

Victoria Davis: I notice that in your writing you use “fighters,” “insurgents,” “Nigeria’s Islamic insurgency,” and “Islamic extremists” when referring to Boko Haram. How do you choose your terminology for referring to Boko Haram and its members?

Drew Hinshaw: I definitely use all the synonyms for “insurgent,” and it gets a little silly sometimes. At some point they morph into something more than terrorists. They were hoarding towns, villages and territory. That’s a tough one, and I don’t know if there are any easy answers to it. You’re also restricted by your word limit, so it’s hard to have “Boko Haram, a group of people who are in the forest fighting because they believe in a version of Islam that is not everybody’s.” You have to call them something that tries to capture that all. Sometimes I am resistant to the Foreign Terrorist Organization’s “terrorist” label because it also includes these armies across the world controlling territory similar to how the Viet Cong was run. For me, that’s not the same. Boko Haram is about a religion, and that’s much harder to write about, at least for me.

VD: What are your responsibilities when reporting on Boko Haram and its activity?

DH: It’s a tough one. I’m always worried about protecting my sources. More broadly, though, I don’t want to create panic. My job is to make people feel more informed, not more scared. I don’t like reading comments on our stories that say things such as, “We should kick all Muslims out of America because we don’t know who these people are.” That makes me feel pretty bad, having been the person who wrote this text that somehow incited that response. So of course I’m responsible for protecting people I’m interviewing and getting the story right, but I also don’t want to create a some sort of generalized anxiety about Nigeria or Muslims anything of the sort.

VD: It is my understanding that you were in West Africa in 2014 and reported on Boko Haram’s kidnapping of the Chibok Schoolgirls. Can you talk about the role that the Nigerian government and law enforcement played in your reporting?

DH: Around 1 p.m. the BBC broke the news about the kidnapping and it was really bizarre, and the initial reports were more than 100 people kidnapped or somewhere around that number. The backstory was that a car bomb had gone off about a mile from the President’s office the day before, and four or five days later they were gonna host this big world economic forum. It was supposed to be Nigeria’s coming out party when they were going to show that they had this great booming economy that everyone should invest in. Meanwhile, there’s bombs going off in the capital. So, in a weird way, we were all ready to cover it from that perspective because that was the great tension in Nigeria at that time. On the one hand it was a really fast-growing economy that had come a long way since the 1990s. The shelves had been empty in the 90s, then all of a sudden there were shopping malls everywhere and people were buying cars. That was kind of what the government wanted us to report on. On the other hand, it was also true that whole towns and cities were being taken over by these madmen. I think everyone was ready to cover it from that point of view like, “Oh, there’s this investment conference, but there’s bombs going off outside.” It showed the tension of Nigeria’s uncertain future. But the school kidnapping didn’t

really fit into that narrative at first. We kind of asked, “What is that? What do we do with that?” We hinted at that uncertainty in our story--I think it’s the second or third sentence. It read something like, “A bomb went off, police are everywhere, helicopters are everywhere and also there’s this entire school that’s been kidnapped.” It was a crazy week or so. The law enforcement basically denied it happened. Initially, they didn’t have anything to say about it, and then the defense ministry put out a statement saying that all of the schoolgirls had been freed except for a small number. They were flat-out lying. It was really sad, because at that point I had covered enough of the Boko Haram that I knew how much the military lied about things. The government would say they had a ferocious battle and they were victorious, but I’d find out that none of that was true, so I knew not to take their word for it. But the parents of the Chibok schoolgirls who we spoke to back then didn’t know that. The families thought that the girls had been rescued when the military said that they had freed them.

VD: So how did you handle this blatantly false information coming from the government?

DH: We just wouldn’t. There were a few times when we would use the information in our stories as a way of saying that the government was losing credibility. At first I thought that if the government is saying something you need to take them seriously. After awhile, though, I realized that some of the stuff they wrote was just fiction. You can picture some frustrated novelist working in their press department. Sometimes we would mention it, but we always tried to give them a chance. We interviewed soldiers and were always open to talking to them, but they wouldn’t talk to us much except at these statements, which were bogus, so we wouldn’t base our stories on it.

VD: But you would never use the government as a main source for your stories?

DH: At a certain point, we didn’t really get much from the military. They were not the source of our stories. Witnesses were the key. There was an informant who worked in Nigeria that would call me late at night and tell me what was happening. Sometimes other local journalists would catch wind of something. We would get the edges of our stories from other places, then, if we felt it was worthwhile, we would include what the military was saying.

VD: Would you treat the videos released by Boko Haram differently than you treated press releases from the government?

DH: That stuff we would use a lot. We would use a lot of that. I wanted to know who these guys were. What drives them? What motivates them? I didn’t want to just write these kind of dark exotica where horrible people are doing horrible things -- even though they were -- and have that be the only perspective. I wanted to understand them on some level and be able to critically analyze Boko Haram’s actions. As a reporter, those videos tell you a lot.

VD: Nigerian coverage of terrorism attacks seems to focus strongly on the government’s reaction, whereas American coverage has more of a civilian focus. Do you think that there

could be a medium between those two styles that would bring a new angle into the story?

DH: I guess it depends on what the government is saying. For Nigerian coverage it has to be noted that it's their government. They're the ones who decide who is the president, and who is governor of which state. So for them it's as if they're covering the government because Nigerian people have a say in reelecting or ousting their leaders. Realistically, what person in America cares what the governor of a Nigerian state said about the issue unless what that governor said is something interesting and new. I'm sure Nigerians aren't wrapped up in what Bill de Blasio says about the next terrorist attack either. But they do care about the loss of innocent life and terrorism, and those are both intrinsically interesting in a way.

VD: Did you have any sources within Boko Haram whom you interviewed or received information from?

DH: We've interviewed former members, and I've talked to people that can talk to them, like intermediaries. We've also gone to prisons and interviewed Boko Haram prisoners, which is also interesting. I don't really know if there's any one way for cultivating these sources, though. I think that a lot of sources come from people passing contacts around. Nigeria is a friendly place, so there were a lot of contacts passed around.

VD: Do you approach an interview with a member or a former member of Boko Haram the same way you would approach an interview with a civilian or a soldier?

DH: No, definitely not. I've talked to so many civilians and heard so many tough stories. I've spent years talking to them. At some point, I don't want to make civilians relive trauma or come close to that at all, and I definitely don't want to do it if it's not going to produce some new understanding about the group. But Boko Haram members, I mean, there's still a lot of questions I have for those guys. That time is really valuable. When you get to ask them, "What's going on? Who are you guys? How much do you believe in this?" There's a million questions you can add to that.

VD: You mentioned that you gather a lot of your information about Boko Haram from layers of sources. Do you talk to terrorism experts or other journalists that have connections within Boko Haram?

DH: I found that there aren't a lot of terrorism experts who know a lot about Boko Haram. There are a few based out of London or Washington, D.C., but that distance really limits how much they can truly understand the group. In general, I've also found the world of terrorism experts is sort of political, and I didn't find those conversations very fruitful. Nigerian journalists were much more helpful. Some of them have known the group for ages, and they would give me really interesting angles.

VD: When you were writing about Boko Haram, how would you use social media or the Internet to gain insight and information about what was occurring?

DH: In a weird way it was all kind of pre-social media. Boko Haram didn't say very much on social media. They used the old Al Qaeda channels to get the news out. In my current job, all I do is prowl social media and see what the Polish ruling party is saying. A big part of what I do now is examine social media, but with Boko Haram that wasn't the case. Around 2014 and 2015 nobody in the area used Twitter, so I didn't want to hear stories from Twitter. I wanted to hear from the person who just walked in the woods for a week to escape Boko Haram, and she doesn't have a Twitter account.

VD: Following the Chibok schoolgirls kidnapping, the hashtag “BringBackOurGirls” became internationally recognized. Did the international attention influence how much you wrote about the issue?

DH: I think that, for a long time, there had been a sense that Boko Haram was unstoppable and there was a sense of dread. You'd wake up every morning and you'd see these grizzly pictures and details from another attack. The kidnapping was the night before their final exams and they were in their dorms. It was innocence, and they were on the cusp of graduating and becoming adults and making their parents proud. Something about the whole story incited this rallying cry for these women to have a better life. They started to push the government to really come face-to-face with Boko Haram. I'm sympathetic to the whole idea that thousands of people get kidnapped, so why do people care about just one group? But I think people just saw what they could do for these girls and had to act on it. We can't fix everything for every victim, so people focused on the schoolgirls.

VD: How does the immediate aftermath of an attack affect the way you write a story?

DH: By the end of my time in Nigeria I became a little bit disinterested. When I first got there and started covering Boko Haram, every attack there was something new to say. But after awhile it wasn't telling us anything new. I don't want the job of a journalist to just be recording who died and how they were killed. Sometimes I feel as if covering terrorism is almost like covering the Olympics. I find it morbid and weird, and so I've stopped. By the end of my time in Nigeria I kind of stopped covering things with the lens of “34 people killed in a church bomb.” There was a time when I would have gotten on the next plane to whatever town the attack occurred and interviewed all the survivors, but it just wasn't surprising anymore.