Covering the Israel-Hamas conflict

This a highly complex and sensitive coverage, and to provide some talking points for our discussion, here are some of the areas of concern with explanations of how AFP is dealing with them.
They include: safety; mental health; use of language; hostages; disinformation; graphic images.

Safety and Mental Health
All our staff on the ground have undergone hostile environment training and have the proper protective equipment. However, it is impossible to protect your staff against all eventualities. Two AFP journalists were wounded in the strike in southern Lebanon that killed Reuters video journalist Issam Abdallah and wounded four other journalists, two from Reuters and two from Al Jazeera. Reuters and AFP have called for the IDF to conduct a thorough investigation, and AFP is conducting its own enquiry (there is video evidence of the incident).
In Gaza, we have moved our team from Gaza City to the south and are working from Rafah pending the possible Israeli attack in the north. Conditions are very difficult.
Beyond the physical risks, there is the psychological impact for our journalists in Israel, Gaza and around the Middle East region. AFP subscribes to Eutelmed, an international group that provides psychological counselling and help online in 60 languages.
Journalists far from the front lines can be subject to visceral trauma by exposure to graphic images and disturbing details about the violence, and our company doctor is preparing guidelines on how to protect your mental health.
The DART Center offers this guidance on how to minimise the risk of developing PTSD through exposure to traumatic imagery.

Social Media
We have advised our staff to refrain from commenting on the conflict on social media and limit themselves to sharing AFP posts. The reasons are multi-fold: the slightest wrong word or comment can expose a news organisation and the journalist to accusations of bias; the online environment is toxic and even the most banal post can attract a torrent of online abuse; and ill-considered social media posts can also potential endanger journalists on the ground. If your journalists are subject to online harassment, PEN America publishes an online field manual that gives advice on how to deal with it.

Language
We have drawn up detailed guidance on use of language and terms related to the conflict and are regularly updating it as the conflict evolves. We have stressed to our staff around the world that they must be extra vigilant, and familiarise themselves with the correct terminology. This is the global reach of the conflict - a badly formulated photo caption from the other side of the world can be spotted, shared online and expose the journalist or news outlet to online or real world violence.
The most contentious issue is the discussion over the use of terrorist and terrorism to describe Hamas and its attack on Israel.
The BBC's veteran correspondent John Simpson faced vitriol over his explanation of why the corporation does not use the term terrorist.

This is the AFP rule:

Terrorist, terrorism

AFP does not describe movements, organisations, guerrillas or armed groups as terrorists, even if they have taken part in what can be defined as terrorist acts i.e. the politically motivated killing of innocent civilians with the intent to create fear.

However, if an organisation is designated by the United States, European Union or United Nations as a terrorist group we should say so. We can also use "terrorist" and "terrorism" in direct quotes.

We should not use the word terrorist to describe an individual who has placed a bomb in a building, detonated a suicide bomb or hijacked a plane or bus. Instead use neutral, more precise descriptions such as suicide bomber, hostage taker and hijacker.

The reason for these style rules is that governments often brand opposition, separatist or other militant groups as terrorists, so in the interests of objectivity it is better for AFP to avoid making that value judgement.

As a news agency, AFP's mission is to report the facts and not attach labels. For example, we fact-check politicians' erroneous statements but we don't brand them "liars", we don't call authoritarian leaders "dictators", or military governments "regimes".

Hate speech

We can quote strong opinions that reflect the powerful feelings and emotions surrounding this conflict, but we must guard against giving a platform to language that incites violence or could foment hatred of a particular ethnic, religious or national group, the definition of hate speech.
What we use should also depend on who is saying it. We can generally quote politicians and other leading players expressing strong views (Netanyahu saying, "every Hamas member is a dead man").
However, we must be careful when we are quoting people who are not public figures.
We should also differentiate between people who are speaking on the record, such as families of victims expressing their anguish and feelings towards the perpetrators;
And people who are speaking anonymously, or who are only being identified by their role or by a given name. If we quote them, then AFP bears the responsibility for their words, not the people we are quoting.

Hostages

Hamas has begun publishing videos of hostages it is holding in Gaza. The AFP ethics code says: *Images or videos of hostages can serve as a sign of life. We must avoid becoming the publicity vehicle for hostage takers in text, photo or video.*

We can publish a still image from a video if it does not show the hostage in distress or in a degrading situation and it serves as a proof of life. Our policy is to not distribute the video

footage, or publish audio or quotes from statements delivered under duress. These are in line with the rules we followed when Isis was taking, and murdering, hostages.

This is an ethical issue that may affect newsrooms around the world as videos emerge of foreign nationals being held hostage.

Disinformation

Social media have been awash with disinformation, and X is seen as a particular source of falsehoods since the dismantling of its content moderation team after Elon Musk's take over. The disinformation is still rooted in the misrepresentation or manipulation of existing content, and for now AI images have played a very limited role. AFP fact-checking team put together this report on the kinds of disinformation we are seeing out of the Middle East.

Graphic Images

With so much horrific imagery coming from both sides of the conflict, it is a challenge to decide what should be published and why. We work from the following checklist.

- Does publishing the image add essential understanding to the story?
- Is it in the public interest to publish the image? Does it meet the public's right to know?
- Does the journalist have a duty to inform the public by publishing the image rather than withholding it?
- Would publishing the image appeal to morbid curiosity and voyeurism, without meeting any of the criteria above?
- Have you considered the human dignity of the victim?
- Have you tried to minimize harm to the victims' families and their community?
- How will the image be published? Does it contain unacceptably graphic content, such as dismembered limbs, that could traumatise your audience?
- Have you considered the question of proximity? Are you exercising double standards by publishing an image from abroad that you would not publish from your own community?
- Is there an alternative image?

Eric Wishart (AFP)
Talking points Israel – Hamas
ONO Shop Talk, October 18th 2023