[MT] Publication of Guidelines on Broadcasting Coverage of Tragic Events

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In August 2001, the Malta Broadcasting Authority published Guidelines on the Broadcasting Coverage of Tragic Events. The guidelines were prepared by the Advisory Committee on Quality and Ethics in Broadcasting and are intended as guidelines for television and radio broadcasters in the reporting of tragedies. In the introductory section it is pointed out that the coverage given by the various television stations in Malta to tragedies that occurred during the summer of 2000 sparked the Broadcasting Authority's initiative to publish a set of guidelines. Similar documents in other countries were consulted, keeping in mind, however, the particular circumstances of Malta. Separate sections are dedicated to the victim of a tragedy, the relatives and the viewer. The guidelines also contain sections on the verification of facts, suicides, children and certain ancillary issues.

Broadly speaking, the guidelines contain an enumeration of general principles and specific restrictions aiming at preserving the dignity of victims of tragedies and their relatives, whilst safeguarding the audience's right to be informed.

A look at the section dealing with the victim illustrates how this is to be achieved. Whilst a tragedy affects primarily the victim and his/her relatives and friends, it is recognised that the event, once it has been reported, also becomes the concern of the audience. However, broadcasters reporting on the tragedy are to keep in mind that the subject is a person or persons who deserve to be treated with respect and dignity. In fact, no other consideration should override such respect and dignity. Specifically, the guidelines prohibit the close-up depiction of injured or deceased victims, unless there are reasons for doing so. Furthermore, they state that care should be taken not to linger unduly on the physical consequences of the tragedy. Also, broadcasters should not show persons dying, and should refrain from unsavoury or sensational speculation on the causes of the tragedy, the state of the victim before the tragedy, how the tragedy happened or any other factor which has not been duly verified.

The considerations regarding the dignity of the victim also apply to relatives and friends. Here again, principles and specific prohibitions are listed, notably, that reporting on the tragedy should not cause further distress. The section on the viewer contains several considerations regarding the impact of televised images on the viewer. In summary, this section and the section titled "Verification of

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Facts" contain generally-accepted principles of fair and balanced broadcasting.

No mention may be made of suicide except in exceptional circumstances. The relevant section gives expression to widely-shared concerns about the negative aspects of detailed portrayal of suicide, especially when there is some novel aspect which may be copied. This section is perhaps the most prominent example of how the particular circumstances of Malta, a predominantly Catholic country, have been taken into account for the drafting of the guidelines.

The guidelines also deal with the treatment and the rights of children in the event that their parents or the children themselves have been involved in a tragedy.

Finally, the guidelines contain provisions to prevent political or any other exploitation of tragic events. In a section entitled "conclusion", it is said that only a strong, overriding public interest can provide exceptions to these norms, and that, whilst the guidelines are generally geared towards television broadcasting, they also cover radio broadcasting, where applicable.

Linji Gwida Dwar Il-Mod Kif Jigu Rappurtati Tragedji Fix-Xandir, 20 August 2001

http://www.ba-malta.org/guidelines/m_code_trag.htm

Guidelines on the coverage of Tragedies in Broadcasting, 20 August 2001

http://www.ba-malta.org/guidelines/m_code_trag.htm#AAAA

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