

Action for Prisoners' Families Briefing

Dealing with the Media – Guidance for prisoners' families

This fact sheet is based on a presentation given by journalist, Max Daly, to families at an Action for Prisoners' Families event in March 2011. It has been produced as part of the 'Family Voices' work supported by Lloyds TSB Foundation for England and Wales.

Getting the story

When deciding on whether to speak to a journalist you need to know what their motivation is for writing the piece. Usually they are after some kind of 'story' – something that is topical, interesting, new and surprising. It will either be for a news story or a longer story called a **feature**. A journalist is not there to take down everything you say to them and then repeat it back to their readers; after an interview they will go through their notes and pick out the key paragraph or even line which is '**the story**'. A good story is valuable to a newspaper. Papers such as The Sun and the Mail on Sunday will pay £200,000 for a top end exclusive scandal. Prisoners' families will be approached by journalists at court when their relative is convicted, door-stepped (when a journalist knocks on your front door and won't leave), via a charity or organisation, through a friend or even via Facebook. It may be that the journalist wants to get a quote or some background information from the family of someone who has been convicted of a crime, or that they are doing a feature piece about a miscarriage of justice, an appeal, relatives of prisoners, or a group of prisoners for example 'drug mules'.

Morality

A journalist's primary motivation is usually 'getting a story' but they are also interested in affirming their readers' views. Newspapers and their staff are driven by their readership. Editors will have a **moral code** of what is right or wrong, good and evil, largely based on what their perception is of how and what their readers think. Some newspapers will see prisoners' families as being morally corrupt just because they are related to prisoners. This means they see them as having less human rights, for example less of a right to privacy, and therefore they become easy targets for negative stories. Other groups treated like this might be people who sell drugs or so-called benefit scroungers. Some newspapers (usually those from the tabloid press) see prisoners as deserving no sympathy whatsoever from journalists or the general public because

they have been found guilty of an offence in a court of law. It doesn't matter to the media whether the prisoner is asserting their innocence and appealing against their conviction, it is enough that they have been convicted.

Conflicting Agendas

If you decide to let a journalist use your story you need to be aware that what you hope to achieve from getting your story published is unlikely to be the same as what the journalist wants from writing the piece. The main reasons for this mismatch are outlined above. Their agenda and your agenda may well be very different, but more importantly they may actually be in conflict. You may want to put across your side of the story and to get your voice heard, but a journalist may just be looking for a juicy story of their own which furthers their career. For example, you may write a letter to your local newspaper for the letters page which gives your view of the facts which resulted in your relative being in jail, but in some cases that letter will not go onto the letters page, it may be handed to a news reporter and turned into a story.

Journalists will also have a **time limit/deadline** to do a story quickly. This can mean you are rushed when you speak to them and that information may be printed incorrectly. So make sure you stick to your own time scale, rather than being forced to go along with the journalist's one.

Should you talk?

The first thing I would do if a journalist contacted me is to 'stalk the stalker'. You need to check their credentials, but also need to know what kind of journalist they are, who they work for and what kind of articles they write. This can be done by typing their name into a Google search and you should get a list of all their articles coming up. You could also have a look on www.journalisted.com to see if they have submitted previous articles which will give you an idea of the sort of articles they write. For instance, you are approached by a Sarah Smith from the Daily Mail who says she wants to do a sympathetic piece about how difficult prisoners' families find it to arrange prison visits. This may be the truth, but a simple bit of online research could reveal that in the past two months, Sarah Smith has written two articles on prisons: 'Why all criminals should be transported to Afghanistan' and 'The argument for sterilising prisoners' wives'!. Therefore from reading her profile and looking at her work you might guess that it is unlikely that she will be writing a sympathetic article about you.

Families need also to be aware of the wolf in sheep's clothing – which sometimes comes in the form of TV chat shows such as 'Jeremy Kyle' and 'Trisha'. Under the guise of 'helping' people they can often put individuals and families through a traumatic experience and be more 'trashy' than any tabloid. If tabloid journalists are the shock troops of journalism, the talk show researchers are the 'cults' trying to dazzle people with promises of help whilst actually taking advantage of them and seeking to profit from their misfortune. An investigation was carried out into one popular TV talk show which revealed that a 'helpline' number that was put up after the show was monitored by researchers. The researchers hoped that one of the callers seeking help might actually lead to a good story for the programme.

Exercise caution

It is best to always proceed with caution. Talk to the journalist and find out what the story is that they want to write. Then seek advice from any support groups, charities, friends and experts that you know. Don't be bullied, rushed or dazzled by the thought of being featured in the media. Think of the knock-on effect a story may have on your children, grand-children or any other relatives. It is possible that the journalist will publish a perfect piece, but it more likely that you find the article or experience very damaging and the resulting intrusion harmful. Families need to be aware, that because the Press Complaints Commission (PCC) may not always uphold your complaint, once the article is published or the interview aired it is too late to heal any damage that this may cause. The PCC is a last resort, but is not to be relied upon, so make sure you think before saying anything to a journalist. Always proceed with caution.

Useful contacts and information

Press Complaints Commission - is an independent self-regulatory body, which has been set up to examine complaints about the editorial content of UK newspapers and magazines (and their websites). Its services are free. www.pcc.org.uk Tel: 0207 831 0022

BBC Complaints procedure

To find out more about complaining about a BBC radio or television programme, or BBC website go to: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/complaints/complain-online/>

Ofcom

Broadcasters and the broadcasting news organisations have agreed with the Press Complaints Commission that in a situation where an individual feels harassed because large numbers of print and broadcast journalists have congregated to cover a news story, the following emergency number: **07659 152 656** (24 hours) can be used by someone affected to notify the relevant organisations of their concern. Whether the journalists are withdrawn is then a decision for the relevant organisations. www.ofcom.org.uk



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