Occasional Paper

A Complex Matter
Examining Reporting on Terrorism in the UK

Jessica White
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Jessica White
190 years of independent thinking on defence and security

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Published in 2021 by the Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies.

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RUSI Occasional Paper, March 2021. ISSN 2397-0286 (Online).
# Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forewords</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Executive Summary</td>
<td>xi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Introduction</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodology</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>I. The Role of the Media and the Impact of Reporting</strong></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who is Responsible for Impact?</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>II. Dynamics and Factors Shaping Media Reporting on Terrorism</strong></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How Does the Online Information Ecosystem Influence Reporting Practices?</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What Challenges Are Presented by the ‘Need for Speed’ in Reporting?</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How Does Language and Framing Vary?</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>III. The Importance of Guidance</strong></td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For Media Reporting</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guidance Recommendations</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For Police and Government Communications</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>IV. The Police–Media Information Relationship</strong></td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What Are the Challenges Police Face in Providing Information?</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship Recommendations</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Conclusion</strong></td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommendations</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>About the Author</strong></td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Acknowledgements

This research was commissioned by the Private Office of the Assistant Commissioner of Specialist Operations for the London Metropolitan Police Service Neil Basu, Head of UK Counter Terrorism Policing. The author would like to thank the many members of the Counter Terrorism Policing team who supported this project, especially the project direction offered by Detective Chief Inspector William Lexton-Jones.

This project benefited immensely from the support of a wider research team, especially Claudia Wallner; members of the RUSI communications team, especially Jack Haines; members of the research team from University College London, Paul McFarlane and Bennett Kleinberg; and Joy Hauser. Additionally, the author would like to thank the individuals who dedicated their time and expertise to reviewing and editing this paper, including internal and external peer-reviewers and the RUSI publications team.

Finally, this research would not have been possible without the participation of the interviewees and their willingness to contribute their perspectives to this research process.
Forewords

Assistant Commissioner of Specialist Operations for the London Metropolitan Police Service Neil Basu, Head of UK Counter Terrorism Policing

In March 2019, following the Christchurch attack in New Zealand, I wrote an open letter challenging the way it and other egregious terrorist attacks were reported. I criticised traditional and social media for publication of terrorist propaganda and manifestos and I invited editors to debate these issues. To say my letter wasn’t well received is something of an understatement. I was robustly challenged by senior editors and journalists, who were rightly defending freedom of the press and public interest.

The conversation had gotten off to a rocky start, but it had started. Those early discussions helped to shift my thinking and reshape my understanding. They highlighted the need to truly understand the complex relationship between terrorism and terrorist reporting, and requirement for dispassionate independent analysis. These early conversations were the catalyst, ultimately resulting in today’s launch of ‘A Complex Matter: Examining Reporting on Terrorism in the UK’.

Eight months after Christchurch, I was the keynote speaker at the Society of Editors’ Annual Conference. There I attempted to explain why I had said what I said and asked for a constructive conversation – this time less publicly! By this time, I had concluded many conversations with media partners and communications professionals. Additionally, I had commissioned the first phase of RUSI’s ‘Terrorism and the Media’ research project. Three things were becoming clear. First, that the interaction between terrorism and terrorist reporting is far more complicated than the one driving the other – there was going be no easy solution for a ‘good’ or ‘bad’ way to report terrorism. Second, that Counter Terrorism (CT) Policing shares responsibility and must take steps to put our own house in order. And last, that nothing could be achieved if the relationship between policing and the media did not improve.

My lasting impression from the conference was for the need to build mutual trust, and to that end I shifted the project from an independent CT Policing effort to a more collaborative approach with research and media partners. RUSI led the push, developing a research methodology that ensured media professionals directly informed the qualitative analysis. This, triangulated with an exhaustive literature review and innovative quantitative analysis, closed the research gap. It has provided suitably tentative conclusions and recommendations that are both realistic and pragmatic.

It is important to stress the independence of RUSI’s work. CT Policing asked no more and no less than an answer to the research question. The conclusions are challenging and certainly not what we were expecting at the outset. While they indicate that the media can contribute to the
negative impacts of terrorism, onus is placed in equal measure on the media and CT Policing to enact change.

‘A Complex Matter: Examining Reporting on Terrorism in the UK’ is a remarkable research achievement. RUSI have delivered a balanced, unique and important piece of research under demanding timescales. I want to particularly commend lead researcher Jessica White for her rigour, integrity and endless patience in producing this work. I would also like to acknowledge the valuable contribution from Paul McFarlane and Bennett Kleinberg (UCL) who conducted language sentiment analysis, using cutting-edge natural language processing software, bringing a helpful quantitative dataset to inform conclusions.

The content of the paper and the collegiate way it was delivered gives me great optimism that terrorism can be reported to meet public interest needs while also mitigating and even preventing potential harm.

It is my job to counter terrorism in the UK and to protect its interests overseas, but I also see a crucial part of my job as reducing the fear of terrorism. I feel a deep personal responsibility to explore anything that could move the dial on this – even a little. I have always said that communities defeat terrorism and we must all do our part, acknowledging that security must never come at the expense of our civil liberties. Nevertheless, I am asking the media community to join with me and help defeat both terrorism and the fear it creates. It has taken two years of hard work to get to this place, but this publication is not the end of the journey, it is the beginning – working together to make reporting of terrorism good for the public and bad for the terrorists is a noble aspiration we can all share.

**Ian Murray, Executive Director of the Society of Editors**

One of the greatest challenges in a free and liberal society is creating the balance between the public’s right to know what is being done in their name and ensuring they remain protected from those who would wish to harm them.

In all democracies that challenge is never more acute than in the relationship between the security forces and a free media on the subject of terrorism.

In the UK, the media has a proud history of ensuring the public is kept aware of threats against them and the role of the security forces in protecting them, while always seeking to be mindful of avoiding giving succour to the terrorist.

This is not an easy balance to achieve, which is why every editor in the UK takes their responsibility seriously when covering terrorism subjects.

Although the Society of Editors did not commission this paper on the roles and relationship between the police and the media and terrorism reporting, as with many in the media we were willing participants in what has proved, I believe, a valuable discussion.
This paper reveals a pragmatic piece of research which concludes that the media’s role in covering terrorism subjects is vital and plays an important function in keeping the public informed and therefore safer. It concludes that there is work to be done by both police and the media which, if achieved, could bring a fuller understanding of the aims and challenges faced when tackling terrorism-related subjects.

While recognising that the media has an important role to play, the paper recommends that improved communication, education and information would help both the media and the police to better work towards their common goal of keeping the public informed and safe.

The terrorist wishes to harm or destroy our way of life, and that includes the essential freedoms we enjoy. Free speech and the ability of the public to understand and trust what is being done in their name is one of those cherished freedoms those who abhor our way of life wish to see diminished.

With a better understanding of the ways in which these essential arms of our free society – the police and the media – operate, we can work together to combat those who threaten us without diminishing our respective roles.
Executive Summary

The UK continues to confront the ever-changing threat of terrorism, making it essential to understand the relationship between terrorism and the media. As a form of communicative political violence which attempts to influence an audience, terrorists may seek to use mass media infrastructure to further their objectives.

This paper examines the potential impacts of reporting in British newspapers on terrorism. Through interviews with stakeholders in the media and the police, it also explores the practical challenges and fluid dynamics of the modern media environment and their contribution to the impact of media reporting on terrorism.

Building on this, it explores the value of further guidance specific to reporting on terrorism, as well as the importance of a positive information relationship between the police and the media.

Key Findings and Recommendations

1. Both the public and the police contribute to the impact of media reporting on terrorism in the UK.

News organisations in the UK face multiple challenges, including shrinking space due to the expansion of online news sources, faster news cycles and the prevalence of unverified information. Public appetite for information, especially after a terrorist attack, plays a role in both police communications and media reporting. The expansion of citizen journalism and sharing of content online has reshaped the information landscape. The police face multiple challenges and competing priorities, including balancing the communication of information with the protection of public trust and ongoing investigations and operations. These dynamics and factors shape the way journalists report on terrorism and can thus contribute to potential negative impacts, such as the amplification of propaganda or the perpetuation of prejudice.

Recommendations for the police:

- **Establish an educational programme** to offer regular information sessions for news outlets. Consistency and trust are key to success, which can be difficult in the context of rotating liaison officers and communications teams. Therefore, a more permanent liaison position or thorough handover process should be considered.

- **Hold briefings with the media** proactively, to raise known issues (for example, disinformation and malicious media strategies) and anticipate operational considerations which may arise during major incidents. Hold briefings with the media reactively, after incidents, or periodically to illustrate and discuss issues through case studies of recent events.
• Join the Defence and Security Media Advisory Committee as an avenue to provide proactive advisory information to the media on operational concerns in active incidents.

Recommendation for the media:

• Prioritise protection of the brand. In a world of ever-increasing competition over the consumption of media, news outlets should view adherence to the Editor’s Code of Practice and factual, objective reporting as a good business strategy.¹

2. The way the media reports on terrorism can have unintended negative impacts.

The Code provides the framework for journalistic ethics and responsibilities in the UK. However, the development of good practice takes time and experience. Therefore, further non-prescriptive terrorism-specific guidance on the following issues could assist journalistic best practice:

• Volume of reporting on terrorism is a collective issue of the wider mainstream media space. There is huge public interest in terrorism, but a disproportionate focus on terrorist attacks can raise levels of fear and contribute to terrorist objectives.

• Content issues can be easier for editors to address following discussions and with reference to best practice and guidance. However, terrorist attacks vary in method, severity, perpetrators and victims and, as such, prescriptive guidelines can be counterproductive in fluid and unpredictable contexts.

• Sensitivity is covered under the Code but can be particularly difficult to interpret, as some victims or associated families wish to speak to the media, and some do not. However, reporting that focuses more on victims and responders than perpetrators is preferable as it starves terrorist actors of publicity and highlights the negative consequences of their actions.

• Impact cannot always be controlled for, but awareness and discussion can help to mitigate potential negative impacts. This paper suggests that education and guidance are key to identifying mis- and disinformation and reducing outcomes like the amplification of propaganda or contribution to imitation.

Recommendations for the police:

• Provide timely and detailed information to help counteract mis- and disinformation during an active incident. Provide evidence of how media reporting can have negative or positive impacts to aid wider media discussions.

• Establish internal guidance for communications. Cooperate with the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO) for enforcement of privacy notices and harassment policies.

Recommendations for the media:

- **Engage in cross-industry discussion** of the impact of reporting on terrorism.
- **Establish internal written guidance** to ingrain understanding of issues like volume, sensitivity, content and impact before events occur. **Conduct regular training/engagement sessions** for reporters and editors covering terrorism.
- **Add a ‘Terrorism’ guidance page to the IPSO website** highlighting terrorism-specific issues and impacts, to provide easily accessible, non-prescriptive guidance which could be helpful to journalists as they are writing and editing stories on this complex topic.

3. In the UK, a positive and effective mode of engagement between the media and the police is key to mitigating the potential negative impacts of terrorism reporting.

Recognition, communication, information and education should be the pillars on which a positive information relationship between the media and the police is built.

Recommendation for the police and the media:

- **Build relationships** by being open to self-reflection and criticism. Recognise the challenges each face and share positive examples of reporting practice and police interaction. Work to build trust through increasing communication and flow of information.
Introduction

The ‘TERRORISM AND the Media’ project has been a year-long, two-phase independent research project funded by the office of the UK’s Head of Counter Terrorism (CT) Policing, Assistant Commissioner of Specialist Operations Neil Basu, and led by RUSI to examine the relationship between terrorism and media reporting. The first phase of the project, a literature review of the theoretical evidence, concluded that media reporting on terrorism can have a positive or negative impact on public reactions, discourse and even behaviour. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to measure the size of this effect, the second phase of this research project builds on the first phase by assessing the dynamics and factors contributing to and shaping the media’s role. Media reporting does not take place in a vacuum, rather it is influenced by practices and pressures which contribute to the potential impacts of reporting on terrorism.

Three key relationship dynamics are between the media, the public and the police. These three actors have different interests and approaches: the media want to report stories accurately and at speed, and ideally better and faster than their competitors; the public wants as much information as possible, as quickly as possible; and the police want to control the flow of information, to ensure their work to secure public safety is not impeded or even countered by the information being released in the public domain. Other actors in the information space (for example, social media platforms or malicious actors trying to spread disinformation) are beyond the scope of this paper but do also play a significant role in the way that the media, the public and the police share, consume and provide information.

Following an analysis of these dynamics and other factors shaping media reporting on terrorism in the UK, this paper focuses on the relationship between journalists and the police. Interviews were conducted with journalists, media professionals, academics and police and government communications professionals to understand their perceptions of the impact and the challenges and risks they face in providing information or reporting on terrorism, and how police–media interactions shape each actor’s ability to achieve their goals.

Methodology

In this paper, the term ‘media’ refers to the following news outlets, including their online platforms (which follow similar editorial procedures): Daily Mirror; The Guardian; The Independent; The Observer; Financial Times; Evening Standard; The Times; The Sunday Times; The Daily Telegraph; The Sunday Telegraph; The Sun; Daily Mail; Mail on Sunday; Daily Express. These news outlets were selected on the basis of an assessment of the most prominent national print media news outlets in the UK with the highest percentage of relevant coverage. While this

The paper’s examination of media sources does not extend beyond national coverage, to broadcast media, or to online-only media sources, some lessons identified here could be applicable to wider mainstream media organisations.

This research focuses on qualitative evidence gathered from 21 semi-structured interviews. The journalist interviewees were sampled from the crime, home affairs and foreign affairs reporters and editors who cover terrorism for the selected news outlets. Due to time constraints, one interviewee from each news outlet or organisation was chosen. The interviews were conducted virtually from September to October 2020. All interviewees have been anonymised, but the list of participating organisations is as follows:

- **News Outlets**: The Guardian; The Independent; Financial Times; Evening Standard; Daily Telegraph; The Sun; Daily Mail; Mail on Sunday.
- **Professional Associations**: Editor’s Code of Practice Committee; Independent Press Standards Organisation; Society of Editors; Defence and Security Media Advisory System.
- **Security Organisations**: Specialist Operations Desk, Metropolitan Police Service Directorate of Media and Communications; National Police Chief’s Council, CT Policing; CT Desk, Home Office Press Office.
- **Universities**: Cardiff University School of Journalism, Media and Culture; Department of Journalism Studies, University of Sheffield; Department of Journalism, City, University of London; Department of Media and Communications, London School of Economics; Crime and Security Research Institute, Cardiff University; International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation, King’s College London.

Chapter I examines the role of media reporting on the impact of terrorism and how they perceive responsibility for that role. Chapter II analyses the dynamics and factors that shape reporting practices and news coverage. Chapter III explores the efficacy and suitability of guidance for shaping positive reporting practices, as well as offering recommendations on what that guidance should include. Chapter IV details the nature of the police–media relationship and provides recommendations on how it might be improved. The paper concludes with recommendations for both the police and the media.

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2. ‘Journalist interviewees’ refers to reporters and editors from news outlets listed above, and ‘media interviewees’ refers to the wider body of journalists plus professional media association representatives.

3. 21 out of the 32 organisations that were contacted chose to participate.
I. The Role of the Media and the Impact of Reporting

The Media is an essential provider of public information. Media and academic interviewees highlighted that while journalists are bound by responsibilities, there is a culture of independence in the UK’s media that must be respected.

The public is an important multidimensional actor that contributes to reporting dynamics. Interviewees noted how the public’s appetite for information shapes both police communications and media reporting on terrorism. The police also contribute to how terrorism is reported, as they control official information flows and have different priorities from the media.

These complex relationship dynamics contribute to the role that the media plays and the potential negative impacts of reporting on terrorism.

Who is Responsible for Impact?

Through the interviews, this research explored the perceptions of responsibility for impact, which was defined as the role terrorism reporting by the media can play in the public’s behaviour and perception of terrorism – such as amplifying propaganda, encouraging an imitative relationship, increasing levels of public fear, or perpetuating prejudice. However, it is important to note that multiple media interviewees identified impact as more related to sensitivity in interactions with victims or families and friends of victims, rather than issues like radicalisation or effects on public discourse.

While the majority of media interviewees indicated that managing or mitigating potentially negative impacts was the responsibility of those reporting on terrorism, a few journalist interviewees indicated that their role is to report the facts without being overly concerned with the larger social impact of those details.

Police interviewees indicated awareness of the potential impact of their communications. They highlighted, for example, how disparities in terminology used for different forms of terrorism (for example, far-right and Islamist) may shape public perceptions and prejudices in undesirable ways. However, police interviewees noted that they face many challenges in making these determinations. For example, legal definitions of acts of terrorism can be weighted towards links with foreign terrorist organisations, therefore more easily associating terrorism to organisations such as the Islamic State. Also, in some cases, different types and scales of violence can make determinations difficult. Smaller-scale violence, such as stabbings or murders, can be harder to label as terrorism when the perpetrator is not clearly linked to a terrorist organisation.
All interviewees indicated awareness that the media could be instrumentalised by terrorist actors. Multiple media and academic interviewees gave the example of how the novelty of high-quality photo and video content put out as part of the Islamic State’s sophisticated digital communications strategies required learning on how reporting and sharing content can contribute to the amplification of propaganda. The fast-pace nature of the changing media landscape, rise in availability of communications platforms and increase in terrorists’ ability to fulfil their own media strategies have all presented new challenges.
II. Dynamics and Factors Shaping Media Reporting on Terrorism

This chapter analyses the dynamics and factors that shape the way the media reports on terrorism.

How Does the Online Information Ecosystem Influence Reporting Practices?

Interviewees agreed that the expansion of citizen journalism and the sharing of content online has reshaped the information landscape. Journalistic standards are not something that the public can replicate easily, and many online news platforms (for example, social media or ‘alt news’ sites) do not have the same editorial standards as traditional media outlets. Terrorist incidents are chaotic, and journalists must filter a lot of incoming information. Interviewees said that, as recently as a few years ago, journalists relied more on cultivated contacts and eyewitnesses in order to write their articles. However, now ‘eyewitness’ reports are posted on social media, although their accuracy is often questionable. Editors usually oversee the fact-checking process, but media interviewees attested to the challenges of making these decisions in the ‘heat of the moment’.

Academic interviewees confirmed that journalism programmes at universities usually conduct training on social media and how to handle it carefully as a source of information. This training normally includes fact-checking good practice, including checking multiple sources, corroborating facts and triangulating information with as many sources as possible. However, not all programmes emphasise this or are able to simulate the complexity of an active terrorist incident. Many of the media interviewees noted that while core terrorism coverage is usually provided by more experienced reporters, there are often younger, relatively inexperienced journalists creating online coverage and liveblogs.

All interviewees acknowledged the importance of reporting accurately and maintaining the trust of their readership, but there was an array of opinions on the most appropriate way to handle information found online. Social media offers a wealth of content, often much faster to access than waiting for official communications from the police. While a few interviewees said they do not use unverified information, others said that they do publish it but with attribution to social media. There were also various responses on what type of information (for example, naming individuals or casualty counts) would or would not be reported before official confirmation. This often depended on editorial discretion and the perceived ‘taste’ of the audience in question, particularly with use of images or videos.
The public’s desire for rapid access to information can create competition between media outlets and social media platforms. While the online space increases the amount of information available, much of the content found there in the aftermath of a terrorist attack is not subject to any kind of ethical or editorial code, as during or immediately after a terrorist attack members of the public are themselves contributing to the information pool by sharing photos, videos and other material. However, terrorism is a particularly sensitive topic, as it involves traumatic events. The public can be aware of the issues of potential negative impact of information sharing but this is not always the case.

Furthermore, one interviewee suggested that the growth of the online media ecosystem and the spread of mis- and disinformation means the public has easy access to a much wider range of information and can therefore be more likely to question official sources. The police, as well as the media, are challenged by this ecosystem. For example, the police might put out notices on not sharing videos and photos of a crime scene, but it is up to the public to choose whether to follow these instructions. This is a challenge shared by both the police and the media, and a media interviewee indicated how both parties have an interest in finding an effective approach to this problem.

What Challenges Are Presented by the ‘Need for Speed’ in Reporting?

A key factor that intersects with the growth of unedited online content and public demand for rapid information can be the lack of official communication during or immediately after an event. During an active terrorist incident, police do not always have the time for communication and may not fully understand the circumstances of an ongoing event. Media interviewees noted that often, in the initial hours after a particular incident, the police response to media enquiries is to refer them to their website or Twitter feed where they usually only post a message indicating there is an ongoing incident and to avoid the area. This can make it difficult to cover terrorism incidents and even contribute to mistakes in coverage, given the pressure to publish quickly. However, most media interviewees indicated that they valued accuracy more than speed.

Also, journalist interviewees indicated that in the digital age, news outlets are adding online coverage to their print components or converting to online altogether. Interviewees noted how this adds to the challenge of ensuring internet traffic (views of articles) gets to that coverage and can encourage the prioritisation of speed over content quality. Furthermore, often news outlets want stories to ‘go viral’ and thus reach more people. However, journalist interviewees emphasised that good reporting practices can still be maintained in this environment, even if it becomes a tricky balance. Therefore, written reporting guidance, as a quick reference guide, could be helpful in these pressured situations as a reminder of potential negative impacts and how to mitigate them – while acknowledging that each situation is going to present unique challenges.

4. Author video call with an academic, 1 October 2020.
5. Author video call with a media representative, 30 September 2020.
How Does Language and Framing Vary?

The way journalists use language and frame events significantly shapes the impact of their articles. As such, academic interviewees said that issues of representation, patterns of framing and the need for nuance are all covered in journalism studies. The underlying argument over the use of language and framing is that sensationalising and amplifying terrorism is fulfilling a media strategy on behalf of the terrorists. However, multiple interviewees argued that journalists have a right to tailor their language and framing to their respective audiences.

Change Over Time

When media interviewees were asked whether they thought reporting on terrorism had changed over time there was a wide range of responses. Many felt there is now more awareness of how their reporting could impact wider society (for example, increasing public levels of fear), and so more attention is given to maintaining language neutrality and ensuring that the amount of reporting devoted to terrorism remains proportionate. Several interviewees also felt that the increased rate of terrorist attacks in the UK in recent years has actually strengthened reporting practices. This is because reporting on attacks more regularly allowed routines and best practices to be developed and modified.

Bennett Kleinberg and Paul McFarlane find that, overall, language sentiment has remained broadly consistent in relation to terrorism over the period from 2000 to 2020, and there was no correlation in the data between specific attacks and sentiment.6

Impact of Political Leaning

A few media interviewees acknowledged that the political leaning of a news outlet does influence the language used in an article. However, more interviewees placed emphasis on the editor’s influence rather than on the outlet’s political leaning. Kleinberg and McFarlane find that over the period from 2000 to 2020 articles published in left-leaning news outlets, to a small but statistically significant extent, were associated with more negative sentiment than their counterparts in right-leaning outlets.7

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6. Bennett Kleinberg and Paul McFarlane, ‘Assessing the Sentiment in UK Media Coverage of Terrorism and Terrorist Attacks’, University College London, (forthcoming 2021). Kleinberg and McFarlane were commissioned by RUSI to conduct language sentiment analysis to provide supporting quantitative evidence that also guided the design and questions of interviews conducted for this research. Their dataset, which was compiled by RUSI, covers articles on terrorism produced by the selected news outlets over the period from 2000 to 2020. This form of analysis operationalises language as the sentiment of newspaper articles (that is, the media shape their reporting to their readers and therefore reflect the sentiment of those readers).

7. Kleinberg and McFarlane, ‘Assessing the Sentiment in UK Media Coverage of Terrorism and Terrorist Attacks’. Kleinberg and McFarlane’s study did not control for tabloid versus broadsheet, a limitation which could be addressed in future studies.
Kleinberg and McFarlane also find that left-leaning news outlets use the term ‘terrorism’ more often than right-leaning ones. When journalist interviewees were asked how they defined ‘terrorism’ and when they used the label, all stated that in the UK the ‘terrorism’ label is not usually applied to an event until police have declared it as such, or sometimes when the police indicate they are treating it as a CT investigation. Most journalist interviewees also indicated that the term is used as the police define it – even if a particular reporter, for example, thought it to be more of a mental health issue. A few interviewees, however, said that if an attack was of a certain scale or carried out in a certain way then it could be labelled an act of terrorism even before a police declaration.

**Differences Between Ideologies**

The question of whether different ideological motivations were reported on differently elicited a divided response from the media interviewees. A few journalist interviewees felt that reporting on different ideologies is inherently going to require different language and framing, as they felt the last two decades of large-scale attacks in the UK have been Islamist inspired and this has impacted their reporting. However, the way the motivations of attackers is reported can compound audience biases and social prejudices. Most interviewees recognised that the volume of reporting in the UK on Islamist-inspired terrorism has had a negative cumulative effect on the British Muslim community.

It can be more difficult to link far-right inspired attackers to organisations and extremist networks in the same way as it is with other ideologies. One interviewee noted that some far-right extremist individuals and organisations might be more inclined to sue the media for libel if linked to terrorist activities without evidence – whereas that would not be the case with the Islamic State, for example. Beyond these practical challenges, a few interviewees suggested that because far-right extremists are generally white, rather than from an ethnic minority background, with ideologies which draw on mainstream anxieties and discourses (for example, on migration), it can be less appealing to report on due to the news outlet’s political leaning.

Others felt that there was no significant difference in the way they reported on terrorists with different ideological motivations. These interviewees noted that there might be differences in how the story is told, in terms of framing, but not in the language used to describe the violence itself.

Kleinberg and McFarlane find that articles describing Islamist attacks used the term ‘terrorism’ more often than those reporting on far-right attacks. Furthermore, left-leaning outlets reported more on far-right terrorism and right-leaning outlets more on Islamist terrorism than

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9. Author video call with a journalist, 12 October 2020.
would have been expected, if the factors of political leaning and ideology were not associated. However, they found no significant differences in sentiment when comparing articles describing Islamist or far-right terrorism.

**Importance of Demographics**

Interviewees largely said that the demographic background of a perpetrator does not unduly influence the language used in an article. However, they felt reporting must include an acknowledgement of ethnicity, and that this would be applied equally for a white or non-white attacker. Sometimes ethnicity is used as an indicator to point to a certain religious background, which would then become part of the story. Interviewees noted that demographic outliers, such as female or child terrorists, tend to receive a lot of attention because they are more shocking to the public. However, this is common across all types of reporting, not just on terrorism.
FOLLOWING THE DISCUSSION on what dynamics and factors influence the way the media reports on terrorism, the interviewees were asked about their perceptions of the significance of guidance to their reporting/communications process. Interviewees acknowledged the utility of non-prescriptive guidance as a means of mitigating potential negative impacts.

For Media Reporting

In the UK, the Editor’s Code,\(^\text{11}\) the Codebook\(^\text{12}\) and the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO) guidance\(^\text{13}\) cover journalistic responsibilities, including accuracy, privacy and sensitivity. There was a wide range of responses from journalist interviewees regarding the importance of the Code to their reporting process and whether external or internal guidance was more influential to the way in which they report.

At one end of the spectrum, there were journalist interviewees who said they place little reliance on the Code itself, but rather emphasised their own ethical intuition. Multiple interviewees indicated that they do not often refer to the Code directly and had not received related training. Usually, however, they go to their editors for guidance, expecting them to know and follow the

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11. The Editors’ Code of Practice ‘is the foundation stone of the UK press self-regulatory system’. The Code sets the framework for the highest professional standards that members of the press subscribing to the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO) have undertaken to maintain. It balances both the rights of the individual and the public’s right to know and it covers multiple areas of responsibility. In the case of terrorism, clauses on accuracy, privacy, harassment, intrusion into grief or shock, children, hospitals and discrimination could all be relevant. The Code is short and non-prescriptive, which makes it possible for regulation based on the spirit of the Code. See Editors’ Code of Practice Committee, <https://www.editorscode.org.uk/index.php>, accessed 20 October 2020.


Code. Many of these interviewees also indicated that they approach reporting on terrorism in the same way as other crimes. In the middle of the spectrum, multiple journalist interviewees indicated some reliance on the Code in addition to editorial discretion or the importance of their news outlet’s internal guidance. At the other end of the spectrum, there were interviewees who stressed the utmost importance of the Code and the boundaries it dictates, as well as the information laws around suspected versus convicted offenders.

A few media interviewees indicated that the competitive nature of UK newspapers and a history of scandals associated with this competition has led some news outlets to opt out of IPSO regulation. Several of the journalist interviewees also indicated that while their news outlets may not subscribe to the Code or its regulation, they still follow its principles. Additionally, some news outlets have established internal guidance or complaints procedures. However, there tends to be a lack of written guidance, with more emphasis placed on established practices dictated by editors. It was noted by several interviewees that if terrorist attacks become less regular it becomes more important to write down and disseminate guidance, especially for less experienced reporters. Almost all the interviewees emphasised the rules around intrusion into grief and sensitivity. Most news outlets have in-house lawyers who determine if articles break any of the legislative guidelines or IPSO rules. However, several of the interviewees emphasised that, even with the Code, the way a story is developed and reported is a skill that comes with experience and through conversations with senior editors and line managers.

This spectrum of perspectives on guidance and its enforcement indicate that editorial interpretation and discussion are essential in the space between following the specific legal and Code requirements and the deeper assessment of impact and consideration for unintended consequences.

Guidance Recommendations

Almost all interviewees noted the dynamic and unpredictable nature of terrorism, and thus the challenge around establishing prescriptive guidelines. However, many of the journalist interviewees indicated that they saw the value in collaborative discussions around these issues and of raising awareness around impact.

In this challenging reporting environment, most interviewees agreed that some further non-prescriptive guidance for reporters and editors could be helpful, especially during the training of journalism students and young reporters who are learning the ropes. Additionally, as print media changes, there are fewer specialised reporters who focus only on crime, meaning they can devote less time to understanding the complexities of reporting on terrorism.

In a world of declining readership for newspapers, the way forward is to invest in protecting their brand and providing well-edited news to a loyal readership base. Further guidance could support the process of maintaining critical, trustworthy and reputable journalism.

The following sub-sections explore issues that should be kept at the forefront of training and discussion, ideally with some form of generalised written guidance, for all those involved in reporting or issuing communications on terrorism. These recommendations and findings are consistent with recommendations produced by current and former journalists.\textsuperscript{15}

**Volume**

In the aftermath of a terrorist incident there is usually a significant amount of coverage, as there is immense public interest in terrorism. This is a collective issue of the wider mainstream media space and the 24-hour news cycle. However, a lack of perspective can raise levels of public fear, perpetuate prejudice towards certain groups and contribute to terrorist objectives. News outlets should be aware of the time spent reporting on an attack, so that disproportionate amounts of coverage do not create unintended social consequences.

**Content**

Terrorism is unpredictable, thus strict guidelines can be counterproductive. However, non-prescriptive guidance can help increase awareness, in addition to constant reviews of good practice. The following issues should be considered in guidance documents and internal reviews:

**Framing and Bias**

- Journalistic self-reflection on ideological influence and possibly unsubstantiated theories can help maintain objectivity and accuracy.
- Fitting events into existing narratives, or persistent framing, can encourage bias.
- Assigning attacks to individuals or networks rather than entire groups or communities is essential to reducing bias and avoiding the perpetuation of prejudice.\textsuperscript{16}


**Language**

- Prominence in an article of the identification or naming of an attacker can have negative consequences. Articles could highlight the stories of victims and responders over the act of violence itself.
- Accuracy is essential, and consideration is needed on the value of publishing inflammatory statements or unverified information, even if attributed to other sources.
- Sensational language that demonises perpetrators can help to glorify a terrorist and potentially contribute to negative impacts, such as imitation. The value of content should be carefully considered.

**Imagery**

- A picture is worth a thousand words. Focusing on images of an attacker can offer them the personal glory they seek. Large-scale pictures of an attacker and/or of them with a weapon may not be necessary.
- There should be sensitivity in visualisations of the victims, for example, using an image of the victim from their life before the incident.
- In the case of digital reporting, placement of pictures is especially important. When an article is retweeted or shared on social media the picture of the attacker can become the image associated with the reporting. A still image can be cropped instead of linking videos depicting violent acts.

**Sensitivity**

While the issue of sensitivity towards victims or the families of both victims and attackers is covered in the Code under ‘Intrusion into grief or shock’, it was raised by many interviewees as being particularly difficult to interpret. Everyone reacts differently to traumatic situations. Some wish to speak to the media, and some do not. For those who do not want to be contacted, the media can be made aware through IPSO privacy notices. Developing awareness in this regard requires time and experience. Many interviewees, from across the groups, viewed reporting that focuses on the victims rather than the perpetrators to be a positive ongoing change.

**Impact**

Negative impact cannot always be moderated, as reporting on terrorism cannot cease. However, awareness and discussion of guidance for how to mitigate the potentially negative impacts of reporting on terrorism should consider the following issues.

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17. Privacy notices can be issued (for example, in the aftermath of an attack) to one publication, a section of the industry, or the whole industry (for example, saying that a person does not want to be contacted, or that a funeral service will be private and no media should attend).
**Disinformation and Speculation**

- During and after a terrorist attack, malicious actors (for example, the terrorists themselves or foreign actors) may spread disinformation and propaganda as part of a media strategy. This presents a risk to independent reporting and public understanding.
- Acknowledging upfront that information is of questionable accuracy or journalistic expertise is limited can help engage critical debate, rather than feed speculation or misinformation.
- The prevalence of unverified content online in the face of limited official communication can lead to speculation. Police and security authorities can be key partners in providing timely and detailed information to help counteract disinformation.

**Imitation**

- Reporting in detail on the method of attack should be considered carefully. Terrorist attacks often occur in public places, so some details of the method are readily available. However, unnecessary details can be avoided.
- Providing terrorists with information which might help them prepare an attack (for example, use of mobile phones or encrypted communication services) should be avoided. However, it must be recognised this information is often readily available from other sources.
- Security authorities should recognise that some discussion of method might be reasonable and necessary (for example, how a bomb was planted), as public safety was breached.

**Amplification**

- The media should consider whether it is necessary to mention searchable extremist terminology or links to extremist content in their reporting.
- Signposting or including sources of propaganda (for example, images, hashtags or manifestos) can direct others to it and fulfil terrorist objectives.¹⁸
- Prominently fact-checking conspiracy theories or rumours by using the same hashtag can amplify their reach.¹⁹

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¹⁸. Counter Terrorism (CT) Policing, Threat Assessment & Intelligence Unit Protective Security Operations, ‘Propaganda and the Media’, 2020; CT Policing, National Digital Exploitation Service report, 2020. These declassified sources provide evidence for how propaganda reproduced in media reporting can encourage traffic online and expand into wider circles of influence. For further information and access to these documents, contact CT Policing.

¹⁹. First Draft is a non-profit, collaborative coalition of newsrooms, universities, platforms and civil society organisations seeking to combat disinformation and reduce amplification. See <https://firstdraftnews.org/>, accessed 20 October 2020.
Amplifying disinformation or extremist content, even when it is attributed to social media, still draws attention to it. Its impact cannot always be reversed. When retraction is necessary, it is important to advertise it openly.

**For Police and Government Communications**

While the police and the government communicate in a different context from the media, they also need to consider the issues highlighted above, especially in relation to language and framing. For example, the operational communications of the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) are governed by a Major Incident Plan, and these are the first communications released to reporters and the public in the event of a terrorist incident.\(^\text{20}\) However, operational communications currently do not have written guidance on how to describe suspects (for example, their ethnicity or ideological motivations), as this type of information is normally covered in communications under the investigation that follows and would be at the discretion of senior MPS leaders.

For police and government strategic communications that present their perspective on terrorism legislation or CT strategy, there is a core script which pulls together all the agreed lines on various subject areas—such as statistics and key messages on the Prevent, Pursue, Protect and Prepare pillars of the CONTEST strategy.\(^\text{21}\) However, there is no specific terminology guidance. Similarly, the Home Office CT desk does not have any formal terminology guidance.

Therefore, it is important to highlight that police and government press offices and communications teams also need to consider the potential impact of their communications, in coordination with policy teams. They should consider the importance of written guidance, especially for communications including more than just operational response details.

\(^{20}\) This focuses on pre-prepared messaging to keep responses as simple and quick as possible (for example, ‘We are aware of an incident in X location, we have officers responding’).

IV. The Police–Media Information Relationship

LINKED TO THE challenges of the online information environment and time pressures on reporting, the importance of the information relationship between the police and the media emerged from the interviews. In the event of terrorist incidents, the police represent the primary source of confirmed and official information. When that information or a working line of communication is not available, this can contribute to mistakes in reporting and potential negative impact.

What Are the Challenges Police Face in Providing Information?

Police interviewees suggested there are three main dynamics and factors that influence how and when they provide information.

First, the need to protect their reputation by ensuring information accuracy, as they are public security providers and rely on public confidence. Additionally, inaccurate information can feed disinformation or too much information can give terrorists insight into how the police work or potentially compromise an operation or investigation. Therefore, officers are asked not to give out information directly to reporters to ensure that information which is disseminated is accurate and appropriate.

Second is the lack of specialist crime reporters. Police interviewees noted the challenge of information dissemination without established relationships with reporters. While information is commonly disseminated through press releases, there are still police communications teams available to contact, of which the increasing numbers of non-specialised reporters might not be aware.

Third is the required opacity of strategic communications. Interviewees indicated that communications must be written to account for a multidimensional audience that might interpret them differently in light of their own ideological frames. Therefore, they may contain limited information. Police and media interviewees both noted that these three dynamics and factors may mean that journalists cannot get the information they need to report accurately and in a timely manner.

The competing priorities of these two actors can, and have, resulted in a strained relationship. A fractious environment can contribute to negative impacts of reporting, due to the decreased
information flows and cooperation. By highlighting the challenges each actor faces, this paper seeks to propose a new and improved model of communication between the police and the media. Information and security both have important roles to play – a free press is essential to an open, democratic society, as is the safety of its citizens.

Relationship Recommendations

The following four pillars can improve the police–media information relationship and help to reduce potential negative impacts of reporting on terrorism.

Recognition

There needs to be recognition by both the media and the police of the challenges and competing priorities each face, especially during active terrorist incidents:

- The media should recognise that the police priority in an active incident is the safety of its officers and the public. Therefore, the police need to ensure accurate and appropriate information dissemination.
- The police should recognise that while they can take the time to verify information before issuing a communication, the media are obliged by the modern news environment to fill that space immediately and can only operate with the available information.
- The police should recognise that while live reporting will inevitably contain some mistakes, they are not intentional, and the media make significant efforts to avoid errors.
- It must be recognised that the majority of the media abide by the Code or its principles.
- Positive coverage should be recognised, including media proactivity around repairing damage done by terrorism.22

Communication

The police and the media should find a new mode of communication which respects necessary boundaries but improves information flows and understanding. This must be a constructive environment with a mutual willingness to receive criticism and learn from mistakes:

- The police should raise awareness among news outlets of their communications framework and process during active incidents. This could help improve understanding of the challenges the police face in issuing information.
- The police should be able to provide evidence of the impact that media reporting on terrorism may have and advise journalists on what they feel can be improved.

• Journalists should be able to communicate the challenges they face, as well as discuss policing-related concerns, such as asking questions about policing failures.

Information

Police interviewees indicated that over the last decade, and especially since the Leveson Inquiry in 2012, they have reduced the flow of information to journalists, largely to protect their reputation. This has had negative consequences in some instances. However, adjustments have been made. The following could help improve the flow of information:

• The police should recognise that the provision of information during major incidents is essential to accurate reporting.
• Media interviewees noted that assigned police press liaisons would provide a channel for improved flows of information.
• Media interviewees noted that Defence and Security Media Advisory (DSMA) Notices could be a more effective way to inform them of operational concerns in an ongoing investigation.
• Media interviewees suggested that there needs to be a channel for police to point out quickly when the media are spreading disinformation or speculation, allowing editors to correct the mistake rather than waiting for a government inquiry after the fact.

23. The Leveson Inquiry was a public inquiry into the practices, culture and ethics of UK newspapers following a phone-hacking scandal, in which their relationship with the police was described as ‘too cosy’. See Leveson Inquiry, Report into the Culture, Practices and Ethics of the Press (London: The Stationery Office, 2011).

24. For example, in 2013, the police issued no communications for several hours after the murder of Lee Rigby, except for advice to not retweet photos of firearms officers. Interviewees indicated how this information void allowed others to dominate the media space, including those encouraging extremist rhetoric, for example, Tommy Robinson.

25. Police interviewees said a review of the Metropolitan Police Service’s communications policy took place after the murder of Lee Rigby and their Major Incident Plan was adapted for readily accessible guidance and operational communications.

26. The Defence and Security Media Advisory (DSMA) Notice System is a means of providing advice and guidance to the media about defence and security information, the publication of which would be damaging to national security. See DSMA Notice System, ‘Standing Notices’, <https://dsma.uk/standing-notices/>, accessed 20 October 2020.
Education

One of the key elements of developing a more effective and positive relationship is education.27 The following types of interactions were emphasised by media interviewees as effective ways to increase awareness and understanding of the challenges to reporting on terrorism:

- Educational sessions held by the police, including role-playing, scenarios and discussions.28
- Proactive briefings held by the police to raise awareness around expected issues and to establish best practice before incidents.
- Wrap-up briefings held by the police to review actions after major incidents.
- The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office has also worked with the Society of Editors (SoE) to provide some sessions on the issue of amplification of terrorist messages, which offered some valuable data points and helped raise awareness.29

Each of these pillars represent steps that can be taken to improve the working police–media information relationship in a way that is conducive to the goals of both – informing the public and keeping them safe. This relationship is crucial to mitigating the potential negative impacts of reporting on terrorism.

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27. The Samaritans could be an inspirational model for successfully offering guidance on a sensitive reporting issue (suicide, in the case of the Samaritans). They have a consistent message and goals and engage in relationship-building, which has created credibility, trust and authority. They exercise restraint in their approach, do not criticise organisations publicly, and very rarely make complaints to IPSO; and they offer training, based on clear evidence and advice points. See <https://www.samaritans.org/>, accessed 18 February 2021.

28. For example, CT Policing invited media leadership to a Hydra training at Hendon Police College in 2016. See Hydra Foundation, <https://hydrafoundation.org/international-hydra/uk-south/metropolitan-police-service>, accessed 20 February 2021. Journalists took away valuable lessons on terrorism coverage, which were then disseminated in their outlets.

Conclusion

The role that the media plays in information provision is essential to public knowledge, and a free press should be protected and preserved in a liberal democracy. Therefore, this paper focuses on getting first-hand perspective from a range of associated professionals on the role of media reporting and police and government communications in terrorism, via their potential negative impacts. The evidence gathered highlights how media reporting does not occur in a vacuum. There are multiple dynamics and factors that contribute to how, what, when and where the media reports on terrorism – which can, in turn, contribute to the potential impacts of that reporting on wider society.

This paper highlights the importance of the relationship between the police and the media, and how cooperative and transparent information exchange can be beneficial to both actors. Furthermore, based on the interviews conducted for this paper and other journalist sources, this paper suggests that non-prescriptive guidance could play an important role in mitigating potential negative impacts of media reporting on terrorism, as well as of police and government communications on terrorism.

There are steps that can be taken by both the police and the media to encourage a more positive approach.

Recommendations

Counter Terrorism Policing

- **Build relationships** by being open to self-reflection and criticism. Recognise the challenges the media face, positive examples of reporting, and the media’s role in repairing communities and engaging public discussion. Work to build trust with the media through increasing flows of information.

- **Establish an educational programme** to offer regular informational sessions for news outlets. Consistency and trust are key to success, which can be difficult in the context of rotating liaison officers and communications teams. Therefore, a more permanent liaison position or thorough handover process should be considered.

- **Hold proactive briefings** to raise known issues (for example, disinformation and malicious media strategies) and anticipate major incidents. Highlight operational considerations and reasons why the media might be asked to delay reporting.

• **Hold wrap-up briefings** after incidents or periodic sessions to illustrate and discuss issues through case studies of recent events.

• **Join the DSMA Committee** as an avenue to provide proactive advisory information to the media on operational concerns in active incidents.

• **Provide evidence of impact**, including declassified evidence, where possible, of how propaganda reproduction can drive further internet traffic and expanding rings of extremism can be linked to media reporting. Additionally, await evidence before making claims of correlation.

• **Establish internal guidance** for language and framing in strategic communications. Disseminate information on the role of IPSO and collaborate with them on privacy notices and the enforcement of harassment policies.³¹

**Media**

• **Establish internal written guidance** to ingrain understanding of the issues before events occur. This cements behaviours before the additional pressures of time, social media and lack of verified information are added.

• **Conduct regular internal training/engagement sessions** for reporters and editors covering terrorism. Use available resources prepared by journalists and academics for training and discussion, for example:
  - IPSO guidance pages, covering multiple topics.³²
  - UNESCO handbook for reporting on terrorism, providing recommendations from active event coverage to post-coverage reflection.³³
  - The Dart Center for Journalism & Trauma website, with multiple resources for covering terrorism.³⁴
  - The Tow Center for Digital Journalism report, providing recommendations for challenges around digital reporting and the impact of social media.³⁵

• **Prioritise protection of the brand**. In an increasingly competitive consumer environment, media should view adherence to the Editors’ Code of Practice and factual, objective reporting as good business strategy. Providing well-written and edited content to a loyal readership base will be more competitive in the long run than simply reposting or reusing unedited, easily accessible online content.

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³³ Marthoz, ‘Terrorism and the Media’.
³⁴ Dart Center for Journalism & Trauma, ‘Terrorism’.
³⁵ Beckett, ‘Fanning the Flames’. 
• **Engage in cross-industry discussion** of the guidance recommendations given in Chapter III. The SoE offers a good platform to host engagement seminars, roundtables and meetings to this end.36

• **Add a ‘Terrorism’ guidance page on the IPSO website** highlighting terrorism-specific issues and impact.37 This should be part of a consultative process and include multiple perspectives, as this research project has done. This would provide easily accessible, non-prescriptive guidance which could be helpful to journalists as they are writing and editing stories on this complex topic.

36. This could include bringing in foreign journalists to get additional perspectives (for example, experience in publishing pictures of or naming attackers).

37. Similar to IPSO guidance pages on reporting suicide or coronavirus, see IPSO, ‘Guidance for Journalists and Editors’.
About the Author

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