

Talk to the press

How to handle press attention

Why are there press on my doorstep?

If there are journalists outside your house, then something about you (or someone you know) has either already made headlines or is about to make headlines.

What are press on the doorstep like?

All journalists are different, but 'door stepping' is one of the toughest parts of the job. As such, the journalists who do it can be rather difficult to deal with. They have the staying power to sit outside your house for hours on end, which most people find intimidating and upsetting.

This is particularly the case if there are journalists from rival publications on your doorstep too. They are all under huge pressure to get whatever it is their editor wants from you.

What happens if I talk to the journalists?

You need to be prepared for the fact that anything you say could end up in print the following day. They don't need your permission and they don't need to agree with you a fee first. Remember, even a few sentences of fresh quotes is enough to generate a page in a newspaper. I've lost count of the number of times I've seen quotes like 'It's a very stressful time for us, Mum is very upset' end up making a page in a newspaper (even though they were most likely followed with 'and we'd appreciate it if we could just have a bit of space').

If you are happy for what you say to end up in print and to not receive a fee or any other benefits such as copy approval or control over the situation, then go ahead. If you would prefer for your experience of talking to the media to be less frantic and to be at a moment that actually suits you then say nothing at all. If you do say something and you don't want it to be printed, or attributed to you, you must state that what you are saying is 'off the record.'

How can I make the journalists go away?

If you do not want to talk, the best thing to do is to shut your front door, turn your phone off, go away for a couple of days, and say politely to any journalist who does manage to get hold of you that you simply do not wish to comment. If you have nowhere to go, stick a note on your front door saying you will not be making any comment at all, and request that journalists do not ring your doorbell.

Although it seems hard to believe at the time, the attention will quickly die away if you refuse to cooperate.

A good journalist will know that under the Press Complaints Commission Code of practice, they are not allowed to keep pursuing you for comment once you have told them to stop, unless they can justify it as being in the public interest. If a journalist persists, politely point out to them the below and tell them you won't hesitate in reporting them to the PCC.

The PCC Code of Practise on Privacy and Harassment

***Privacy**

- i) Everyone is entitled to respect for his or her private and family life, home, health and correspondence, including digital communications.
- ii) Editors will be expected to justify intrusions into any individual's private life without consent. Account will be taken of the complainant's own public disclosures of information.
- iii) It is unacceptable to photograph individuals in private places without their consent.

Note - Private places are public or private property where there is a reasonable expectation of privacy.

***Harassment**

- i) Journalists must not engage in intimidation, harassment or persistent pursuit.
- ii) They must not persist in questioning, telephoning, pursuing or photographing individuals once asked to desist; nor remain on their property when asked to leave and must not follow them. If requested, they must identify themselves and whom they represent.
- iii) Editors must ensure these principles are observed by those working for them and take care not to use non-compliant material from other sources.

What if they are about to expose something about me, such as an affair?

Again, say nothing at all. If journalists have turned up to confront you about an affair (or a similar situation) they are seeking corroboration from you. If you say 'How did you find out?' you are confirming to them the story they have is true. Bear in mind, journalists are good at making out they have the entire story already. They might do but they probably don't – unless you confirm it yourself. If you are in this situation, seek expert advice immediately. We can help.

I am worried about an article that I think is going to appear in a newspaper/magazine. Can you stop it from being published?

Not even the PCC has formal powers to prevent something being published.

However, we can advise you on how to deal with the publication in question. We can also approach them and pass on your concerns. They can then take an informed view on whether or not to publish and what the damage of publishing might be.

Can a newspaper publish a photograph of me without my consent?

It depends on the circumstances. The PCC states "It is unacceptable to photograph individuals in private places without their consent". Private places are defined as

"public or private property where there is a reasonable expectation of privacy". The Commission will consider each case on an individual basis, and will look at a number of factors, including: whether the person was out of public view, whether they were engaged in private activity, and whether publication was in the public interest. That said, plenty of publications might just publish a photo of you standing in your front door (technically private property) as they may consider there are unlikely to be any repercussions.

What if I do want to talk?

Often, when your life is making headlines, you feel you want to talk. Having your say is an entirely understandable reaction to finding yourself making headlines. Although no official studies have been done, my general impression is that most people who find themselves making national news headlines do interviews, simply to have their say, set records straight and to be heard.

If you want to give an interview, there is nothing stopping you from dealing with the national newspapers and magazines directly. But you may not get the best deal possible. The person on your doorstep is not necessarily the right person – they are not, for instance, the features editor of the newspaper. They may even be a freelance journalist who just happens to live locally.

Whatever you decide to do, we recommend you think about your decision carefully and then seek expert help. Because in the midst of what is a stressful situation, it's almost impossible to know how to deal with the constant knocks on the door, the endless ringing of the telephone and the confusing talk of contracts, money, and exclusive interviews.

Why should I get someone to represent me?

When you in the eye of the media frenzy, the last thing you want to be doing is dealing with the press. If you work with an agency such as Talk to the Press, there will always be someone who can handle all the enquiries and interview requests on your behalf. We will also be able to help you negotiate the best possible fee for your story. Even if you've already been approached by a newspaper or magazine, an agency will still be able to step in to manage the deal for you. We can negotiate with the media on your behalf, help you understand your contracts, organize your interviews and ensure you get paid the best possible rates for your interview.

Some guidance from the PCC's website on harassment by journalists

If you are involved in a news story, you may be approached by members of the press at some point for comment, for information or for photographs. Sometimes, people are only too happy to speak to journalists in such circumstances. There are occasions, however, when people will want to be left alone.

The PCC offers clear protection for those who feel harassed by the media. Clause 4 (Harassment) of the Code of Practice enforced by the PCC says that "journalists must not engage in intimidation, harassment or persistent pursuit" and that they "must not persist in questioning, telephoning, pursuing or photographing individuals once asked to desist; nor remain on their property when asked to leave and must not follow them".

Only when there is a clear public interest in doing so may a journalist breach this

clause of the Code.

There are a number of practical steps that you can take to avoid unwanted or repeated approaches:

1. Get the name of the journalist and the newspaper or news agency for which they work. Tell them politely that you do not wish to speak to them and that they should not contact you again. Say that you understand that under the Code of Practice journalists must not persist in contacting you having been asked to desist.
2. If you are at home and too distressed to answer your door, pin a short note to it to say that you do not wish to speak to journalists and do not want to be disturbed.
3. Similarly, if you are being telephoned repeatedly and do not wish to speak to journalists, alter your answerphone message to say that only personal callers should leave a message as you are not speaking to the media.
4. Some people – particularly at times of grief or shock – find it helpful to ask a friend or neighbour who is not as closely associated with the story to deal with press enquiries. They can then answer your phone and door and either pass on a prepared statement (reflecting what is said in point 1) or turn down requests for interviews.
5. If these measures fail and you feel that you are still being harassed, contact the PCC immediately. The number of the PCC's emergency 24 hour advice service, designed to offer round-the-clock help, is 07659 152656. We will get in touch with the editor concerned and deal with your complaint urgently, aiming to stop any harassment that is occurring as soon as possible.

If you do not know the names of the journalists concerned, or the newspapers for which they work, you should still contact the PCC. It may then be able to communicate your concerns across the industry as a whole via a general “desist” message, which should alleviate the problem.

Useful Links

<http://www.pcc.org.uk/>

<http://www.talktothepress.co.uk>

<http://sellmystory.wordpress.com/>

To contact Talk to the Press call 0207 792 2011 or email

message@talktothepress.com

Follow us on Twitter: twitter.com/talktothepress or @talktothepress