



Guidance for Journalists

Media Guidance: Responsible, respectful, reporting on Technology- Assisted Child Sexual Abuse



Marie Collins
Foundation

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Why you should read this guidance:

“Journalism can be a gateway to positive change in society, or it can perpetuate the status quo.”

Soledad O’Brien, Journalist

An estimated **300 million+**⁽¹⁾ children under the age of 18 globally have been affected by online child sexual exploitation and abuse from May 2023 to May 2024.

The way crime is reported in the media can shape public attitudes so it is paramount that all reports are factual, empathetic and most importantly, do no further harm.



How journalists report on Technology-Assisted Child Sexual Abuse can help:

- 1 Combat unhelpful stereotypes and harmful victim blaming attitudes associated with victims and survivors.
- 2 Stop victims and survivors being triggered or re-traumatised by media reports.
- 3 Empower communities to create space for conversations and to put an end to the silence and stigma that surrounds TACSA.
- 4 Create a shift in societal views ensuring the public has a better understanding of TACSA, how it can occur, and the widespread harm it can cause.
- 5 Encourage victims and survivors to disclose and seek help and support at whatever pace is comfortable to them.
- 6 Assist police investigations and bring about a sense of justice.

What makes this media guidance particularly unique is that it has been written by victims and survivors and is based on their own experiences of working with the media. The Marie Collins Foundation Lived Experience Group (LEG)⁽²⁾ was established in 2021 and is made up of a network of adult victims and survivors of Child Sexual Abuse who want to use their experiences to improve outcomes for the victims and survivors of yesterday and the victims of today.

Members of the group have a wide range of different experiences including technology-assisted abuse, familial abuse, trafficking, image-based abuse, and child sexual exploitation. The group’s collective and diverse expertise are vital to what we do here at MCF, and their insights into media reporting has been the driving force behind this guidance.

This guide does not cover how to work alongside victims and survivors who are publicly sharing their experiences of Child Sexual Abuse such as in interviews. You can learn more about how to work safely and ethically with victims and survivors in our guidance at www.mariecollinsfoundation.org.uk/How-We-Can-Help/Resources

⁽¹⁾ Stanfield, Paul. World’s First Estimate of the Scale of Online Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse, WeProtect Global Alliance, 27 May 2024, www.weprotect.org/blog/worlds-first-estimate-of-the-scale-of-online-child-sexual-exploitation-and-abuse/.

⁽²⁾ www.mariecollinsfoundation.org.uk/Who-We-Are/Lived-Experience-Group



The issue

Technological advances are enhancing the lives of millions across the globe, but with rapid development of technology, comes new and emerging risks to the safety and wellbeing of children.

Child Sexual Abuse destroys lives, and the growth of technology means Technology-Assisted Child Sexual Abuse (TACSA) is happening to children on a scale never seen before. The trauma effects from such abuse on victims and survivors is complex due to the online nature of offending. Victims often face re-traumatisation due to the permanence of their images online and the unknown extent of their distribution to others.

The impact of this type of abuse means many never speak up. If they do, they often feel blamed for what has been done to them due to the lack of understanding about online harm. This can have profound effects on victims' and survivors' recovery journeys.



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About MCF

At Marie Collins Foundation we work to change the system to one that will do no further harm to those impacted by TACSA.

We ensure that at every level the needs of victims and survivors are at the forefront of all decision making. We achieve this by supporting children, young people and their families affected by Technology-Assisted Child Sexual Abuse by working with them directly and indirectly.

We also provide training to frontline practitioners, support the development of academic literature and influence policy makers and tech companies through amplifying the voice of those with lived experience.

But in order for the system to change to one that will truly do no further harm, we must blow the lid off of Technology-Assisted Child Sexual Abuse. Child Sexual Abuse thrives in silence, and we must shine a light on this issue to bring survivor voices out of the dark.



What is TACSA?

Technology-Assisted Child Sexual Abuse or TACSA can take place in many forms and includes, but is not limited to online grooming, the creation/distribution/access/purchase of Child Sexual Abuse material, sexual harassment, financially motivated sexual extortion or exposure to sexually explicit materials including pornography. The technology element of TACSA is not confined to social media platforms, it can also include technology such as video cameras, games consoles, VR headsets, laptops and Artificial Intelligence amongst other things. TACSA can take place online only or involve elements of contact abuse, either way, **the impact and harm caused to victims and survivors is severe and often lifelong.**

The abuser may be a stranger, or someone known to the child, a family member or a peer. Technology has made it easier for those who wish to target and use children, and the online environment has also led to children being increasingly exposed to harmful content. At Marie Collins Foundation we call this societal grooming. It has skewed the perception of what is 'normal', a phenomenon that not only makes it difficult for children to recognise when something is 'not right', but also provides abusers with the opportunity to appear to be behaving within the boundaries of what is acceptable and normal.

Understanding the true extent of Child Sexual Abuse, in all its manifestations, is a perennial problem. It is the most hidden form of abuse of children and the least spoken about by many child victims. Most cases of Child Sexual Abuse do not come to the attention of professionals. Sexual abuse occurs across all social classes, geographic areas, and ethnic and cultural groups. Victims are both boys and girls and abuse can happen to any child regardless of their age.

Sadly, the numbers relating to Technology-Assisted Child Sexual Abuse can often feel overwhelming, given the vast number of reports received globally. Despite the belief that this is very much an underreported crime, the growth in the production of abusive images has been exponential in recent years. The Internet Watch Foundation confirmed in their latest report that they have successfully removed more than **1 million webpages** showing at least one, and often many tens, hundreds or thousands of Child Sexual Abuse images and videos in the past five years alone.

It is important to remember that these are not just numbers.

These are children whose abuse has been orchestrated, documented or distributed through the use of technology.



What does best practice look like?

Victims and survivors of TACSA are exposed to media reports about this crime on a daily basis. By making simple changes to reports, journalists have the opportunity to challenge the status quo whilst empowering and validating victims and survivors. But what does best practice look like from a lived experience perspective?

All reports should be factual, accurate, balanced and respectful to the victim or survivor and their family. Reports should seek to educate and inform members of the public about TACSA and this can be easily achieved by speaking to experts, like Marie Collins Foundation, who can provide wider context for the report.

Particular care should be taken to not sensationalise the story especially when writing headlines which often set the tone for a media article. Avoid going into excessive detail about the crime committed, this can be retraumatising for victims and survivors to read. Whilst it is important and factually correct to name the online platforms that a perpetrator used to carry out their offending, do not give details on tactics used to groom children online. Although reports must be impartial, it is important to hold technology companies to account when they have failed their responsibility to keep children safe on their platforms.

Lived experience voices are often missing within media reports, with focus often placed on the perpetrator and the horrific details of the crimes they committed. Whilst victims and survivors of TACSA are granted lifetime anonymity, many who are on their recovery journey feel passionate about sharing their experiences with the media. It is important that due care is taken when working with those with lived experience. Find our guide to working alongside victims and survivors at www.mariecollinsfoundation.org.uk/How-We-Can-Help/Resources.

Survivors of TACSA are often depicted as weak, broken people whose lives are defined by their abuse. This is a harmful stereotype. With the right support victims and survivors can thrive on their recovery journey and go on to live healthy, happy, fulfilling lives. Messages of hope are best coming from victims and survivors themselves but can also come from third sector support services, or expert commentators. The Marie Collins Foundation have an active Lived Experience Group who may be able to provide comment and insight from a victim or survivor perspective.

By embedding messages of hope within media reports, it empowers victims and survivors and can be of comfort and reassurance to children experiencing this type of harm whose abuse has not yet been discovered or disclosed.



Top Tips

Call it what it is

Don't use sensational language or 'click bait' style headlines to draw readers in, name the crime and call it Child Sexual Abuse.

Avoid using language such as 'relationship' or 'had sex with', instead use words which accurately reflect the offense such as 'grooming' or 'rape'. You can find out more about language and correct terminology on [pages 12 and 13](#).

Be mindful about labelling offenders, there is a difference between sex offenders, child sexual abusers and paedophiles, conflating these adds to disinformation amongst society. Instead use factual neutral language such as abuser, perpetrator or offender. For more information on terminology please refer to our language framework at the end of this guidance.



Convey the harm

Every photograph found on a device is a crime scene where a child has been abused and captured in the worst moments of their life. It is vital that this is communicated in all news reports.

One of the myths regarding TACSA is that online Child Sexual Abuse has less impact and is of less immediate concern than offline abuse. Research has shown this is simply not true with findings indicating that the consequences of TACSA are at least as severe and harmful, if not more so than offline sexual abuse. Where images or videos of the abuse are created, the permanency and lack of control over who sees them leaves significant and long-term impacts for victims and survivors. They are revictimised every time these are viewed.

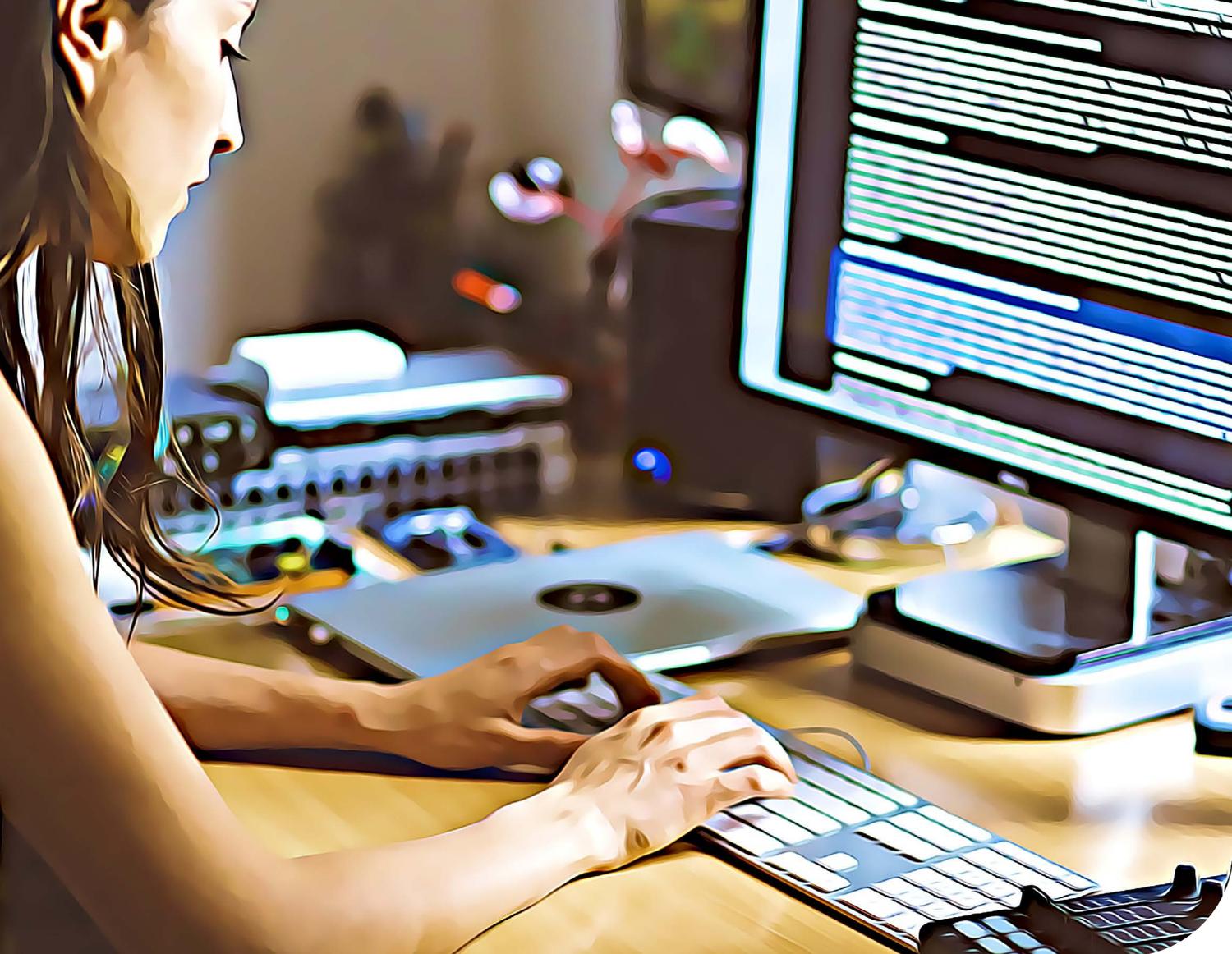


People don't understand what it feels like to have images out there. This impact is missing from the reports.

Because they don't have a clear view of the children that are being abused in the images, there is a broken connection with the public not realising what has happened.

They almost convey that the child hasn't been abused because it 'is just a photo' and it makes it out to not be as bad as it isn't contact abuse.

Even though we know someone will try to identify those children found in the images, it is never put in an article that this is happening. We need people to realise the work happening in the background to find these children.



Keep the responsibility on perpetrators

Technology-Assisted Child Sexual Abuse is never the fault of the victim or survivor. Reports often inadvertently place blame on victims and survivors, or their family, but the **perpetrator is solely responsible for the harm**. This causes further harm to victims and survivors and can prevent future disclosures from children and young people.

Don't excuse or simplify the abuse by reporting that situational factors such as alcohol, poor mental health, isolation or divorce, were the root cause of the offence.

Use active voice when describing the perpetrator's actions. For example: 'The perpetrator coerced and manipulated the child into sending images' instead of 'The child sent images to the perpetrator'.

Where appropriate, link media reports on TACSA to other news items calling for technology companies to strengthen online safeguarding for children and young people.

It can back up concerns about disclosing when we see victim blaming language. They think, 'my parents will be ashamed and it's my fault'. Media reports are on the internet forever, in 20 years' time someone could still come across it and it shut them down.

Victim blaming language diminishes responsibility, harm and responsibility and adds to misplaced distrust of victims and survivors.

Be mindful of how you frame the perpetrator

News reports often focus on good character traits of perpetrators, using language such as 'loving husband', 'top businessman' or 'budding sports person'. This framing of perpetrators minimises the impact and harm the offence and can call a survivor's victimhood into question. Instead focus on personal attributes of the victim or survivor and centre their experience at the heart of the report.

Avoid using positive language to describe an offender's physical appearance. The 'attractiveness' of perpetrators is irrelevant to factual reports and can either detract from the harm or reinforce harmful stereotypes. This is particularly pertinent in cases where the perpetrator is female or the victim is male, as the harm is often minimised due to gender stereotypes.

We automatically question the victimhood of victims who are abused by high profile or 'attractive' people.

When reading about offenders you often see 'he has such a bright future' or 'this will ruin their future', but you never read 'this lovely victim had this lovely life ahead of them'.

You can't excuse abuse with good character traits. This should not mitigate their behaviour but should be used to explain tactics perpetrators use to abuse children.

We need to report truthfully and use quantitative to inform the qualitative. Facts spell out what happened because numbers don't lie.

Show the scale of the crime

Using statistics to illustrate the prevalence of Child Sexual Abuse is encouraged. It gives an unbiased insight into the issue and demonstrates that TACSA is part of a wider societal issue rather than a one-off occurrence. Using statistics from reputable sources also helps to combat disinformation about offenders and victims such as the Internet Watch Foundation or the Centre of Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse.

I want to see more articles on factual perspectives on TACSA. Calls for action, solutions, parental advice. Not putting blame on single entities.

Turn off comments

The comment section online can undermine the victim, and the harm caused to them, despite best efforts of journalists to use correct language and convey harm within reports. Trolls can leave triggering and abusive comments leading to disinformation or further harm to the victim or survivor and their family. It is considered best practice to disable the comment section on all TACSA reports unless stringent moderation is possible.

Reading a comment section is even worse than reading a poorly written article, especially when you see things written like 'I would let him do that to me'.

We should frame media reports around the help available and tell victims and survivors 'it is not your fault'.

Direct people to more information

Adding helplines and support information is a vital addition to reports. It can assist parents or carers looking for further information and can help victims and survivors to access support they desperately need. Marie Collins Foundation is available to support victims and survivors of TACSA and we would encourage linking to our website for more information for children and their families.

Use diverse images

Use a diverse range of images to depict victims from all backgrounds including those from ethnic minority communities, LGBTQ+ communities, males and those from all social classes.

Images should show strength of survivors and not reinforce shame. Survivors do not want to be portrayed as weak, broken people with stock images of sad or crying children on dark backgrounds. Instead, they encourage the use of empowering images which convey strength and hope.

If a victim or survivor has chosen to waive their anonymity, use the supplied image, do not troll through their social media to find further images.



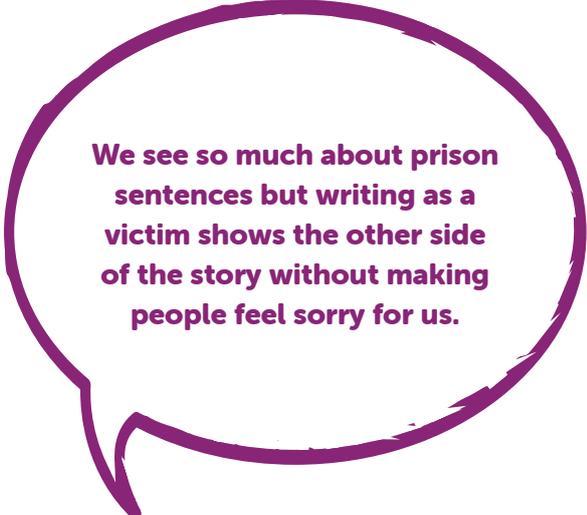
Don't reinforce harmful stereotypes

TACSA is just as harmful to victims and survivors as 'contact abuse' and often the loss of control of images and videos can cause additional impacts. It should be made clear that TACSA can affect all children irrespective of gender, culture, religion, age, or class and can be perpetrated by anyone, including by children themselves. In fact, most Child Sexual Abuse happens within the home and is perpetrated by someone close to the child.

Children are never to blame for their abuse, and media outlets should avoid reporting anything which may suggest the victim is at fault. This includes narratives about children's online activity, family life or personality traits. Many victims of TACSA never disclose their abuse, this is not because it was not harmful at the time, but is often due to complex feelings of fear, shame and societal silence.



We need to stop the narrative of 'not here' or it would never happen to my children as it can happen to anyone and can be committed by all types of perpetrators of all ages, races and communities.



We see so much about prison sentences but writing as a victim shows the other side of the story without making people feel sorry for us.



Painting victims as faceless is dangerous. We need to take away shame and blame for victims and survivors.



It is aggravating to not mention victims. Every image is a victim, but it isn't put across that way. That is possibly 100,00 children that are being abused.

Place the voice of the survivor at the centre of the story

Offenders silence children through TACSA, so it is important that victims and survivors don't feel voiceless when it comes to the media. Anchor coverage on the impact and harm caused to the victim of the crime instead of the impact on the perpetrator. It is particularly important to remember, and convey the message, that behind every image on a downloader's device, is a child being abused.

Take opportunities where possible to give victims and survivors the chance to have their say. This could be in the form of first person or opinion pieces or offering comment to survivor groups when covering news stories about TACSA where the victim perspective is missing.



Language Guide

Popular language	Preferred Term	Why this language change matters
Child pornography, nudes, indecent images, X-rated pictures, sexting, explicit pictures, seedy pictures, self-generated images	Child Sexual Abuse material, images of Child Sexual Abuse	Children cannot consent to abuse and we must not diminish the additional harm and impact caused through having abuse captured or recorded through technology.
Sextortion	Child Sexual Abuse, sexual extortion, financially motivated sexual extortion, blackmail	'Sextortion' sensationalises the crime and fails to convey the harm caused to children who are victim of this crime.
Peer-to-peer	Child-on-child, harmful sexual behaviour	Use of terminology such as peer-to-peer fails to encapsulate the power imbalance often found between the offender and victim in harmful sexual behaviour cases.
Lured, coaxed, duped, tricked	Manipulated, coerced, exploited	Words such as lured or duped inadvertently victim blame. They make survivors feel stupid and weak and take away responsibility from the perpetrator.
Relationship	Child Sexual Abuse	Children cannot consent to their abuse and whilst children who have been groomed may believe there are in a relationship, what they have been subjected to is Child Sexual Abuse.
Child prostitution	Child sexual exploitation	This is an outdated term which places blame on the victim or survivor.

Popular language	Preferred Term	Why this language change matters
Sex, sexual activity	Rape, sexual assault	It is important that we do not seek to normalise Child Sexual Abuse by watering it down with terms such as 'sex'.
Troubled teen, underage boy/girl	Abused child, victim	Children are never to blame for their abuse.
Paedophile, pervert, predator	Sex offender, perpetrator, abuser, child sexual abuser	Not all perpetrators of Child Sexual Abuse are paedophiles, we must avoid this oversimplified stereotype as it impacts how we respond to prevent Child Sexual Abuse.
Historical	Non-recent	To victims and survivors abuse is not historical, it has a very real impact on their lives no matter how much time has passed. No other crime is diminished by calling it 'historical'.
Mistake, accident	Choice, chose	Child Sexual Abuse is not a mistake or an accident it is a choice.
Deep fake	AI-generated Child Sexual Abuse material, AI sexual abuse images	AI-generated imagery is based on real child abuse material and it is important we convey this through use of language. It is not a victimless crime and labelling it as 'fake' is harmful.
Catfishing	Grooming, Child Sexual Abuse	This is linked to adult online dating, which should not be conflated with Child Sexual Abuse. It minimises the abuse perpetrated against the child and the harm caused.

**This guidance has been written by and in collaboration with
a group of victims and survivors**

They each would like to share a message with you:

Society needs good reporting of TACSA to help prevent this horrific crime.

Nicole

Media tailored with this guidance in mind can make the difference between empowering someone to disclose their experience and leaving them feeling silenced and powerless to speak out about their abuse. Your role in creating a safe space in the media is key to reaching victims and survivors.

Jamie

Abusers often move on with ease, while survivors are left carrying the trauma for a lifetime. That's why it's crucial to recognise the resilience of survivors when telling stories of TACSA—because behind every story is a person who never had a choice in what happened to them, yet chooses to keep going despite it.

Marie

The Marie Collins Foundation has proved to me that healing from sexual abuse is possible! I feel that I can talk honestly and freely about my past experiences, and the challenges in the aftermath. I believe the victim, and I have faith in the work we do.

Lauren

The impact of this guidance and the way stories are written hopefully can give people that have suffered from abuse a sense that someone is on their side. Being a survivor of violence and abuse can feel very lonely. Survivors want to share their story for the right reasons and not just be another headline.

Billie

Pre-publication checklist:

- Have you named the crime?
- Have you added a helpline for parents/carers?
- Have you added a helpline for children and young people?
- Have you added a helpline for adult victims and survivors of TACSA?
- Have you used active voice to describe the perpetrators actions?
- Have you used diverse and dignified images to depict victims and survivors?
- Have you used facts or statistics to show the scale and nature of TACSA?
- Is your reporting empathetic, does it convey the harm done to the child/children?
- Have you kept responsibility on the offender and held them accountable for their actions?
- Have you avoided language which justifies or minimises the offense?
- Have you avoided language which reinforces harmful stereotypes?
- Have you ensured the headline doesn't trivialise or sensationalise the report?
- Have you asked experts for comment?
- Have you added in a message of hope?
- Have you turned off the comments section both online and on social media?



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Funded by:



This project was made possible through
the support of Oak Foundation.