



CONCLUSION PAPER

*RAN VoT Working Group meeting
23-24 May 2022, Milan, Italy*

The perception of victims/survivors of terrorism in media

Key outcomes

In the aftermath of an attack there is a large hunger for information and media often turn to those who have been directly affected. Also, in the long run the stories of victims/survivors can shape the narrative surrounding an attack. By portraying the victims/survivors in a certain way, and through choosing whether or not to share their stories, media play a large role in shaping the perception of victims/survivors in the public eye. In addition, cooperation between victims/survivors and media can contribute to commemorative activities, play a part in the victims'/survivors' healing process, and even be part of a preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) approach.

However, especially in the immediate aftermath, being approached by media can be harming for victims/survivors if not done properly, especially if their needs and potential wish for anonymity are not honoured. This can lead to secondary traumatisation.

On 23 and 24 May victims/survivors of terrorism, journalists, communication and commemoration experts, and practitioners working in victim organisations came together at the Victims/survivors of Terrorism (VoT) Working Group meeting in Milan to discuss the perception of victims/survivors of terrorism in media and possibilities for cooperation with a commemorative and P/CVE aim. The discussions led to the following key outcomes:

- The portrayal of victims/survivors has **greatly evolved** in the last 20 years — whereas with the London 7/7 attacks in 2005 media still showed many pictures of injured victims/survivors, this is no longer the case. However, there is still a **disconnect** between media reporting and the needs and wants of victims/survivors.
- Especially in the immediate aftermath of an attack it can be hard for victims/survivors to assess whether they are ready to talk to media, which often leads to regret later on. There is a **duty of care for journalists** in this regard, and a potential role to play for **victim organisations as mediators**.
- There is a significant **difference between short- and long-term reporting**. Shortly after an attack the hunger for information is the largest and journalists are under time pressure, but at the same time this is the phase when victims/survivors are at their most vulnerable. In the long term there is more time for elaborate cooperation, leading to more mindful and respectful reporting.
- Sharing their story in the media can be a vital part of **victims'/survivors' healing process**.

This conclusion paper collects the highlights of the meeting's discussion and includes recommendations for journalists, victims/survivors of terrorism and those working with victims/survivors, in order to ensure a respectful portrayal of victims/survivors in media and fruitful cooperation as part of P/CVE approaches.

Highlights of the discussion

For victims/survivors of a terrorist attack it is almost impossible to completely avoid interaction with media; an attack is often a public trauma, so it's hard to shield yourself from the attention resulting from it. Whereas some choose to share their story in the media soon after the attack has taken place, others might prefer anonymity. For journalists reporting on (the aftermath of) terror attacks, victims/survivors are a powerful source of information and can serve as a face behind the numbers shared in the news. The experiences victims/survivors have with media, both in the days and weeks after the attack, as well as in the longer run, can significantly shape their response to the events that have taken place and also affect their healing process, both negatively and positively. Therefore, journalists should be aware of the responsibility they have when working with victims/survivors — and also when choosing not to.

Reporting on a terror attack can be a challenge, as there are some ambiguities at play. On the one hand, there should not be too large a focus on the perpetrator(s), as this can further the spread of their ideology. At the same time, the immediate aftermath of an attack is the time when victims/survivors are at their most vulnerable and might not be able to oversee the choices they make with regard to talking to the media or not, as they are often in shock. It is therefore paramount that journalists approach victims/survivors with care and respect, and keep in mind these vulnerabilities. Another ambiguity with regard to reporting on an attack is whether or not to share details of the attack. For some victims/survivors it might be retraumatising to hear about what happened over and over, whereas for others it might help them recover their memories of the event. Moreover, it can prevent the public from downplaying what happened by confronting them with the full story and it shifts the focus from the perpetrators themselves to the consequences of their actions. Again, there is a large responsibility with journalists to decide which stories and details they share.

Media attention – positive and negative consequences

In the last decades a lot has changed with regard to reporting on terror attacks. Nowadays, for example, most media outlets abide by the rule to not depict injured or deceased victims in a recognisable way. However, there is still a significant disconnect between the goals of journalists and the needs of victims/survivors. There are multiple examples of people being actively informed by journalists that their loved ones had died, even before government officials had done so. And while the shooting was taking place on the island of Utøya, Norway, on 22 July 2011, media tried to contact the young individuals hiding from the shooter, asking them for information on what was going on at the island, thereby risking exposure to the attacker.

There are many examples of possible negative consequences of media attention that victims/survivors experience. If their story is not shared, or in a way that does not reflect their experience of the situation, they can feel invisible, misunderstood and ashamed. When they do have the opportunity to share their own narrative, it is sometimes “hijacked” by others, such as politicians using the victims'/survivors' story for their own political gain. Moreover, harmful experiences on social media often force victims/survivors to delete their social media accounts in order to protect themselves from negative comments. The examples above do not necessarily stem from the approach journalists use, yet journalists can play an important role in limiting this negative experience. Further in this paper, recommendations for journalists are included.

It should not be forgotten, however, that media attention can also have positive consequences for victims/survivors and for P/CVE efforts. Publications, in whatever way, shape or form, can serve as a dynamic and continuous approach of commemoration. Documentaries or fictional movies, for example, can play a significant role in creating awareness and keeping the memory alive. And, perhaps most importantly, providing a stage for victims/survivors to share their story can play a key role in their healing process.

Recommendations

The way media cooperate with and portray victims/survivors highly influences the public perception of the attack and of victims/survivors themselves. During the meeting several inspiring examples and lessons learned were shared, as well as the consequences different kinds of reporting can have and the powerful role victims/survivors can play in changing the narrative.

For example, after the attacks in Hanau, Germany, in February 2020, the victims/survivors experienced a “second attack” through the way the deceased — who were all from a migrant background — were initially portrayed in the media. The attacks were dubbed the “shisha attacks”, stereotyping the victims and contributing to the image that they were not “truly” German. In response, the affected families and members of their community bonded together and started the ‘Say their names’ campaign, giving a face to the victims and emphasising that they, too, are part of German society. In addition, the families collectively made decisions on which media to talk to, and also who from their community would talk to which journalist. This approach drastically changed the reporting on the attack and subsequently society’s perspective of the victims and survivors.

Media coverage from different media outlets after the attack in Norway of 22 July 2011, and the subsequent court and parole cases, show the consequences different approaches can have. Whereas some media chose to share everything the perpetrator said and shared during the hearings, which was then shared within minutes on online right-wing forums, other media decided to blur his messages, in order not to give him the stage he so desired. The latter approach not only keeps in mind the victims/survivors, for whom the perpetrator’s messages might be hurtful, but also shows an acknowledgment of the responsibility in not helping disseminate the perpetrator’s ideology.

Below are some tangible recommendations and ethical guidelines for journalists wanting to work with victims/survivors of terrorism and tips for victims/survivors who are being approached by media.

Recommendations for journalists

The ambiguity that is constantly at play, as described above, might complicate journalists’ work as no one victim/survivor is the same and might require a different approach. However, at the core the (ethical) guidelines for journalists can be summarised as **respecting the individual’s needs and dignity**. In addition, it is recommended to keep the following in mind:

- Decisions on whether to send a journalist to the site of an attack or not, who is being sent, and with what instructions and guidelines are made in the editorial room. There is a **duty of care** with the whole editorial team.
- Shortly after an attack, victims/survivors are at their most vulnerable and might not be capable of formulating their needs, let alone share these with journalists. Journalists wishing to hear first-hand experiences could instead **focus on first responders** who were first to the scene (while also keeping in mind their needs).
- When reporting on an attack, ask yourself and your colleagues: what is the purpose of our message, and how does, for example, me interviewing a woman who has just lost her child add to this? **Is it useful**, or just sensational?
- Try to **stick to the facts** and only report on what is actually known, without sharing “alleged” information on the attack. Any information shared by media is often perceived by the public as being true. Moreover, **not all information should be shared**, especially when an attack is still ongoing and the shared information might be beneficial to the perpetrator.

- It is paramount to have a **crisis communication plan** in place before an attack takes place, and to evaluate and adjust after an attack has in fact taken place. As crisis communication in the direct aftermath of an attack often comes both from media and government, it can be useful to cooperate with the government on formulating this crisis response.
- Be aware of the **individuality of each victim/survivor**. They all have different needs and experiences and these should be respected. For example, the “immediate aftermath” for one person might only be a week, for another it could be a month or more. This may be due to medical reasons, like waking up from a coma after several weeks, but also due to some people taking a longer time to actually realise what has happened to them.
- The **dignity of the victims/survivors** should at all times be respected. No (recognisable) pictures of the dead or wounded should be shared.
- When reporting on a deceased victim, **focus on their life story** instead of the way they died.
- **Victims/survivors are not suddenly experts** on terrorism, extremism, or on victims’ experiences and rights. They all have different views and opinions and should not be required to speak for all victims/survivors or to reflect on the perpetrator’s motives.
- To ensure a safe experience for the victim/survivor, take the time to **brief and debrief**.
- Realise that **victims/survivors are most likely in shock** directly after an attack. Even though they might (appear to) give consent for an interview, they might not be capable of making such a decision at that moment.
- **Prevent using “whataboutisms”**, comparing the victims/survivors of this attack to other victims/survivors. This creates a hierarchy of suffering that is damaging to all involved.
- Sharing — with their permission — images, posts and videos that victims/survivors themselves have already shared publicly supports them in **sharing their own narrative** and shaping the public’s image of themselves. Moreover, it acknowledges their agency and allows them to share their story without being limited by a journalist’s framework.
- Realise the influence you have on **society’s response to and perception of an attack**. Extrapolating individuals’ trauma by collectivising it can create grievances, potentially leading to Islamophobia or hate crimes.
- **Adjust to victims’/survivors’ needs**, also in a practical sense: don’t ask them to adapt to your schedule, but follow theirs, and respect their choice if they cancel last-minute.
- Focusing solely on victims’/survivors’ trauma and the objective of healing can be stigmatising and puts pressure on victims/survivors of the same attack that have a different experience. Not everyone “heals” at the same pace, in the same way or at all. There needs to be an **array of stories**, not just of victims/survivors getting better. Other possible angles are:
 - What can society or the government do (better) to support victims/survivors?
 - Focus on a perspective beyond victimhood: how did the victim/survivor move on (if at all)? What did they do in the meantime?
 - Pay attention to commemorative activities surrounding the anniversary of an attack, their role in healing and as part of a P/CVE approach.
- Do not pity, but show respect, and **humanise the victim/survivor**. Dehumanisation is one of the aims of the perpetrator; this needs to be countered.
- Journalists can **respect and support the development of victims/survivors** over the years by writing stories about how they have developed their resilience.
- Give the victim/survivor the opportunity to **approve everything before publication**.

- **Journalists themselves are also affected** when reporting on terror attacks and when working with victims/survivors. They should receive sufficient care, for example in the shape of psychological support or in sharing their experiences with peers.

Recommendations for victims/survivors and victim organisations

Everyone who has been affected by a terror attack, whether directly or indirectly, has a different experience and response. Each person's needs are different, so the tips below might not apply to all victims/survivors. However, they might support victims/survivors in shaping their experience in dealing and possibly cooperating with media, leading to a less stressful experience that can even be beneficial to their healing process.

- You can't be "normal" in an abnormal situation; there is **no right or wrong way** to be a victim/survivor.
- Try to **be clear about your boundaries** and realise nobody else can define for you whether or not you are ready to talk to media. If you struggle in expressing your boundaries, ask for help from a person close to you or a victim organisation that can speak on your behalf or come up with solutions. For example, during the court case of the 22 July 2011 attacks, the Norwegian Support Group handed out stickers saying "No interviews" to the victims/survivors present at the trial, providing them an easy and clear way of communicating their needs to journalists.
- **Practice your message** beforehand, so you know what you want to say. It is up to you to define the event and what happened to you; don't let the media define you.
- What is shared online, stays online. **Be mindful of what you share** and think of whether you still want this to be public information in 5 or 10 years.
- It can be hard to share your story over and over. **Talking to media collectively** with fellow victims/survivors or family members can lighten the burden. This way others can take over or encourage you when you're struggling. In addition, don't feel burdened to refer to previous media productions in case you don't want to repeat (part of) your story.
- Get **media training** as soon as you can. This is not possible immediately after the attack, but especially when dealing with the media in the long term, it is essential.
- You are forced to own your story, as it will stay with you no matter what. With the right support an individual, possibly chaotic perception of the event can be shaped into a **conscious narrative**, even or especially through cooperation with media.
- Victim organisations can make sure victims/survivors can be **supported directly after an attack** by:
 - helping them find the right news outlets to talk to;
 - helping them find the right words;
 - helping them say no (to media requests or specific questions).
- Media like **positive stories**, especially in the long run. Victims/survivors can work together with media to focus on the positive side of their story.

Relevant practices

1. The **Finn Nørgaard Association (DK)** is a charity established by relatives and next of kin to Finn Nørgaard. Finn was one of the two victims of the terror attacks that took place in Copenhagen on 14 and 15 February 2015. The association's mission is "to promote understanding and dialogue in order to counter conflicts like the one that took the life of Finn. The association especially focuses on kids and adolescents as well as people with social challenges."
2. **Marcin Wierchowski**, journalist and documentary maker, and **Nesrin Unvar (DE)**, sister of Ferhat Unvar, who was a victim of the February 2020 attacks in Hanau, provided a presentation on their work in the community after the attack. Through letting the families affected by the attack tell their story in their own words — in a documentary and on social media — the victims/survivors reshaped the narrative that was constructed in the media after the attack.
3. In collaboration with journalists, mental health experts and investigators, psychologist **Dr Štěpán Vymětal (CZ)** produced the booklets *Tragedies and Journalists* (2006) and *Journalists and Victims of Crime* (2008), which include guidelines for journalists reporting on crime and disasters on how to report in a respectful manner while at the same time keeping in mind their own (mental) safety.
4. The **National Support Group after the 22 July attacks (NO)** supports victims/survivors and their families affected by the 2011 attacks that took place in Oslo and on the island of Utøya. Amongst other tools, they developed a system that helps guide victims/survivors through the institutions they have to deal with after an attack, and this system is now broadened to also be relevant for victims of "regular" crimes.

Follow-up

Although some journalists and communication experts were invited to this meeting, these guidelines were primarily drafted from the point of view of victims/survivors of terrorism. It could therefore be valuable to have a group of communication experts look at these guidelines and adjust them according to their needs and expertise. This could, for example, take place during a RAN Communication and Narratives (C&N) Working Group meeting, whether or not combined with members of the RAN VoT Working Group.

Additionally, it was discussed to draft a paper in which the strategic communication and victims'/survivors' perspectives are brought together in the context of media reporting in the aftermath of a terrorist attack, and more broadly in the context of P/CVE and diminishing the terrorist propaganda effect.

Further reading

- [Guidelines on Media Engagement](#) – Queen’s University Belfast
- RAN VoT and C&N Working Group Meeting, 2020: [How to involve victims of terrorism in a prevention campaign](#)
- RAN VoT Working Group Meeting, 2021: [Supporting the voices of young victims/survivors of terrorism](#)
- RAN specialised paper, 2021: [Reporting about violent extremism and P/CVE: Challenges for journalists – Recommendations from practitioners](#)
- [A Second Trauma - Media reporting of terror attacks through the eyes of survivors](#) – Survivors Against Terror)