

## **Affixing labels: The impressions created by short-hand language**

As the evening wears on, your wire desk is sifting through stories about a bombing in Iraq, an attack in Israel, homeland security spending and new U.S. policies affecting privacy and immigration. Many of the stories contain the words “Muslim,” “terrorism,” or “Arab.”

One story out of Iraq says a suicide bombing was carried out by “Islamic terrorists.” A story out of Washington about airline safety includes the words “passengers who appear to be Arab Muslims.”

Such stories about homeland security and terrorism were rare before 9/11 but now appear on a daily basis. As this story count grew, the paper heard complaints that short-hand labels inaccurately portray entire groups of people. As the paper developed relationships with people in these communities, the readers and sources felt more comfortable calling to air their views.

Now the wire desk is under time pressure to move the suicide bombing story and airline safety piece to the copy desk. But the labels raise questions, and the editors must not only decide which versions of the stories to use but whether to use the labels or rework the language.

How should the stories be worded? And how can such issues be summarized in headlines without depending on labels?

Some considerations:

**Who are “Arab Muslims”?** What if a story about airline safety mentions “passengers who appear to be Arab Muslims”?

Questions to answer:

What did the writer mean by “Arab Muslims?” What about Arab Christians? What about Kurds? What about Iranians, who are Persians, not an Arabs? Did the writer intend to include North Africans? What about Pakistanis? Or even Indonesian Muslims?

What if the story replaced “Arab Muslims” with “Middle Easterners”? Does that include Egyptians? Israelis? Iraqis? Jews? Christians?

**What is an “Islamic terrorist”?** Suicide bombings have typically been considered to be acts of terror, and videos made by the bombers say they were carrying them out in the name of Islam.

Some Muslims believe that “Jihad” is one of the pillars of faith in Islam. Merriam-Webster defines jihad as “a holy war waged on behalf of Islam as a religious

duty; *also*: a personal struggle in devotion to Islam especially involving spiritual discipline.” Some Muslims interpret Jihad as a requirement for the faithful to do whatever is necessary to please God, including committing violent acts. Many Muslims say that idea is evil and completely incompatible with other requirements of the faith.

Questions to answer:

Whose interpretation of the faith is correct? Who has the right to describe himself as a Muslim and to say he is acting in the name of his faith? Can one Muslim say that someone else is not a Muslim because they differ in their beliefs?

Now consider various interpretations of other faiths. If a person shoots a doctor who performs abortions, killing in the name of Christ, is that person a Christian terrorist? Does another Christian have the right to say the killer is not a Christian? Can a Messianic Jew who believes in Jesus’ divinity have the right to call himself a Jew? Does someone in the three mainstream branches of Judaism have the right to say a Messianic Jew is not a Jew?

**What is a “terrorist”?** According to Merriam-Webster, it is a person who commits terrorism, which is “the systematic use of terror (a state of intense fear), especially as a means of coercion.”

Questions to answer:

Is anyone who systematically creates a state of intense fear a “terrorist”? When is it fair and accurate to apply the label?

Most Americans believe that the 9/11 attackers were terrorists. What about a suicide bomber who blows up a bus? What about a military patrol that raids the bomber’s house, seeking a weapons cache, but kills the bomber’s family? What about an air force that drops a bomb on a mosque where soldiers had hidden, killing worshippers? What about the acts of a Cuban exile who has sought for decades to overthrow Castro, possibly including bombing a commercial airliner and killing 76 people?

Some options chosen by newspapers have been “foreign fighter,” “martyr,” “citizen,” “militant,” “rebel,” “insurgent,” or “soldier.” Is any of these labels more accurate, more nuanced or more fair?

**Whose newspaper is this, anyway?** In the perspective of some or many people in other countries, U.S. military personnel are the “foreign fighters” and another nation’s citizens are those under attack. That perspective also exists and is growing among U.S. newspapers’ local readers as more U.S. cities include residents who emigrated from Afghanistan and Iraq or elsewhere. News

organizations serve such local readers, as well as like-minded on-line readers around the globe.

Some questions to consider: How does a U.S. newspaper serve the reader who calls to give a tearful litany about how bad the Americans made it for fleeing Iraqis? This reader says, "The Americans always try to find excuses to attack our people." Which people are "our" people? Is a paper being accurate by calling neither side "ours?" Or does that make the paper "liberal" or "conservative?"

Many people who call the paper about fairness issues feel that the U.S. media go out of their way to find fault with the U.S. and particularly the George W. Bush administration. Some of these people believe that the U.S. media should promote U.S. positions; others say that the media should play it straight down the middle. Considering readers' wishes, what is your news organization's responsibility?

### **Resolution of the case:**

This case was based on issues faced by the Orange County Register in California in 2003 and 2004, issues similar to those confronted by many newspapers after 9/11 and during the war in Iraq.

Its wire desk routinely edits stories that contain labels. Such identifiers quickly communicate an idea and help keep stories tight. But "Islamic terrorist" and "Arab Muslim," among others, inflamed readers who saw them as stereotyping and lacking nuance. Even more prevalent in subsequent years are complaints about political labels such as: *conservative, liberal, right-wing, ultra liberal* or *extremist*.

Chris Meyer, deputy editor for community news, said that after 9/11 the paper started hearing from Muslim and Arab readers who believed media shorthand was contributing to inaccurate stereotypes. The paper knew it would be dealing for a long time with stories about terrorism and homeland security. "We thought that the journalists who handle these stories should discuss these issues with the community."

The paper held a roundtable with about 20 representatives of several communities, including the Arab Muslim, Arab Christian, Iraqi and Kurdish populations. The newspaper's goals were to get a better understanding of how to write effectively and fairly about terrorism issues and to understand the community better while exposing any misconceptions the staff might have held. For example, Meyer said, the roundtable participants admonished the staff not to think of "Muslims" and "Arabs" as interchangeable words. Also, the participants made the case that terrorism is not condoned by mainstream Islam, and therefore the paper would be inaccurate to call someone an "Islamic terrorist."

The roundtable conversation, thoughtful though sometimes heated, led the staff to redouble efforts to avoid labeling. Although the newsroom staff disagreed with

some of the assertions from the community, the guests expressed appreciation that they were listened to.

The Orange County Register has asked its wire editors to be vigilant gatekeepers of fairness and accuracy in its wire stories, including watching for use of labels. This new language was added to the labels section of the Register's ethics policy: "Care should be exercised with phrasing such as 'Muslim extremists' or 'Islamic terrorist,' which appear in wire-service international reports. Such terms should be avoided."

The issue applies beyond post-9/11 issue stories to other arenas such as politics and religion. Roundtables involving Latino readers and conservatives have raised similar concern about labels. For example, what is a "liberal," "conservative," or "centrist?" What are the litmus tests for each? Who says? The paper replaces such labels with specific information about views and behavior relevant to the news.

Again, from the ethics policy:

*We should avoid applying labels in news copy because of the risk that they will be inaccurate or misleading and because it might appear that the newspaper is expressing its opinion, raising perceptions of bias.*

*Consistent with the Register in-house stylebook, we should avoid applying labels that draw conclusions and that make value judgments or blanket characterizations, such as "tony," "impoverished," or "middle-class." Instead, provide specific details and let readers make their own judgments.*

*Labels such as "conservative," "liberal," "right-wing," and "left-wing," "archconservative" and "ultraliberal" should be avoided in political news accounts. Instead, provide specific, relevant information about policy-makers', elected officials', candidates' and advocacy groups' points of view, voting records, and positions on issues.*

This has been especially challenging to accomplish in headlines. Meyer said participants of roundtables pointed out that sometimes the newspaper gets too "cute" in news headlines in order to turn a phrase. The paper now believes in playing it straight and going for clarity.

"The biggest lesson is that we need to have conversations with readers all the time," Meyer said. Not only reporters, but editors and other journalists as well. "Direct contact is so beneficial and works both ways. Readers learn they can talk to us and we'll listen. And they point out our blind spots. The result is coverage that is not only more credible, but more relevant."