

Catalan Audiovisual Council Guidelines on the News Treatment of Personal Tragedies

Barcelone, February 21st, 2001

Guidelines addressed especially to authorities

- 1.** In the event of a tragedy occurring, authorities and their professional bodies involved in working in emergencies and catastrophes (police, civil protection units, rescue services, fire departments, etc.) should undertake to help the media and ensure them diligent and egalitarian treatment.
- 2.** As part of the priorities involved in intervening in emergencies, authorities should be prepared to meet the requirements journalists need to carry out their work (providing them with areas where they can work and facilitating them access to the scene, providing information on investigations into the causes or effects of a tragedy, verified information, state of victims, precautions taken and recommendations to be made).
- 3.** The authorities, especially politicians, should avoid taking too great a role and resist the temptation of becoming the star at the site of an accident or tragic event. They should relinquish activities such as making routine statements or calling crews specifically to appear before the cameras.
- 4.** Authorities should be rigorous and show restraint when using declarations of “official sorrow”, to prevent the tragedy being made to look greater than it is in the eyes of the public.

5. Authorities and the news media should inform the public that, especially in painful situations, people always have the right to refuse requests that journalists make on them and to have their right to intimacy and privacy protected.

Guidelines addressed especially to broadcast media outlets

1. Broadcast media companies must guarantee the satisfactory training and specialisation of their employees when it comes to covering news stories about tragedies. They should also take into account that their journalists, camera operators and other employees who cover tragedies and catastrophes from the front line can be emotionally affected by the events they report on. Specialised training and satisfactory attention and support can prevent risks and improve the quality of their work and the news product.

2. Broadcast media companies must ensure that their employees are informed correctly of the rights of victims and their relatives in relation to the media.

3. It is important not to fall into using strategies that give too much attention to catastrophes, except when ongoing and continual coverage may prevent the tragic effects from spreading further.

4. A sense of moderation and proportion is fundamental in a media company's news policy when covering a disaster or tragedy. Avoid disproportionately large deployments of staff, unnecessary connections and simply following authorities who visit the place or people affected. Also, avoid the cumulative effect of the repeated use of the same images.

5. Whenever possible, it is worth avoiding the use of routine or superfluous information that does not provide added news value or which can damage the privacy of people affected. Instead, use the services of specialist people and

organisations, according to the type of event (in medicine, architecture, engineering, psychology, geology, meteorology, etc.).

Guidelines addressed especially to broadcast journalists and crews

1. It is important to always remember that it is not acceptable to make demands on victims under circumstances when they do not have effective freedom of choice or decision, or when their suffering could be increased in any way. It is imperative that journalists respect a victim's right to privacy.
2. As a general rule, and as far as possible, avoid involving minors.
3. When covering tragedies, it is important to reduce issues of public concern as quickly as possible in order to minimise or save anxiety amongst a great number of people. Providing a clear and accurate mention of sources, as well as detailed and precise, verified and contrasted information is the best way to achieve this.
4. When covering tragedies, it is advisable to avoid any type of special effect or resource that has a primarily sensationalist function.
5. Try to ensure that shots of people affected do not transgress their privacy. Increasing the sensation of proximity by zooming in closer than a bystander could see can infringe on this privacy.
6. Close-ups of people injured, in a state of shock or suffering should not be filmed or broadcast. This is especially so if the person's explicit consent has not been obtained.
7. A great deal of care should be taken with reusing archive footage about tragic events, because it could suddenly evoke intense suffering amongst many

people. Archive footage should preferably be impersonal and not invoke private tragedies if not absolutely necessary.

8. It is important to always include a warning and to include it far enough in advance before broadcasting images of graphic scenes. Their contents should be clearly labelled and the audience given enough time to avoid having to watch them.

9. The distinction between direct coverage of a tragic event, documentary reconstruction (using pre-recorded images and sounds) and dramatised fictional recreations must be clearly marked in such a way that the audience cannot possibly confuse them.

10. It is important to always provide explicit details on the context of interviews or statements by direct or indirect witnesses of tragic events that are to be broadcast. For example, it should be specified whether a statement has been authorised by the person making it, requested by the person affected or obtained through some other form of agreement.

11. In particular cases, journalists should take steps to preserve the anonymity of people affected and guarantee their privacy by manipulating their images or voices.

12. To avoid causing unnecessary fear amongst the public, it is absolutely necessary that journalists avoid any type of speculation or conjecture about tragic events, their causes or consequences.

13. At no time should journalists venture lists of victims until they have been checked and officially released. People involved and their relatives should also be made aware of the information before it is broadcast.

14. It is important to exercise prudence when it comes to discussing or listing sequences of events. It is especially important not to prejudice or cause blame to be apportioned to people, nor to lead to suspicions falling on people (drivers, train drivers, pilots, etc.).

15. When presenting information on tragedies, journalists should be particularly careful with the language they use. It is important to avoid using adjectives, sayings or clichés that unnecessarily dramatise and sensationalise the telling of an event and which could frighten victims, their relatives or people who could potentially be affected.

16. Journalists should be extremely cautious when it comes to broadcasting amateur video recordings. When using either their own images or those by third parties on tragedies that affect people, the images should first be edited and not broadcast live. Failure to edit images or the decision to broadcast them live does not excuse journalists from the responsibilities referred to in this document.

17. Images of suffering from tragedies produced outside the immediate sphere of reference of the media organisations that broadcast them must also be handled with special care, in order to avoid trivialising the suffering of “others”, through flagrant differences in treatment compared to the suffering of people closer to home. Images that reflect hunger, poverty or suffering in poor countries affected by catastrophes can often promote solidarity, but occasionally help form a stereotyped view and cause moral damage.

18. It is important to bear in mind how to assign “seriousness” and “news-worthiness” according to the number of victims, their status, race or age in a way that does not establish implicitly discriminatory or harmful comparisons for some victims or relatives, or any segment of society.

19. In the case of tragedies caused by terrorist groups, the expressions used to designate them must be rigorous and exact. It is important to prevent misunderstandings that can arise from the use of expressions such as “Basque terrorism” or “Islamic terrorism”, which can, by extension, allude to all the Basque people or all Moslems.

Final guidelines for general consideration

1. In the event of tragedies, accidents or catastrophes, it should be a priority not only of the authorities but also media companies and their employees (based on their own good criteria) to carry out emergency tasks and provide first aid to victims, as well as broadcast urgent information that could save lives or reduce risks for people potentially in danger.

2. People directly or indirectly affected by a tragedy should always be treated not only as worthy of the greatest respect but also as needing especially prudent and scrupulous attention and treatment in terms of procedures.

3. Prior notification to relatives is an essential step before broadcasting the names of people involved in tragedies, their personal situation, address or the town they come from. However, even this does not go far enough, as this type of information is not always relevant to the audience and can sometimes increase suffering. Authorities, media companies and their employees should all bear this in mind.

4. As a general rule, and as far as possible, avoid images of corpses, coffins and people injured. These kinds of images are often used repeatedly and simply to illustrate a story. Images of funerals and similar events should not be broadcast without the explicit consent of the relatives. The fact that these events occur in public does not exempt the media from protecting the privacy of the people affected.

5. Finally, the Catalan Audiovisual Council believes that, after tragic events have occurred, it would be useful to hold work sessions for the authorities involved, professional organisations and associations and the media, in order to assess the work carried out and be able to extract conclusions, establish behavioural models and improve procedures.