

Guidance on reporting major incidents

[About this guidance](#)

It is strongly in the public interest that the media reports on major incidents (which includes natural disasters, terror attacks and other such events). In the immediate aftermath, such reporting plays an important role in informing the public of emerging developments and can be used to convey public safety messages. Over time, the reporting helps the public to understand how an incident happened, share their feelings of grief or compassion and to hold public authorities to account for any failures to respond appropriately.

IPSO recognises the pressures on journalists when reporting in these situations, which often require on-the-spot judgements. This guidance provides editors and journalists with a framework for thinking through how to report on major incidents drawn from the Editors' Code of Practice (the Code) and from some examples of relevant decisions by IPSO's Complaints Committee.

[Key points](#)

- There is a public interest in the reporting of major incidents, to inform the public of what has happened and over time allow the public to make sense of those events
- Legitimate reporting of major incidents will often include approaches to individuals who have witnessed or been otherwise affected by the events; the Code does not seek to prevent this.
- Journalists must approach individuals caught up in these incidents, or affected family and friends, with sensitivity and sympathy
- Journalists must take care to distinguish between claims and facts when reporting on major incidents
- Journalists must take particular care in relation to any content about a major incident which involves children, considering carefully how to avoid unnecessary intrusion.

A number of clauses in the Editors' Code of Practice are relevant to the issue of reporting major incidents. These include Clause 1 (Accuracy), Clause 2 (Privacy), Clause 3 (Harassment), Clause 4 (Intrusion into grief or shock), Clause 6 (Children), and Clause 8 (Hospitals).

1. Striking the balance

Reporting on major incidents can be extremely challenging for journalists. Journalists are reporting on traumatic events, which can have a long term impact on those who have experienced them.

When reporting, journalists may come into contact with extremely vulnerable people. These can include people who have themselves been seriously injured, individuals who have been told that a loved one has died or been injured or children who have been caught up in an event. Journalists should take into account the potential impact of any intrusion on the individual and take steps to handle it with sympathy and sensitivity.

Major incidents will, by their nature, generate significant media interest and extensive coverage, often across the world. This can result in situations where journalists from across the world arrive at the location to report, or where individuals involved in the incident may receive contacts from many different media organisations.

Journalists should be aware that, even in situations where each media organisation makes contact only once to an individual and that contact is sensitive and sympathetic, the sheer scale of the coverage and number of media organisations reporting on these events and making contact can lead to some people feeling overwhelmed by that contact. However, there is a strong public interest in the reporting of major incidents. Journalists have a responsibility and obligation to society to report on these incidents. They are required to do so quickly and to show the devastating effects of the incident. They can only provide effective coverage by speaking to those affected by the incident.

2. Reporting breaking news

When reporting on breaking news, journalists may be presented with conflicting and incomplete information, or information from eyewitnesses which proves to be inaccurate. If journalists report events inaccurately, they can create panic, potentially endangering others.

Journalists may witness graphic scenes including people who have been wounded or killed and may have to make difficult decisions about how to balance reporting on the incident with the need to protect individuals. Powerful photographs or footage can demonstrate the scale and damage caused by the incident, but journalists should still take care to comply with the Code. In particular, journalists should think about their obligations under Clauses 1, 2 and 4 of the Code.

Journalists should think about the following in the newsgathering process:

- What photos or video are you recording of the scene?
 - *Do they show anyone who is injured, in shock or dead?*
 - *In the process of recording, are you interfering in the events?*
- If you are reporting the number of deaths, how do you know the figures?
- If you are identifying an individual who has died, are you aware that the family knows of the death?
- How will you approach eyewitnesses at the scene for comment?
- What steps will you take to keep yourself and others around you safe?

Editors should consider the following when deciding what to publish or when reporting live from the scene:

- What photos or video do you have of the scene?
- Does it show anyone who is injured or dead? Are they identifiable?
 - *If so, how will you prevent intrusion into grief or shock when publishing the content?*
 - *How will you verify that the photos or video are accurate?*
- Are there any children at the scene? How will you protect their interests in your reporting?
- How will you verify the information you have about what has happened?
- If you are publishing information taken from social media about what has happened, how are you taking care to verify that information?
- Are you taking care to present unverified information about what is happening as claims and not fact?
- If you have published information which is later found to be inaccurate, how will you make readers aware of the correct position?
- Are you putting anyone in immediate danger through the information you are publishing? If there are or may be attacker(s) at large, could it assist them?

3. The immediate aftermath

Making approaches with sympathy and discretion

Major incidents are often extremely traumatic experiences, for those who are caught up in them as well as for those who have witnessed them. Some individuals will wish to speak about their experience, whilst others will not. Journalists should be aware that individuals in shock may be confused and unable to answer questions about their experience or may not be able to agree to be interviewed or photographed.

It is right that journalists have an opportunity to approach people to see if they wish to comment about their experience. Clause 4 of the Code requires journalists to make approaches to people experiencing grief or shock with sympathy and discretion. This means treating people with dignity, sensitivity and respect. Journalists will need to consider the timing of when they make their approaches.

Journalists may find it helpful to do the following when making an approach:

Have in mind at all times the need to make an approach with sympathy and discretion

- Clearly identify who you are
- Explain why you are asking questions
- Take extra care to respond calmly if people decline to speak to you and respect the request

Clause 3 of the Code also makes clear that journalists must not persist in questioning, telephoning, pursuing or photographing individuals once asked to desist, unless there is a strong public interest in continuing to do so.

Making approaches after a death

The fact of someone's death is not private. Deaths affect communities as well as individuals and are a legitimate subject for reporting.

While deaths are public matters, they are also extremely sensitive and often painful matters.

The families of those who died may welcome the opportunity to pay tribute to their loved one, or may find any questions from journalists about their bereavement intrusive.

Journalists should not make immediate family members aware of the death of a family member. 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.

Key questions

1. How will you approach someone who has been involved in the major incident, or their family or friends?
2. Have you checked whether the immediate family is aware of the person's involvement in the incident?
3. Are you publishing any information which could lead to the identification of the person who has been injured or died?
4. Have you confirmed that the immediate family knows that the individual has died?
5. How reliable is the information you are using to identify the individual who has died? What steps have you taken to verify the information?

Engaging with the emergency services

Journalists have a moral obligation to be aware of the emergency services' need to respond quickly to any major incident and should not obstruct such a response.

The emergency services may establish media rendezvous points both near the scene of the incident and at local hospitals to ensure that the press attending an event are given an accurate overview of the situation and are aware of any upcoming briefings.

Hospitals

As set out in Clause 8 of the Code, journalists must not enter non-public areas of a hospital without permission from a responsible executive at the hospital, unless it is in the public interest in doing so. A 'responsible executive'

means someone with sufficient seniority within the hospital or institution.

The Code makes clear that the restrictions on intruding into privacy are particularly relevant to enquiries about individuals in hospitals or similar institutions. Under the Code, a person's medical details – which could, for example, include specific information about injuries or treatment – should be considered private unless there are good public interest reasons to suggest otherwise.

Key questions

1. If you are reporting from a hospital, how will you ensure you do not intrude into someone's privacy?
2. Have you obtained permission from a responsible executive before entering a non-public area?

Accuracy in reporting

Clause 1 of the Code makes clear that the press must distinguish in their coverage between comment, conjecture and fact. Often when reporting on breaking news, publishers may be reporting claims about what is occurring from eyewitnesses, before there is official confirmation of what is happening. Publications are entitled to report first hand claims, but must take care to show that these are claims and not factual statements (see *Hill v Express.co.uk* and *Various v MailOnline*).

Major incidents may be subject to rolling coverage, meaning that coverage is often updated as new information comes to light. However, even in such circumstances, a publication must still demonstrate that it has taken appropriate

care over the accuracy of the information it publishes.

Social media can be a valuable source of information about major incidents, particularly as those incidents are unfolding. However, information on social media may be misleading and may also be difficult to verify. This situation may be made worse when editors are looking at non-recent social media posts.

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*).

Key questions

1. How will you verify the information you are publishing?
2. How will you distinguish between claims and fact in your reporting of the incident?
3. If you are taking information from social media, how will you check that it is accurate?

4. Reporting in the aftermath

Inquests and inquiries

There is a public interest in the reporting of inquests and inquiries, which are public events unless there are reporting restrictions in place. Journalists should be aware that not all families will know that journalists can report the findings of inquests or inquiries. When approaching families for comment at an inquest or inquiry, journalists should do so with appropriate regard for the fact that proceedings may be extremely distressing to the bereaved.

IPSO has produced guidance for journalists on the reporting of deaths and inquests, which is available on our website.

Anniversaries of major incidents

The anniversary of a major incident is an opportunity to reflect on events and to commemorate those who died. It may also be a time to discuss the perpetrators of the incidents.

Journalists should be aware that the anniversary of a major incident, even many years after, can be extremely distressing to the families and friends of those who died, as well as to survivors of those incidents.

Journalists should take care to make approaches to families and friends with sympathy and discretion. Journalists may find it helpful to make approaches in advance of an anniversary as it is possible that the period around the anniversary may be particularly distressing to friends and family.

5. Other relevant issues

Keeping yourself safe

In the reporting of major incidents, the Editors' Code of Practice focusses on the need to take care to report those incidents accurately and to prevent unnecessary intrusion for people who are experiencing grief or shock. The matter of personal safety is not an issue that engages with the Code. However, IPSO recognises that reporting on major incidents can place journalists in dangerous circumstances or be traumatic for journalists.

When reporting from the scene, journalists should not do things which might endanger themselves or the people around them. Journalists who have seen traumatic events may find it helpful to speak to someone, whether colleague, professional or friend, about their experiences.

6. Relevant complaints

Various v Mail Online

Mail Online reported social media comments about an ongoing incident at Oxford Circus which, at the time, was being treated as a possible terror attack. One of the tweets published made reference to a lorry which had been involved in the incident and was surrounded by police. The published tweet referring to the lorry had in fact been tweeted some days before the incident at Oxford Circus and the publication had failed to check the time stamp of the tweet before publishing.

Key point

As part of the process of verifying information taken from social media, journalists should check the source of the information, including when it was published.

Hill v express.co.uk

Express.co.uk, covering the same incident as Mail Online, reported in the headline of their coverage that a gunman was running amok on Oxford Street. Whilst there were claims that gun shots had been heard at the scene, this was not in fact correct. Neither the language used nor the way the headline was presented made clear that reference to a gunman on the scene was unconfirmed.

Key point

Care should be taken to distinguish between claims and fact when reporting on major incidents.

Gorman v Daily Star

The Daily Star published a photo gallery of people missing or dead following the terror attack in Manchester Arena. The photo gallery included the complainant's daughter's details which had been appropriated and used by a hoax Twitter account, when the complainant's daughter was not missing and was misnamed. The newspaper had relied on agency copy and taken no further steps to establish the accuracy of the claims on the Twitter account.

Key point

Sufficient care must be taken to ensure the accuracy of significant claims, including claims that people are missing or dead; be wary of attempts to spread false claims.

Lincolnshire Police v Lincolnshire Echo

Lincolnshire Echo reported that a local woman had been killed in a terrorist attack in Tunisia, before the family had confirmation that she was dead. 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 the woman's death were clearly inaccurate and had not been confirmed by an official source.

Key point

Journalists should take care to ensure that they are not in the position of breaking the news of the death to immediate family members, directly or indirectly.