

Guidance on reporting deaths and inquests

IPSO is regularly contacted by editors and journalists seeking advice on how the Editors' Code of Practice applies to the reporting of deaths. The Code says that journalists should report sensitively, and that approaches to bereaved people should be made with sympathy and discretion.

This guidance provides editors and journalists with a framework for thinking through these issues and some examples of relevant decisions by IPSO's Complaints Committee.

Key points

- The fact of someone's death is not private. Deaths affect communities as well as individuals and are a legitimate subject for reporting.
- Journalists should show sensitivity towards people in a state of grief or shock. Reporting should be handled sensitively and appropriate consideration should be given to the wishes and needs of the bereaved.
- The press should take care not to break news of the death of an individual to the immediate members of their family.
- Particular care should be taken with the reporting of suicide to avoid the possibility of other people copying the same method.

Deaths are public matters

The death of an individual is a matter of public record and their death may affect a community as well as those who knew the individual personally. Journalists have a basic right to report the fact of a person's death, even if surviving family members would prefer for there to be no reporting and regard the death as private.

Obituaries

Obituaries provide an overview of the life of the deceased, a sense of their personality and of their public contributions.

While obituaries usually focus on key achievements in a person's life, they may also refer to information which the family of the deceased would prefer not to be published, because it may reflect poorly on the deceased or others.

In other cases, an obituary will be of interest because of a person's infamy, not their accomplishments. The fact that an article under complaint is an obituary does not mean that Clause 4 can be ignored: journalists should consider before publishing embarrassing information whether it is justified, for example in order to provide a rounded view of the individual's life.

Inquests

There is a public interest in the reporting of inquests, which are public events in any case.

In reporting an inquest, a journalist may clear up any rumours or suspicion about the death. They may also draw attention to circumstances which may lead to further deaths or injuries if no preventative action is taken.

Journalists should be aware that not all families will know that journalists can report the findings of inquests. When approaching families for comment at an inquest, journalists must do so with appropriate regard for the fact that inquests may be extremely distressing to the bereaved. Journalists must cease questioning, pursuing or photographing members of the public if asked to do so by that person or their representative.

Key questions

1. What information will you include in the obituary and why are you including it?
2. How will you approach the family at inquest?
3. Have you considered the effect of your behaviour on the family of the deceased?

Sympathy and sensitivity

While deaths are public matters, they are also extremely sensitive and often painful matters. The Code makes clear that in cases involving personal grief or shock, enquiries and approaches must be made with sympathy and discretion and publication handled sensitively.

Journalists must make decisions about how to approach a family or write a story with sympathy and sensitivity. Journalists should consider the effect of their behaviour on the family of the deceased, before making an approach or writing a story. In doing so, it may be useful to consider the amount of time that has elapsed since the bereavement and the nature of the bereavement.

Journalists must also use sensitivity when choosing the pictures or videos they will use to illustrate a story about the death of an individual. Particular care should be taken with the selection of photos of the recently deceased. In addition, editors and journalists should also consider what the photos show and the context of the individual's death (see [Farrow v Lancashire Evening Post](#)).

IPSO will consider the following in deciding whether approaches or reporting are consistent with the Code:

- the tone of the approaches or the piece
- the timing of the approach
- whether the individual or the manner of their death is mocked or sensationalised
- whether graphic information is included, or asked about.

Funerals

Among the most difficult requests from journalists for pre-publication advice that IPSO receives are those relating to funerals and other ceremonies following a death, because attitudes by bereaved family members to such events vary widely. Some families regard funerals and memorial services as opportunities to bring the community together to mourn the death, and celebrate

the life, of their loved one. They may accept, or even welcome, press coverage. Other families regard funerals as intensely private events and find any attendance at the service or location by journalists or coverage to be intrusive and distressing.

Because of this, journalists must make judgments about what constitutes appropriate sensitivity based on the specific circumstances, which includes the wishes of the family, where they are known or can reasonably be inferred based on the nature of the event. It may also be appropriate to take steps to try to understand the family's wishes, perhaps by contacting an intermediary such as a funeral home or the funeral officiant, if known.

Some parts of a funeral, such as a funeral procession, may happen in public view. However, care should be taken with photographs of people in states of extreme distress.

Journalists can always contact IPSO for advice on these situations. Families will sometimes ask IPSO to issue private advisory notice to cover a funeral, to communicate their request that the funeral is a private event and that journalists should not seek to attend.

Key questions

1. If you are considering attending a funeral, what type of event is it and what are the family's wishes?
2. Does the information you are thinking of publishing from tributes contain anything private about a living person?
3. Are there any other reasons why you shouldn't publish information from tributes?
4. Have you considered the effect of your behaviour on the family of the deceased?
5. Are you mocking or sensationalising the individual or the manner of their death?
6. Are you thinking of publishing photos which show the individual engaged in embarrassing activity?
7. Are you including graphic information at a time of grief?

Reporting breaking news

Often when journalists are reporting on the death of an individual, they are reporting on breaking news.

Breaking news of a death

Immediate family members should not expect to be made aware of the death of a family member by a journalist. That means taking care that the immediate family is aware before publishing the name of a person who has died in an incident, or approaching them for comment (see [Lincolnshire Police v. Lincolnshire Echo](#)).

Journalists should also carefully consider whether they should publish any information about the death in the immediate aftermath that may inadvertently identify the deceased and thereby break the news of the death. For example, photos of the scene of a road traffic accident might lead to a family identifying a victim if it includes a vehicle's number plate or other distinctive characteristics.

Verifying information

Particular care should be taken in relation to the publication of information taken from social media which reports on a person's involvement in a life-threatening incident. News of major incidents has been followed by the creation of hoax social media or fundraising accounts, pretending to identify individuals caught up in the incident. Journalists should be wary of sources on social media carrying this information and verify the source of information before publishing (see [Gorman v Daily Star](#)).

Cause of death

Journalists should exercise caution when speculating on the cause of an individual's death. Speculating on these matters could be insensitive, particularly in cases where allegations are made about the deceased or the manner of their death which are proved to be unsubstantiated.

Key questions

1. Have you checked whether the immediate family is aware of the person's death?
2. Are you publishing any information which could lead to the identification of the person who has died?
3. How reliable is the information you are using to identify the individual who has died? What steps have you taken to verify the information?

Reporting of suicide

The Code makes clear that journalists should take particular care when reporting on suicide, to ensure that they do not provide excessive detail of the method used, which might result in simulative acts. Sometimes there may be specific justification for including detail about the method, for example because it is central to the proceedings at an inquest; in those instances this detail may not be “excessive”. However, journalists should still take great care in selecting what details to include in a story and should be prepared to explain the decision about what was included.

Journalists should take particular care when reporting on a novel method of suicide, to prevent the likelihood of attention being drawn to a new method of suicide and the risk therefore of others using this method.

Key questions

1. What level of detail are you going to include in the report of the death?
2. Is the method you are reporting on novel? If so, what steps will you take to ensure that you don't provide excessive detail?

Case studies

These case studies explore IPSO's decision making on complaints relating to the reporting of deaths

All of the adjudications mentioned below can be found on IPSO's website:
www.ipso.co.uk

[Lincolnshire Police v Lincolnshire Echo*](#)

This ruling was made under the 2015 Editors' Code

Lincolnshire Police, on behalf of the family of Carly Lovett, complained about an article in the Lincolnshire Echo reporting that Ms Lovett had been killed in a terrorist attack in Tunisia, before the family had confirmation that she was dead. The newspaper said that they had a number of confidential sources who had told them that Ms Lovett had died and that the family were aware.

The complaint was upheld under Clause 5. The newspaper was entitled to report on a local connection to the attack and had not intended to cause distress. However, the claims that the family were aware of Ms Lovett's death were clearly inaccurate and had not been confirmed by an official source. In addition, the newspaper had relied solely on confidential sources and was unable

to show that it had taken appropriate care to ensure that the family knew that Ms Lovett had been killed. It had therefore failed to demonstrate that it had acted sensitively, in line with the Code.

[Farrow v Lancashire Evening Post*](#)

This ruling was made under the 2015 Editors' Code

Kate Farrow complained about an article published in print and online by the Lancashire Evening Post covering the inquest into her stepdaughter's (Ms Potts) suicide. The print article reported that Ms Potts had hanged herself in a hotel room and that in the hours before her death she had been three times over the drink-drive limit, and had taken three drugs. The online article included additional information on the method of suicide as it identified the item from which Ms Potts had been found hanged and the item used as a ligature.

It was illustrated by a number of photographs, taken from her stepdaughter's Facebook page, which the complainant said were "disproportionate" and inappropriate.

The complaint was upheld in relation to some elements, including in relation to the excessive detail provided in the online article. In particular, the publication of details concerning the items Ms Potts had used illustrated that they were easily accessible and could have led to simulative acts. These details were clearly excessive, and their publication was irresponsible.

However, the complaint was not upheld in relation to the use of images. The images had been taken from Ms Potts' open Facebook profile and were not explicit or embarrassing. The presentation of the images had not sought to mock or ridicule Ms Potts, and their publication, along with the factual information concerning her

employment, did not constitute insensitive handling of the story in breach of Clause 5.

Gorman v Daily Star

Pauline Gorman complained to IPSO after a photo of her daughter was published on the front page of the Daily Star amongst photos of the people missing or dead following the terror attack in Manchester Arena. The photo identified her daughter as "MISSING: Lucy Cross". The complainant said that her daughter was not called Lucy Cross and was not missing.

The Committee upheld the complaint and required the publication of an adjudication. The complainant's daughter's details had been appropriated and used by a hoax Twitter account. The newspaper had relied on information provided by a trusted agency. While there was no reason to doubt that the newspaper had acted in good faith, it was ultimately responsible for the inaccuracy. The newspaper had taken no further steps to establish the accuracy of the claims on the

Twitter account. The claim that an individual was missing following a terror attack was very significant, and it was therefore vitally important that the newspaper took sufficient care to ensure the accuracy of the claim.