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“Public-Private Partnerships: Engaging with the Media in Countering Terrorism”

Comments from Alison Bethel-McKenzie

When we look at the issue of the media engaging with government and civic society in preventing terrorism and promoting tolerance, we inevitably are looking at the issue of a free and unencumbered media. At least, that’s how the media sees it – as an issue of press freedom.

In the aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks on the United States, discussions heightened in the West over whether the media should exercise restraint in what and how it covered news of terrorism and tolerance. The discussions have been heated and in most cases end with the media on one side and the government on the other, adding extra tension to an already uneasy relationship.

At issue is whether an alliance with the government, law enforcement or civil society would mean decreased coverage or skewed coverage of terrorism, war or intolerance on the part of the media, which often sees any suggestion of a “partnership” as an attempt at government regulation and an encroachment on freedom of expression. I don’t believe that you can ever get a truly independent media to agree to partner with government. It is not what they do. The Fourth Estate’s duties are to act as a watchdog on the government’s activities, not as some sort of tool or partner of the establishment.

But admittedly, the issue is difficult on all fronts. While the media argues the people’s “right to know,” the people themselves often are critical about how much information or how much coverage the media should give to intolerant groups and to terrorists or extremists. So where is the balance? And does the media

undermine its own credibility when it self-regulates and decides not to report certain information at the suggestion of the government? I would argue that it does.

While I am not in favour of government agencies withdrawing or withholding information solely in the name of national security, I do believe the media has a responsibility to ask itself whether certain sensitive information should be left out of its reporting in the name of national interest. And I do believe that an independent and credible media does that on its own, without the intervention of government. But where is the line drawn and can it be drawn without jeopardizing freedom of the press?

The media has a responsibility to report information that is accurate and fair. The media has been criticized for going on the record with unsubstantiated information and certain media personalities have been chastised for sensationalizing events in the name of competition, increased ratings or circulation. Yes, this happens. I would be less than honest if I did not admit that. But it is not the norm, especially in today's environment when lessons about the role the media plays in reporting on terrorist acts have been learned.

Having said that, there needs to be more media training on terrorism and on the government's their role in countering terrorism. I think the media often operates without full knowledge of the "system" or government structures or even the duties assigned to various counter-terrorism groups. Embedding journalists in conflicts, for example, has given them a better understanding and appreciation of security issues. So I think a partnership between the media, government and civic society on training would move the ball forward.

What many media organizations in Canada, Hong Kong, the United Kingdom and the U.S., to name a few, have done is establish terrorism "beats," if you will, where reporters and editors specialize

in terrorism and tolerance. By dedicating specific staff to the topic, media allow strong working relationships to develop between reporters and editors and civic society and the government. It also allows for more comprehensive and ongoing training of specific journalists.

In the same manner, members of civic society and government must have a greater understanding of what journalists do and how they do it. For example, in the Tomsk region of Russia, the information officers are former journalists who, because of their intimate knowledge of media and the journalists in the region, have developed a strong and trusting relationship with the media in Tomsk. These relationships are crucial to developing trust between the government and the media.

Finally, governments must also work to protect and promote an independent media and best practices. The greatest partnership would be where the government assists the media in promoting the highest standards of journalism and where the government works towards giving the media the legislative and professional tools it needs to be truly independent and free.