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Media Guidelines

The *Respect in Reporting* campaign is based on the principle, embedded in the **Society for Professional Journalist's Code of Ethics** that "public enlightenment is the forerunner of justice and the foundation of democracy. In November 2011, we worked with families who have lost young people to violence to host a forum discussing the ways in which a failure to honor this principle has impacted their lives. The result are these guidelines, organized into the four sections of SPJ's Code of Ethics. **From the families:**

As close friends and family members of young people who fell victim to street violence, we have endured much added suffering on account of what we consider to be sensationalized, irresponsible, and even hateful news coverage of events that have already pained us severely. As such, we have compiled a list of considerations that we believe should be paid, by reporters and media outlets of all varieties, to survivors in times of extreme grief and sadness.



We appreciate those publications which already make a concerted effort to respect our communities, and that do not find news questioning the dignity of the deceased. We hope that all news outlets will join us in closely examining our practices to ensure that we are not unintentionally inflicting additional grief and pain on the families and communities that we serve.

By taking the pledge to promote and practice **Respect in Reporting**, you are agreeing to apply the following standards to journalistic ethics. If you're a journalist or a media outlet, that means carefully examining your policies and practices against these guidelines and doing your best to follow them. If you're a supporter, community member or scholar, it means vigorously holding the media you turn to for information accountable to these guidelines through letters, blogs, and public conversations. Together, we can change the story.

Act Independently

- If possible media outlets should verify facts regarding families with the families themselves. In the least they should request direct comment from the family.
- SPJ's Code of Ethics says "be vigilant and courageous about holding those with power accountable." In order to do this, we believe you must balance information received from community sources with the same weight you give to institutional and police sources.

Be Accountable

- Treat every murder case as a high priority – not just for its sensationalist value, but for concern for public safety and for peace and healing in our city.

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- Consult services and resources in the affected community that work with survivors of homicide such as the Louis D Brown Peace Institute.
- Use compassion when asking for photographs of victims, and make sure that all materials are returned promptly to their rightful owners. It is always better to ask the family, rather than get a picture from another source such as Facebook.

Minimize Harm

- Recognize that all cases are unique. Whereas one family might not mind being asked questions immediately following a tragedy, another might be averse to it. Either way their wishes should be honored, but it is always acceptable to make initial contact so as to determine the circumstances. This consideration also applies to wakes, funerals, peace walks, etc.
- Check with police and/or detectives if necessary before approaching family members in order to make sure that authorities have already notified loved ones.
- Announcing which hospital the victim has been taken to (eg. Taken to Boston Medical) also endangers the victim, employees and loved ones and is not relevant information. It suffices to say something along the lines of “victim has been taken to hospital for medical attention.”
- Consider the impact that releasing information on the witnesses has. It not only endangers them, but discourages others from speaking out because of fear.
- Printing an exact address, such as “shot in front of his grandmother’s house at 47 Morton St.” is endangering the family, loved ones and neighbors.
- If you are granted access to family members, encourage subjects to have someone there to support them during any interviews they give.

Seek Truth and Report It

- When you site “known to the police” it leaves the impression that the victim had a criminal involvement when that may not be the case. Assess whether this information is necessary and whenever possible clarify what that means. In other words, a youth may be “known to the police” because of a simple charge like loitering (hardly newsworthy) or because they were in the system in order to receive services.
- Acknowledge the particular types of suffering that the families of murder victims endure, such as: loss of income; legal problems; marriage stress; religious crises; substance abuse issues. These obstacles are central to the full story.
- Treat all families with respect and dignity, regardless of a victim's past history. Tearing down the family and the victim’s past is counterproductive and superficial reporting at best and does not get at the root cause of violence but rather only examines the symptoms nor does it inform our community.

Lastly we recognize that even when reporters do their best, errors can occur. It is important to treat retractions/corrections with the same urgency as the initial story. To faithfully follow these guidelines means to genuinely understand the impact that reporting has on real people’s lives. If you make a mistake be honest and open about what you’ve learned from it and in the spirit of being accountable and minimizing harm, do your best to correct any harm it may have caused.

To take the pledge, visit respectinreporting.presspasstv.org

These guidelines were adapted from Louis D. Brown Peace Institute Survivor Recommendations and created in partnership with families who have lost children to murder.