4.9 and 5.4.22 and Section 7 Privacy: 7.4.52-7.4.57

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

## 12.2 Principles

12.2.1 BBC reports of war, terror, disasters and similar events must meet the Editorial Guidelines' requirements on Accuracy and Impartiality.  
See Section 2 Impartiality and Section 3 Accuracy

12.2.2 It is important that human dignity is respected without unduly sanitising the realities of war, terror, disasters and similar events. There must be strong editorial justification for the use of very graphic content.  
See Section 5 Harm and Offence: 5.4.22 and Section 7 Privacy: 7.4.52–7.4.55

12.2.3 Content makers should take account of the Geneva Convention of 1949 and the Additional Protocols, particularly as they apply to the treatment of prisoners of war, hostages and detainees. Where the provisions have been disregarded, any use of humiliating and degrading footage of prisoners of war, hostages and detainees that disregards their right to human dignity should be considered carefully.

12.2.4 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.

## 12.3 Mandatory Referrals—must be referred in advance

*Mandatory referrals are an essential part of the BBC's editorial and compliance process and must be observed.*

### Referrals to Director Editorial Policy and Standards

12.3.1 Any proposal to attend an event staged for the media by organisations proscribed under UK law, or groups known for extreme violence in pursuit of political or ideological objectives, 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 12.4.11**

12.3.2 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 12.4.12**

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

**See 12.4.19**

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

**See 12.4.20**

12.3.5 Official Secrets legislation affects the BBC's ability to report on some matters relating to confidential security and intelligence issues. Content makers must consult Director Editorial Policy

and Standards and Programme Legal Advice when handling material that falls, or might fall, within its terms.

See 12.4.21

12.3.6 Any approach to or from the Secretary to the Defence and Security Media Advisory Committee<sup>2</sup> must be referred to Director Editorial Policy and Standards.

See 12.4.22

12.3.7 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 12.4.23

12.3.8 Any proposal to approach an organisation (or an individual member of an organisation) designated a 'terrorist group' by the UK Home Secretary under the Terrorism Acts, and any proposal to approach individuals or organisations responsible for extreme violence in pursuit of political or ideological objectives, to participate in BBC output whether in the UK or internationally must be referred in advance to Director Editorial Policy and Standards.

See 12.4.23

## Other Referrals

12.3.9 Any proposal to broadcast material recorded at legitimate events when paramilitary groups, 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 should consult Editorial Policy.

See 12.4.13

<sup>2</sup> Sometimes also referred to as the D-Notice Committee

12.3.10 Before investigating, contacting or potentially secretly recording groups or individuals suspected of being involved in serious or potentially violent criminality, or extreme violence in pursuit of political or ideological objectives and extremism, BBC Safety's High Risk Team, Editorial Policy and Programme Legal Advice must be consulted.

See 12.4.24

12.3.11 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 12.4.25

## 12.4 Guidelines

### Accuracy and Impartiality

12.4.1 When reporting war and covering national and international emergencies, including extreme violence for political or ideological ends, disasters and major accidents, it is important to give the source of information and material from third parties, particularly when there are conflicting claims. These sorts of chaotic events often generate misinformation. For instance, first estimates of casualty figures may often turn out to be inaccurate. If different sources give different estimates, content makers should either report the range or go for the source which carries the greatest authority and attribute the estimate accordingly.

12.4.2 The BBC should make it clear if reports are censored or monitored or if content makers are asked or required to withhold information. The BBC should explain, wherever possible, the conditions under which it is operating.

12.4.3 Reporters and correspondents must be aware that comments they make on social media 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. Inaccuracies must be corrected as quickly as possible.

12.4.4 When reporting demonstrations, disturbances and similar events, estimates of the numbers involved should be treated with appropriate scepticism; wide disparities should be reported as well as the sources of the figures. A comprehensive and impartial view of events should be offered. When it is difficult for reporters to form a clear overall view because of their location, their material should be put into a wider context.

See Section 3 Accuracy: 3.1 and 3.4.16

12.4.5 In a UK civil emergency, the BBC aims to deliver essential information in the interests of public safety across services. Content makers should work with the relevant authorities to identify the kind of major incidents requiring a special response. However, appropriate editorial judgements to ensure accuracy and independence must be made.

See 12.4.20

## Audience Comment and Moderation

12.4.6 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—these factors should be considered while continuing to maintain open debate. Content makers may need to consider limiting online stories that are open to comments and make appropriate moderation arrangements—pre-moderating may be necessary. It may not be appropriate to publish BBC stories on social media where there is less ability to moderate comments and where moderation may involve a high level of resource.

See 12.4.9

See Section 7 Privacy: 7.4.52–7.4.55

See guidance: User-Generated Contributions

## Use of Language

12.4.7 Reporting of extreme violence in pursuit of political or ideological objectives should be timely and responsible, bearing in mind the requirement for due accuracy and due impartiality. Care is required in the use of language that carries implicit value judgements. The perpetrators of extreme political or ideological violence are not viewed in the same way by all audiences.

12.4.8 The term 'terrorist' should only be used with attribution, ie when quoting or citing its use by others. Content makers should not adopt other people's language as their own; their responsibility is to remain objective and report in a way that enables audiences to make their own assessments. The BBC should convey to the audience the full consequences of an act by describing the perpetrators as, for example, 'bombers', 'gunmen', 'kidnappers', 'insurgents' and 'militants'. Their actions should only be described as 'terrorist attacks' with attribution.

## Identifying Victims

12.4.9 When people have been killed, injured or are missing, next of kin should, as far as is reasonably practicable, find out from the relevant authorities and not from BBC production teams or output. This applies wherever in the world the event has happened.

To minimise anxieties, the area of concern should be narrowed 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 12.4.6

See Section 7 Privacy: 7.4.52–7.4.55

## Violent Protests, Disturbances and Riots

12.4.10 Coverage of violent protests, disturbances and riots is an important part of news reporting. Content makers may conduct interviews with organisers provided the output is duly impartial. Interviews must be rigorous and challenging and the output should include alternative perspectives.

In addition to the specific guidelines concerning accuracy and impartiality, it is important that content makers:

- assess the risk that previewing potentially violent protests might encourage people to take part. However, this should not prevent discussion about the issues that underpin the protest
- withdraw immediately if they suspect their presence is inflaming the situation
- 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
- take particular care when considering using material posted by protesters on social media. Content makers should adhere to BBC Guidelines on impartiality, the use of third-party material and user-generated content. Content producers must be mindful that the use of such material could encourage further and more dangerous activity.

See 12.4.1–12.4.5

See Section 5 Harm and Offence: 5.4.22

## Staged Events

12.4.11 Any proposal to attend an event staged for the media by organisations proscribed under UK law, or groups known for mounting extreme acts of violence for political or ideological objectives, 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.

12.4.12 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.

12.4.13 Any proposal to broadcast material recorded at legitimate events when paramilitary groups, 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 should consult Editorial Policy.

## Threats and Hoaxes

12.4.14 If a bomb warning or other credible and specific threat is received, the first priority is to pass it on to the appropriate authorities.

12.4.15 Security details or other sensitive information not widely in the public domain which might assist an attack must not be revealed.

12.4.16 Threats against named individuals must not normally be reported unless they have produced a tangible effect, such as the cancellation of a public appearance.

12.4.17 Care must be taken not to identify individuals or organisations, who would not otherwise be in danger, as possible targets unless there is an overriding editorial justification. Individuals or organisations which may be at risk of being targeted include those engaged in animal testing or working for military establishments.

12.4.18 Incidents which turn out to be hoaxes should not normally be reported unless they have had a serious and evident effect, such as major and highly visible transport disruption.

## Sieges, Mass Killings, Hostage-Taking, Hijacking and Kidnapping

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

It is important that demands are reported in context. Content makers should also consider carefully the ethical issues raised by providing a platform to shooters, bombers, hijackers, kidnappers or hostage-takers, especially if they make direct contact.

The BBC must remain in editorial control of the reporting of events and content makers must not:

- interview a perpetrator live on air  
See Section 8 Crime and Anti-Social Behaviour: 8.4.14–8.4.16
- broadcast live any content provided by a perpetrator.

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

In addition, content makers must:

- bear in mind that the outcome is unpredictable and be cautious about broadcasting live images as they risk showing distressing material that is unsuitable for broadcast
- subject information from social media from alleged victims and eyewitness accounts, 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, content

makers need to weigh up very carefully whether their reporting of the situation creates further danger for the alleged victim, or other victims. Consideration must be given as to whether they are under pressure from the perpetrator to put out false statements or propaganda.

12.4.20 When reporting stories relating to sieges, mass killings, hostage-taking, kidnapping and hijacking, content makers 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 the BBC to withhold or even to include information. The BBC will normally comply with a reasonable request, but it will not knowingly broadcast anything that is untrue.

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

## National Security and Counter-Terrorism

### Official Secrets Legislation

12.4.21 Official Secrets legislation affects the BBC's ability to report on some matters relating to confidential security and intelligence issues. Content makers must consult Director Editorial Policy and Standards and Programme Legal Advice when handling material that falls, or might fall, within its terms. It is important that any material of this nature is only shared where necessary.

### Defence and Security Media Advisory Notices

12.4.22 Defence and Security Media Advisory Notices provide guidance to the media about information which, if broadcast or published, 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 or publish on the BBC rests solely with the BBC. Content makers 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 Committee<sup>3</sup> must be referred to Director Editorial Policy and Standards.

## Terrorism Acts

12.4.23 There is a legal obligation under the Terrorism Acts to disclose to the police, as soon as reasonably practicable, any information which content makers 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 UK Home Secretary powers to designate UK and international organisations as 'terrorist groups',

<sup>3</sup> Sometimes also referred to as the D-Notice Committee

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 'terrorist group' by the UK Home Secretary under the Terrorism Acts, and any proposal to approach individuals or organisations responsible for extreme violence in pursuit of political or ideological objectives, to participate in BBC output whether in the UK or internationally must be referred in advance to Director Editorial Policy and Standards.

See Section 18 The Law: 18.4.4

12.4.24 Before investigating, contacting or potentially secretly recording groups or individuals suspected of being involved in serious or potentially violent criminality, or extreme violence in pursuit of political or ideological objectives and extremism, BBC Safety's High Risk Team, Editorial Policy and Programme Legal Advice must be consulted.

## Hostile Environments and Travel Advisories

12.4.25 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 website<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> See BBC Safety Site: Available on Gateway for BBC or via commissioning editors for independent producers