

# Title: Interviewing and Reporting on Tragedies

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## Interviewing Victims

When interviewing victims of a tragic event, such as the numerous school shootings that have occurred, it is absolutely crucial for the journalist to be prepared. Being weary of the sensitivity surrounding the interview, journalists need to be equipped on more than just a professional level, but also emotional. The reporter needs to present him or herself as calm and nonthreatening.

If the journalist is interviewing children, preparation for this includes receiving permission from a parent or guardian. When interviewing, journalists need to establish trust. The interviewee needs to feel comfortable and safe in the environment. As the journalist, it is essential to allow the interviewee or victim to see that the motives are solely for what was presented to them, such as a news story or personal piece. This idea agrees with the Code of Ethics statement, "be accountable and transparent." Finally, if the family or victims don't wish to share their experience with you, suggest alternatives such as seeing a therapist, for them to cope with their trauma. If they do agree to share information, the reporter needs to include the victim's family's human feelings and experiences. It is important to keep in mind the sensitivity of the situation, and present evidence and information in a sympathetic way. Before asking the first prepared question, journalists need to begin with stating how sorry they are for what their family has experienced and that they are sorry for their loss. Stating these before reporting also allows the reporter to be ethically transparent, as they are also human and can understand strong emotions.

## Tips for Interviewing Victims:

Throughout the interview, journalists need to make sure the victim or family feels they are in power and have control. Reporters also need to constantly let them know they can stop recording or put their notebooks at anytime. It is the journalists responsibility to read nonverbal signals and body language to put down their notes if they are becoming extremely emotional. Questions for the interview should be prepared in an unfolding pattern, meaning the journalist should ease into asking the serious questions and not being too pushy. After asking permission for publishing and thanking the family for their time, apologize again for their loss. Journalists need to prepare themselves for taking the responsibility of bearing and reporting the bad news to the public. They must be alert to powerful images that could enhance the article. Of course, accuracy is any journalists main concern. The Code of Ethics notes for journalists to "seek truth and report it." Along with this, remains the accuracy of any article published.

Sources  
Bucqueroux, Bonnie, and Sue Carter. "Interviewing victims." *Quill* 87, no. 9 (December 1999): 19. *Communication & Mass Media Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed April 6, 2018).  
Cote, William, and Bonnie Bucqueroux. "Tips on interviewing victims." *Nieman Reports* 50, no. 3 (Fall96 1996): 27. *Communication & Mass Media Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed April 6, 2018).



## Does the media need to be more mindful when reporting on tragedies and interviewing victims and witnesses?

Journalist's duty is to seek truth and report it to the public, minimize harm for stakeholders, and act transparent. Even when a tragic event occurs like a mass shooting or natural disaster, journalists are still responsible for reporting news and facts to the public even though it may be a tricky and uncomfortable situation. "It's certainly within journalists' purview — some may even argue obligation — to report news of tragedy and grief. Citizens expect to see these stories, especially if the circumstances have an impact on neighborhoods and community" stated by the Society of Professional Journalism Ethics Committee. Although this is true, much of the public wonders where does the media draw the line in interviewing witnesses and reporting on these events? To limit the public feeling this way, reporters and journalists need to keep in mind the ethical guidelines for their profession.

SPJ Code of Ethics: Guidelines for journalists to keep in mind while interviewing victims or witnesses in tragic events

### Minimize Harm:

- Balance the public's need for information against potential harm of discomfort. Pursuit of the news is not a license for arrogance or undue intrusiveness.
- Show compassion for those who may be affected by news coverage. Use heightened sensitivity when dealing with juveniles, victims of tragedies, victims of sex crimes, and sources or subjects who are inexperienced or unable to give consent.
- Consider the long-term implications of the extended reach and permanence of publication.

Journalists are faced with great amount of pressure when covering tragedies or disasters. Reporters must be patient. Tom Hallman Jr., who is a writer for Quill Magazine, made a point to say "Disaster coverage brings a reporter close to the raw, emotional, heart of the story, and it's not always easy for the reporter, or the people he writes about." Interviewing and reporting on these tragedies is difficult for not only the reporter, but also challenging for the interviewee. Reporters want to try their absolute best to interview the victims and witnesses in a considerate and respectful manner and perform their duties properly.

Some of the media, including journalists, reporters, including the press may not deliver this consideration in a proper way. A recent example of this was some of the media's aggressive approach to report on the story and interview stakeholders during the Parkland, FL high school shooting. Some reporters tried contacting students while the shooter was in the building, asking students if they could broadcast and use their social media postings. Although the reporters may have been simply just trying to gain information on the situation, it may have been too soon and too much for the victims and stakeholders. Also during this time, some media were asking students via social media if they could do an interview after they get out of the building.

Hallman Jr., Tom. 2005. "Interviewing victims often the hardest part of reporting." *Quill* 93, no. 8: 19. *Communication & Mass Media Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed April 6, 2018).  
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