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For accountable journalism

Guidance on reporting major incidents



Key points

There is a public interest in the reporting of major incidents to inform the public of what has happened and help them to make sense of events. Journalists scrutinise and hold to account the authorities and others with responsibilities to prevent and manage responses to major incidents. In some cases, they communicate public safety messages while an incident is in progress.

- It is legitimate for journalists to approach people who have witnessed or been affected by a major incident to investigate what has happened and the impact on individuals. The Editors' Code of Practice does not seek to prevent this.
- Journalists should ensure that they are not in the position of breaking the news of a death or serious injury to immediate family members, directly or indirectly.
- Journalists must take particular care in relation to any content about a major incident which involves children, considering carefully how to avoid unnecessary intrusion.
- While information is likely to be incomplete and uncertain during a major incident, care should be taken to distinguish between claims and fact.
- 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.

- Editors should take care to handle publication sensitively in cases involving grief or shock and to make enquiries and approaches with sympathy and discretion.

About this guidance

A major incident can be defined as an event or situation which threatens widespread damage to human welfare or to the security of the country. It could also be defined as an event which results in large scale grief, shock and trauma, and has the potential to directly impact a wider community.

Major incidents can also cause significant emotional distress to journalists and photographers reporting on them.

Firsthand major incidents include, but are not limited to, terrorist attacks, natural disasters and incidents that result in mass loss of life. Secondary types of emotional distress can be caused by, but are not limited to, exposure to graphic and/or explicit details, (such as in court or on video/visual images), and harrowing interviews with communities in shock, grief and tragedy.

This guidance explains how the [Editors' Code of Practice](#) applies to the reporting of major incidents, focusing

closely on the issue of reporting breaking news, and the use of social media. This guidance does not replace or supersede the Editors' Code but is designed to support editors and journalists.

It includes case studies of relevant decisions by IPSO. The case studies are summaries of the decisions, and it is recommended that the decisions are read in full.

The Editors' Code

The Editors' Code of Practice sets the framework for the highest professional standards for journalists and the rules that newspapers, magazines and digital sites, which are regulated by IPSO, must follow. A number of clauses in the Code 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).

The importance of reporting major incidents

Reporting on major incidents accurately and sensitively can be extremely challenging for journalists. They must balance the public interest in reporting accurately and fully on events, with the potential of intruding into the grief and shock of

those directly affected. Journalists themselves may also be affected by the experience of being at the scene of dangerous and upsetting events.

When reporting, journalists may come into contact with vulnerable people. Anyone affected by a major incident could be vulnerable because they may have been seriously injured or recently informed that a loved one has died or been injured, or for another reason. Children may be caught up in an event or affected through the impact on a family member or friend. Journalists should take into account the potential impact of any approach and take steps to handle it with sympathy and sensitivity.

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

Journalists should be aware often people will have had little, or no prior contact with journalists or the media and even the simplest interactions can feel overwhelming. Even in situations where each media organisation makes contact only once to an individual and that contact is sensitive and sympathetic, the scale of the coverage and number of media organisations reporting can be intrusive for people. However, it is in the public interest

for journalists to report on incidents quickly and to publicise the effects of an incident. Speaking to those affected can provide direct insight into what happened and its impact.

Reporting breaking news

When reporting on breaking news, journalists may be presented with conflicting and incomplete information, or information from eyewitnesses which later 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 the Editors' Code still applies; in particular, journalists should think about their obligations under Clauses 1, 2 and 4 of the Code. These are discussed in more detail later.

Newsgathering

Journalists should consider how to approach eyewitnesses at the scene for comment, what to photograph or record at the scene, whether they will identify anyone who is injured or

dead, and how to keep themselves and others around them safe. Particular care must be given to protecting the interests of children.

Clause 1 (Accuracy)

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, it may be appropriate to report claims from eyewitnesses before there is official confirmation of what is happening. Publications are entitled to report firsthand claims, but must take care to show that these are unconfirmed and not factual statements.

Major incidents may be subject to rolling coverage, meaning that reporting is 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, in the context.

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 historic social media posts. 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.

In the complaints of **Hill v express.co.uk** and **Various v Mail Online**, publications reported social media posts about an incident but had not verified the information or checked the time stamps of the 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, as in the complaint of **Gorman v Daily Star**. Journalists should be wary of attempts to spread false claims and take care to verify the source of information before publishing.

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?

[Various v Mail Online & Hill v express.co.uk](#)

In 2017, Mail Online reported social media comments about an ongoing incident at Oxford Circus which was being treated as a possible terror attack. One tweet referenced a lorry said to have been involved and surrounded by police. The source was a social media post published days earlier; the publication failed to check the time stamp. The complaint was upheld.

express.co.uk, covering the same incident, reported in its headline that a gunman was running amok. While there were claims shots had been heard, this was not correct. Neither the language used nor the way the headline was presented made clear that reference to a gunman was unconfirmed.

[Gorman v Daily Star](#)

The Daily Star published photos of people missing or dead following the Manchester Arena terror attack. One of the photographs was of the complainant's daughter, captioned: "MISSING: Lucy Cross". The complainant's daughter, who is not called Lucy Cross had been at home at the time of the attack. The newspaper relied on agency copy based on a social media account, and took no further steps to establish the accuracy of the claims. It said at the time of publication it had no reason to believe the information was false. Given the nature of the claim, greater care should have been taken.

Clause 2 (Privacy)

All individuals are entitled to respect for their private and family life, home, physical and mental health, and correspondence. Information published in the aftermath of a major incident has the potential to intrude on the privacy of individuals, particularly if this information discloses injuries or medical treatment. Under the Code, a person's medical details should be considered private unless there are good public interest reasons to suggest otherwise.

Sometimes individuals may share information on social media which shows private information, for example, medical treatment. The absence of privacy settings on social media posts does not necessarily mean that information can be published. The nature of the material, who has published it, and the context of the story must also be considered. Before publishing anything taken from social media, editors and journalists should consider the extent of any possible intrusion and the public interest.

Clause 8 (Hospitals)

Restrictions on intruding into privacy are particularly relevant to enquiries about individuals in hospitals or similar institutions.

Clause 8 protects patients in hospitals from intrusion. 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. A "responsible executive" means someone with sufficient seniority within the hospital or institution. The clause applies to all editorial staff including photographers and also covers the newsgathering process, so the Code can be breached even if nothing is published.

Key questions

- 1 Is the publication of information intrusive into the subject's privacy? Is there a justification for publishing this information?
- 2 How will you demonstrate that you have considered the public interest before publication?
- 3 If you are reporting from a hospital, how will you ensure you do not intrude into someone's privacy?
- 4 Have you obtained permission from a responsible executive before entering a non-public area?

Clause 3 (Harassment)

Clause 3 of the Code makes clear that journalists must not engage in intimidation, harassment or persistent pursuit; or persist in questioning, telephoning, pursuing or photographing individuals once asked to desist, unless there is a strong public interest in doing so. It is also important that editors ensure these principles are observed by those working for them and take care not to use non-compliant material from other sources.

Privacy notices

In some cases, IPSO will contact editors at the request of an individual, to make them aware of that individual's privacy concerns. These are advisory and do not legally prevent publication or journalistic inquiries. However, a privacy notice would be taken into account if a complaint was later brought under Clause 3 (Harassment). Editors can receive privacy notices by emailing inquiries@ipso.co.uk

Clause 4 (Intrusion into grief or shock)

Clause 4 requires that publication is handled sensitively in cases involving grief or shock and that enquiries and approaches are made with sympathy and discretion. Although reporting on a death can be very upsetting and painful to the person's family and friends, deaths affect whole communities, and

the obligation to handle publication sensitively does not prevent news organisations from reporting on them.

Making approaches with sympathy and discretion

In the aftermath of a major incident, some people will wish to speak about their experience, and others will not. Someone in shock may be confused and unable to answer questions about their experience or may not have the capacity to agree to be interviewed or photographed. Journalists should also take care when reporting people who may not be speaking in their first language as this may lead to unintentional misunderstandings. It is right that journalists have an opportunity to approach people to see if they wish to comment about their experience. Journalists will need to consider the timing of when they make their approaches, and may find it helpful to do the following when making an approach:

- 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.

Making approaches after a death

The Code does not require that publications contact families in advance of publishing reports of a death to comply with Clause 4; rather, it states that any such inquiries, if

made, should be handled sensitively. This means treating people with dignity, sensitivity and respect.

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

Journalists should not inform immediate family members about the death of a relation. 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. In the complaint of **Lincolnshire Police v Lincolnshire Echo**, the publication reported that a local woman had been killed in a terror attack abroad before her family had received confirmation that she was dead.

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?
- 6 Are you handling publication sensitively?

Lincolnshire Police v Lincolnshire Echo

Lincolnshire Police complained about an article which reported that a local woman had been killed in a terrorist attack in Tunisia. At the time, her family only knew that she had been involved in the attack and had been injured. Reporters had contacted various family, friends, and colleagues of the woman. One source, who was close to the family, had confirmed that she had been killed.

However, neither the death nor the family's knowledge of it had been confirmed by any official source. As the newspaper had relied solely on confidential sources, it had been unable to show that it had taken appropriate care before it took the decision to publish to ensure that the family knew the woman had been killed. It had therefore failed to demonstrate that it had acted with the level of sensitivity required by the Code. The publication of the information that the woman had died, so soon after the attack and before it had been confirmed to her immediate family, was a serious failure to handle publication sensitively and a breach of the Code.

Shock

Clause 4 does not only apply to the reporting of grief in connection with someone's death, it also includes shock. Even if a major incident does not result in a death, the terms of Clause 4 may still apply, so editors should think carefully about the terms of Clause 4. Publication of private medical information or distressing details of someone's injuries or their reaction to an incident could potentially breach the Editors' Code.

Clause 6 (Children)

A major incident which a child has been involved in or witnessed will affect their welfare, and the Code is clear that children cannot be photographed or interviewed about their own or another child's welfare without consent from a parent or guardian. This does not only refer to a situation where a journalist directly speaks to a child, but can include comments posted by a child on social media, or using pre-existing images of a child.

Journalists must therefore take particular care in relation to any content about a major incident which involves children, considering carefully how to avoid unnecessary intrusion. Although there is a public interest defence available to editors, an exceptional justification would need to be demonstrated.

Key questions:

- 1 Are there any children at the scene? How will you protect their interests in your reporting?
- 2 Have you gained consent from a parent or guardian before interviewing or photographing a child, including cases where you may want to publish information from their social media posts?

Additional matters

Keeping yourself safe

The matter of personal safety is not an issue that engages the Code. However, IPSO recognises that reporting on major incidents can place journalists in dangerous circumstances or can be traumatic.

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 a colleague, professional or friend, about their experiences. Editors and publishers should consider how they will support journalists involved in reporting a major incident.

Engaging with the emergency services

Journalists should not obstruct any response from the emergency services who may establish media rendezvous points both near the scene of the incident and at local hospitals to ensure the press are given an accurate overview of the situation and are aware of any upcoming briefings. Any directions or instructions given by emergency services personnel should be followed in the interests of safety.

Specialist police communications professionals can provide important information which may be more beneficial than contacting members of the public directly. Police forces can also verify disinformation and misinformation particularly relating to the number of casualties or deaths.

Inquests and inquiries

Inquests and inquiries are public unless there are reporting restrictions in place, but this may not be well known to members of the public involved in the incident. 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 revisit earlier reporting. Journalists should be aware that media attention, even after many years, can be distressing to the families and friends of those who died, as well as to survivors.

Journalists should take care to make approaches to families and friends with sympathy and discretion. It may be helpful to make approaches in advance to avoid the particularly sensitive period immediately around the anniversary.

Terrorism propaganda and methodology

Terrorist attacks lead to considerable press coverage. Policing and national security organisations have concerns that detailed reporting of methodology or tradecraft can assist or inspire others to carry out attacks, or glorify terrorist activity.

Similarly, there are concerns that reproducing or signposting to terrorist propaganda can have serious consequences including providing credibility to terrorist causes.

It is important to consider carefully what material you are publishing and the justification for this.

More resources for journalists

IPSO has produced the following guidance which may be useful when reporting on major incidents:

[IPSO Guidance on reporting deaths and inquests](#)

We can provide non-binding, 24-hour pre-publication advice on the Editors' Code of Practice if there are any concerns about articles prior to publication. During office hours, please call **0300 123 2220**. Out of hours, where necessary, a complaints officer on duty can be contacted via **07799 903 929**.

Publishers can sign up to receive privacy notices by contacting IPSO at inquiries@ipso.co.uk

Resources for the public

You may also find it useful to refer to the following information which has been produced for the public:

- IPSO [information for the public on reporting major incidents](#).

External resources

The following resources may be useful for journalists. Please note that these are not endorsed by IPSO:

[Journalism as the Fourth Emergency Service: Trauma and Resilience](#) by Lisa Bradley and Emma Heywood, 2024 explores the emotional trauma

experienced by journalists and suggests tools to help journalists build resilience. The book can be downloaded for free.

[Survivors Against Terror](#) is a network of survivors of terror attacks in Britain and of British people who have been affected overseas. Their report ["A Second Trauma"](#) (2022) makes a number of suggestions on how the media should respond to a terror attack. Contact for media enquiries: press@survivorsagainstterror.org.uk

The DSMA Notice System provides advice and guidance to the media about defence and security information, the publication or broadcast of which could damage national security, critical national infrastructure or endanger lives. The system is voluntary; final responsibility for publishing or broadcasting rests solely with the editor, journalist or publisher concerned. Secretary@dsma.uk (24/7 contact) or phone 020 7218 2206