

MEDIA SPIN REVOLVES AROUND THE WORD "TERRORIST"

By Norman Solomon / Creators Syndicate
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During the first two days of this month, CNN's website displayed an odd little announcement. "There have been false reports that CNN has not used the word 'terrorist' to refer to those who attacked the World Trade Center and Pentagon," the notice said. "In fact, CNN has consistently and repeatedly referred to the attackers and hijackers as terrorists, and it will continue to do so."

The CNN disclaimer was accurate -- and, by conventional media standards, reassuring. But it bypassed a basic question that festers beneath America's overwhelming media coverage of recent weeks: Exactly what qualifies as "terrorism"?

For this country's mainstream journalists, that's a non-question about a no-brainer. More than ever, the proper function of the "terrorist" label seems obvious. "A group of people commandeered airliners and used them as guided missiles against thousands of people," says NBC News executive Bill Wheatley. "If that doesn't fit the definition of terrorism, what does?"

True enough. At the same time, it's notable that American news outlets routinely define terrorism the same way that U.S. government officials do. Usually, editors assume that reporters don't need any formal directive because the appropriate usage is simply understood.

The Wall Street Journal does provide some guidelines, telling its staff that the word terrorist "should be used carefully, and specifically, to describe those people and nongovernmental organizations that plan and execute acts

of violence against civilian or noncombatant targets." In newsrooms across the United States, media professionals would agree.

But -- in sharp contrast -- Reuters has stuck to a distinctive approach for decades. "As part of a policy to avoid the use of emotive words," the global news service says, "we do not use terms like 'terrorist' and 'freedom fighter' unless they are in a direct quote or are otherwise attributable to a third party. We do not characterize the subjects of news stories but instead report their actions, identity and background so that readers can make their own decisions based on the facts."

Since mid-September, the Reuters management has taken a lot of heat for maintaining this policy -- and for reiterating it in an internal memo, which included the observation that "one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter." In a clarifying statement, released last Tuesday, the top execs at Reuters explained: "Our policy is to avoid the use of emotional terms and not make value judgments concerning the facts we attempt to report accurately and fairly."

Reuters reports from 160 countries, and the "terrorist" label is highly contentious in quite a few of them. Behind the scenes, many governments have pressured Reuters to flatly describe their enemies as terrorists in news dispatches.

From the vantage point of government leaders in Ankara or Jerusalem or Moscow, for example, journalists shouldn't hesitate to describe their violent foes as terrorists. But why should reporters oblige by pinning that tag on Kurdish combatants in Turkey, or Palestinian militants in occupied territories, or rebels in Chechnya?

Unless we buy into the absurd pretense that governments don't engage in "terrorism," the circumscribed use of the

term by U.S. media makes no sense. Turkish military forces have certainly terrorized and killed many civilians; the same is true of Israeli forces and Russian troops. As a result, plenty of Kurds, Palestinians and Chechens are grieving.

American reporters could plausibly expand their working definition of terrorism to include all organized acts of terror and murder committed against civilians. But such consistency would meet with fierce opposition in high Washington places.

During the 1980s, with a non-evasive standard for terrorism, news accounts would have routinely referred to the Nicaraguan contra guerrillas -- in addition to the Salvadoran and Guatemalan governments -- as U.S.-backed "terrorists." Today, for instance, such a standard would require news coverage of terrorism in the Middle East to include the Israeli assaults with bullets and missiles that take the lives of Palestinian children and other civilians.

Sadly, the evenhanded use of the "terrorist" label would mean sometimes affixing it directly on the U.S. government. During the past decade, from Iraq to Sudan to Yugoslavia, the Pentagon's missiles have destroyed the lives of civilians just as innocent as those who perished on Sept. 11. If journalists dare not call that "terrorism," then perhaps the word should be retired from the media lexicon.

It's entirely appropriate for news outlets to describe the Sept.

11 hijackers as "terrorists" -- if those outlets are willing to use the "terrorist" label with integrity across the board. But as long as news organizations are not willing to do so, the Reuters policy is the only principled journalistic alternative.

Norman Solomon's weekly syndicated column -- archived at www.fair.org/media-beat/ -- focuses on media and politics. His latest book is "The Habits of Highly Deceptive Media."