



HOSTAGE UK

A family's guide to handling the media during and after a kidnapping

Having a family member kidnapped can be a frightening experience. Many families find handling the media attention difficult and stressful, so Hostage UK has produced this leaflet to provide practical advice and guidance on how to cope with the media.

It is aimed at the UK-based families of British hostages taken overseas, but some things are relevant in other cases.

Each kidnap is different, so there is no one-size-fits-all approach.

This leaflet is for guidance only.

Should we talk to the media?

Families should always think carefully before talking to the media.

In most cases, it is **not** advisable to speak to the media because of the potentially negative impact media coverage can have on the hostage. It can raise the 'value' of the hostage, especially in kidnap for ransom cases, which can prolong the negotiation process. It can also lead to hostage transfer, where a kidnap group passes on or sells the hostage, sometimes turning a criminal kidnap into a political one. Giving away too much information about the hostage can also help 'copycats' who claim to have the hostage and divert attention and resources away from the real case.

You need to be clear about why you want to talk to the media – what do you hope it will achieve? It is always worth taking professional advice, and Hostage UK can assist with this.

Be careful about the language you use. Try to avoid terms such as 'hostage', 'deadline', and 'terrorists', and public condemnation of the kidnappers' demands can be unhelpful.

Media coverage can also have a negative impact on a hostage's family. It can attract attention from unscrupulous individuals who might hijack the story for their own purposes.

If a release seems to be imminent, media needs to be handled by a professional.

How much media attention is there likely to be?

Each case is different.

The amount of media attention will depend on the nature of the kidnapping, who has been taken, and the amount of publicity sought by the kidnappers. Some cases are not covered in the media at all, whereas others generate considerable attention.

You might also receive interest from the media when related incidents are reported, such as other kidnaps or events in the country where the kidnapping has taken place.

What information will the media want or need from me?

Journalists covering a kidnap will want to get lots of information. You do not have to tell them anything, but it can help to know what to expect.

They will want to know what has happened: who has been taken? Where were they taken, and why were they there? Which group has taken them? And why? Has a ransom been demanded?

They are likely to want personal details about the hostage: their job, employer, are they married, do they have children, do they have any medical problems, or whether there is anything about their background that will help them to cope with the kidnapping.

They will ask for a recent photo of the hostage – it is not advisable to give them one unless you have sought advice. Having one ready in case it is needed can be helpful. Try to find a personal family photo rather than an official passport-style one.

Make sure that the photo is not 'unhelpful'. Don't choose one that gives the impression the hostage is wealthy. Avoid photos that might be perceived as offensive to the kidnappers – those that show the hostage drinking alcohol, dressing immodestly, or showing an allegiance to a particular religious faith or political cause. Avoid photos that imply military links.

Journalists will be interested in how the family is feeling, what they know, and who they are talking to. They might ask your views about the actions of the hostage's employer (if they were kidnapped while working overseas) or whether you are happy with the response of the Foreign Office, police, or the government of the country where the kidnap happened.

Because of the Internet and global media, you must assume that anything you say to the media could be seen by the kidnappers.

What can we expect from the media?

In a high profile case, journalists will be under pressure to get as much information as possible. You do not have to speak to anyone if you do not want to.

Journalists might try a number of things to get you to speak to them. They might turn up on your doorstep, call your phone or mobile, or try to speak to your neighbours, friends, extended family members or colleagues.

Websites such as Facebook, Twitter and MySpace provide a wealth of information for journalists, who are able to access personal photos, information about the hostage's private life, and messages from friends during the kidnap. To avoid this happening, you should increase privacy settings, including controlling access by the hostage's friends. If you do not know how to do this, or can't get access to the settings, contact the Foreign Office for assistance. It can be very unhelpful or potentially dangerous for personal information like this to be used by the media.

What can I do if journalists behave inappropriately?

On the whole, most journalists are responsible. But, they have a job to do and will be under pressure to get information.

If you are unhappy with the behaviour of a journalist, you could warn them that you will report them to their employer. If this does not work, go ahead and report them.

You can also report them to the Press Complaints Commission or to the police if they trespass on your property or harass you.

If you do not want to have to deal with confrontational situations, you could ask the Foreign Office to intervene on your behalf or contact Hostage UK for assistance.

You can screen your phone calls and have a dedicated phone number for family, the police, government, or the hostage's employer to reach you on. And it might be advisable to record your conversations with journalists so you have proof if they mis-quote you. This might also encourage them to act appropriately at all times.

How can we handle the media in a way that minimises distress to our family?

Remember – it is up to you whether you talk to the media. Take your time and do not feel pressurised into saying anything unless and until you are ready.

The following ideas might help you to reduce the stress on you and your family:

Write down what you want to say before you speak to a journalist. Stick to that, and do not say more than you had planned to. They will always push you for more and might rely on the silence technique to try to make you fill the gap. Be firm but friendly. You could also email quotes to journalists rather than meeting them or talking to them on the phone.

Whenever you speak to a journalist, make a note of their name, organisation and contact details.

Consider screening your phone calls, or having a dedicated number for important calls.

Consider having one person to act as the point of contact for the media. They will establish relationships with journalists, track what has been said, stop journalists playing one family member off against another, and ensure the family maintains a consistent message.

You might feel more comfortable speaking to one particular journalist – trust your instinct.

If you do need to speak to the media, you could use a single interview that is shared around newspapers and TV channels, rather than doing separate interviews for each. This is called a 'pooled clip' and the Foreign Office can help you to organise it.

You could also consider reading a prepared statement, rather than answering questions.

You might find it helpful to keep a diary where you record information. This would be kept private, but it would help you to keep a clear mind when talking to journalists.

What should we do if there are things we don't want the press to report?

If you don't want a journalist to report something – don't tell them.

It is important to understand that anything you tell a journalist 'off the record' can be used but won't be reported as having come from you.

If you want to give a journalist information for background purposes only you need to state clearly that it is 'not for publication or broadcast' and check that they have understood that.

Journalists are always under pressure to get as much information as possible so you will need to be clear and firm with them about the basis of your conversation.

Journalists will generally not let you check quotes before using them, but it is worth checking if they are willing due to the sensitivities of a kidnap. You can expect them to use quotes without changing them, but there is always a risk they will take them out of context. If in doubt, ask the journalist to explain how they would use what you say.

Who else might be talking to the media?

Lots of other people and organisations might be commenting in the media.

The Foreign Office will probably issue a factual statement if pressed by the media to comment, but they will liaise with you before speaking publicly.

Foreign governments might comment if the kidnap involved other nationalities.

The hostage's employer (if they were kidnapped while working overseas) may comment.

A private security company will be involved if engaged by the hostage's employer.

Your friends, neighbours and colleagues may be approached by journalists, and it is advisable to discourage them from speaking to the media.

People claiming to be related to or a friend of the hostage might comment – where this happens, let the press know and they will generally stop speaking to them.

If more than one hostage has been taken, it is important that the families try to agree a common media strategy. If one hostage is released before the others, the media must be handled with considerable care until all hostages are home safely.

Are there things the media can do to help?

In some cases, media coverage can be helpful but you should always take professional advice and proceed with caution.

It can be useful to use the media to make public appeals but they should be carefully organised, both to maximise public response and minimise any risks.

Make a note of the name, organisation and contact details of all the journalists you come across so that if you need their help you know how to reach them.

Try to be polite in your dealings with the media, especially as you might need their help at some point. On the whole, they will understand the pressure you are under, and are just doing their job. But you need to remember that their interests are not the same as yours, and they may think different details are more important, or wish to take an editorial line you don't agree with.

There is likely to be press interest at the end of the kidnapping, and you need to think carefully about what to say, if anything.

What should we do after the kidnap has ended?

You do not need to say anything.

Sometimes a short statement or press conference can provide the journalists with the quotes they need which then leaves the family time to relax outside of the spotlight. The Foreign Office or Hostage UK can assist.

If you think you might sell your story, you need to limit what you say to the press. Remember to check first with family and friends to ensure there are no surprises for them and always take professional advice.

If you have had good relationships with certain journalists, do take the time to thank them afterwards. Give them feedback about anything that was distressing as good journalists will take this on board.

Please also pass on your experiences to Hostage UK so we can update this leaflet.

Ultimately, the decision to communicate directly with the media rests with the family. Whatever you decide to do, Hostage UK will try to help in any way we can.

**Contacts and sources
of information**

Foreign and Commonwealth Consular Division phone line: 020 7008 8779

Press Complaints Commission: www.pcc.org.uk or 020 7831 0022

Press Complaints Commission Editors' Code of Practice:
www.pcc.org.uk/cop/practice.html

Hostage UK has a wealth of experience, but we are always learning. We would appreciate your feedback so we can continue to improve the support and advice we provide. Please send your comments and experiences to administrator@hostageuk.org

Hostage UK has a strict privacy policy; any information you provide will not be shared with anyone without your permission.

For more information about Hostage UK or to find out how we can help, please visit our website: www.hostageuk.org

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