



PEACE, PROSPERITY AND
REGIONAL INTEGRATION

OFFICIAL REMARKS

WORKNEH GEBEYEHU, IGAD EXECUTIVE SECRETARY

MEDIA FORUM:

**Reviewing Best Practices in Media Coverage of Violent
Extremism**

Tuesday, 22nd March 2022



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- Your Excellency and our gracious host, **Amb. Mohamed Ali Hassan**, Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Djibouti;
- Distinguished **Members of the Fourth Estate**, drawn from our IGAD Member States;
- Our CVE partners, **Ambassador Aiden O'Hara**, Head of the EU Delegation and **Ambassador Jonathan Pratt** from the United States Embassy;
- **Dear IGAD Colleagues;**
- **Ladies and Gentlemen,**



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Good morning and welcome to this **forum to review the best practices in media coverage of violent extremism.**

I have always imagined that **in 1436 when Johannes Gutenberg invented the printing press, his intentions must have been to use the power of words to unite our world.**

The capacity his invention gave us to reproduce information on an industrial scale marked the beginning of the age of reason, enabled alternative viewpoints to influence mainstream thinking and spawned religious and political revolutions that forever changed the world order.



ES Statement | Media Forum: Reviewing Best Practices in Media Coverage of Violent Extremism

The subsequent invention of **radio, television and the internet** merely amplified the global information network that was **created by the printed word** and established the knowledge economy that we live in today.

If history has taught us anything, it is that **the progression of human race is often a double-edged sword.** And the democratisation of information is no exception; it has had an immeasurably beneficial effect on humankind, but at the same time it has had some of the most detrimental impacts on us as a species.



Nothing is more powerful than a compelling idea, except perhaps a compelling idea that is being heard and believed by many people. Indeed, what is change but the process of animating ideas and replacing old ideas with new ones?

And taken altogether, these notions capture and reflect the essence of our gathering here today. **The media is the arbitrator that will ultimately determine whose ideas will be dominant; those of mainstream society or those of violent extremists.**

The statement by Margaret Thatcher that “media coverage is the oxygen of terrorism” has drawn positive and negative reactions in equal measure.



Irrespective of these diverse perspectives, **what remains undeniable is that terrorist and extremist groups thrive on the media publicity that follows their acts of violence.**

Data from IGAD's conflict early warning mechanism CEWARN, the global terrorism database and media monitoring institutions suggests that terrorist incidents in the more developed parts of the world receive a disproportionate amount of media coverage.

This is in comparison to Africa and the Middle East where a majority of attacks take place and victims are located.



ES Statement | Media Forum: Reviewing Best Practices in Media Coverage of Violent Extremism

Furthermore, some observers have highlighted what appears to be **double standards when it comes to journalistic ethics in the coverage of terrorist incidents in different parts of the world.**

The media has also been **occasionally accused of sensationalist reporting**, which not only furtheres the agenda of terrorist organisations but also undermines civic confidence in state institutions and also contributes to spreading public fear.

Considering that terrorism and violent extremism are relatively recent developments in the Horn of Africa, **IGAD concedes that it is only natural that some errors would occur when reporting on a new and constantly subject matter such as terrorism.**



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Certainly, **as IGAD, we sympathise with how terrorism puts you all as media professionals on the horns of a dilemma**, “how do you preserve journalistic ethics and maintain balanced reporting when you, your loved ones or your countrymen have been affected or are at-risk of terrorist attacks?”

At the same time, mainstream media-houses are under immense pressure to maintain their traditional audience base in **a rapidly changing world, where the increasing majority of people are relying on non-traditional news sources such as social media platforms** and biased websites.



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It is within these contexts that **a monumental contest between equal but opposite choices is taking place.**

The paradox that our brothers and sisters in the media have to face every day is; **“shall we suppress coverage of terrorism to avoid perpetuating it?”** or ***“shall we sensationalize violence and report even unverified information in order to keep our audience base?”***

Bearing these mitigations in mind, **IGAD’s aim through this workshop is to focus on the solutions, not the problem.** Rather than castigate our important partners in the media fraternity, we are seeking to provide a platform for media practitioners from our region to discuss and share best practice in the coverage of violent extremism.



IGAD recognises that the media is a key stakeholder in preventing and countering violent extremism.

This is why the IGAD Centre of Excellence for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism organised this regional media forum with the support of our development partners **as part of our joint strategic communications effort to prevent and counter violent extremism in the region.**

The objective is for **all of us who serve as custodians and guardians of public interest to agree upon the basic principles that we can collectively adopt in order to protect the communities we serve** and to uphold a common standard of professionalism in media reporting.



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Organisations such as IGAD and our development partners tasked with the responsibility of originating and implementing public policy **share a symbiotic and mutually reinforcing relationship with the members of the media fraternity**, whose responsibility it is to amplify public policy messages on one hand, and also echo the voices of the public constituency on the other.

And if democratic governance is founded on the popular expression that *"the voice of the people is the voice of God."* Let us understand that terrorists and violent extremists seek to destroy and undermine society by sowing fear and mistrust in the sacred relationship between government as an expression of the will of the people, **and the media as the watchdog of the people against the excesses of government.**



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But allow me to caution that **the incredible power that the media wields to disseminate information to the public must be also measured against the potentially detrimental effects it has on the interests of the public.**

Just like doctors, journalists are similarly bound by the principle to **“first do no harm.”**

At this juncture, **I must underscore that IGAD subscribes to the principles of freedom of expression as enshrined in Article 9 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights** regarding the right to receive information and free expression.



ES Statement | Media Forum: Reviewing Best Practices in Media Coverage of Violent Extremism

IGAD therefore supports the principle that journalists and media professionals are **obliged to reliably report verified information** in the public interest, and the public has an **inalienable right to truthful, impartial and timely information**, particularly where it touches on their freedom and safety.

It is our firm belief therefore, **that information is the fastest way to change the world.** *One idea can kill more people than a thousand bullets, but a single idea can also uplift more people than a Billion dollars.*

For us in this region, it is imperative that we transmit ideas that drive positive transformation; **after all, the pen is mightier than the bomb.**



ES Statement | Media Forum: Reviewing Best Practices in Media Coverage of Violent Extremism

In this regard, **balanced and ethical journalism is one of the factors that will define the difference between a positive and a negative narrative** when it comes to countering terrorism and violent extremism.

I wish to submit a 3-step framework towards this goal for your consideration;

The first step is to domesticate and tailor to our unique circumstances, the international guidelines on reporting terrorism and violent extremism so that they are responsive and effective for our region.



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The second step is to take back control of the narrative. Media coverage is a fundamental for stimulating informed debates on the prevention of terrorism and violent extremism.

I urge our partners in the media fraternity to counter-balance the negative coverage of attacks, with positive coverage of how member states and international community are responding to the threat of violent extremism.

The third step is for the media to actively oppose and neutralise extremist messaging. Terrorists have become very good at using multiple channels of communication **including social media to spread, disinformation, misinformation, fake news and propaganda**.



ES Statement | Media Forum: Reviewing Best Practices in Media Coverage of Violent Extremism

Let us remember the wise saying that **a lie can run halfway around the world before the truth has put its shoes on.**

I therefore **invite our media partners here to also be just as innovative as the terrorists** by adopting new approaches such as citizen-journalism, promoting fact-based reporting and taking on a more aggressive stance that directly challenges false and negative messaging on mainstream and alternative media platforms.

I conclude by saying **that you are our storytellers, our modern-day printing press.** Just as Gutenberg intended, use your words to unite our world against every form of injustice, violence and extremism.

Thank you very much.