Preventing Incitement to Terrorism and Radicalisation: What Role for the Media?

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Opening Address by Professor John Horgan

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I have read the documentation prepared for your conference with considerable interest. It covers many different fields, and provides evidence of a serious and detailed attempt to grapple with the many professional and political issues that arise in this area. My own necessarily limited contribution to your discussions will involve some case histories from my own country, and will raise some questions which may merit further discussion. What I have to suggest focuses on the processes bh which media are produced, rther than on media products, because process is, I believe, the most fruitful context in which to discuss the dynamic reality that is media today.

At the outset, however, it is important to recognise how much the media has changed, and is changing, even since the process on which you are engaged began in Barcelona two years ago. The growth of the internet, of web-based publishing and of blogging has generated new challenges, not only for traditional journalism but also for public officials and administrative systems. Recent research by Harvard's Berkman Center for Internet and Society has shown that in the last five years the number of states carrying out state-mandated net filtering – which I suppose is a polite word for censorship – has grown from a handful to more than two dozen. Countries which carry out the broadest range of filtering include Burma, Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen. The filtering has three primary rationales, according to the report: politics and power, security concerns and social norms. In other countries, notably in the EU, filtering is carried out by the private sector rather than by the state.[1]

The emphasis, in this official response to new media, on politics, power and security is especially relevant to the theme of your conference. And it is hardly surprising that the growth of filtering technology is being followed, as night follows day, by the

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[1] Source: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/6665945.stm - BBC News. Accessed 18 May 2007.

development of circumvention technology. The new media provide new battlegrounds for conflicts between citizens and the state, between different groups within the state, and even between states themselves. Your role in these emerging areas of contention will be critical. And, as you develop that role, it is worth remembering that there are two sides to the blogging coin. One side of it is well expressed by the adage that a lie can be half way around the world before truth gets its boots on. But the other side of the coin is that blogging also has a role as a kind of quality check on mainstream media. This is because it can – and has – on occasion helped to identify errors, biases and other shortcomings in those sections of the media that tend to stake their reputations on accuracy, authenticity and reliability.

However, it is important not to be seduced by technology. The task you have set yourselves, if I interpret it correctly, is to devise strategies and structures in this area which do not depend on any particular form or level of technology for their development and implementation.

I hope I am also correct in assuming that you would generally share Thomas Jefferson's view that the truth will prevail "unless disarmed of her natural weapons, free argument and debate."

In practice, of course, life is not as simple as that. All states reserve the right to protect themselves and, in an era increasingly dominated by low-intensity conflict, the question sometimes becomes not one of whether there should be any constraints on media, but when, how many, and by whom they are operated.

The history of Ireland in the past eight decades provides a fascinating case history of this process in operation, of its evolution, and indeed of its duration. Although our civil war ended formally in 1923, its effects - including further episodes of political violence – have continued to be experienced for a further eighty years. In 1939 it was made a criminal offence for any publication in this state to refer by name to the IRA. The only descriptive words allowed were "an illegal organisation". One of the former members of that "illegal organisation" is now a member of the new power-sharing administration in Northern Ireland. That law has never been repealed. In the past 35 years it was broken every day, and no publication was ever prosecuted.

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Another law was introduced in the early 1970s to ban the broadcasting of interviews with members of Sinn Fein, then a legal political party, but described by one government minister of the day as "a public relations agency for a murder gang". It was repealed thirty years later, before the final ceasefire by the IRA, as a confidence building measure designed to encourage that organisation to abandon its armed struggle. Almost decade later, that ceasefire led to the formal abandonment of the armed struggle as a political option. The question of the often cloudy relationships between legal political organisations and illegal para-military organisations to which they may be linked, and the relationship between both and the media, remains a live one to this day, and continues to have significance for media organisations and for states.

Also in Ireland, the highly problematic nature of the relationship between governments and media – in particular, public service broadcasters – was exemplified by a government decision in 1972 to dismiss the entire governing body of the public broadcasting system because, in the government's view, they had broadcast material which was effectively, in the words of your conference title, an incitement to terrorism.

All this happened a long time ago, but this does not mean that it lacks contemporary relevance. For example, the argument between government and media at that time was, as it generally is, about means rather than ends. The consensus opposes terrorism; the consensus is at least in theory in favour of freedom of the press. The no-man's-land in the middle is where the bodies are strewn. A government prohibition that is too vague engenders self-censorship or worse in media organisations. One that is too specific involves government directly in the vitally important function of editing, in a way that threatens the central tenet of a free press.

And the issue of "incitement" was at the core of an argument about the introduction of new security legislation in the mid-1970s when the print media successfully persuaded the government of the day to modify a draft law which, in the view of the newspapers, invited the courts to equate reportage with incitement.

Both government officials and journalists have to acknowledge – and to implement in their own practices – this difference between reportage and incitement, even though this crucial difference may at times be obscured or even partially compromised by the speed of modern communications and the intensity of the conflict which is being reported. It may also be obscured by the fact that nobody who picks up a newspaper or turns on a radio or television set has a mind like a blank slate waiting to be written on. A graphic newspaper or television image of the carnage caused by a terrorist bomb may inspire many to greater efforts to defeat the terrorism that caused it. It may give others, equally opposed to terrorism,s the hollow, despairing feeling that terrorism can never be defeated. It may even – and without any intention on the part of the publishers - incite terrorists to repeat the tactic in the light of what they perceive to be its evident success.

Government and journalists alike, in this context, can at least start with an acceptance of good faith on both sides. Professional journalism is neither a willing nor an unwilling collaborator with terrorism. Government officials who are trying to do their jobs do not generally have, as their prime objective, the eradication of free speech. But they are different entities, with different tasks to perform, and the fact that they may often come into conflict does not have to be a cause for despair – indeed, a certain amount of tension is inevitable, and probably a good thing overall. And acceptance of good faith can be buttressed by an acceptance that people and institutiions make mistakes, and that mistakes are not necessarily evidence of bad faith, of bias, or of malice: more often than not, they are just that – mistakes, made under the pressure of events.

But there are also two issues which should, I think, be addressed, one by each side, if the relationship between media and government is to develop fruitfully in situations in which terrorism and low-level but intense conflict is endemic.

The first can perhaps be identified as the tendency for governments to think of media purely in terms of their utility to the opposing forces. If it is true, as it sometimes is, that terrorists can use media for their own purposes, perhaps states should resist the temptation to think of the media in the same terms.

It is tempting to believe that if terrorists can use the media to challenge the state, the state can use the media to defeat terrorism, but in my view this is an over-simplification. This is because the function of media is multi-layered.

There are times when the function of the media in relation to terrorism should include, not only exposure of the effects of terrorism, but inquiry, explanation, and the provision of contextual information which will be important for decision-makers and which will reflect more accurately the complex political, ideological and social realities that underpin terrorist actions and policies. This is not incitement, much less support, for terrorism. And there are many occasions when this role of the media can, and should, be accompanied by trenchant oppposition to terrorism. The role of media, as it has traditionally been understood, is that of speaking truth to power – whether that power is based on a democratic mandate or, as in the case of terrorism, on the power of the bomb and the gun.

There is a need, in this area, not primarily for the structures of censorship and state control (although these may occasionally be required in very extreme circumstances), but for structures which allow public decision-makers and journalists alike to explain their strongly held views to each other, without the need to reach agreement, but with the objective of creating a greater mutual understanding of each other's goals and aspirations.

The growth of university departments of media, communications and journalism world-wide, not least in the countries from which many of you come, offers the possibility of creating appropriate, often informal structures in which all those working for the elimination of terrorism and political violence can meet as equals who share common ideals and can discuss experiences and strategies in a context which does not have to divide the participants into censors and libertarians, winners and losers.

The second issue is one which relates to journalists more than to governments. Journalists need to ask themselves whether their traditional professional objectives of impartiality, objectivity and accuracy – objectives which have a much more limited

reality and utility than many journalists optimistically suppose – are in themselves sufficient in the context of terrorism and political violence.

To report, I would argue, is also to participate, although in a different sense from the participation of the protagonists in any coflict involving terrorism or political violence. Because all journalism involves selection, and because all selection involves a value judgment on the part of those making the selection, the media are actors (not in the dramatic sense, of course!) as well as observers. In this context, journalists can learn to become more aware of their own value judgments, and can be encouraged to introduce an element of reflection into what is, by and large, an instinctive process often carried out at high speed.

They ca nalso contribute to the lowering of tension and a reduction, perhaps even eventually the elimination, of political violence, by encouraging the development of peace processes and by resisting the temptation to allow themselves to be used by either side in negotiations as part of the apparatus of megaphone diplomacy.

But they cannot do this on their own. If the experience of our own small island is any guide, it shows that the prime movers in this sort of situation are usually political. It was not until the political actors involved in the Northern Ireland situation, and particularly the British government, became convinced that the solution to the problem of terrorism in Northern Ireland lay in the political rather than in the military or the security sphere, that media in both islands became conscious of the possibilities of exploring the potential solution, rather than sensationalising the violent confrontations which for years had been the staple diet of reportage.

There were mistakes, here, too, of course. The journalistic consensus against terrorism was so strong that many journalists, intially, misjudged or under-estimated the significance of the peace process. For time, therefore, there was a time-lag. Behind the scenes, moves towards peace accelerated while the media continued to be dominated by the images of conflict and the sounds of recrimination.

As well as mistakes being made, risks were taken. For example many journalists, once the peace process had been effectively launched, minimised or even ignored the

para-military pasts of some of the political activists, in the interests of encouraging the process itself. Turning a blind eye in this sense may have assisted the peace process in some ways, but it hampered it in others. This was because many of those who had been the victims of para-military violence, feeling – understandably - that their suffering was being ignored or discounted, and that criminals were being allowed to go unpunished, hardened their attitudes and retreated from agreement.

There are limits, of course, to what journalism can achieve, and these limits are not usually under the control of journalists themselves. If, in a divided society, the media are also divided and there are no shared or common media, then the role of the media in bringing an end to terrorism or political violence of any kind will of necessity be more limited. Some recent research by an Israeli scholar on the role of the Israeli and Northern Ireland media in relation to both the Oslo Agreement and the Belfast Agreement offers convincing, if somewhat disheartening, evidence for this point of view.[2]

Journalists also need to ask themselves, as part of this exercise of self-examination, whether, or to what extent, their professional values can be modified – and perhaps on occasion even compromised – by the fierce competition between media for readers, audiences and advertisers. If political passions are running high in civil society, the temptation for media is to echo, perhaps even inflame further, those passions to achieve objectives that are commercial rather than journalistic.

There are many examples of this kind of media attitude in contexts where terrorism is not even an issue . In ordinary civil societies where crime rates are not dramatically changing, for instance, it is not unknown for media, in the interests of greater sales, to set about frightening their readers by the exaggerated reporting of criminal activity, particularly of crimes involving violence.

In the context of political violence and terrorism journalism can contribute to a heightening of tension, and perhaps even to a delay in arriving at negiotiated

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[2] Wolfsfeld, Gadi (2004), *Media and the Path to Peace* (Cambridge)

solutions, by maximising the reporting of confrontation and by minimising or ignoring the possibilities for negotiation. If this sells more papers or generates more listeners or viewers, it is temptation which is sometimes difficult to avoid. Very often journalists find themselves all but powerless when faced by these forces and these agendas. This is the context in which I think other structures might also be considered – structures within media organisations which could allow journalists the room and the time to reflect, collegially, on what they are doing, on how they are doing it, and on the possible effects of doing their job in different but equally valid ways.

I am not suggesting that all journalistic decisions about content, editorial policy, news priorities and emphasis should be taken by committee – far from it. In media organisations, whether public or private, there has long been acceptance of the principle that editors are, at the end of the day, solely responsible for decisions like these (even though they may be made on occasion by subordinates) in much the same way as the captain of a ship has unquestioned authority. If editors are not doing a good job, there is no point in trying to second-guess them, or to surround them with watchdogs who will make sure that they toe a particular line or editorial policy. In the long and indeed in the short run also, there is only one cure for an editor who isn't up to scratch: a new editor.

What I am suggesting is that journalists - particularly middle-ranking, serious journalists with a wealth of experience – should take the lead in setting up structures in their own media organisations within which purely professional and ethical issues of the kind I have outlined can be discussed. These can be established within the context of existing professional journalistic organisations, including trade unions, or quite independently. They could be internal to any given media organisation, or shared between different media organisations. These discussions may or may not have an influence on overall editorial policy, which in the last analysis is subject to many other pressures as well. But they will inevitably, if they are taken seriously, contribute to a deepening and strengthening of the professional and ethical sense of journalists in key positions in ways which will enable not only individual journalists, but the media as a whole, to tackle more effectively the issues you are discussing at your conference. These are issues not only of politics and professionalism, but issues, for many people, of life and death itself.