



Preparing for and Working with Media in a School Crisis

Media Interviews of Students

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In the chaos and confusion of an unfolding crisis, providing information and preventing or countering misinformation is an immense challenge. This is especially true as media scrambles to interview students, bystanders, and other sources with scant knowledge of the situation.

Circumstances exist where hearing the views of young people, particularly those who have experienced the crisis first-hand, can prove valuable in understanding how an incident occurred or how it is affecting their life. So, while adults are not the only ones who can express worthy views of news events, it is important that parents, students, and journalists understand the role media plays in a crisis.

However, it is the method that media uses to get the views of young people that raise the most ethical questions. Reporters and other media representatives should exercise special care when interviewing students. Especially in breaking news situations, students may be unable to recognize the ramifications to themselves or to others of what they say. Media must be especially careful in interviewing students live, because live coverage is more difficult to control and edit. Students should be given greater privacy protection than adults.

According to the Radio-Television News Directors Association and Foundation (RTNDA), media must weigh the journalistic duty of “seeking truths and reporting them fully as possible” against the need to minimize any harm that might come to a student when collecting information.

The RTNDA offers the following considerations for media when interviewing students.

Journalistic Purpose and Quality of Information

- What is my journalistic approach in interviewing this student?
- In what light will this person be shown? What is their understanding or ability to understand how viewers or listeners might perceive the interview? How mature is this student? How aware is he or she of the ramifications of his or her comments?
- What motivations does the student have in cooperating in this interview?
- How do you know what this student says is true? How much of what this student says does he or she know first-hand? How able is this student to put into context what he or she knows? How can you corroborate the student’s information?
- How clearly have you identified yourself to the student? Does the student know he or she is talking to a reporter?



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Minimize Harm

- What harm can you cause by asking questions or taking pictures of the student even if never included in a story?
- How would you react if you were the parent of this student? What would your concerns be and how would you want to be included in the decision about whether the child is included in a news story?
- How can you include a parent or guardian in the decision to interview a student? What efforts has the reporter made to secure parental permission for the child to be included in a news story? Is it possible to have a parent or guardian present during the course of the interview? What are the parents' motivations for allowing their child to be interviewed? Are there legal issues to be considered, such as the legal age of consent?

Explore Alternatives

- What alternatives can reporters use instead of interviewing a student on camera?
- What are the potential short-term and long-term consequences of this person's comments?
- What rules or guidelines does my news organization have about interviewing students? Do those guidelines change if the student is a suspect in a crime and not a victim? What protocols should a newsroom consider for live coverage that could involve students?