

# Dealing with the press if you're involved in a major incident

# How we can help and about this guidance

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We are the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO), the independent regulator of most of the UK's newspapers and magazines. We enforce the Editors' Code of Practice, which sets out the rules that the newspapers and magazines which we regulate have agreed to follow.

We protect individual rights, uphold high standards of journalism and help to maintain freedom of expression for the press.

Website: [www.ipso.co.uk](http://www.ipso.co.uk)

Email: [inquiries@ipso.co.uk](mailto:inquiries@ipso.co.uk)

If you need advice about the Editors' Code of Practice (the Code) or are concerned about a story or a journalist's behaviour, you can contact us on 0300 123 2220. In an emergency after hours or at the weekend, you can also contact us using our emergency 24-hour advice service on 07799 903929.

Our staff are also able to help you to deal with urgent harassment issues. They will talk about your concerns and can give practical advice and guidance. In some cases we can send out a notice which will allow you to pass on a specific request to the industry (for example, to stop phoning you) or concerns about the future publication of material which might break the Code.

If you want to make a complaint, you will need to do this in writing, either on our website ([www.ipso.co.uk/make-a-complaint](http://www.ipso.co.uk/make-a-complaint)) or by emailing [inquiries@ipso.co.uk](mailto:inquiries@ipso.co.uk).

If you are under 18, we might need the agreement of your parent or guardian before we are able to deal with a complaint.

### Who is this information for?

This information is for people who find themselves at the centre of press attention following a major incident. It can also be used by friends, family and professionals supporting people involved in a major incident. It contains information about why journalists might want to speak to you, how to respond, what to do if you don't want to speak to journalists, and how we can help.

# Why do journalists cover major incidents and why may they want to speak to me?

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When a major incident happens, it will be covered in the media, particularly if it has caused serious harm or risk to life, important services, the environment, or the security of the country.

You may find a lot of journalists arrive at the scene, and they may approach you so that they can write about your experiences. Asking witnesses what they have seen and heard is one way in which they can try to find out what has happened. Journalists may also contact you by phone or on social media, or come to your door. A reporter may approach you for a specific reason, for example, you may have said something on social media or be related to someone involved.

The journalists may work for many types of organisations, including broadcasters, press agencies, newspapers and magazines. They may also include journalists who work for themselves (freelancers) and try to sell their stories to publications. They may be from the local area, the UK, or other countries. Some organisations may have several journalists or photographers at the scene.

It is your choice whether to speak to the press. It can be a good way to raise awareness of a major incident and to share information about any campaigns connected with the incident. If you are looking for a loved one who you fear may have been affected, journalists may be able to help you alert others that they are missing and that you are looking for them.

Some people find it is helpful to talk to the press on the anniversary of a major incident. This may be a way to raise awareness of the impact on survivors. You may also have the chance to pay tribute to loved ones who have died or were seriously injured.

# If you want to speak to the press

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You may want to speak to journalists to publicise what has happened to you and to share your experiences. You may think it is a good idea to share your story if there is a police investigation, or an appeal for missing people or witnesses. You may find the following helpful to know if you are contacted by a journalist.

- It is normal for journalists to get in touch on social media. Sometimes, this may be the best way for them to contact people they do not already know. A journalist may also contact you by phone, email, or in person.
- A journalist might not give you lots of time to reply if they have contacted you, particularly if they are writing a story which will be published in the next day's newspaper. This means that you may need to make a decision quickly about whether and how to respond.
- When a journalist speaks to you, they might want to record you. They may make notes so that they have an accurate record of your conversation.
- After you have spoken to a journalist, they will prepare a story. Sometimes people want to have some control over what a journalist writes. However, editors very rarely let members of the public have any control over an article. This is because of the importance of journalists' freedom of expression, and to make sure that articles meet the editorial standards of the newspaper.

We are not able to stop an article from being printed, but if you think that the story breaks the Code, you can make a complaint to us.

If you do decide to speak to the press you might find it helpful to think about the following.

- If you want to speak to the press you should be clear about what you want to say. While you don't have to answer any questions, reporters might publish any information that you give them, even if you tell them something in confidence or 'off the record'.
- It might be a good idea to have a friend or family member with you for support. You could also ask a friend or relative to speak to the press on your behalf.
- If you want to pay tribute to a family member, you could give the journalist a photograph which shows how you want to remember them. You may want to check with other family members about which photos you would like to use.
- If you want to see how your quotes will be presented in the article before it is published, you should ask the journalist to agree to this before the interview. Unless you get an agreement up front, you will not have a say in how the article is written.

# If you don't want to speak to the press

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Some people prefer not to speak to the press as they find it upsetting and intrusive. If you don't want to speak to the press you should make this clear. If you are approached by a journalist, you should:

- find out the journalist's name and the name of the publication or agency they work for (under the terms of Clause 3 of the Code, journalists must provide this information if asked);
- tell the journalist clearly that you do not want to speak to them or be photographed and that you are asking them to stop;
- if you are at home and don't want to answer your door, pin a short note to it to say that you do not want to speak to journalists and do not want to be disturbed; and
- if you are being telephoned repeatedly you could change your answerphone message to say that you do not want to speak to the media and only personal callers should leave a message.

The Code says that journalists must not continue to question, contact, or photograph people once they have been asked to stop. If you clearly ask that a journalist stops their activities, the Code says they should do so unless there is specific and adequate public interest to justify a decision to carry on.

# Social media

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Journalists can use anything you have written on public social media pages in an article, for example, a comment you may have made on a tribute page. If you don't want your comments reported in the press, check the privacy settings for any websites you might use, and let friends and family know you won't be speaking publicly.

We also have some social media guidance available here: [https://www.ipso.co.uk/media/1517/social-media-public\\_v4.pdf](https://www.ipso.co.uk/media/1517/social-media-public_v4.pdf)



# Further support

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We can give advice about how the Code applies to your situation. In some cases, we can send out a notice called a private advisory notice, which will allow you to pass on a specific request to the industry to make them aware of concerns.

Private advisory notices are not injunctions and they do not have legal powers. But we know they are extremely effective at dealing with concerns about harassment. For more information, go to: <https://www.ipso.co.uk/harassment/>

If you are affected by a major incident, Victim Support can provide support, along with advice on talking to the media. You can contact them on 0808 16 89 111 or online at <https://www.victimsupport.org.uk/>

If you have been assigned a police family liaison officer, they can also help you. The family liaison officer may have support from colleagues in the police press office who are experienced in supporting and advising families in times of crisis.

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