

BBC WORLD SERVICE NEWSROOM POLICY ON NEUTRAL LANGUAGE AND TERRORISM

by David Spaul

The BBC World Service objectives place on the newsroom the obligation to produce “a credible, unbiased, reliable, accurate, balanced and independent service of news covering international and national developments”. Over the years we have evolved, and constantly refined, standards of dispassionate and unemotive language. By this we do not mean dull language; we describe events as graphically as is appropriate. But we do it without histrionics, and without the extravagant language of some of our competitors. We regard the careful use of language as essential if we are to achieve the objectives set for us. It is a vital element of our reputation for impartiality - and that, together with the accuracy, speed and comprehensive nature of our coverage, is the basis for any renown we may have achieved.

In this care with language we differ greatly from large sections of the rest of the media. Nowhere is the difference more apparent than in our treatment of the words terrorist and terrorism.

Our policy is straightforward. We acknowledge the existence of terrorism - at this point in the twentieth century we could hardly do otherwise. We don't change the word “terrorist” or “terrorism” when quoting other people - although as some of the main commercial newsagencies censor it, it can be difficult to be sure what words were actually used. But at the core of our policy is the decision - taken some years ago - not to label either people, groups or acts as terrorist.

As a policy it can create difficulties, particularly when handling some especially savage attack. We are not “soft” on terrorism, either as individuals or as a department; nor do we have any sympathy for the perpetrators of inhuman atrocities which all too often we have to report. For most of us, at one time or another, our policy is something of a self-denying ordinance. We too would often like to relieve our feeling of revulsion by using the broadcastable equivalents of “murdering bastards”. We don't, because we feel that something far more important than our feelings, or the feelings of some of our listeners, is at stake.

A vital part of the pursuit of this policy is to ensure that neutrality of language does not obscure the true nature of a terrorist attack. Without the word terrorist, a report could become anodyne. The difficulty does not usually arise when reporting a particular incident, because at such a time the detail of what was done is the story, and we are not in the business of pulling punches. It might arise subsequently when referring back to the incident. Even then, the label does not necessarily make a report more telling. “Last week's terrorist attack at Rome airport” is not as strong as “Last week's attack at Rome airport when passengers in the departure lounge were machine-gunned...” The former is a classic piece of shorthand which, as is often the case, actually obscures meaning. But if the word terrorist is to be dropped, it is essential to remind listeners of the nature of the attack.

In considering whether or not we should use the words terrorist and terrorism it's worth mentioning as a starting point that there is no consensus on what constitutes a terrorist, or a terrorist attack. Even those who are most vehement in stating their opposition to terrorism are inconsistent. For one thing, no-one uses the dictionary definition “One who...uses terror-inspiring methods of governing”. The word is confined to those who are trying to coerce

governments or society. Terrorism is therefore a label for actions against governments, never for the actions of governments. (The fairly recent concept of “state sponsored terrorism”, while blurring this distinction, is still used mainly to describe the support of one government for a terrorist group attacking another). Equally importantly, the individual’s conception of what constitutes terrorism is affected to a greater or lesser degree by their sympathy with the aims of the group concerned. At times this sympathy - or lack of it - is rationalised by complex assessments of whether any other method of achieving their aims is open to the group involved.

It is for these complex reasons that some people who would have no difficulty labelling some of the actions of the Contras as terrorist would shy away from so labelling similar acts if carried out by the ANC; others who have no doubt that an IRA attack is terrorist would not use the label for the Contras or the mujahadin. The list of comparisons is almost endless, and as our bulletins span the world, our listeners are likely to encompass every variety of opinion.

In a world so inconsistent in its attitude to terrorism, should the BBC pursue a consistent policy of using “terrorist” to describe an action which clearly fits the description? So far as World Service is concerned the answer has to be no. Accepting that there are some actions which most people would recognise as terrorist - the hand-grenade thrown into a crèche, the airport queue machine-gunned - we should still avoid the word. In the first place, our audience is as perceptive as we are, and can make up their own minds without being provided with labels. In the second place, there are actions which are not quite so clearly terrorist, and we should not be forced into the position of having to make value judgements on each event. And as I shall argue in a moment, while the label terrorist is unnecessary for listeners who share our view, it is likely to have a totally negative effect on those who do not.

We also have to consider the language used to describe actions often taken by governments against the groups concerned. A PLO attack has in the past been followed by Israeli over-reaction in which many innocent people have been killed. We do not, and should not, say “The Israeli airforce has made a terrorist attack...”. We use unemotive language to describe as accurately as possible what action was taken, and what its results were. Exactly the same language should be used to describe the actions of the PLO. In Sri Lanka, both sides carried out terrorist attacks on bus passengers. We would never have considered saying “The Sri Lankan army has carried out a terrorist attack on a bus”. Wanting to remain impartial, we had to treat the Tamil Tigers in the same unemotive way. Similar examples can be quoted from many countries which have terrorist or guerrilla groups.

If for these reasons we should avoid terrorist in describing events in the third world, should we use it in Europe, and particularly to describe the IRA? Again the answer must be no. In the first place, we would lay ourselves open to the criticism, already frequently voiced, that we are sensitive to terrorism near home, but not when it’s far away. In the second place, we should be particularly careful in the case of IRA violence. We may see it clearly as terrorism, but that’s not how it’s always perceived abroad. It’s salutary to remember that it is in the United States, of all countries in the world the one most overtly hostile to terrorism, where there is most foreign sympathy for the IRA. It is comforting to say that this arises from people’s Irish origins, or because they do not properly understand what is going on. It doesn’t follow that all the American IRA sympathisers suffer from either or both these forms of blindness; some understand perfectly well, but put a different interpretation on what is happening because they see it from a different perspective.

Most importantly, if we allow hostility to the IRA and its actions to colour the language we use, we shall be perceived in many places - not only in the United States - as being biased, or even as pursuing a government line. Provided we ensure that neutrality of language does not emasculate our reports, we shall be more effective than if we use labels which some will regard as evidence of partiality. If you hear a foreign radio station say that the racist South African Government has taken action you immediately assume that you are not going to hear an unbiased account, even if you agree with the description. The label has put you on your guard against what you are about to hear. Without it, you would have considered the report on its merits.

This is the rationale for the style on the use of language and on terrorism which the newsroom has followed for years now. I have no doubt that it has added to our stature abroad rather than diminished it. It has never led to complaints that we do not share the abhorrence of terrorism which the British public feel. I and my senior colleagues have no doubt at all that it is the right policy to follow, and that if we were to depart from it, our credibility and reputation for impartiality would be badly damaged in the minds of our listeners. Nowhere is this more true than in our reporting of the IRA. Anyone who doubts this should also bear in mind that when things go wrong in the fight against the IRA, as from time to time inevitably they must, there is no better damage limitation in terms of world opinion than the BBC telling the facts without embellishment and without emotive language.

That we are free to speak in such a way will not be lost on listeners in the many countries where such freedoms do not exist.

David Spaul, Editor BBC World Service News, September 1988.