A guide to managing incidents and promoting safety in Culture

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Index

1

What is happening?

In recent times, the cultural sector has been the target of disruptive manifestations – in some cases even violent, at a psychological and physical level – by different people or groups. The intention is to condition freedom of creation and cultural enjoyment by censoring exhibitions, books, performances and other public cultural events.

We need to better understand the practices adopted, as well as our rights in a state governed by the rule of law, and to be prepared to deal with these disruptions, establishing protective measures and safety protocols, taking into account the protection and wellbeing of professionals in the sector and members of the public.

What we can learn from history – both recent and not so recent – is that the tolerance of those who value democracy towards those who only take advantage of its mechanisms for anti-democratic purposes does not help the fight against extremism, it does not weaken it. On the contrary, it normalises it and, in this way, allows for its consolidation. Extremism and violence, regardless of the underlying ideologies, cannot be normalised; instead, they must be condemned and repudiated.

1.1   What kind of incidents of disruption and violence have been taking place?

Violent acts by individuals or groups at cultural events follow similar patterns in different countries. This is yet another reason for us to learn from those who have been dealing with these situations for longer. Here are some of the episodes that have taken place recently:

→ Demonstrations and protests near cultural institutions, which intimidate participants, workers, and the public, creating an atmosphere of hostility and hindering cultural activities from taking place normally.

→ Organised groups entering spaces where cultural events are taking place (book presentations, performances, debates) shouting and using loudspeakers, provoking discomfort among those participating or watching, causing feelings of lack of safety and fear, and, in many cases, forcing the interruption or cancellation of events.

→ Verbal violence directed at cultural workers in positions of greater public exposure – such as front-of-house staff, mediators or ushers. These professionals become particularly vulnerable when they are perceived as migrants and/or members of the LGBTQI+ community (due to their accent, physical appearance or other identity characteristics).

→ Interruption of performances, including unauthorised entries on stage, as well as offensive and insulting comments directed at actors during performances.

→ Filming and/or photographing, without authorisation, people participating in or attending cultural events and posting this content on social media, accompanied by offensive and insulting comments that incite hate and violence.

→ Making available on social media personal data of the "targets" (address, telephone number, photos of them and their family members);

→ Online publication, by organised groups, of lists of people (in the case of Portugal, with titles such as "LGBTQIA+ terrorists" or "enemies of the homeland") encouraging the coordinated exposure of the respective "targets" on social media, both in public spaces (such as comment boxes) and private spaces (through direct messages or SMS). These are forms of intimidation and digital violence that include derogatory and offensive comments, threats and explicit hate speech.

→ Incidents involving violent physical assaults on cultural professionals, when heading to their workplaces;

→ Incidents directed against works of art, including books, involving acts of vandalism, censorship or deliberate destruction.

1.2 Who are the targets?

→ Writers at book launches, presentations and debates

→ Librarians

→ Actors on stage or on their way to work

→ Artists and cultural mediators at cultural centres, libraries, schools, museums, galleries, etc.

→ Panellists in debates

→ Front-of-house staff, ushers and security guards

→ Audience members at these events.

1.3   What are the main effects?

→   Interruption, disruption or cancellation of cultural events.

→   Invasion of the targets' privacy (sharing photos of them and their families, phone numbers, addresses).

→   Insecurity, fear and anxiety among the victims and their families.

→   Insecurity, fear and anxiety among teachers and guardians.

→   Self-censorship (the often silent choice to avoid topics and people who may be the target of the disruptive or violent attacks described above).

→   Cancellation of the participation of schools in cultural events and activities; headmasters or teachers choosing to withdraw their students while these events are taking place; guardians not allowing their children to participate in these initiatives, including, in some cases, keeping them away from school on that day.

2

What to do?

Some of the operating patterns of organised groups are well known: they seek to reverse narratives, exploit the reach of social networks and they avoid real debates. In order to deal with this kind of challenge, professionals in the cultural sector must stay informed and adopt clear and unified procedures. These should include effective communication, team preparation, psychological support, and the strengthening of support networks. Crises may occur, so it is essential that we are prepared to respond in an organised and resilient manner.

2.1 Planning ahead

2.1.1 Cultural organisations

→ Define and share (both with your team and society at large) the organisation's mission, values and codes of conduct.

→ Anticipate attempts of disruption, ensuring coverage and protection from your managing body. If necessary, put this commitment in writing.

→ Identify people or groups that can offer support and maintain regular communication, promoting the exchange of information, mutual support and consistent presence, in order to enable informed decisions.

→ Gather the entire team and speak openly about what could be the target of censorship or attack, concerns, anxieties. Include external teams (such as security or cleaning staff) in this meeting, acknowledging their role as an integral part of cultural organisations and a contact point with audiences and staff.

→ Develop operating protocols to ensure the safety of the team, invited guests, collaborators, and the public; in these protocols, assign specific roles to team members who will be present.

→ Prepare to manage the main operating patterns and arguments of known extremist groups.

→ Prepare professionals who maintain direct contact with the public (front-of-house staff, cultural mediators, etc.) through continuing training programmes that provide them with the necessary tools to identify, manage and de-escalate situations of disruption or violence. This should include specific training to manage appropriately hate speech and incidents, whether racist, xenophobic, homophobic, sexist, or any other form of discrimination. This preparation should combine nonviolent communication techniques, conflict de-escalation strategies and knowledge regarding one's rights and protection mechanisms.

→ Empower Production

> → How to protect artists or guests?
> → When can you interrupt the show/event?
> → What are the red lines?
> → Who is responsible for making this decision?
> → What happens next?
> → Who communicates with the students? (when dealing with a class/school)

→ Empower Communication

  → Anticipate different scenarios.
  → Prepare press releases/social media posts in advance.
  → Manage comments (delete and block anything that does not respect the organisation's mission and values; do not tolerate hate speech and do not confuse it with freedom of expression).

→ In the case of school groups, prepare to welcome them (mediation), provide materials to teachers.

→ Define and make clear and visible the venue's rules of conduct.

→ Define whether and who is allowed to take photographs or film. Inform press representatives and the public about the procedure.

→ Inform the police when disruptive and violent demonstrations are anticipated.

2.1.2 Managing bodies and associations representing the cultural sector

Recomenda-se, ainda, que as entidades tutelares competentes, em articulação com as associações representativas do setor cultural, promovam um conjunto estruturado de medidas de proteção e apoio aos profissionais que lidam diretamente com o público. Entre estas medidas, destacam-se:

→ Capacitação para desescalar situações de violência: implementação de programas de formação contínua que ensinem técnicas de gestão de conflitos, comunicação não violenta e intervenção segura perante incidentes de agressão ou discursos de ódio.

→ Apoio psicológico: disponibilização de acompanhamento psicológico especializado para os profissionais que tenham sido vítimas de agressões, discriminação ou assédio, garantindo suporte emocional e estratégias de resiliência.

→ Apoio jurídico: disponibilizar gratuitamente recursos humanos especializados para apoio jurídico e assegurar os custos associados a processos de denúncia ou apresentação de queixas formais, garantindo que os profissionais possam aceder aos mecanismos legais sem quaisquer obstáculos financeiros.

Esta recomendação deve ser implementada de forma articulada entre tutelas e associações, assegurando coordenação institucional, uniformidade de procedimentos e acompanhamento contínuo da eficácia destas medidas, promovendo um ambiente de trabalho mais seguro, inclusivo e protegido para todos os profissionais do setor.

2.2 Managing on the moment hate speech or incidents or the violent interruption of an event

→ **Maintain calm and safety**

  → Avoid direct confrontation.
  → Evaluate the situation and, if necessary, remove the people who are being threatened in order to ensure everyone's safety.

→ **Intervene in a constructive manner, deconstruct the arguments**

  → Use non-violent communication: "This language is not acceptable here."
  → If possible, re-direct the conversation towards the values of respect and inclusion.
  → Instead of classifying a comment as offensive, explain its impact. For example, you may say that it makes people feel uncomfortable and scared. This approach may be more effective, capable of changing the attitude of a person in future situations.

→ **Document the incident**

  → Register details such as date, hour, place, people involved and witnesses.
  → In digital contexts, bring together evidence such as printscreens or URLs.

→ **Activate institutional protocols**

> → Inform the hierarchy or those responsible for security.
> → Follow procedures established by the organisation.

→ **Support the victims**

> → Ensure the people affected have adequate emotional and psychological support.
> → If necessary, refer the people affected to available support services.

2.3 Taking action after a disruptive or violent incident

→ Don't remain silent, silence doesn't protect anyone.

→ Don't stay isolated, inform your colleagues, associations and other allies.

→ Don't choose self-censorship in order to "avoid trouble".

→ In the case of school visits, plan a follow up contact, in order to discuss the incident.

→ File a complaint with the police or the Public Prosecutor's Office.

→ In the case of transmission of personal data or images, file a complaint with the National Data Protection Commission.

→ Review protocols and guidelines, if necessary.

3

What are our rights and obligations? — Legal framework

Part 3 of the guide is a not translation from the Portuguese original, as laws and provisions differ from country to country. Please seek expert legal advice on:

3.1   International Law and Human Rights

Is your country bound by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN, 1948)?

→   Article 27: Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life

3.2   The Constitution

What are your country's constitutional provisions regarding:

→   The principle of equality

→   Freedom of speech and information

→   Other personal rights (i.e. The right to personal identity, good name and reputation, image, speech, and the privacy of private and family life.

→   Participation in cultural life

→   Personal freedom and safety

3.3   Criminal code – Protection against violence and harassment

What are the legal provisions in your country regarding:

→   Threat, provoking fear or anxiety
→   Coercion
→   Illicit recording and photography
→   Defamation and Slander
→   Offense against Physical Integrity
→   Discrimination and incitement to Hatred and Violence

3.4   Data protection law

What are the legal provisions in your country regarding the collection, use or sharing of personal data (including images), as well as the disclosure of personal data without authorisation?

3.5   Operation of artistic performances

What are the legal provisions in your country regarding the entrance, presence and exit of members of the audience during a performance? Is the interruption of a performance considered an act of freedom of expression or is it illegal?

3.6   Right to protest

What are the legal provisions in your country regarding the right to protest? When, where and how can it take place?

4

Main resources for dealing with hate crimes

Part 4 of the guide is not a translation from the Portuguese original, as resources differ from country to country. Please look for and make available the contacts of:

→ Organisations that support victims of physical, verbal, psychological violence.

→ Manual Hate no More

→ Organisations that can help file complaints regarding discrimination (racism, misogynism, homophobia, etc).

→ Platforms where one can file complaints regarding hate crimes and hate speech

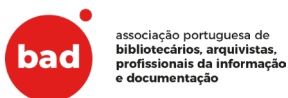→ Organisations that offer training in these fields.

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