

HANDLING THE MEDIA AND SOCIAL MEDIA

A family's guide



HOSTAGE US

A FAMILY'S GUIDE

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

This leaflet is for guidance only and is aimed at assisting families of hostages. Each situation is different, so there is no one-size-fits-all approach.

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SHOULD WE TALK TO THE MEDIA?

It is worth remembering that once you have publicized the case, you cannot undo this action and members of the media will be encouraged to continue contacting you for comment - even after the kidnap. With the internet and global media, you must assume that anything you say to the media could be seen by the kidnapers.

In all cases, it is advisable to make decisions about the media in conjunction with the people who are managing negotiations and have a full picture of communications and background information.

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 including that it could:

- Raise the kidnapper's financial expectations, giving them publicity and increasing the risks to the hostage;
- Lead to hostage transfer, where a kidnap group passes on or sells the hostage, sometimes turning a criminal kidnap into a political one;
- Encourage hoaxers who claim to hold the hostage, diverting attention and resources away from the real case;
- Attract attention from unscrupulous individuals who might hijack the story for their own purposes; and
- Have a negative impact on a hostage's family when social media "trolls" send targeted, unprovoked, cruel and abusive messages via social media.

There are some cases where the media can play a useful role. You might want to give a statement if news of the incident is already publicized or if those handling the negotiations encourage you to make a public plea.

If you are considering going to the media about the kidnapping incident, identify your objectives and consider how you will manage reactions and media requests in the long term.

If you do decide to speak, be careful about the language you use. Try to avoid terms such as "hostage," "deadline," and "terrorists," and public condemnation of the kidnapers' demands can be unhelpful.

It is always worth taking professional media advice and Hostage US can assist with this.

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

You may be approached by journalists. Reputable journalists and media professionals will explain what they are after and allow you to ask questions and come back to them when you are ready.

They will want to know what has happened: who has been taken, where they were taken and why they were there. They will also want to know which group has taken them and why. They will likely ask if a ransom has been demanded.

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

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, such as if they were kidnapped while working overseas, or whether you are happy with government and police response domestically or in the country where the kidnap happened.

With the global reach of the internet and 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

Some journalists might put unnecessary pressure on you or try to convince you to give them your story in exchange for exclusive information. They can be very persuasive and may imply that if you confirm certain details, they will be able to verify that information for you through their contacts on the ground. This is rarely the case, and you should be very cautious of any such approaches. Your point of contact in government, the hostage's employers if they are leading on the response, or Hostage US can help you to assess the credibility of these claims.

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 neighbors, friends, extended family members or colleagues.

Do not feel pressured to give your story to any journalists and vet the credibility of all approaches. If you are unsure about whether to give your story, keep a record

of the journalist's contact details so you can reach out to them when you are clearer about your final decision.

Photographs

Journalists will ask for a recent photograph of the hostage and/or their family. It is not advisable to give them one unless you have sought advice. But 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.

Choose a photo carefully to ensure it is not "unhelpful."

Avoid photos which:

- Give the impression the hostage is wealthy;
- May be perceived as offensive to the kidnapers e.g., showing the hostage drinking alcohol, dressing immodestly, or showing an allegiance to a particular religious faith or political cause;
- Imply military links.

WHAT ABOUT SOCIAL MEDIA?

SOCIAL MEDIA ACCOUNTS CAN BE SEEN BY A WIDE NETWORK OF PEOPLE, SO IT IS IMPORTANT TO THINK CAREFULLY ABOUT WHAT IS ON YOUR PROFILE, AND THAT OF THE HOSTAGE AND WIDER FAMILY

Most people have social media accounts across different platforms including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and LinkedIn. Our social media accounts contain personal information about us and our loved ones, where we live, what we spend our money on, how we use our spare time, what we do for a job, and our interests. They also connect us to family, friends, colleagues, people we went to school or university with, as well as some random acquaintances. It can be very unhelpful and potentially dangerous for personal information like this to be used by the media.

Considerations for social media:

Liaise with those who are handling the kidnapping response about the steps to take with your social media accounts. Considerations include closing your social media accounts, deleting certain

information or increasing the privacy settings to limit the number of people who have access to your personal information, photos, and comments.

Social media platforms, like Facebook, have options to allow you to limit the people who can see your profile, view your photos, and access information about you. Each platform has instructions on how to do this.

Don't forget LinkedIn profiles, which might contain information that could be harmful to the hostage, such as military connections, affiliations with certain organizations, or other information that might imply you or the hostage are wealthy or influential.

Cyberbullying

Some families have been victims of cyberbullying on social media. Bullies can be people you know or strangers, including “trolls” who proactively find vulnerable people to bully online. Cyberbullying is a hard issue to deal with and should be referred to law enforcement.

Using social media to monitor developments

You might want to monitor social media and the internet for news about the hostage, the group holding them, or the country where they have been taken. This is understandable. However, given the amount of information available, it can become overwhelming. It might be advisable to give yourself “time out” from the internet and social media each day and try to avoid this before you go to bed so you can rest properly.

Scrutinize sources of information in view of the rise of fake news and misinformation.

Due to the speed of social media, you might hear about new developments in the kidnap incident via this means before you hear it from your government contacts or the hostage’s employer.

Children, young people, and social media

Children and young people have grown up using social media and often communicate with their friends that way. Therefore, it can be difficult to ask them to close their accounts entirely.

It can help to talk to them about why it is important for them to increase their privacy settings and think differently about what they post. You should discourage them from writing about the kidnapping on their social media accounts and help them to understand why this could be dangerous for the hostage or distressing for them should this be used in newspaper articles or media reports.

What to do if images or videos of the hostage appear on social media

In some cases, images or videos of your loved one might appear online and on social media.

Immediately report these videos to the authorities. Consider the access young people and children have to social media and ensure they are supported if they have accessed distressing videos relating to the kidnap. While you cannot control their access, try to make sure they do not watch these videos over and over.

It can sometimes be possible to have videos removed if they breach the terms of service of the social media or search engine companies. Sometimes it will not be possible and this can be very distressing. You can complain directly to the companies concerned and ask them to take action to remove the images or videos.

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 behavior 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 to the editor, news editor, or complaints department within the media organization they represent.

You can also report them 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 contact Hostage US 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 MINIMIZES DISTRESS TO OUR FAMILY?

REMEMBER – IT IS UP TO YOU WHETHER YOU TALK TO THE MEDIA. TAKE YOUR TIME AND DO NOT FEEL PRESSURED 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 ask them to email you questions so that you can respond via email with 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, organization, 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 from playing one family member 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. For example, you could hold a press conference and ask Hostage US to help you organize 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 MEDIA 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; it just 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 asking if they are willing to let you check them, given the sensitivities of a kidnapping. You can expect them to use quotes without changing them,

but there is always a risk they will place 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 ORGANIZATIONS MIGHT BE COMMENTING IN THE MEDIA

The US Government might issue a factual statement, but they should liaise with you before speaking publicly.

Governments of other countries might comment if the kidnapping involves their nationals.

The hostage's employer may comment.

Your friends, neighbors, 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 they are not who they say they are, 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 to 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 organized, both to maximize public response and minimize any risks.

Make a note of the name, organization, 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 outside of the spotlight. Hostage US 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 US 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 US will try to help in any way we can.

CONTACTS AND SOURCES OF INFORMATION

OTHER INFORMATION:

Hostage US 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 info@hostageus.org

Hostage US has also produced “A family’s guide to coping during a kidnapping” and “A life after captivity: reintegration guide.” Both available on our website.

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

This information is provided for guidance only.

Hostage US 24/7 toll-free helpline 888-284-1010

hostageus.org

Having a family member kidnapped can be a frightening experience. You will need support, information and advice.

This guide offers practical pointers on how to cope and where to look for further information.

It is aimed at families of hostages abducted outside of their own country, but some things are relevant in other cases.

Each kidnap is different and each family's needs are unique.

There is no one-size-fits-all approach and this document is for guidance only.



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