



HOSTAGE UK

Handling the media and social media

Having a family member kidnapped can be a frightening experience. Many families find the publicity and attention that kidnaps can attract difficult and stressful.

This guide offers practical pointers on how to cope with the media and social media during and after a kidnap.

It is aimed at UK-based families of British hostages taken overseas, but some things are relevant in other cases.

Each kidnap is different, so there is no one-size-fits-all approach.

This document is for guidance only.

Should we talk to the media?

You 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. It can raise the 'value' of the hostage, which can prolong the negotiation process. It can also lead to hostage transfer, where a kidnap group passes on or sells the hostage, sometimes turning a criminal kidnap into a political one. Giving away too much information about the hostage can also help 'copycats' who claim to have the hostage and divert attention and resources away from the real case.

You need to be clear about why you want to talk to the media – what do you hope it will achieve? It is always worth taking professional advice, and we at Hostage UK can assist with this.

Be careful about the language you use. Try to avoid terms such as 'hostage', 'deadline', and 'terrorists', and public condemnation of the kidnappers' demands can be unhelpful.

Media coverage can also have a negative impact on your family. It can attract attention from unscrupulous individuals who might hijack the story for their own purposes.

If a release seems to be imminent, media needs to be handled by a professional.

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, they don't need anything from you, but it can help to know what they might ask for.

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

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

They will ask for a recent photo of the hostage – it is not advisable to give them one unless you have sought advice. If you decide to provide a photograph, 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.

Make sure that the photo is not 'unhelpful'. Don't choose one that gives the impression the hostage is wealthy. Avoid photos that might be perceived as offensive to the kidnappers – those that show the hostage drinking alcohol, dressing immodestly, or showing an allegiance to a particular religious faith or political cause. Avoid photos that imply military links.

Journalists will be interested in how your 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 (if they were kidnapped while working overseas) or whether you are happy with the response of the Foreign & Commonwealth Office, police, or the government of the country where the kidnap has happened.

Because of the Internet, social media and the global nature of the media, you must assume that anything you say to the media here 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.

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 neighbours, friends, extended family members or colleagues.

Social media such as Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn provide a wealth of information for journalists, who are able to access personal photos, information about the hostage's private life, and messages from friends during the kidnap. When a person makes a comment on social media it is a public message and can be used by journalists. It can be very unhelpful or potentially dangerous for personal information like this to be used by the media.

To avoid this happening, you should consider closing your accounts or increasing privacy settings, including controlling access by the hostage's friends. You might also consider removing unhelpful photos or comments. Hostage UK and the Foreign & Commonwealth Office can assist you.

What about social media?

As soon as you learn about the kidnapping, consider closing the social media accounts of the hostage and immediate family members. At the very least, reset privacy settings to limit the number of people that can get access to photos and comments on these accounts. Hostage UK and the Foreign & Commonwealth Office can help you to do this.

In doing this, don't forget LinkedIn profiles, which might contain information that could be harmful, such as military connections, affiliations with certain organisations, and might imply the hostage or their family is wealthy or influential.

Families have also been victims of cyber bullying on social media. This can be very distressing. If this happens to you, contact the Foreign & Commonwealth Office or Hostage UK for assistance. In some cases, cyber bullying should be referred to the police.

Due to the speed of social media, you might hear about new developments in the kidnapping via that route rather than from the Foreign & Commonwealth Office or the hostage's employer.

Many families 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 it can become overwhelming. It might be advisable to give yourself 'time out' from the Internet and social media each day.

What can I do if journalists behave inappropriately?

On the whole, most journalists are responsible people. But, they have a job to do and will be under pressure to get information.

If you are unhappy with the behaviour of a journalist, you could tell them that you will report them to their employer. If this does not work, go ahead and report them by writing to their editor (newspapers) or news editor (television and radio).

You can also report them to the Independent Press Standards Organisation or 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 ask the Foreign & Commonwealth Office to intervene on your behalf or contact Hostage UK 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. Hostage UK can help you to arrange this. It might be advisable to record your conversations with journalists so you have proof if they misquote you. This might also encourage them to act appropriately at all times.

How can we handle the media in a way that minimises distress to our family?

Remember – it is up to you whether you talk to the media. Take your time and do not feel pressurised into saying anything unless and until you are ready.

The following ideas might help you to reduce the stress on you and your family from media contact:

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 email 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, organisation 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 playing one family member off 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. This is called a 'pooled clip' and the Foreign & Commonwealth Office can help you to organise 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 press to report?

If you don't want a journalist to report something – don't tell them.

It is important to understand that talking to a journalist 'off the record' does not mean you are speaking confidentially. They can report what you have said but can not attribute it to 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 checking if they are willing due to the sensitivities of a kidnap. You can expect them to use quotes without changing them, but there is always a risk they will take 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 organisations might be commenting in the media.

The Foreign & Commonwealth Office will probably issue a factual statement if pressed by the media to comment, but they will liaise with you before speaking publicly.

Foreign governments might comment if the kidnap involved other nationalities.

The hostage's employer (if they were kidnapped while working overseas) may comment.

A private security company will be involved if engaged by the hostage's employer.

Your friends, neighbours and colleagues may be approached by journalists, and it is advisable to discourage them from speaking to the media.

People pretending to be related to or a friend of the hostage might comment – where this happens, let the press know 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 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 organised, both to maximise public response and minimise any risks.

Make a note of the name, organisation 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 might 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 to relax outside of the spotlight. The Foreign & Commonwealth Office or Hostage UK 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 UK so we can update this guide.

Ultimately, the decision to communicate directly with the media rests with the family. Whatever you decide to do, Hostage UK will try to help in any way we can.

Contacts and sources of information

Foreign and Commonwealth Office: call 020 7008 1500 (24/7 phone line) and ask to be put through to the Special Cases Unit.

Independent Press Standards Organisation: www.ipso.co.uk or 0300 123 2220

Independent Press Standards Organisation Editors' Code of Practice:
www.ipso.co.uk/IPSO/cop.html

Hostage UK 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 administrator@hostageuk.org

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

For more information about Hostage UK or to find out how we can help, please visit our website: www.hostageuk.org

This information is provided for guidance only.

© Hostage UK 2015

Hostage UK 24/7 Helpline 0845 608 1360

www.hostageuk.org

Hostage UK is a registered charity, number 1161072