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# REPORTING ON TRAUMATIC EVENTS

A Journalist's Code  
of Conduct



HQ 1080P

CH 1  
CH 2



30 FPS



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The iMEdD team actively sought out experts to obtain fundamental rules of journalistic practice when approaching and covering traumatic events. The research focuses on understanding the psychological effects experienced by individuals who undergo trauma as a consequence of these tragic events, and it addresses issues related to privacy, legislation, and journalistic ethics.

# THE INITIAL HOURS FOLLOWING THE EVENT

**1.** When reporting on emergency events, such as accidents or disasters, it is crucial for journalists to possess essential knowledge that prevents the perpetuation of social, racial, or ethnic stereotypes, even if these stereotypes align with initial public opinion or represent an instinctive reaction –in which case, journalists have a responsibility to actively challenge these stereotypes.

Media outlets should refrain from contributing to any form of stigmatisation in their immediate coverage of these events.

**2.** Journalists are advised to maintain composure when reporting on tragic events.

Excessive emotional display during broadcasts or recordings may potentially amplify the already traumatic and stressful experience for the audience.

**3.** During the initial hours and throughout the reporting of a tragic event, it is advisable for journalists to refrain from broadcasting graphic images or explicit portrayals of the bodies or body parts of the deceased.

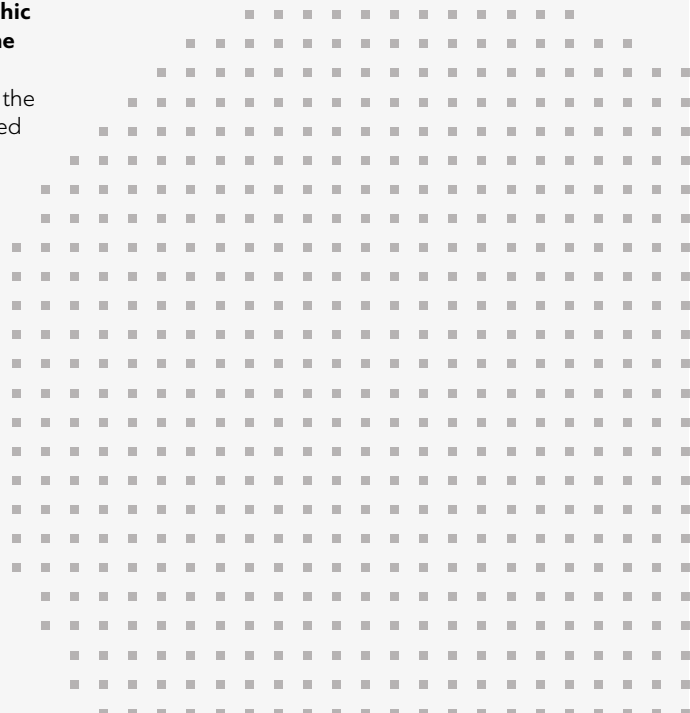
It would be highly distressing for the relatives of the victims to receive news of the death of their loved ones through the media.

**4.** When journalists are in the field, they may face reactions or be required to apologise for the actions of their colleagues who may have failed in their journalistic duties. It is the

journalist's responsibility to attentively listen to complaints and avoid responding aggressively, even if they feel unjustly targeted.

It is essential from an ethical standpoint, and it often results in improved reporting, for journalists to engage in human communication and demonstrate an understanding of the trauma before proceeding with inquiries and further investigation.

**5.** Journalists should prioritise the physical and mental well-being of the injured and survivors. Additionally, it is crucial not to impede the work of the authorities who are actively operating at the scene.





# INTERVIEW/ PUTTING PEOPLE AT THE CENTRE

**1.** Journalists should handle citizens with discretion and sensitivity when they are experiencing mourning, emotional distress, or suffering.

**2.** It is recommended to disclose the identity of missing persons only after the authorities have officially notified the relatives.

- The missing persons are individuals with their own rights. Similar to survivors, it is the responsibility of the authorities to provide information on their status.

**3.** For a journalist to conduct an interview with a relative or friend of a victim, it is essential to obtain their explicit consent. The most appropriate time to request such an interview is after the completion of the victim's funeral.

Individuals experiencing grief and loss do not usually have complete clarity or control over their emotions until they reach the final stage of grief, known as "acceptance", which is typically marked by the completion of the funeral ceremony.

**4.** Journalists should refrain from using recording devices when requesting an interview from an individual who has experienced loss or trauma until

- they have obtained explicit consent to record.

Journalists have a duty to respect the privacy of the moment and, above all, maintain the dignity of the individual.

**5.** Remember people you speak to in these circumstances are rarely media-savvy. Try to explain the media process and how your story/ picture/footage is likely to be used.

- Also explain that it may be reshaped prior to publication, or afterwards, or not used at all. Be honest if you know something is likely to run more than once.

Dart Center, [Working with Victims and Survivors: Minimise Further Harm](#)



**6** ● It is advisable for the journalist to turn off the camera/audio recording if the victim or the victim's relatives are experiencing intense emotional distress.

Once again, journalists should respect the privacy of the moment and, above all, maintain the dignity of the individual.

**7** ● An inclination to “over-empathise” can be dangerous –you’re not there to rescue or make things better for the person you’re interviewing.

● It doesn't help either you or your interviewee if you climb over professional boundaries in order to become a confidante or advocate.

*Dart Center, Mark Brayne, TRAUMA & JOURNALISM: A Guide For Journalists, Editors & Managers*

**8** ● A safe way to open the interview is to ask, “what would you like to tell me”, or “what happened to you?” This gives the interviewee the sense

● that they can be in control of the interview and its content.

*Dart Center, Kimina Lyall, Interviewing in the aftermath of trauma*

**9** ● When conducting an interview with a victim or a relative of a victim, it is advisable to refrain from asking questions that may

● evoke painful memories or trigger additional traumatic emotions.

Questions like «How did you feel?» or «What pleasant moments do you remember from your relative?» should be avoided.

**10**

During the interview –useful questions include:

“What decisions did you make that you think helped you survive the incident?”

● “What do you need right now to feel safe?”

“What will you do after this interview to keep yourself feeling safe?”

*Dart Center, Kimina Lyall, Interviewing in the aftermath of trauma*

**11**

Use empathic interviewing.

Empathy is the capacity to participate in another's sensations, feelings, thoughts,

● and movements. Using specific

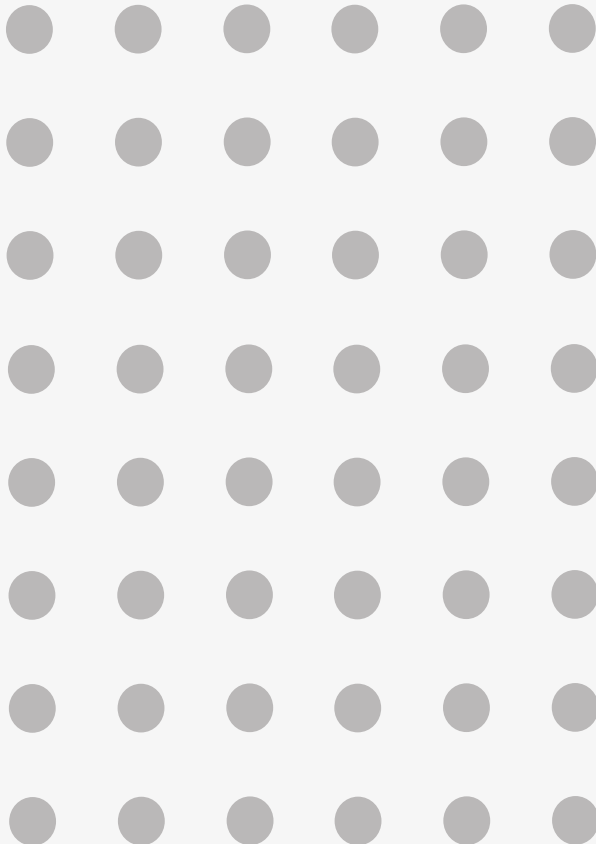
words can make a difference in the interview and how your interview subject responds.

“So, what you're saying is...”

“From what you're saying, I can see how you would be...”

“That must have been very hard to watch...”

*Dart Center, Kimina Lyall, Interviewing in the aftermath of trauma*



# VIDEO/PHOTO

**1** In photographs or videos, it is crucial to take measures to cover the faces of both the survivors and the deceased (such as applying mosaic/blur effects).

This practice is recommended to uphold the dignity of the victims, particularly because obtaining consent from the victims themselves is not possible. Additionally, legally speaking, the survivors are natural persons, and the fact that they were present at the scene of the tragic event constitutes personal information. Information regarding the survivors and deceased of an accident should be provided to the relatives by the relevant authorities rather than by the media.

**2** Journalists should refrain from repeatedly showcasing images or descriptions of disasters within the context of a story or news report.

The repetitive exposure to such visuals can trigger or amplify traumatic memories and induce unnecessary stress, without serving a significant informative purpose.

**3** It is recommended to avoid exposing grieving relatives and refrain from showing them in photographs and footage (during a funeral, for instance). Special attention should be given to respecting the privacy and well-being of children in such situations.

Recital 38 of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) stresses the need for enhanced protection of children's personal data, especially when they are experiencing bereavement.

# STORYTELLING & REPORTING

**1** Sensitive content warnings, commonly known as “disclaimers” or “trigger warnings”, have limited efficacy or minimal impact in mitigating the negative effects on survivors of traumatic events. Instead, they may reinforce the perception that trauma is a defining aspect of their identity.

Even though avoidance of sensitive content may provide temporary relief from stress, it can ultimately contribute to the perpetuation or worsening of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) symptoms in the long run.

**2** It is advisable to refrain from using phrases that excessively emphasise human tragedy and instead opt for expressions that describe the event while showing respect for the human experience. (For instance, using terms like “unforeseen disaster” rather than “human drama” or “unspeakable tragedy”).

It is important to recognise that the mere reporting or dissemination of a tragic event can evoke intense negative emotions and potentially activate existing trauma. Failure to present the event in a purely informative manner may exacerbate the situation.

**3** It's time to stop using the phrase “natural disasters”.

This term misguides the public by fostering the belief that catastrophic effects are “inevitable”, “beyond human control”, and merely a “part of a natural process”, thereby disregarding the significant human influence that underlies these events.

**4** Any reference to the details of the incident, statistics, or numbers (such as those related to the deceased or injured) should be verified and supported by multiple sources to the greatest extent possible.

It is essential for journalists to avoid participating in the creation of a panic-inducing atmosphere, especially during the initial hours and days following the event.

**5** It is not always evident who the “good guys” or “bad guys” are in every case, if they exist at all. It necessitates extensive patience and thorough fact-checking before reaching any definitive conclusions.

Early testimonies and evidence often have the potential to mislead and can be politically motivated in an attempt to control the narrative.

**6** Journalists should not assume the roles of police officers or judges. It is important to refrain from jumping to conclusions and strive for a neutral stance, especially when dealing with highly controversial matters. Furthermore, it is crucial not to target individuals affected by a tragic event by assigning them blame for their own misfortune.

The blame game can wait.

**7** Journalists are not experts and should therefore show respect for the opinions of professionals in relevant fields. When experts disagree, journalists should maintain an impartial stance and highlight the diversity of opinions.

However, it is also important for journalists to exercise caution when experts venture outside their area of expertise.

**8** Journalists are not omniscient. There's nothing wrong with openly and publicly acknowledging the extent of one's knowledge.

Their role is to ask questions and seek information rather than provide definitive answers.

**9** Journalists should not assume the role of a hero or present themselves as such.

Nothing and no one is more important than the story itself.



# SOURCES

- General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)
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- [The National Council for Radio and Television \(NCRTV\) Draft Code of Conduct](#)
- [Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma](#), a project of the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism
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