

Treating Victims of the Conflict  
with Respect and Dignity:

Guidelines for

# Journalists, Editors and Media Educators



Arts & Humanities  
Research Council



# Letter of Introduction

These guidelines were developed as part of the 'Voice, Agency and Blame: Victimhood and the Imagined Community' / 'Victims and Dealing with the Past' project – a two-year initiative funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council and based at Queen's University Belfast.

The wider project explores the relationship between victims and 'dealing with the past' in Northern Ireland. In Northern Ireland, both victimhood and legacy issues have become highly politicised. This has, for example, given rise to the question of 'who' is a victim of the conflict, what victimhood 'means' and ultimately, how victims' needs – and which victims' needs are met. By examining these questions and others through the lenses of voice, agency and blame, this project sought to produce a more comprehensive and multi-faceted understanding of the politics of victimhood in Northern Ireland.

Working with the Commission for Victims and Survivors Northern Ireland (CVSNI), over 60 interviews with victims and survivors across Northern Ireland were carried out. In addition, we also spoke at length with a range of distinguished journalists and editors about the challenges of reporting on victim and survivor related issues.

Project team members – Dr. Cheryl Lawther, Professor Kieran McEvoy and Dr. Lauren Dempster are all based at the School of Law, Queen's University Belfast.

At its core and in addition to academic work, this project has a 'real world' dimension and is trying to ensure that the voices of victims are heard, respected and acted upon in Northern Ireland and beyond. These media guidelines are a practical expression of that ethical commitment. They are informed by the interviews we carried out with victims, many of whom told us about their good and bad experiences of dealing with journalists in Northern Ireland. We also took on board the views of journalists and editors about this complex and sensitive work. Finally, we looked for and were surprised by the comparative absence of international best practice guidelines in the aftermath of political violence.

## **The process for the production of the guidelines was as follows.**

1. The award-winning journalist Susan McKay was appointed to prepare and write the guidelines. Consultation was key to that process.
2. In addition to specific questions on media engagement asked during interview by the project team members, a further round of interviews with members and representatives of victims' groups and journalists and editors was conducted by Susan.
3. This was coupled with two presentations and feedback sessions with the Victims Forum, the hosting of a CVSNI Policy Seminar – with discussion and feedback, and the presentation of draft versions of the guidelines at the Victims and Dealing with the Past project conference held at Queen's University Belfast, May 2018.
4. In June 2018 a further round of consultation was conducted with all funded victims' and survivors' groups in Northern Ireland and the guidelines were again presented at the National Union of Journalists (NUJ) Belfast and Dart Centre Europe 'Do No Harm' Journalism Conference.

## **The end result was the production of four documents:**

- Guidelines on media engagement for victims and survivors;
- Guidelines on representing and engaging with victims and survivors/legacy issues for journalists, editors and educators;
- A set of 'essential' tips on media engagement for victims and survivors;
- A set of 'essential' tips on representing and engaging with victims and survivors/legacy issues for journalists, editors and educators.

These guidelines are designed to be of immediate value and practical use and we encourage you to share them amongst your networks.

For further information about the wider project, please feel free to contact us at: <https://victimsandthepast.org>

**Cheryl Lawther**

January 2019

# Endorsements

## Commissioner for Victims and Survivors Northern Ireland

### Judith Thompson

As Commissioner for Victims and Survivors (NI) I very much welcome and fully support the production of these guidance to journalists and editors working in the print and broadcast media in their reporting of incidents relating to the Troubles/Conflict.

The adoption of this guidance can ensure the maintenance of high standards and professionalism of journalists and editors in working with victims and survivors of the Conflict/Troubles. The guidance for journalists and editors provide practical advice that if followed should ensure that engagement with individuals and families about their traumatic lived experiences of the Conflict is conducted in an empathetic, sensitive and respectful manner. The guidelines also provide an important reference tool for journalism educators in training current and future generations of journalists in approaching victims and their families with the empathy and respect that they deserve.

These widely informed guidelines can grow in stature and reputation locally, nationally and internationally the more they become embedded in the practice among media outlets in Northern Ireland and elsewhere.

### Victims and Survivors Forum: Media Guidance for Journalists and Editors

The Victims and Survivors Forum fully support the production of these guidance to journalists and editors working in the print and broadcast media in their engagement with victims and survivors of the Conflict/Troubles. The Forum would encourage all media outlets to adopt these guidance in their current and future practice when writing and reporting about the Conflict/Troubles. This widely informed guidance should be a critical reference to all media representatives ensuring they always treat victims and survivors and their families in an empathetic and respectful manner.

The timely production of these guidance should also provide a key source for journalism educators in their important work in training the next generation of journalists and editors to maintain the highest standards in working with victims and survivors in the years ahead.

## **Dart Centre Europe for Journalism and Trauma**

Violence leaves a mark. Interviewing someone who has lost a friend or relative through a traumatic death - however long ago that loss happened - is one of the most serious undertakings a journalist can face.

These guidelines provide an excellent route map for navigating the ethical and craft challenges that conflict and the continuing aftermath of it generates. In Northern Ireland, the past lives on in the present in painful and complicated ways. The suggestions here will not only help journalists avoid causing additional harm and distress, they will also increase the likelihood that their reporting is accurate and genuinely informed by the voices of victims and survivors. The advice here matches and draws on the experience of journalists and filmmakers in the Dart Centre's international network who have dedicated their careers to increasing public understanding of violence and personal tragedy.

## **National Union of Journalists (NUJ) Note of Recommendation**

As Assistant General Secretary I commend the work of Queen's University Belfast in developing guidelines to assist media practitioners in coverage of stories relating to the legacy of the Troubles. For the families of victims and for survivors of violence time does not erase painful memories of deeply traumatic events.

Media practitioners must always be mindful of the impact which coverage of such events can have on individuals and families. The guidelines will assist victims, survivors and their families in dealing with the media.

Read in conjunction with the NUJ Code Of Conduct the guidelines will assist journalists, editors and students to approach these important stories sensitively and with the utmost compassion.

Seamus Dooley  
Assistant General Secretary  
National Union of Journalists, UK and Ireland.

# Guidelines for Journalists, Editors and Journalism Educators

Interviewing people who have been bereaved as a result of conflict is challenging, whether in the immediate aftermath or many years after violence has ceased. Reporting on the human cost of war or civil strife is clearly in the public interest, but asking people to talk about the murder of a loved one or multiple members of their family or community must be undertaken with skill and sensitivity. This work is just as important as war reporting. Psychologists talk of a “second wound”. In media terms this means that the harm caused by the violence is followed by harm done by the intervention of unskilled or unscrupulous reporters. In a post conflict situation, victims and survivors may, by the time a journalist approaches them, already have been multiply wounded by for example, inappropriate earlier media coverage, public indifference, failure to investigate by the police, perceived injustice in the courts or perceived rewarding of perpetrators through a peace process.

These guidelines aim to help you to work sensitively and constructively with victims and survivors without inadvertently intruding into private grief or causing further suffering. They have been written in consultation with, among others, the Commission for Victims and Survivors Northern Ireland and the Dart Centre Europe.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> While preparing these guidelines we were acutely aware of the sensitivities of language. After consideration, the following definitions were adopted:

## **Victim**

The use of the term victim follows that contained in the Victims and Survivors (Northern Ireland) Order 2006. That is: ‘(a), someone who is or has been physically or psychologically injured as a result of or in consequence of a conflict-related incident; (b) someone who provides a substantial amount of care on a regular basis for an individual mentioned in paragraph (a); (c) or someone who has been bereaved as a result of or in consequence of a conflict-related event’ (Art.3, para.1).

## **Conflict**

The term conflict is used to describe the violence that occurred in Northern Ireland from 1968-1998. It reflects the scale and intensity of that violence which resulted in over 3,500 deaths and over 47,000 injuries. It includes violence which involved non-state actors (paramilitaries) and state actors (security forces).

# Getting an interview:

## Approach people with sensitivity and respect.

- Member or not, it is impossible to argue with the National Union of Journalists (UK and Ireland) code of conduct which states that a journalist “obtains material by honest, straightforward and open means, with the exception of investigations that are both overwhelmingly in the public interest and which involve evidence that cannot be obtained by straightforward means”. A journalist “does nothing to intrude into anybody’s private life, grief or distress unless justified by overriding consideration of the public interest.”<sup>2</sup>
- Always identify yourself as a journalist and state clearly who you work for and what you want from an interviewee. Give a business card. Never lie or conceal your intention to report.
- Do your research, and be aware of and sensitive to contested narratives and language.
- Be aware of gender - include the voices of women.
- Don’t run with the pack on a story. Weigh it up as you would any other story, and don’t weaponise victims in political battles.
- Immediately after a violent event you may be met with anger – be prepared to take no for an answer. Don’t assume you understand, and don’t say you understand. Grief is complex and unique to each individual.
- Try to approach a potential interviewee via someone who knows them. If you must cold call, approach the person gently and be willing to spend time discussing your request with them.
- Make sure a person is capable of giving informed consent to an interview.
- Explain exactly what you want – the sort of piece you are working on, where and when it will appear, if there will be photographs, interviews with others – especially if these include perpetrators or their spokespersons.
- Don’t make promises you can’t keep – or claim that there will be impacts you cannot guarantee.
- If possible give the interviewee a choice about where the interview will take place. If they are going to have costs, be ready to offer expenses.
- Don’t risk reputational damage by acting as a fixer or in another freelance capacity for an individual or company you haven’t checked out. Only work for companies you trust.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nuj.org.uk/about/nuj-code/>

## Conducting the interview:

**Treat people with care, and be conscientious about how you present their story – try to put yourself in their shoes.**

- Behave respectfully no matter what your views or feelings.
- Be aware that no matter how long ago a traumatic loss or violent injury occurred, the person re-telling the story of what happened is likely to experience intense emotions. You need to stay calm and behave with empathy. Again - don't assume you understand and don't say you understand. You probably don't.
- Let the person know they can stop the interview at any time if they need a break or want to pull out altogether.
- Ask open, straightforward questions that enable them to tell their story. Ask the person how they wish to be described.
- Explain that you will need to find out if there are any legal cases ongoing or pending, and if anyone has been charged or is about to be charged in relation to the story.
- Be clear that you need to check and report all the facts of the story, and that if you cannot back up an assertion you won't be able to publish it.
- Let the interviewee know if you plan to speak with other people, especially if this includes a perpetrator or those sympathetic to the perpetrators.
- Never deliberately make someone cry or provoke them into saying something.
- Don't ask people to go through their worst memories at length and in detail if you only need a few soundbites. However, allow the person to talk if they need to. Be clear that you may not be able to use all of what they say.
- In broadcast or group situations, don't allow domineering people to shout others down. Make sure everyone gets a chance to contribute.
- Understand that victims groups may be wary of journalists because they have experienced their clients being hurt or exploited – however be alert to being invited to take part in propaganda.
- Don't talk too much yourself, and don't get into political arguments – your opinions are irrelevant.
- Don't go looking for "good victims" or ask if someone "forgives" the perpetrators or similar value laden questions – if someone is bitter or angry, reflect their feelings.
- Be careful not to inadvertently publish or broadcast threats to others, or commentary on other people which may be motivated by a desire to hurt.



- There will be circumstances in which some parties to a murder or murders want the story to be told while others do not – this may happen within a family. Exercise judgment and discuss such situations with your editor.
- If someone is aggressive or abusive to you, don't argue. Don't allow yourself to be manipulated or bullied, and if you feel in danger, get yourself out of the situation.
- People often ask to see the piece before it appears. Don't promise this unless you are certain you can. Go back over the interview with them before you leave. This is particularly important if they have been very emotional. Be willing to make changes if requested. Make sure to check personal details – how names are spelled, ages, nature of relationship with the interviewee etc.
- Respect the privacy of a person's home. Don't wander about or lift photos or other items without permission. If you want photos or documents shown to you by the interviewee take copies rather than originals if possible to avoid the potential for losing precious items.
- Make sure the person has your professional contact details and explain that once a certain point in the production process is reached you will be unable to make changes.

## Follow up:

- Check that the person is alright after the interview – they may need some time to compose themselves, or a taxi home, or for you to call someone to come and collect them. Show appreciation and be kind.
- Remember that deciding to talk to the media is usually a big deal for people. Keep in touch. Let them know when the piece will be broadcast or published and if you have to drop a piece or an interview, make sure you apologise in advance, give a good reason and be prepared for people to be angry.
- Use the same rigour and diligence in checking the facts and context as you would with any other story.
- Take great care if you need to seek a response to things a victim or survivor has said from someone else who is part of a story. Make sure you do not put anyone at risk.

- If in the course of your fact checking you discover something which is likely to shock or upset a victim or survivor, and you believe it is in the public interest to report it, you will need to tell them.
- If you have agreed to maintain confidentiality and anonymity check that you have not inadvertently identified someone.

## Self care:

- Interviewing people who are traumatised can be exhausting and upsetting. One reporter said, "Prolonged exposure means you get desensitised or you get damaged – you get depressed or you take it out on other people like your family." Most journalists are resilient and cope well on harrowing assignments, but the risks are real. Taking time out from harrowing stories and talking to someone who understands can help. Don't be macho; and do find out more about trauma and what it takes to stay resilient.

## Editors:

- Be aware of anniversaries and sensitivities surrounding them in setting news agendas. Consider balance and fairness - selective coverage can cause hurt.
- While it is impractical to contact everyone impacted by a major atrocity, when possible, alert victims and survivors and groups representing them if you are covering an anniversary or new development.
- Have a policy in relation to use of graphic descriptions or images of death, extreme distress and injury – social media has no filters but media outlets should consider taste, decency and risk of hurting.
- Be discerning in selecting reporters to do interviews with victims and survivors – this is skilled work and not everyone can do it.
- Make sure reporters have done research or are well briefed before they approach victims and survivors. Don't send anyone out to get a story with a pre-conceived narrative.
- Publish links to victims and survivor support services and helplines.
- Ensure the production team is careful about the use of headlines and photos, and where the stories are placed.
- Don't make journalists cold call victims and survivors if it can be avoided, and don't make them rush an interview – people deserve time and respect.

- Develop a database of diverse victims and survivors who are willing to be contacted in relation to particular issues or stories.
- Adopt the guidelines and train reporters, photographers and sub-editors accordingly. They aren't legally binding - just good practise.
- If staff are upset or exhausted, offer social support, time off and/or counselling.

## Journalism Educators:

- Use the guidelines. Provide training on dealing with the coverage of traumatic events, investigating atrocities, interviewing victims and survivors, covering anniversaries, and self-care for journalists/photographers.
- Invite experienced journalists to speak with students about the skills of working with victims and survivors of conflict related trauma and bereavement.
- Provide opportunities to discuss ethical issues arising out of reporting on these issues.



