

Terrorist or Freedom Fighter? Why it's time for the BBC to put its Moral Compass Away. FC03

At dawn on 7 October, members of Hamas invaded Israel from their base in Gaza. During a 24-hour rampage, 250 young Israelis at a peace festival were massacred, entire families were murdered in their homes, men, women and children were killed in cold blood. Some were beheaded, some had their throats slit, some were burned alive. More than 1,500 Jews were killed, 200 taken hostage.

BBC News decided not to refer to those who committed these acts as "terrorists", referring instead to "Hamas militants." It said it was following editorial guidelines and demonstrating impartiality. However, its refusal to use the T-word caused widespread astonishment and anger and drew condemnation from politicians. An eminent group of KCs complained to Ofcom,

"The legal position in this country is that Hamas is a proscribed terrorist organisation. That is not a matter of debate or discussion. It is a matter of legal fact... In trying to be impartial, the BBC has become partial."

In response to mounting criticism, the BBC wheeled out veteran World Affairs Editor John Simpson who explained,

"Terrorism is a loaded word, which people use about an outfit they disapprove of morally. It's simply not the BBC's job to tell people who to support and who to condemn - who are the good guys and who are the bad guys."

"We don't take sides", he added, "We don't use loaded words... It's always been like this in the BBC."

This was an extraordinary thing for Simpson to say because he had previously argued exactly the opposite. When the Conservative Party criticised the BBC for being soft on Libyan terrorism in 1986, Simpson wrote an article insisting the BBC was more than willing to use the T-word when it was justified. As proof, he quoted a BBC Nine O'clock News headline; Mrs Thatcher "under fire in the Commons... tonight she shows her critics proof of Libyan terrorism." Simpson said it was, "absurd to suggest" the headline was "anything other than a powerful and unqualified statement of fact." He stressed, "The BBC headlines referred to proof of Libyan terrorism within seven seconds of its mention of casualties", adding, the words were designed to "state the objective facts of the situation." *

So, what's really going on here? How did the BBC — an organisation that prides itself on fighting misinformation and avoiding causing offence — end up in a swamp of contradiction, moral relativism and double standards? And what is the way out?

The Baby Boomers and The Romanticisation of Terrorism.

John Simpson is wrong to say, "It's always been like this." It hasn't. It was the Baby Boomer generation, Simpson's generation, that changed it.

Terrorism can be motivated by religious, ethnic, ideological or tribal hatreds. But the Boomer generation tended to collapse all forms of terrorism into *political* terrorism. To the Boomers, who grew-up in a world in which European empires were being dismantled, it seemed that all terrorists were waging ethical struggles for liberation against colonial oppressors. The terrorism they saw, for example in Kenya, Algeria, Angola or Vietnam, seemed to fit the pattern.

Starting in the 1970s, Boomer academics began to excuse terrorism and blame the victims for the crime. For example, writing in 1977, the academic Robert Young complained, "Political revolutionaries who engage in terrorism have had a very bad press recently in most Western countries". Young excused bomb attacks in South Africa against civilians arguing, "there are very few white innocents in South Africa since all whites in the community there have been unjustly enriched in virtue of the exploitation of blacks."

Another Boomer academic who engaged in victim-blaming was Luigi Bonanate who argued that terrorism was a justifiable response to a "blocked" society. "A society that knows terrorism" he said is "incapable of answering the citizens' requests for change." He added that terrorists should be understood as idealists trying to change the world. They were, he said, "trying to awaken the working class" and "laying the bases for a new road to socialism."

The romanticisation of terrorism reached its apogee in the cult of the Cuban revolutionary Ché Guevara whose face adorned countless Boomer tee shirts and bedroom posters. His psychopathic comments such as, "I discovered I really liked killing" and "a revolutionary must become a cold killing machine motivated by pure hate" were ignored. The Boomer generation made terrorism cool.

The Boomer worldview also influenced journalism which started to become a moral enterprise. Its goal shifted from the search for truth, to trying to make the world a better place.

John Birt, born the same year as Simpson, introduced Boomer Journalism to the BBC during the 1990s. Birt wanted to see more analysis and urged his journalists to "do the right thing and diagnose the deeper causes of our problems." He called it the "Mission to Explain". The sacred distinction between fact and opinion in journalism began to dissolve. News came to be dominated by narratives — simplified scripts of good versus evil. BBC correspondent Martin Bell famously summed up the new ethical mood in 1998 when he called for a new "Journalism of Attachment." It was time, he said, for a journalism that would be, "aware of its responsibilities, that will not stand neutrally between good and evil, right and wrong, the victim and the oppressor".

But, while today's journalism remains in the grip of a mindset which evolved during the last third of the 20th Century, reality has moved-on. Consequently, the ideological map that guides journalism no longer fits the terrain.

Today terrorism experts acknowledge that not all terrorist campaigns are political, nor are all terrorists fighting colonial oppression. As the analyst Paul Wilkinson notes, jihadi terrorism is implacable and seeks the total extermination of its enemies,

"The harsh reality is that the underlying causes of the Al Qaeda global jihad are incorrigible... In the face of such evil cruelty and fanaticism, any form of appeasement would be disastrous."

If we look at the Arab-Israeli conflict through the lens of Boomer Journalism and its narratives, Hamas terrorism appears as the righteous anger of an oppressed people resulting from colonial oppression. However, the narrative obscures a reality that is far more complex. As the Israeli journalist Yossi Halevi points out,

"The fatal miscalculation of Israel's enemies is that they mistake Israel for a rootless colonial project that will go the way of Rhodesia and white-ruled South Africa... The failure of the Palestinian national movement, in all its factions, to understand that it is facing not a colonialist entity but a re-indigenized people whose story is unique in history."

Arrogant Journalism.

Defence Secretary Grant Shapps called for the BBC to get its "moral compass out". He said it was "disgraceful" for the news organisation not to describe Hamas as terrorists. Paradoxically, the reverse is true. It's time for the BBC to put its moral compass *away* and return to its pre-Boomer role of attempting to report facts honestly, fairly and impartially. If the BBC adopted a purely descriptive approach, and moved away from the narrative-led, ethical-political journalism introduced by John Birt, a terrorist would be defined as a member of an organisation proscribed by the British government. The BBC would solve its dilemma and transfer the moral problem to elected politicians.

Abandoning Boomer Journalism might feel unfamiliar and uncomfortable, however, to quote Desmond Taylor, a pre-Boomer Editor of BBC News and Current Affairs,

"It is not irresponsible to feel that these problems should be handled by the people elected to do so. It would be arrogant and insupportable if we tried to take a hand in solving them ourselves and strayed outside the strictly journalistic role. Provided we stick to that, and do our job well, society is not hurt. The effect of journalism is, in the long run, to heal."

That's what we need urgently today. Honest journalism that heals.

* The article, for *Index on Censorship* magazine, was jointly authored by Simpson, Ron Neil, Editor of TV News and two other BBC executives.