



# High Profile Cases in the Media: Invasion of Privacy or Society's Right to Know?

Canadian Resource Centre for  
Victims of Crime

# Working with the Media: A Guide for Canadian Victim Service Providers

Today's presentation includes information available in our newly released Media Guide for Canadian Victim Service Providers. Additional information can be accessed at [www.crcvc.ca/en/media-guide/](http://www.crcvc.ca/en/media-guide/)



Published by  
Canadian Resource Centre for Victims of Crime  
100-141 Catherine Street  
Ottawa, ON K2P-1C3  
[www.crcvc.ca](http://www.crcvc.ca)

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We gratefully acknowledge financial assistance provided by the Department of Justice Victims Fund.

# Who are we?

The Canadian Resource Centre for Victims of Crime was established in 1993 to help victims families and survivors of violent crimes. The CRCVC is mandated to provide the following core services;

- advocacy
- education and awareness
- research
- police liaison
- memorials for fallen officers
- survivor outreach
- networking to promote and exchange information with other agencies.

# Types of Media

## **National Media**

- Generally avoids criminal cases unless they are considered sensational or unique
- When a case reaches national attention coverage rises

## **Local Media**

- Covers a specific geographical area
- Provides the most in depth coverage of crime

## **Web-based Media**

- Includes blogs, social media (facebook, twitter), and online sharing
- News is available instantaneously

## **Hard news**

- Time sensitive and covered immediately (live coverage, arrest, verdicts)

## **Soft news**

- Human interest pieces (follow-ups and in-depth examination of crime stories)

## **Columns/Editorials**

- Involves the writers personal opinions and is not free of bias

# Impact of Modern Technology

- Promotes a culture that allows the public to thrive on details of individuals private lives and their tribulations.
  - Invasion of privacy
- Expectation that news will be delivered to us instantaneously through Twitter and other social networking sites like Facebook.
- Individuals can leave anonymous comments that are cruel and uninformed on websites and other social media outlets.
- Harmful posts and videos can be placed on the Internet at any time .
- People tend to believe what is posted on the Internet, regardless of the source or reliability. Falsehoods can be made about both victims and offenders.
- Victims can learn devastating things about their loved ones or others who have been similarly victimized.

# The Internet & 24-hour news cycle

- Changed the way stories are reported and how quickly reporters must file their stories. Newspapers no longer have to wait for deadlines for the morning paper – they all have websites and stories can go up on the paper's website as soon as they are done.
- Fewer and fewer people are getting their news from newspapers because it is all available online.
- People now have access to a wider range of news beyond the traditional news sources.

# 24-hour news networks

- Twenty-four hour television news networks, like CBC and CTV, require a lot more news than the traditional newscasts that followed the noon, 6:00 and 11:00pm schedule.
- These networks are constantly reporting so they report on many issues of interest, need updates to ongoing stories faster, and to fill a lot of airtime when there may not be new developments.

# How much is too much information?

- Is it necessary to report all of the very gruesome details of the crime?
  - The public can be informed of the facts of the case without dehumanizing the victim further, without printing/showing graphic images and without revealing information before survivors are informed of it.

*“Journalists and media outlets should avoid inflicting a ‘second wound’ upon victims and their families by placing themselves in the shoes of the victims or by thinking about how they would feel if the victim was their son, daughter or loved one.”*

*- Cote and Bucqueroux, 1996*

# How does it feel to be in the media spotlight?

*"I never imagined anything like this could ever happen. That she could be abducted and that it would attract so much national and international attention, that my family would be thrown involuntarily into the spotlight for such a terrible reason. Our privacy has been invaded on a constant basis by the media. Not only have I had to endure this grieving process, but I've had to do it in a public spotlight when describing my thoughts and what this has done to me. Most people who are put in this terrible situation are at least entitled to their privacy. Strictly because of who Russell Williams was, an important figure in the Canadian military, this case has drawn so much attention that our grieving process is constantly interrupted..."*  
(Lloyd, A. The Ottawa Citizen)

*- Andrew Lloyd, Brother of Jessica Lloyd, October 21, 2010*

# Impact of Media

- Positive / Negative coverage
- Loss of Control
- Secondary Victimization
- Gaps in Coverage/Intensity of Coverage
- Reinforce inaccurate stereotypes
- Re-victimize victims by inaccurate reporting and over sensationalizing the story

# “If it bleeds, it leads...”

- Violent crimes makes up about 6% of reported offences but receive 50% of crime media coverage in Canada. Distorts the real picture of crime across Canada.
- Focus on the unique, the sensational, the extreme, and those that have the potential to impact the greatest number of people.
- For crime-related stories, the focus is on events that have occurred multiple times, for example a number of assaults or break-ins that are centred in a small geographic area, or those that are very unlikely to occur.

# High Profile Crimes

- Attract media attention because of the unique/bizarre nature of the crime (victim or offender).
- The victim an attractive, white, middle class female.
- The offender is a “regular” guy.
- Multiple victims.
- The violence was excessive or of a sexual nature.
- The offender was a stranger to the victim.
- The victim was missing for a while before being found.
- The offender or the victim, or someone closely associated with them, are previously known in the media.

# Media Coverage and Crime

## **Ideal/Non-ideal victim**

- Includes children, women and the elderly.
- Race, class and status play a role.
- These individuals are viewed to be “more innocent”.

## **Stranger Crime**

- Garners more attention than domestic crimes.
- Allows for a false sense of security.

## **Youth Crime**

- Obsessive reporting of youth crime leads to a misrepresentation of accurate youth victimization ex. Child abuse/neglect .

# How does it feel to be in the media spotlight?

*“Immediately after the event, the media’s focus was the fact that I was overseas, and that my kids were home alone at 16 and 21 years of age. I was made to feel that I was abandoning my kids. My daughter was studying journalism at the time, and therefore able to handle this, but most might not. People mourn in their own way, and I could not process my grief quickly enough to answer the questions about the event. The media pounced on us – I felt like I was in a goldfish bowl. There is an immediate resentment of media because you are trying to deal with the shock. They show no sensitivity at your darkest moments.”*

*Maureen Basnicki’s speaking of the media’s coverage of her husband’s death.  
Ken Basnicki perished in the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Centre.*

## 3 Key reasons for victims to speak to the media

- To tell their story or to be a voice for a loved one who cannot speak for themselves.
- To educate the public and to prevent similar victimizations.
- Be a voice for change within the criminal justice system.

# Benefits of Speaking to the Media

- Reveal how crime affects victims and their loved ones – physically, emotionally, financially, socially, and spiritually.
- Humanize crime and its impact on individuals, families, and communities.
- Validate victims who want their perspectives heard.
- Empower victims who often feel that the criminal justice system lacks balance.
- Inspires others to report crimes and seek supportive services.
- Encourages the growth of victim services in Canada.

Seymour & Bucqueroux 2009

# Other Benefits

- Brings attention to current policies and public attitudes.
- The public is reminded that crime can happen to *anyone, anywhere*.
- Can lead to increased public support for victim assistance initiatives.
- Public platform for advocacy.
- Garner support/advocate for change/raise awareness.
- When survivors are ready and well-prepared speaking with the media can be a cathartic experience for both victims and their families.
- Exposes the need for improvement and funding to victim services.

# Risks of Speaking to the Media

- For some victims, the trauma of victimization can be compounded by speaking publicly about their experiences in the aftermath of a crime.
- Media coverage in the wake of a crime can result in a “secondary victimization” that may exacerbate victims’ trauma and cause unnecessary additional harm.
- The shame that some victims feel, as well as the blame they sometimes feel from others, can be increased by untimely, inappropriate, or intrusive reporting.
- Family members may not be supportive of a loved one’s need to speak out in the media.

# Risks of Speaking to the Media

- Victims may be called upon by the media at sensitive and stressful times, for example, when the trial begins, at sentencing, on anniversaries or at parole hearings for the offender, etc.
- Privacy can be very difficult to guard, especially in high profile cases where it is almost impossible to escape media coverage.
- Victims that do not fit the media's idea of a "perfect victim" may not receive the desired amount of media attention.
- Tremendous let down when the media goes away.
  - In the immediate aftermath of the crime, the media are constantly present and the victim's story may be in the headlines. Eventually other news begins to take precedence and victims may feel abandoned and alone.

# The Role of Service Providers

- **Facilitators** – serve as a liaison between victims and the media to help them prepare for all media interactions and interviews.
- **Public awareness professionals** – use the media to increase public awareness of crime and victimization.

There may be potential conflicts or ethical considerations for service providers in identifying and or recommending victims to speak to the media.

- Mandate limitations;
- Government agencies are not able to release names of clients as it would be a breach of privacy;
- Agencies that provide counselling have strict confidentiality requirements.

# How to help victims navigate the media

- High profile crimes may require an increased role in victim support as the media coverage will be overwhelming and their desire for privacy is heightened.
- Refer to support services (crisis intervention, counselling, and support groups).
- Explain the possible benefits of talking to reporters.
- At the request of the victim speak to the media in lieu of an interview.
- Assist in preparing a media statement.
  - What can/should be discussed in public?
- Be present when media is around to limit unwanted media exposure .
- Help the victim to assert control with the media
  - Spokespersons, refrain from answering certain questions, demanding corrections.

# Other considerations for survivors in speaking to media

- According to the Canadian Association of Journalists:

*“...People also have a right to privacy and those accused of crimes have a right to a fair trial. There are inevitable conflicts between the right to privacy, the public good and the public’s right to be informed. Each situation should be judged in the light of common sense, humanity and the public’s rights to know.”*

- Remember, mass media is only bound by publication bans, court orders and their employers policies.

# The business of media

- Especially true in high profile cases:
  - Media can become very aggressive; following family members relentlessly for the picture they want.
  - Constant speculation, distortion and untruths.
  - Report information that the police/Crown have not yet disclosed to family. Leaks may also be harmful to the case.
  - Do not seem interested in seeing that justice is served.
  - May oppose publication bans or publish gruesome information because “it’s the public’s right to know”
  - Little value placed on privacy & human dignity.

# How to reach us

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