

International Federation of Journalists' Draft Guidelines and Principles for reporting on issues involving children

All journalists and media professionals have a duty to maintain the highest ethical and professional standards and should promote within the industry the widest possible dissemination of information about the UN *Convention on the Rights of the Child* and its implications for the exercise of independent journalism.

Media organizations should regard violation of the rights of children and issues related to children's safety, privacy, security, their education, health and social welfare, and all forms of exploitation, as important questions for investigation and public debate. Children have an absolute right to privacy, the only exceptions being those explicitly set out in these guidelines.

Journalistic activity which touches on the lives and welfare of children should always be carried out with appreciation of the vulnerable situation of children.

Journalists and media organizations shall strive to maintain the highest standards of ethical conduct in reporting children's affairs and, in particular, they shall:

- Strive for standards of excellence in terms of accuracy and sensitivity when reporting on issues involving children;
- Avoid programming and publication of images which intrude upon the media space of children with information which is damaging to them;
- Avoid the use of stereotypes and sensational presentation to promote journalistic material involving children;
- Consider carefully the consequences of publication of any material concerning children and shall minimize harm to children;
- Guard against visually or otherwise identifying children unless it is demonstrably in the public interest;
- Give children, where possible, the right of access to media to express their own opinions without inducement of any kind;
- Ensure independent verification of information provided by children and take special care to ensure that verification takes place without putting child informants at risk;
- Avoid the use of sexualized images of children;
- Use fair, open and straightforward methods for obtaining pictures and, where possible, obtain them with the knowledge and consent of children or a responsible adult, guardian or carer;
- Verify the credentials of any organization purporting to speak for or to represent the interests of children;
- Not make payment to children for material involving the welfare of children or to parents or guardians of children unless it is demonstrably in the interest of the child.

Journalists should put to critical examination the reports submitted and the claims made by governments on implementation of the UN *Convention on the Rights of the Child* in their respective countries.

Media should not consider and report the conditions of children only as events but should continuously report the process likely to lead or leading to the occurrence of these events.

On reporting sexual abuse and exploitation of children:

Never identify through words or images a child who is or has been abused or exploited – you could be putting their life at risk.

For example: the full-face photo of a young girl caught up in the sex trade in a bar not only violates the dignity of the child, it could be seen by a family member who will kill the child to ‘save family honour’. Children in most parts of the world face similar risks – whether it be for family honour, to protect a pimp, or for various other reasons.

If you want to show images of children caught up in the sex trade, crop the photos (masking is possible but risks de-humanizing the child), film from a distance or from behind. If you are writing, make sure names are changed and that this is stated in your copy.

Never identify through words or images places where vulnerable children can be located – you might be leading abusers and exploiters right to them.

For example: a photo of a beach or shopping centre where children are prostituted might be identified. Beginning a story, “In a back street in the XXX district of downtown Bombay...” is a picturesque way to begin a feature and as good as a map to a sex tourist.

Don’t suggest that children are caught in the sex trade unless you are certain they are.

For example: children who live on the streets are certainly vulnerable to exploitation but they are not all necessarily being sexually exploited; don’t print a photo of children on the street and caption it ‘street prostitutes in XX’. You could be putting these children at risk and you are, in any case, giving misleading information that an adult would sue you over.

Don’t suggest that all adults are abusers or exploiters.

For example: a middle-aged man with a young boy on a tropical beach might just be father and son. Adverse publicity following a number of libel cases have made the public wary of challenging adults they actually suspect of coercing children to accompany them. Check your facts.

Understand what sexual abuse and exploitation are about.

For example: don’t over-use the word ‘paedophile’ – this word relates to a specific group of (usually) men who have a psychological profile that includes sexual relations (of varying degrees) with a child below the age of puberty. Over-using this word hides the reality: that the majority of men who have sex with minors are ‘normal’ (non-paedophile) men who simply choose to do so. This is important because we need to get our responses to the problem right if we are going to have an impact on it: in this case, governments as well as the public need to know that paedophiles are not the only threat to children – the ‘normal’ guy living next door might be a bigger threat. So do your research.

Be a care-taker of children who may need support

You may well meet a young person who has been a victim of sexual abuse/exploitation and who wants to speak out. Many young people become effective activists and are powerful speakers. Also, many organizations realize this and are sometimes too ready to ‘offer’ young people as ‘testimony’ to the press. Our experience is that some of these young people do not realize (i) the risk they may be running in allowing their identity/image to be revealed; (ii) the pressure that can arise out of – even fleeting press interest and profile. This is a delicate issue and the young person must be allowed to express his/her own feelings in this matter. But you, as not only a journalist but as someone who safeguards the identity and security of sources/informants, must use your discretion and take care of the young person involved, including refusing to profile them if you believe that is in their best interest. Please do not ever feel that their safety is someone else’s responsibility.

Finally

Please let us know of any situations we haven’t covered that you meet in your work. Tell us of solutions you have found to the challenges that freedom of the press and protection of the child pose. You can e-mail June Kane at: junekane@bluewin.ch