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Living with al-Qaeda: The Robert Fowler Story

CBC Guidelines on Covering Kidnapping and Hostage Situations

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[CBC News](#)

The following are the CBC's most recent journalistic guidelines for how to cover kidnapping and hostage situations. They are not yet formally part of the CBC's Journalistic Standards and Practices, but do reflect CBC News' most up-to-date thinking on the issue.

GUIDELINES The number of Canadians involved in kidnappings abroad seems to be rising exponentially. For good reason - they have become a lucrative industry. Covering these incidents presents some obvious challenges for us. As journalists, we believe in the value of sharing information. But there are other values that can have equal weight. Giving publicity to these events can put the hostages' lives in greater danger. By raising the profile of their plight, it can increase their "value" to the kidnappers, leading to increased demands, or even the "trading up" of a hostage to more powerful and dangerous elements. (This isn't always the case. In some kidnappings, publicity may help the hostage. But those are the minority. And it is extremely difficult to know which is which). But going back to first principles always helps:

There are two that most pertain here:

1. What is our journalistic purpose in covering a kidnapping?
2. What, if anything, can we do to minimize harm?

OUR JOURNALISTIC PURPOSE This is the place to start. If we decide to cover a kidnapping, what is the value of our reporting? What are we contributing? Certainly when a local community finds out one of their own is missing, there will be interest. But before we go with the story, here are some initial questions we should ask ourselves:

- Have we confirmed the story? Or confirmed what the wire is saying?
- Have we talked to the agency the person might be working for?
- What do we know about the motive for the kidnapping. Is it political?
- What are other major stakeholders (family, in-country officials) saying?

Generally speaking, we should stay away from ransom demands, speculation on who and what is being negotiated. Report only what we know to be true. There is too much at stake to be delving into the rumour mills in these cases.

MINIMIZING HARM The obvious point to consider here is whether our choices are putting the hostage in greater danger. So again...some questions to ask:

- Have we thought through what the potential harm is to the hostage if we report?

- Are we inadvertently providing the kidnappers with valuable information? (This is a business in the electronic age - assume all is public. Are we providing information so they can contact friends and family they may not have known about.)
- If there are negotiations going on behind the scenes, might our coverage adversely affect them?
- Are we providing the kidnappers with a platform to create more pressure on those negotiating for release? For instance, we should be VERY hesitant about broadcasting or publishing any particular threats from the kidnappers. As you know, for some time our policy has been to refrain from using kidnapper shot video of hostages pleading for their lives or making declarations -since they are surely under duress.

EXCERPT FROM CBC'S JOURNALISTIC STANDARDS AND PRACTICES

The Journalistic Standards and Practices provide the policy framework within which CBC journalism seeks to meet the expectations and obligations it faces. They are currently in the process of being reviewed and updated. The following is the current policy.

IV. Production Standards A: Information Gathering 09. Coverage of Violent Acts

9. COVERAGE OF VIOLENT ACTS

Reporting on hostage taking, acts of terrorism, riots and civil disorder raises complex problems and places heavy responsibility on the broadcaster.

9.1 CIVIL DISORDER

In some cases of riots or civil disorder, it is clear that the presence of cameras and microphones has provoked violence. There is also evidence that in other situations the presence of the media has had a moderating effect on violent incidents.

When plans are being made for coverage of events where civil violence may be expected, every precaution should be taken to ensure that the presence of CBC journalists, cameras or microphones is not a provocation. CBC personnel should abide by the guidelines developed for the coverage of demonstrations.

Furthermore, if their presence is evidently inspiring a potentially dangerous situation, they should cease using recording equipment and, in some circumstances, even conceal it.

9.2 TERRORISM AND HOSTAGE TAKING

CBC journalists must ensure that any action they take will not further endanger the lives of the hostages or interfere with efforts of authorities to secure the hostages' release. They must guard against being used or manipulated by the terrorists/hostage takers.

The following guidelines also apply:

- a. Any direct communication from terrorists/hostage takers which contains information about current or contemplated acts of terrorism should be reported immediately to the senior officer in information programming. In the absence of the senior officer, the report is to be made to the media vice-president.
- b. No live or recorded broadcast of a statement by or interview with a terrorist/hostage taker or hostage may occur without authorization from the senior officer in information programming. Such authorization will only be provided in exceptional circumstances. In the absence of the senior officer, the authorization must come from the media vice-president.

- c. Statements or demands by terrorists/hostage takers form an integral part of the incident. In most cases, however, these should be broadcast in summary or edited form to avoid the danger of manipulation.
- d. Telephone or other direct contact with hostages or terrorist/hostage takers or both should only be undertaken if, in the judgment of the senior officer in information programming, such activity does not interfere with the authorities' communications or further jeopardize the safety of hostages. In the absence of the senior officer, the judgment is to be made by the media vice-president.
- e. Reporters and producers should promptly convey to the senior officer in information programming any request made by the authorities to delay the broadcasting of certain information regarding the incident in progress. The final decision on this request rests with the senior officer in information programming, who will ensure adequate consultation with his or her peers. In the absence of the senior officer, the request must be conveyed to the media vice-president.