

# Speech: Lead Commissioner's speech on the role of the media in challenging extremism

Thanks to IPSO for inviting me and to Alan and Miranda for the introduction

My independent Commission has had a series of productive conversations with IPSO over the last year about the media and extremism – and so I've been looking forward to tonight's discussion.

It's a pleasure to be addressing a room full of journalists, industry leaders and those with an interest in this area. I've been asked by the Home Secretary to look into the threat of extremism, and what more we can do as a society to counter it.

I'll be publishing an in-depth report later this year, but I'm here because I wanted to discuss the important role of the media in exposing extremism.

We are living in an era of extremism, and the impact is being felt by individuals, communities and wider society. It is being felt at home and abroad, as we saw this weekend with the devastating attacks in Sri Lanka.

A free and fearless press, determined to shine a light on extremism and the divisive tactics of extremists, is crucial.

However, investigating and exposing extremism is hugely challenging and fraught with risks – not least the increasingly vicious attacks on journalists from extremists and their sympathisers.

This is all happening at a time when extremists, and others are deliberately, and strategically, attacking the integrity and veracity of mainstream journalism.

Extremists are creating alternative social media outlets that are short on the principles of journalism and journalistic ethics, but are full of propaganda and conspiracy theories.

The threat to journalism from extremism is one that cannot be ignored.

And today I want to start a conversation about how you might be better supported in covering this crucial issue, knowing as I do, that calling out extremism can lead to abuse, much of it highly personal, as well as intimidation.

You do your job because you seek to educate and inform the wider public.

Like many concepts, extremism does not have a universally-agreed definition. But that has never stopped journalists from reporting on it.

IPSO's code grants considerable latitude on journalists' use of the term, while recognising that it is serious to allege someone is an extremist.

For now though, I'd like to address a couple of common misconceptions.

Firstly, extremism isn't about one single race, religion or political view.

I've heard about a wide variety of extremisms – from the Far Right, from Islamists, but also from within other religious communities, political groups and single-issue campaigns.

The tactics also vary. They range from hateful street demonstrations, to disinformation online, to the denial of individual rights or coercion and intimidation of individuals.

What extremists have in common is an opposition to our rich diversity, equality and human rights. Most of us know this when we see it.

Extremists shut down debates, twist facts and turn communities against each other to further their ideological worldview. They oppose pluralism.

Secondly, extremism isn't just about violence or terrorism.

Our polling shows many people conflate the terms.

But extremism captures a range of harms.

It can radicalise into terror, but can also cause other harms from individuals being threatened or ostracised for not holding a particular belief or worldview, to experiencing a campaign of hate, to the undermining of trust in our democracy.

Countering extremism is therefore an urgent and important task.

Over the last few years, it has become apparent that extremism is a global challenge. It is a challenge that will remain for years if not decades.

My Commission has been looking into the threat of extremism in this country.

I've visited 15 towns and cities meeting hundreds of experts and activists.

We've carried out polling and reviewed academic literature.

We've also held the country's first consultation on extremism, commissioned almost 30 academics to look into key issues and we're analysing government data on possible indicators of extremism.

A worrying picture is emerging.

In every town or city I have visited, I have heard deep and growing concern about the effect extremist views and activities are having on our society.

Extremism is the single most polarising force in this country. Like terrorism, it seeks to force people to takesides. And some – who otherwise

wouldn't – do.

Extremists actively seek to recruit people to their cause, which is why they invest so much time and energy into spreading their propaganda.

From the Far Right exploiting local tensions and mobilising anti-minority sentiment, to Islamist extremists turning young people against their country.

Extremism is having a devastating impact on the lives of individuals and their freedoms, on our towns and cities, on young people, on minority groups and even on our democracy.

I have recently been to the Midlands and the North East to gather evidence where I've heard first-hand how both Far Right and Islamist extremists are spreading hatred and intimidating and threatening members of the public, teachers, parents and councillors.

A mosque representative cried as he told me that because of his willingness to stand up to Far Right extremism, his home and work details had been put on Facebook by Far Right activists, alongside false claims that he was a paedophile.

Apostates, women, and LGBTQ+ individuals have described to me how they have been targeted, threatened and abused by religious extremists.

Extremists seek to inspire and create fear to ensure conformity to their worldview.

Social media has, of course, been a game-changer. It has allowed extremists to spread their ideologies, amplifying their hatred and their activities further and faster than ever before. A small hard core can get the attention of hundreds of thousands within days or even hours.

We've seen misinformation, conspiracy theories and fake news circulate at an unprecedented rate, challenging our perceptions of 'truth' and 'fact'. This assault on our sensibilities is unrivalled in human history.

We cannot stand passively by if we are to recapture moderation and measured debate that sheds more light than heat.

As the Culture, Media and Sport select committee has said, passing off propaganda and bias as news is nothing new. But, in recent times, these activities have been hugely magnified by developments in technology and the ubiquity of social media.

It's so easy now to believe information that reinforces our views, no matter how distorted or inaccurate it is, while labelling the content we don't agree with as 'fake news'.

And often it is extremists who thrive in such a climate.

I have seen time and again how they actively engage in an information war – on and offline, ignoring or hiding the facts, deliberately conflating and

confusing truth from fiction in an attempt to drive fear and distrust and recruit people to their cause.

Not only do they regularly attack the reputations of counter-extremists in this manner, they also attack the integrity and truthfulness of your accurate reporting; of your profession.

The consequences of this to our free press, to those who are countering extremism and indeed to our democracy are very troubling.

A free, independent and vigilant media, acting as truthbearer in our society, is a vital defence against extremism.

The government published a Counter Extremism Strategy in 2015, which has prompted work at a local and national level.

This strategy is nearly 4 years old. I'm currently assessing whether the government's response to extremism has kept pace with the changing face of extremism in that time.

But challenging extremism isn't just a job for government.

It requires a whole society response.

I've been inspired by individuals and groups up and down the country who are bravely challenging extremism.

Many of them are journalists; journalists working at every level and for every kind of publication. It seems particularly apt to talk of journalists' bravery today – on the day of Lyra McKee's funeral.

All of you in this room play a vital role in challenging extremism and exposing extremists and their activities.

There are many examples of how the British media has done this extremely well.

Investigative reports exposing the finances behind Stephen Yaxley Lennon, the intimidating and threatening behaviour experienced by headteachers in Birmingham schools for teaching equalities, the targeted threats and abuse of female Jewish MPs by Hard Left activists or the reporting on the resurgent activism of Hizb Ut Tahrir and their targeting of young people on campus and in communities.

This commitment to exposing extremism is also being carried out by local papers too.

A few weeks ago, I spoke to the managing editor of the Sunderland Echo, Gavin Foster.

Sunderland has a recent history of Far Right marches and Gavin has always made a point of never giving these marches coverage. He abhors what they stand for.

But then, a few months ago, an incident happened involving someone connected to the Far Right that was widely discussed across the city and became newsworthy.

Gavin and his reporters considered how they would report on it extremely carefully. They didn't want to ignore something the community was talking about, but they also didn't want to fan the flames of hate.

Gavin took me through some of the lengthy conversations he had had. What tone would the paper adopt for online?

Would it be different for print? What effect might the coverage have on community cohesion in the longer-term? Gavin and his reporters had thought through it all.

This might not come as a surprise to you, but I use this as an example of how seriously so many of you – in local and in national media – take your responsibilities. I wish more people outside the media knew this.

The British media has often done a fantastic job in championing the work of counter-extremists – often little-known individuals who are abused and threatened for daring to stand up to extremists.

I'm thinking of organisations like Hope Not Hate whose research and investigations regularly lead the news agenda.

Who could forget the story of how Robbie Mullen, a member of National Action, foiled Jack Renshaw's plot to murder MP Rosie Cooper.

As someone who used to run a counter-extremism organisation for many years, and when few used to take counter extremism work seriously, it was the media who often did.

I saw first-hand how local authorities and even some politicians chose to ignore extremism in our towns and cities because it was just too difficult or uncomfortable to address.

Yet it would often be the media who would be willing to listen to under-supported and under-resourced counter-extremists and report a story which would force our authorities and leaders to take action.

But covering extremism is difficult territory, with many pitfalls.

What are the consequences of giving extremists media attention? Can certain kinds of coverage legitimise them and their cause?

These challenges are made all the more difficult by the fact that many extremists desperately crave media attention.

The Met's Assistant Commissioner Neil Basu recently wrote an open letter warning the media about publishing uncensored Daesh propaganda on their websites or making the rambling 'manifestos' of crazed killers available for download.

I believe Neil is right. Many journalists know this already and would never do this.

This is what terrorists want. We should refrain from dancing to their tune.

Anjem Choudary is a case in point.

His organisation, the first UK-based proscribed Islamist group Al-Muhajiroun, would deliberately carry out provocative acts to catch the media's attention.

He burned poppies on Remembrance Sunday. He threatened to take empty coffins through Royal Wootton Bassett.

Dr Michael Kenney, of the University of Pittsburgh, explains in his recent book, *The Islamic State in Britain*, how Al-Muhajiroun used the media to appear much bigger and so much more influential than they were.

One Al-Muhajiroun leader told Dr Kenney, "you know and I know we're not many in number...but in the media, we're big, massive."

Reporting on Al-Muhajiroun should be expected, and for good reason. The group has been in the past linked to several Islamist-inspired terror offences in our country.

But the media coverage has had consequences. There were those who had little understanding of Britain's diverse Muslims who believed the views of Al-Muhajiroun were representative of all British Muslims.

The reality of course is that the vast majority of Britain's Muslims despised Choudary and regularly turfed him out of their mosques.

But that message rarely filtered through.

Take Former English Defence League organiser, now counter-extremist, Ivan Humble. He said, and I quote, that it was "Anjem Choudary on the talk shows, chat shows and newspapers," which led to his radicalisation into the Far Right.

Humble believed that too often Choudary became "the go-to Muslim for the media" even after the horrific murder of Fusilier Lee Rigby in May 2013.

I am of the firm view that there is an important role for the media in exposing the activities of extremists and their ideological beliefs, whether that is their hatred for Western democracy, human rights, equality principles or the rule of law.

We need to be made aware of the threat groups like Al-Muhajiroun and others have on our society and on children.

The question is how to do so without playing into the hands of extremists.

I recently re-watched some of the clips of Anjem Choudary. It is quite incredible to see how Choudary was allowed to spew such vile hatred; knowing

what kind of response it would generate.

It's a challenge that journalists are also grappling with when it comes to the likes of Stephen Yaxley Lennon who, on the one hand attacks the veracity of the mainstream media, while on the other desperately craves media limelight.

I do believe the press has learnt lessons from Choudary, but we should never be complacent.

As I will come to later, I believe the answer lies in the principles of quality journalism – thinking critically, reporting accurately on said organisation or individual and not implicating whole communities.

Without this, the reporting hinders rather than helps in our collective struggle against extremism.

Reporting on extremism when the agenda of those you're writing about is explicit is hard enough. But what about when it isn't?

I believe we are seeing the mainstreaming of extremism – as extremists seek to exploit local tensions and present a professional veneer to their hatred.

This adds a second level of challenge to reporting, as journalists have to unpick dubious claims such as championing freedom of speech, campaigning for human rights or in declaring they represent a particular community.

There are troubling consequences when this isn't done.

After the London Bridge attack for example, Islamists were asked for their views on counter-radicalisation programmes and counter-Islamist efforts.

This legitimises Islamist extremists, many of whom attack Muslim counter-extremists who are fighting for equality and human rights.

Consistency matters. It would be rare to not include a comment from a Far Right activist without making clear who and what he she represents/believes. Yet this is often not the case with Islamist activists, who are instead portrayed as "Muslim representatives."

Perhaps due diligence hadn't been carried out. An online search but can offer access to credible information or there are experts on extremism who can be contacted, this can be no defence.

And while, for the most part, I admire the rigour of our network broadcasters, regrettably there's still the odd occasion when someone from an organisation with extremist views is given unchallenged airtime.

Words really matter – and the risks of getting it wrong are that you may contribute to the very issue you're exposing.

It's important to distinguish carefully between Islam, Islamism and Islamist extremist.

And where you are describing an eco-system of individuals, groups and campaigns, it's important to use pinpoint accuracy when it comes to describing and explaining the actors in the story.

But above all, there are real risks of using sweeping statements when you're zooming out to provide the bigger picture.

Words are a journalist's precision tools. They should be used with precision, directed at the individual, or organisation in question, never a whole community.

Getting a description wrong can at best undermine an important expose – rightly leading to complaints – and at worst alienate the very people you're trying to defend.

I'm still surprised at the use of the term "the Muslim community" – and I would treat with suspicion anyone who suggests "The Muslim community believe x or y."

There is no single, one, monolithic Muslim community; that thinks the same, believes the same or behaves the same way. Muslims are one of the most diverse minorities in our country – but this mythical terminology of a singular community only ends up serving the Far Right and Islamists instead.

In the case of the former, all Muslims are extremists and terrorists.

In the case of the latter, Islamists who regularly claim to "represent" Muslims actively yet erroneously promote themselves as gatekeepers in a way that serves them and their ideological cause and not ordinary Muslims.

As a Muslim woman from an ethnic minority background, I wanted to say more personally, that sweeping statements, lazy stereotypes and loose reporting can demonise and misrepresent entire communities, unwittingly contribute to xenophobia and play into the hands of extremists.

Unfortunately, I've met many Muslims who are deeply distrustful of the media and feel it is "out to get them."

Just as one example, I remember reading the reporting after the London bombings and the insinuation that if you were living next door to Muslims, for all you know they could be terrorists. I remember that because I remember how it made me feel and how fearful I felt being possibly viewed with irrational suspicion.

I was pleased to read in IPSO's evidence to our public consultation on extremism that you are drafting guidance on the reporting of Islam and Muslims in the UK.

This is important. Language and tone matters. I very much hope that by working with IPSO the print media can up its game in this respect.

Extremists, and their sympathisers will challenge and attack those journalists who try to expose them.

Abuse comes with the territory, one experienced investigative reporter told me the other day.

But when it comes to reporting on extremism, that abuse is often personal.

I've spoken to reporters and editors and I am deeply concerned that extremist groups and individuals are targeting and intimidating journalists with verbal abuse, physical attacks and intimidation.

I'm concerned about the true scale of this targeted abuse among journalists.

I know you're often referred to as a thick-skinned lot, but you're also human.

Some journalists have even had intimidating behaviour outside their homes.

Mike Stuchbery) has described how Stephen Yaxley Lennon, also known as Tommy Robinson, turned up at his home one evening and then returned to hammer on his door that morning, at 5am.

Katie Razzall, of Newsnight, has vividly described how when covering a Far Right march, one of her cameramen was surrounded by 'men who started to push him and knock him over, taking his microphone from him'.

I've heard too how extremist groups are trying to intimidate young journalists who dare to cover the Far Right or Islamists. Female journalists also experience misogynistic abuse. Journalists from an ethnic minority background experience additional racist abuse.

Journalists reporting on the activities of Islamist extremists, describe the repeated attacks and smears on their reputation: Islamists deceptively labelling journalists as Islamophobic and racist.

As a long-standing counter-extremism campaigner, I know from personal experience what it can be like to endure these sorts of attacks.

It's intimidating and often frightening. You sometimes wonder if exposing extremists is worth the pain and abuse.

But I also know that these attacks, smears and threats are an attempt to intimidate you into silence, into fear, to discourage you from reporting on extremist activity.

It is an attempt to hamper the work of journalists and to undermine the very principles of our free press. And by extension, our democracy.

We must not tolerate such abuse of journalists who are simply doing their jobs and we need to consider more seriously how we can support them in the face of targeted abuse.

As part of my report, I'm looking into what more we can do as a society to challenge extremism.

I'm asking if the government's response is sufficient, but I'm also looking at wider public sector, local leaders and civil society.

And I'll be frank: I think our collective fight against extremism would benefit from a little more confidence and a little less handwringing from some quarters.

This has to include how we can stand up for quality journalism in the face of fake news and attacks.

At the same time, I'd like to open a conversation about how to empower journalists to be emboldened to report more on extremism – and I look forward to hearing your comments in the Q&A.

Let me offer some thoughts based on numerous conversations I've had with journalists.

Earlier I warned about not playing into the hands of attention-seeking extremists.

Why not take an example from the French press? Le Monde has argued that all elements of society must be involved in the struggle against terrorism – (and I would extend this to extremism).

As part of this, the paper, alongside Le Figaro, decided a few years ago to no longer republish images from, for example, ISIS propaganda documents or photographs of people responsible for terrorist killings to avoid bestowing glorification after their death.

When deciding to report on extremism, it comes back to the principles of quality journalism.

Do what you do best. Investigate, challenge and refuse to take a message on face value.

I know something of the constraints in which you work – tight deadlines, a desire to give balance, a need to show you are not taking sides.

But you need to ask: have I done my research into this person, or that organisations'; background? Have I challenged them robustly?

You must have thought carefully: do we understand who and what this person represents? What is their agenda? Is the way they are presenting themselves consistent with how they have acted in the past? Could any third parties be presenting a distorted version of who they are? Have I contextualised these views?

As tempting as it is, it must not be those who shout the loudest or who answer their phones first who are given platforms.

Finally, this is complex territory, so every word matters. As I say, words are your precision tools. Just as they are mine

Report accurately and do not implicate whole communities or conflate the actions of an individual or organisation with an entire community.

Be consistent – don't treat Far Right terrorists differently to Islamist terrorists in your coverage.

A couple of weeks ago, research was done by the media monitoring firm Signal A.I. which showed Islamist attackers are 3 times more likely to be called 'terrorists' in the media than Far Right attackers. The analysts had studied 200,000 articles in 80 different languages.

I know I've used the phrase "words matter" a number of times today. I have done so deliberately. Sadly, we see so often the inappropriate usage of terminology, where the line of civility is readily trampled on.

'Traitors' and 'Nazis' are terms regularly used to denigrate political opponents and the language of 'nooses' is deemed acceptable. Dog whistle politics is something we see with increased frequency. In these polarised times, I would urge the press to think about how words matter. We all have an ethical and moral responsibility to restore the red line of civility.

I am quite sure that those of you who so powerfully uncover extremism in our country and take extremists to task do not see yourselves as counter-extremists – you rightly see yourselves as doing your job.

As one journalist friend put it to me "Journalism is a blunt but effective instrument." And hypocrisy and double standards are one of the many things that extremists at both ends of the extreme have in common.

As I've hopefully highlighted, challenging extremism is complex.

And must be done while protecting and preserving media freedom. Without such freedoms, there is little to demarcate us from totalitarian and extremist regimes.

Shutting down discussion, censoring debates – no matter how controversial a topic – is counter-productive. I believe we need more speech, more debate, more open discussion to counter extremism, not less.

Because reasoned, evidenced based debate is at the heart of our values. It's how we in this country have isolated extremists to a greater extent than most of our neighbours. But that stability is at greater risk now than any in my lifetime.

I firmly believe that it is possible to get the balance right between press freedom and the need to limit the oxygen of publicity extremists so desperately crave.

To conclude, never before has a free, independent and vigilant media been so vital.

You play a critical role in what I call a 'whole society' approach to challenging extremism. That is, that everyone has their part to play – and

your part is vast.

You expose extremists and their activities for what they are and we should applaud you more for it. But when reporting on extremism, the principles of quality journalism matter hugely, rigorous in its analysis, scrupulous in its regard for facts,

Thank you.