

Survivor Spokesperson Best Practices for News Media Relations

Survivor spokespeople assume inherent risks when agreeing to speak or interview with traditional media relations personnel e.g. journalists of newspapers, broadcast channels and established online news websites (blogs and social media should concern separate guidelines). While traditional news media coverage can have a powerful impact in terms of establishing reputation credibility and exponentially advancing advocacy initiatives, it poses unique challenges and liabilities for survivors, including:

- Lack of content control and recourse - once interviewed and/or published, it is typically impossible to remove or edit statements, or reverse the damage already done
- Personal retraumatisation heightened via interactions with “bad faith” or unprofessional behaviour, especially with journalists during interviews
- Significantly increased exposure to harassment and serious safeguarding issues, both online and offline
- Reputational and legal attacks may be recategorised with more severe consequences (e.g. defamation) even if perpetrators are unnamed

These risks can lead to significant and serious harm, and organisations working with survivors have an obligation to adequately inform potential media spokespeople about them, and provide support for how to maintain their safety and wellbeing should they agree to engage.

Recommendations for potential survivor spokespeople

Survivor spokespeople should not be any of the following:

- a. Less than 18 years of age
- b. Actively in an exploitative situation
- c. Brand new to the survivor movement
- d. In a high-risk context
- e. Experiencing compromised safety, health or wellness
- f. Involved in legal proceedings

Spokespeople should pass through media relations training, guided by communications best practices, before engaging with press.

- a. During this training, survivors must be fully prepared to engage with press in a professional capacity. For example, they should understand “on the record” vs “off the record/background”, recognise bad faith or manipulative questions, learn tactics to circumvent hostile interview techniques, know their boundaries and redlines, etc.

Survivor spokespeople speaking formally on behalf of an organisation must be provided with approved key messaging, verified by at least two members of the relevant teams, as well as redlines - both for the organisation and the survivor themselves.

- a. This can ensure that nothing is quoted with factual inaccuracies or that may cross organisational or personal boundaries.
- b. For example, journalists may position individuals as speaking for all survivors which neglects key aspects of differing risks other survivors may face e.g. most survivors do not feel they have the safety and ability to speak publicly about their abuse experiences, they can unintentionally reinforce harmful or excluding myths.

Whenever possible, if not always, survivor spokespeople speaking formally on behalf of an organisation should only take interviews accompanied by a media relations professional and mental health professional.

- a. The media relations person is needed to provide professional support and intervention, particularly to flag and redirect questions when a journalist crosses a boundary line.
- b. The mental health professional or support person is to ensure the mental wellness and safety of the survivor, to stay aware of sensitivities and signs of triggering/activation relevant to traumatic experiences, and address them in real time to avoid, de-escalate and minimise harm. For example, they may flag to a journalist to pause the interview if the survivor is experiencing a PTSD symptom or trauma reaction in real-time.

All media opportunities should be fully vetted by a media-trained professional prior to agreement to avoid unsafe, bad faith or hostile media interactions.

- a. Opportunities should also be reviewed in light of approved survivor safeguarding and media relations strategy, and regional leadership and subject matter experts concerned.
- b. There has been a significant rise in sensationalised journalism which pushes survivors to disclose shocking details of their abuse or statements which will garner attention because the media landscape is so competitive and the 24-hour news cycle is so fast.
- c. There have also been incidents with anti-survivor activists with no journalistic credentials who pose as journalists and write for websites with no ethical standards or safeguarding; these pose serious concerns for survivor safety, and a check by a professional can help spot them before a survivor engages.

Whenever possible, slow down the decision-making process before agreeing to speak with the press; never make a spontaneous decision without first carefully considering the risks.

- a. While press deadlines can be exceptionally fast and opportunities may arise spontaneously, organisations must not use this as an excuse for allowing an accelerated choice by survivors. Potential spokespeople must be given adequate time to fully comprehend and consider the personal and professional risks.

Whenever possible, limit identifying and private information about the survivor.

- a. Recommend that a survivor does not use their real name or identifying details such as their location. Avoid using photos or videos of the survivor's face. Protecting survivor identity and privacy can help avoid stalking, doxxing, online/offline harassment and other more serious risks.

What should an organisation do if they do not have the funding or resources to fulfill these survivor safeguarding best practices for media relations?

When in doubt, no comment and no interview is the best option. Survivors should only be engaged in media relations when safeguarding minimums have been met. There are no media opportunities so great that they validate putting a survivor at risk or compromising their safety, health or wellbeing.