

Alice Millerchip: What was your process in writing, reporting and contributing to the articles about the 2015 Paris attacks?

Aurelien Breeden: You always get a preliminary report on social media that something is going on, and you start to get reports in the local press, in this case the French media. Our editors in London and New York pick up on that very quickly because they have tools to pinpoint those events. They quickly get in touch to let us know that something is going on and ask whether we can check it out.

It involves a lot of different people in a lot of different places working together. Your traditional straightforward news article has one person reporting and writing it, with his or her name in the byline. With a huge breaking news piece like this, it's a collaborative effort.

A couple of other correspondents in Paris and I started working on it. It's too complicated to have one person reporting and writing it all. You can't do that because you have to be monitoring so many different things. You have to be watching TV to see if there is an official speech. You have to be making calls. The way it turned out, I stayed at home that night. I did not go out and report from the streets because I was the one monitoring the official comments, looking to see what the press was going to say, making phone calls.

Others went to the places where the attacks were unfolding to see if they could get witnesses or general coverage of the scene. The way that normally works is you have one or several editors who anchor the coverage. So for that article with my name and two others on it, I didn't sit down with those two people and ask, "Okay, how are we going to do this?" Everyone sends whatever they have to the editors and the editors put it together, maybe rewrite sections and add a bit of context. The editors in London and New York then send it back to us, asking, "Is this okay?" This is all happening very quickly over email and phone.

Maybe not that night because it was late, but the day after, when some of us were doing the more basic reporting, other people were being tasked with writing more big-picture analytical pieces, talking to experts and that kind of thing.

AM: If any, what immediate emotional reactions after the Paris 2015 attacks did you have? Did they affect your reporting and writing?

AB: It's sort of very immediate work that you are doing during and right after the attacks. The work started late at night, and things still hadn't ended during the hours we were writing. In the immediate aftermath of something, your professional instincts kind of kick in, and I say that as a very young and untested journalist – I've only been doing this for three years or so. My instincts aren't as well developed as they will be 10 or 20 years from now. But that's the first thing: you have to hit the ground running.

With any breaking news, there are always rumors, things going around about what's going on. You're trying to confirm things, sift fact from fiction. You're in a rush. And in those moments, I don't think you're as emotionally invested. In that immediate work, you don't have as much time to emotionally process things.

But on the subway and at the office the day after, it became pretty clear pretty quickly that the attacks were a huge deal, and I do think that you register that. You only really have time to process the scale and tragedy of the event then. You don't take it as just more news. As we continued to work on the attacks with a follow-up, it sank in deeper. That's when you start to realize: "Oh, my God. This is what happened." That's when it starts unraveling at the core.

For me, it hits very close to home because I live in the city. I knew people who lived near the attacks. I knew some of the places, I'd been there. Wherever you are based at the time, when it's terrorism that hits your home city, there is that added element of being more familiar, not necessarily with the victims but with the place where it happened. So it can affect you more when you're reporting. It depends on the person though, because not everyone reacts the same way.

AM: Many of the recent terror attacks in France have been perpetrated by French-born citizens who have declared allegiance to ISIS. Is including context like this important for an article about attacks? If so, what and how much context do you give?

AB: People sometimes don't seem interested in knowing why these perpetrators turned to terrorism. In their eyes, the perpetrators are evil people and that's that. We need to arrest them all, or drone strike them or whatever.

But as a journalist, when you are trying to find out why someone did something, where they're from, what their background is, it doesn't mean that you are trying to somehow suggest that they were right to do what they did. The point is to explain and not to excuse. You're just trying to understand what made that person turn to terrorism. What kind of events in their family life and social life? What policies might have helped or hampered them? You are trying to inform your readers about why this kind of thing happens.

If you're not giving context, you are doing a disservice to your readers because all you are giving them is the end point of the story: the attack and the tragedy.

But you can't always explain why, especially because terrorists often die when taking other people's lives, leaving no way for us to question them and gain insight.

There is no easy explanation as to why a certain person turns to terrorism, and you have to recognize that as well. You can't explain every single thing. But you find pointers or things in a person's past that will help understand why they did what they did.

AM: Being a French citizen who has covered terrorist attacks in France, do you feel as if you have a responsibility as a journalist to report on just the facts or also to discern right and wrong and condemn terrorist actions?

AB: I think in terrorism or in any other subject, you have a responsibility to report the facts and to be fair and accurate. I don't think it's the journalist's responsibility to tell people how terrible it is and to express moral judgment on what's going on. I think the facts really speak for themselves, so you don't need to have that added layer of journalists saying, "Look how terrible this is." 130 killed in a single night. You don't really need to add anything to that.

In any case, I don't think it's the journalist's responsibility to do so, regardless of whether they are French or are connected to the people or place that has been affected. It's definitely the responsibility of foreign correspondents to tell their readers what the mood is, so we are going to write pieces about how this has impacted the French people and the country, and how people are coping with it. That's one way of explaining how people are perceiving and seeing it morally. But I don't think it's up to us to do the moral condemnation.

It's not the role of a journalist to be a policy advocate either. The idea is not that you are going to do all this reporting and then say, "In this situation, you have to do A, B and C."

AM: Critics say that media coverage of terrorism glorifies it and allows terrorists to spread their messages. What are your thoughts on this criticism?

AB: I think there are times when it's a fair point. Like a lot of things, it's a question of striking the right balance. You don't want to be restlessly covering every single incident that is related to terrorism, because you want to be aware that one of the terrorists' biggest weapons is being able to leverage what are sometimes relatively small incidents into widespread panic. The goal is to strike fear in the hearts and minds of their enemies. You want to be aware of that and not play into it too much.

That's why I think there are instances where you have to be careful about the framing of your article. You have to be careful when you choose to write about something. For example, at the New York Times, we are careful about reporting small incidents when it's unclear whether it really was a terrorist incident. Sometimes, you'll have a stabbing in the street and the first headlines are that the guy screamed "Allah is great" and had a knife. You then see the beginnings of a huge panic, and then it turns out the person was in fact mentally disturbed.

On the other hand, you have to report on real press and events. With the terror attacks, there was no question that we had to write something. It was obviously a huge event and a major thing for the country. It's important to know how this happened. What kind of security or intelligence failures made this attack possible?

You want to have a better understanding of who these attackers were, where they came from, how they got here and what their ideology was. You have to report the important stuff in a way that tells the reader not just about what happened, but also why it happened, what led to that. If you do that carefully, analytically and factually, then I don't think you are automatically giving them a platform when you write about terror attacks.

AM: Do you think reporting on terrorist attacks and terrorism is any different from reporting on other events or subjects?

AB: I think there are certain things in reporting that remain the same, regardless of what the subject is. When there is big breaking news, you have to make sure not to fall for the rumors and to have everything right. And that's true for terrorism and all other sorts of stories. It can be true for natural disasters. It can be true in war.

But it can also be true in breaking news that doesn't involve tragedy. If the French president was going to step down tomorrow, it would be another big breaking news moment where you would have to be careful about what you are reporting and who you are getting your information from to do the reporting. So that's true of all journalism, but in breaking news situations, it's all the more relevant.

AM: Do you communicate with people outside the media, such as people from national security or police enforcement? Have they ever held back information or tried to influence your reporting?

AB: Do they hold back information? Yes, that's the main thing they do. The officials I mostly deal with are in the different French ministries. In my interactions with officials, part of it is specific to France. I can't talk to what it's like to do similar work in the U.S. because I haven't worked there. But French officials in general are not very open. The flow of information is not organized the way it is in the U.S. When something happens in the States, like a shooting or an attack, the sheriff will have a press conference, or there will be a spokesperson for the police department who will be giving information.

In France, that's much rarer. It's improved a bit over the past couple of years, but on terrorist attacks, there are very few people who will talk to you on the record and give you basic information. You have to wait for the ministers or prosecutors to come out and say something. It makes your work pretty hard when you are trying to discern things.

But no one has ever tried to influence me. Maybe that's because I'm not the national security reporter. I'm sure those kinds of reporters, in their interactions with their sources, have to be careful about what their sources are telling them because there is always a spin on it. In my case, they aren't trying to spin you so much as keep information from you because they just don't want to give it to you.

AM: Is there anything else you would like to share?

AB: Terrorism is not my favorite topic to report on because it's a complicated, inflammatory subject. You have to be careful about how you are framing things. It also involves a lot of interactions with national security and intelligence people, who are not the easiest to work with.

You are dealing with tragedy a lot of the time. Some of the stories I worked on at the time of the 2015 Paris attacks appeared on the front page of the paper, which in usual circumstances, I'd be very proud of. But I had a hard time taking credit for it because the attacks were a terrible tragedy where dozens of people died. It's not on the front page because I found it really interesting and did great reporting on it that impressed the editors. There are stories that can be very interesting and fun to work on, but for me, it's not terribly rewarding.