Guidance on Coverage of Sept. 11, 20 Years Later

This September marks 20 years since the 9/11 attacks. The Arab and Middle Eastern Journalists Association (AMEJA), Asian American Journalists Association (AAJA), the National Association of Black Journalists (NABJ), and the South Asian Journalists Association (SAJA), all independent professional organizations, are issuing guidance to help journalists and newsrooms more accurately and critically cover the commemoration, impacted communities, and policies that resulted from 9/11.

The following is guidance on terminology that is often misused in relation to 9/11 and its aftermath.

- When referring to the events of that day, use “Sept. 11, 2001,” “9/11,” “9/11 attacks,” or “Sept. 11 attacks.”
- Avoid using the word “terrorism” or “terrorist” unless it is in a quote by a source, as the words are emotionally and politically loaded. Instead use a factual approach. The Reuters Handbook of Journalism advises reporters to “use more specific terms like bomber or bombing, hijacker or hijacking, attacker or attacks, gunman or gunmen etc.,” and “not refer to specific events as terrorism [or] … use the adjective word terrorist without attribution.” Moreover, experts have explained why the use of these terms is dangerous and has often resulted in hate crimes and violence against Arab, Middle Eastern, Muslim, and South Asian (AMEMSA) communities in the United States.
- Avoid using the phrase “war on terror” while describing or naming the political violence and wars that have been waged since 9/11, unless it is attributed to a government official or policy. The Reuters Handbook of Journalism advises, “Do not use this phrase unless in a quote. It is poor English and part of the propaganda battle around militant violence.”

Story Tips

- Broaden story angles beyond the national security lens. Be specific and descriptive when referring to surveillance, detention, criminalization, violence, discrimination, and hate crimes in the post-9/11 era targeting AMEMSA communities in the United States.
- Be aware that multiple communities were impacted and traumatized by 9/11 and post-9/11 policies, in the U.S. and abroad. In addition to the nearly 3,000 people who died on Sept. 11, 2001, approximately 801,000 people have been killed directly in the violence of the subsequent wars in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen and elsewhere. Several times as many civilians have died due to the reverberating effects of these wars. The Costs of War data shows the United States conducted counterterrorism operations in 85 countries from 2018 through 2020, and is still aggressively pursuing counterterrorism activities.
- Recognize that there is often a double standard in reporting on extremist violence by non-white and white perpetrators. AAJA has published a guide on avoiding this double standard, which also references the research findings in this ISPU report.
Islamophobia and anti-Muslim bigotry affect Muslims in the U.S. as well as those who are erroneously perceived as Muslim. As a point of reference, the first deadly hate crime after 9/11 was the murder of a Sikh man, Balbir Singh Sodhi, on September 15, in Mesa, Arizona.

Rather than using euphemisms like “anti-Muslim sentiment,” assess whether it is more accurate to use terms like “anti-Muslim bias,” “Islamophobia,” or “anti-Muslim bigotry.” For more information, consult the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding’s guide on Islamophobia.

Be careful about framing that creates a false binary between “the West” and “the Muslim World.” There are nearly 3.5 million Muslims in the United States, and Pew has projected that by 2050, 10 percent of all Europeans will be Muslim. Include the broader context of how foreign policies and interventions tie into local events you are currently covering.

Diversify Sources

Diversify sources by interviewing and quoting experts and leaders from AMEMSA communities. For assistance in connecting with a range of researchers, scholars, community leaders, and experts in policy, advocacy, and legal issues from AMEMSA communities across the U.S., you can:

- Reach out to Firdaus Arastu at ReThink Media firdaus@rethinkmedia.org
- Consult AAJA’s speakers bureau, AAJA Studio
- See ISPU’s database of scholars on Muslims in the United States and abroad.

Reporting on Islam and Muslims

- Muslims are people who practice or identify with the religion of Islam and can be from any ethnicity, race, country of origin, or gender. Muslims are among the most ethnically diverse faith communities in the U.S., with a plurality (28%) identifying as Black or African American. Those who are immigrants or descended from immigrants trace their origins to many countries around the world.

- The terms “Islamist” and “Islamism” are vague and problematic. Most “Islamist” movements are nonviolent and cite Islamic principles as the ethical basis of their political program much like Christian Democratic parties did of Christian principles in Europe. Groups that espouse violence should be identified as such, not as “Islamist,” just as groups such as the Lord’s Resistance Army or Ku Klux Klan, which claim Biblical legitimacy, are not identified as “Christian.”

- “Jihad” is a term of spiritual significance for Muslims that indicates a personal struggle. There is no inherent connotation of violence, and translating it as “holy war” outside of specific context is inaccurate. Individuals committing violence they claim is sanctioned by Islam should not be referred to as engaging in “jihad.” Avoid, too, labelling them as “Jihadis” or “jihadists.”

- Be specific and accurate in referring to clothing that some Muslims wear for religious or cultural reasons. There is no such thing as “Islamic garb”. Understand the difference between hijab, niqab, burqa (or burka), and chador. The styles are depicted in this BBC article and CNN article.
● Ensure that any terminology or names associated with AMEMSA communities are pronounced correctly. Consult this audio pronunciation guide by Michigan State University School of Journalism for common words associated with Islam.

● The news media plays a critical role in shaping perceptions of Muslims. For more information and details on covering Muslim communities in the U.S., the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding has compiled a detailed guide for media professionals.

Check in on your staffers who are from AMEMSA communities, especially those who may be personally impacted by the events of 9/11 and/or post-9/11 policies. Many have experienced compounded trauma while covering the impacts of post-9/11 policies. AAJA has compiled a list of mental health resources for journalists.

Many of our journalists are pushing — sometimes behind-the-scenes and sometimes publicly — for increased and more nuanced coverage of AMEMSA experiences. Be receptive to their feedback on your news organization’s coverage of the conflict without placing undue burdens on them. Recognize that their cultural, religious, and regional knowledge can be an asset to your organization’s coverage.

We will update our guidance as necessary. For more specific coverage guidance related to other communities, we urge you to consult resources created by organizations and people of those communities.