

Defining Terrorism in the Media: Applications of Journalistic Ethical Standards

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Published to CBC News on Oct. 12, 2023, Mark Gollom's article, [*Israel warplanes pound Gaza. A ground invasion is expected. Does Hamas have an endgame?*](#), provides an analysis of the goals and ulterior motivations behind the Palestinian militia group Hamas, and includes a history of the conflict, as well as the opinions of a number of political and historical experts, to explain how and why the Hamas-led events of Oct. 7, 2023 transpired.

Throughout the article, Gollom takes great care to ensure that he provides accurate accounts of the current political situation in Israel-Palestine, while refraining from inserting the opinions of himself or others. Rather than labeling Hamas or its actions as that of terrorism, he chooses instead to use terms such as 'militia' and 'militant group'. A militia is commonly understood to be a group of armed civilians operating like a military, and motivated by a religious or political belief (Merriam-Webster, 2023), which is an accurate representation of both the structure and behaviours of Hamas. It is my belief that Gollom's decision to use the term militia rather than terrorist when referring to Hamas is one that promotes fair and unbiased reporting, as well as acknowledges the real world implications of publicizing one's opinions as fact. Currently, there is not a universally accepted definition of what constitutes an act of terrorism, despite a number of countries having their own, which are often inconsistent with one another.

On Oct. 16 2023, the CBC published an article to its website titled *How CBC News uses the words 'terrorist,' 'terrorism'*, following a National Post article leaking an internal CBC memo.

The article outlines the reasons behind the CBC's decision to refrain from using either term, and reiterates the responsibility of journalists to provide factual and unbiased coverage of an event, not personal opinions (Fenlon, 2023, para. 10). This directly reflects the Canadian Association of Journalists' (CAJ) *Ethical Guidelines* (2011), which states "We do not allow our own biases to

impede fair and accurate reporting” (para. 3). One news outlet may view the actions of Hamas as terrorism, while another may not, and the lack of an internationally accepted definition requires unbiased and accurate reporting.

A recent CNN poll found that 71 per cent of Americans felt a deep level of sympathy for Israelis, while only 41 per cent felt the same level of sympathy for Palestinians (CNN, 2023, p. 3), and the United Kingdom recently announced it would be re-examining the legality of displaying the Palestinian flag at protests, fearing it could be used as an intimidation tactic (Hassan, 2023, para. 5). This attribution of terrorism to Palestinian existence is, in my opinion, most likely fuelled by news and media outlets labeling Hamas as a terrorist organization, while intentionally excluding critical political context, including how Hamas was last elected in 2007 (El Deeb, 2023, para. 1), and that almost half of Palestine’s population is under the age of 18 (State of Palestine, 2022, p. 3). Gollom’s decision to refer to Hamas as a militia not only accurately reflects the current political landscape of the region, but also helps to reduce the likelihood that a reader will automatically associate terrorism with Palestinian identity, and allow them to form their own opinions.

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