

Kay Trulaske: What is your approach for interacting with members and/or leaders of a terrorist organization? Has a terrorist organization contacted you, or have you contacted them as a source? And how does it work with a language barrier?

Declan Walsh: First, in terms of the terminology, I don't use the word terrorist organization – or even terrorist much in my copy. We may use the phrase 'acts of terrorism' or if people are referring to terrorists, if I've taken quotes, we will use that. I find that terrorism is quite a loaded word and sometimes can alienate some people. It's become so politicized in certain parts of the world. Now, if the Islamic State carries out an attack that kills 80 people in a church, that is clearly an act of terrorism and we don't want to shy away from that. But we tend to refer to it as militant organizations carrying out acts of violence.

We have no specific protocols prohibiting them speaking to us. They usually don't, is the short of it. They do, however, issue statements on social media or through channels that are established as Islamic State channels or other organizations. As long as we're confident that these channels have a track record of being from this militant group and have proven reliable in the past, then we will take that and say, the Islamic State said in a statement on a channel that they claimed responsibility. If they claim responsibility, that's a useful way of figuring out who's done an attack.

It's changed a little bit in the past year or two, but for a long period the Islamic State was pretty consistent about claiming things that it was responsible for, so if the Islamic State claimed something, you were pretty sure it was their action. Then again, I think that did change somewhat last year, particularly as the group came under a lot of military pressure in Iraq and Syria, it appeared from the outside that their internal discipline in terms of claiming things was breaking down a bit and that they claimed some things that subsequently it seemed not to have done. It's definitely a murky business, but if someone claims responsibility for something, that's a useful piece of information.

KT: In a recent article you talked about how the Sinai is out of bounds for most reporters, and that Mr. Sisi's government has warned journalists about covering the Sinai operation. As a journalist covering the Sinai operation, are you affected by these sanctions put forth – and if so, how do you continue reporting if you're having issues with access?

DW: Frankly, it's very difficult. Right now, there's a large military operation – or what's been presented as a large military operation – taking place in the Sinai led by the Egyptian military. We have no access to the operation itself. We are almost entirely reliant on information that comes from the military itself about what's happening, and that's usually the worst source of information in any conflict. Well, if not the worst it's definitely not the best. So, it's very difficult. I think that's reflective in the coverage that we've given it, which is to say, we haven't given it very much coverage. We are not in a position, really, to independently verify anything that's been said by the government. They may make claims about how many people they've killed, or arrested, but if we are not able to balance or check that information against other sources, then we're not much better than a stenographer for the government – a press machine,

which of course they would like, but it doesn't dovetail very well with what we see as our mission. The Sinai is a real challenge, there is no physical access to the Sinai for foreign reporters and indeed most Egyptian reporters. So, they can't get there. There are people in Sinai, of course, who live there who come out or tell us what's going on, but the government works very hard to make sure it's hard for those people to reach us, to be afraid about speaking out and that the repercussions could be strong. At the end of the day it's just very difficult to get good visibility about what's going on over there.

KT: What is your experience in dealing with fixers while reporting in Egypt?

DW: I don't speak Arabic, even though I have taken some lessons, but nothing that would be ideal to use in a professional setting. I have an Egyptian reporter, Nour Youssef, who works with me as a news assistant, and she also does some reporting. That's an important part of my operation here on the language side and also, frankly, in terms of the reporting. Especially in a country like Egypt, there are certain things that local reporters have access to that are very difficult for a foreigner. She acts as a translator if we're in a meeting with someone who only speaks Arabic. If I'm doing a story on a certain subject, she will help to locate the right people to talk to about that story so that before we get to the interview she's said, "I think this is a good person." I may also come up with those ideas myself, but because of her local knowledge she might have a better sense of who's an appropriate person to speak with. Currently, she also does her own reporting, so some of the stories we do will be bylined by both of us. Or, if she does a smaller amount, she will get a contributor byline for the story at the bottom. That's the spectrum of assistance she provides, and it's an important part of the operation for sure. One of the ways in which I think foreign reporting has changed, even since I've been doing it, is that local reporters – people with local knowledge, local language, who are from that country – they're definitely having a more prominent role in our reporting just because it's a recognition that sometimes they may know more than us. They may be able to contribute to the reporting in a way that's difficult for an outsider. You can see that in *The Times* certainly from certain countries, you will see bylines from local reporters. Some of those local reporters are people who started off in those positions and gone on to be full correspondents at *The Times*. That's also a new departure if you look at the roster of correspondents, let's say 20 or 30 years ago, you would have found they were almost exclusively Americans, and certainly very few people reported on countries from which they came from.

KT: When you are reporting on terrorism, does the Egyptian government or *The New York Times* set forth rules or guidelines that you have to follow?

DW: Well, *The Times* doesn't set forth any specific rules that I can think of on terrorism. There are quite a lot of guidelines about journalism in general and our conduct, and how we handle difficult situations. They're not specific to terrorism, they're just general guidelines for our reporting. That's largely to do with maintaining a high standard of reporting which is really a big part of what *The Times* is known for, and it's a standard that the paper is keen to guard.

In terms of the Egyptian regulations, there are quite stringent regulations in theory about the figures we are supposed to use. The government tries to tell us that we should only produce, for instance, their figures on terrorism – like how many people have died. In practice, we have certainly published figures that have not always accorded with the government's. That has not led to any consequences for us specifically, but there are other organizations who've had problems in that regard.

There was an ambush on the Egyptian military maybe in October or November, south of Cairo, and the initial information that we had, and that many organizations had, was that between 50 and 60 Egyptian security officials had been killed in the ambush – it was a militant ambush. We reported that, and then the government started to insist that it was more like 16. They pushed back very hard on this, and it became very difficult. We had sources who were in the security services who had stood by this earlier figure, but they pushed very hard – and *our* story went out unchanged – but the government did issue a very strong press release against The BBC and Reuters. They called in the bureau chiefs of those organizations to talk about it. I'm not sure if they took any further action than that, but it was definitely designed to send a message to them that they should not step over the line. It was pretty obscure to me why they went after those organizations and not, for instance, us and other organizations who reported similar figures in that range of 50-60 people. But, the Egyptian government does not always behave in ways that comport with consistency, or even rationality, to be honest.

KT: What makes a story worth reporting when a situation arises? How do you prioritize one story over another?

DW: Usually it's pretty obvious, it's not much of a choice. Any one day is difficult to predict, but it's usually pretty apparent what's a news story and what's not. Unless something else happens in the middle of it that displaces it in terms of importance, which is quite rare, you just start working on your story. The judgment call you have to make initially is whether a story is worth doing or not. What are the factors in the story that make it news, as opposed to something that we don't need to bother with? We may have something else to do that day, and it might not be worth the investment of time to write a story that's already being sufficiently covered on the wires and to which we wouldn't be able to add very much. It's a decision that's taken initially by us, here at the Cairo Bureau – but also in conjunction with editors in London, potentially in Hong Kong, or certainly in New York depending on what time of the day it is.

KT: When a terrorist incident, or an event appearing to be an act of terror happens, what are the next steps in reporting on the event and how do you go about finding sources?

DW: We have a number of people in the security services who we will speak to, we will read what's been said on the wire reports, we will monitor what has been said on local TV stations or the local media outlets, we will use Twitter. We use something called Datamonitor which often provides a first warning for major stories. It is a service that monitors Twitter and other social media feeds and looks for red flags. A local guy tweets that something massive has happened in northern Egypt and they have software that picks up on this, and then sends warnings out to

clients like us. Occasionally, those things will either alert us to the story, or it will provide the first information for what's happened. If it looks like it's going to be a story that we want to do, we will look at all of those sources, sometimes simultaneously, and we will apply our standards to figure out what is confirmed, what is said on the record, what is information that we believe is true. We will do a first draft of the story, if it's a news story, and then we will usually update it on an ongoing basis as the day goes forward, as more information comes in and as we have a better picture of what's happened.

We're no longer writing for the newspaper, we're writing essentially for the website, so stories can change pretty frequently, especially if it's a big story. In the instance of the mosque attack, it started off as they said dozens of people had died. We were like okay, dozens of people – that's a real story. So we start reporting on it; we write a story saying that local media, or whatever it is, is saying dozens of people have died in an attack in northern Sinai. That story will be quite brief probably, the bare bones of what we know -- especially coming from official sources because in any terrorist incident there's always a great deal of confusion in the first couple of hours and there's a lot of contradictory information. You've got to be very careful about what you can say.

You really want to sift out the information that has come from a solid, official source – and usually one that has gone on-record. You don't want to be relying on people who are off-record, because there's no accountability in that, and they may have it wrong. They may be speculating, they might have confused information, you don't know. You put out that initial story about dozens of people dead, and then as the toll starts to rise, you're updating that. Then it's suddenly saying now there's 90 people dead, then 120 people dead. Now more details are coming through about where the wounded are being taken or how the attack went down. You start drawing all of those sources to try and establish as best as you can what's happened.

KT: When you are having conflicting reports of death count, for example, how do you go about fact-checking that before you publish it?

DW: We will usually have multiple sources. Then we have to make a judgment based on the quality of those sources and if they're consistent with each other. To be honest, it depends. It would be unusual that there would be a huge disparity in figures between ours and the governments, anyway. It's often not the central part of the story. Unless there's a massive disparity in the numbers, I think for the readers it's more about knowing whether this is an important attack, what was the target, what was the nature of the attack, that kind of thing. The death toll is not always the central aspect, even though obviously there's a big difference between something when five people die, and 50 people die. I think it was in November or December there was an attack on a mosque in Sinai in which 311 people were confirmed dead. The death toll was so big it just went up really fast once it happened, and in that instance, I don't think the government even tried to influence the way the death toll was reported because it was coming from so many sources and it was clearly huge. That was the worst terrorist attack ever in Egypt's history, and in that instance there was no dispute about the death toll. It really depends on a case-by-case basis. But, like I said, the death toll is not always the hardest part to find out about in these stories, but establishing other information about what happened, who's targeted,

how it went down. Particularly in a country like Egypt where the government doesn't always make it easy – either they don't always provide good information themselves and they don't allow you or your colleague-reporters to get access to the place where the particular thing happened. Sometimes, frankly, we're just far from the place. We're in Cairo and the event can happen 150-200 miles away, so you're reliant upon whatever sources you can get to try and figure out what has happened.

KT: How does proximity to an event that your reporting on play a role in the article that you're going to end up publishing?

DW: It can play a role, it depends. Sometimes, frankly, we're just far from the place. The event can happen 150-200 miles away, so you're reliant upon whatever sources you can get to try and figure out what has happened. If an event occurs in Cairo within a distance that I can get to, then we will try to get there. If we can get to the site of it, we will have a richer report. We'll be able to see the site of wherever it is we're reporting on, directly. We'll have been able to see things with our own eyes, we won't be relying on people's testimonies over the phone or that we find after-the-fact. That's an ideal situation, but in a country like Egypt sometimes it's too far away and you cannot physically get to the place where the thing has happened. You take it on a case-by-case basis and frankly it also depends on the story, how important it is. If something small happens, we won't drive there.

KT: What are your thoughts that the media is a method by which terrorist organizations can relay their message to the public? Have you ever considered work that you've published as potential propaganda for certain groups?

DW: There is no doubt that when a group or organization carries out an attack that kills a lot of people, their intention is to create fear by definition. Their intention is to spread their message, spread their political goal, and to do that through the act of violence and by having it publicized. I can certainly see where you might argue that the media is facilitating this by publicizing the attack, and on the other hand, I'm not sure there's a way out of it.

If 20 or 50 or 100 or 300 people have been killed, that is unavoidably news, and it would be worse I think, and a real dishonor to those people who had died, to somehow ignore their death just because you felt you were doing a service to the people of violence. Most acts of violence, certainly by non-state actors, are to send a message. By definition these groups are not strong enough to take on conventional armies, so they're engaging in asymmetric warfare which involves destabilization, or things that they do for the sake of striking fear into people by sending that message. But I don't see a way around that.

KT: Do you find that it's difficult to emotionally distance yourself from such horrible events? How do you distance yourself? Or do you find that you are emotionally affected by these events?

DW: Unfortunately I have reported on so many terrorist attacks at this point in my career now I cannot remember one from the other – and they often follow a certain sort of pattern when

you're doing them. You're a professional and you slot into the mode of reporting these things, and it all depends how distant you are from it. If you happen to be reporting on it by going onto the ground of the site where the thing has happened because it's close to you, that can be a very affecting experience. Not so much at the time because you're driven by adrenaline and you're running around collecting information and concentrated on finding your story, and that takes up all of your energy. But obviously reporters in well-documented cases have suffered PTSD later on from being exposed to the distressing images of people who've been killed or injured or maimed really badly.

It can be really tough, but I've done it so much by now that I think it's become slightly methodical. I'm not sure if it particularly impacts on me. Obviously, it requires looking at images on TV that you'd rather not see, and that is definitely something that sticks with you. But I think it's when you see things at close quarters that it really becomes visceral and can have a real emotional impact.