

Working with the Media

Introduction

Using print and broadcast media is one way of raising awareness of a missing person and helping in the continued search for them.

Families can work with the media in a wide variety of ways; Missing People can help to facilitate communication between families and the media through web appeals, media slots and features.

The following guidance attempts to inform families about the potential outcomes of using the media, and advise on how to get the most out of any interactions with the media, as well as offering practical guidance relating to how the media works, what rights you have, and how to deal with problems which may arise.

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Should I use the Media?

Using the media

Media appeals may be the quickest and most effective way of raising awareness of your missing person and helping in the continuing search for him or her. But not everyone feels comfortable using the media. Different newspapers and magazines have different interviewing techniques and styles. Whilst many journalists will be sympathetic, others may appear forceful, cold or aggressive or behave in other ways which seem insensitive to what you are going through. Some people don't trust the media or want their circumstances made public; others feel overwhelmed by the thought of dealing with journalists and being asked probing and personal questions about their missing person. We are happy to offer advice to help you reach an informed decision but the following may be helpful when considering your options:

What are the advantages of using the media?

- People may report sightings or be able to provide other valuable information
- The missing person may see or hear any message you wish to send them and choose to make contact if they know you are worried for their safety
- You may get some comfort from feeling you are doing all you can to find them
- Other families in the same situation may come forward to offer support
- Continuing coverage will keep the search fresh in people's minds

What are the drawbacks of using the media?

- Media interest may feel overwhelming, intrusive or frightening
- You may feel that your privacy has been invaded
- There is no guarantee that your story will be used
- You may be asked questions you find insensitive
- You may feel that you are losing control of an already out of control situation
- The missing person may not welcome the attention or wish to be 'found'
- Publicity may put already vulnerable people at even greater risk by forcing them further away if they do not wish to be found

- It can be very hard for someone who has been missing to then 'walk back into their life' knowing that extensive publicity about them has been distributed in the national or local media

I don't think I can cope with dealing with the media personally. Is there an alternative?

Audiences empathise with the fear and anguish people feel when someone close goes missing and will generally respond with compassion. You don't have to be a great speaker to make an appeal. However if you feel unable to deal with journalists yourself, consider asking a close friend or family member to act as your spokesperson.

If you are unsure or confused about dealing with the media, Missing People are always happy to help, by offering impartial advice and making practical suggestions.

Summary

Whether or not to use the media is a very personal decision. It is certainly the speediest and most effective way of reaching a large and diverse audience to ask for help, information and possible sightings. But the experience of having to deal with journalists, answer many questions, disclose personal information about your missing person and yourself and being thrown into the media spotlight may not be one you feel you can handle. Missing People will support your decision either way.

Though some cases will attract a large amount of media attention, in other cases it can be very difficult to gain any media interest at all. Whilst this can be frustrating, Missing People can support you in ensuring the local search is effective and coordinated, with or without the interest and support of the mainstream media.

The Media: First Steps

I want to use the media. Where do I start?

Few of us have any idea of how to deal with the media because we've never had any reason to. These days there are so many different forms of media that it can seem like a big, confusing maze. One of the most important first steps is to get the media interested in running an appeal to try and locate or get information about your missing person. But who do you call at a newspaper or television company? What do you say when you get through to the right person? Which are the best sites to make an appeal online? How can Missing People help reach as many people as possible?

First Steps

- It is important to decide whether publicity will be the best thing for you and the person who is away. You should consider what impact publicity may have on your life, on those around you, and on the well-being and safety of the missing person themselves.
- If you choose to use publicity to search for your missing person, ask Missing People to make a poster and web appeal which you can use as the basis for other press releases.
- Discuss any plans you have to use the media with the police. Agree with them about what information should be shared and what is best kept private.
- Choose photos of the missing person which are clear images of their head and shoulders.
- Give careful consideration before offering precious images for use by the media as the memory of the image may remind you of when they were missing.

How do I contact the media?

- The first step is to choose the media outlets you are going to approach. Your reasons for contacting a particular outlet might be based on circulation, readership, familiarity, personal preference or that of the peer group of your missing person.
- If you prefer to contact media outlets directly, the contact details of any publication including telephone numbers and email addresses will be available on their web page.
- A telephone call may produce a quicker response than an email. The best person to speak to on a newspaper, radio or television programme is the News Editor or any other journalist on the News Desk. If you don't immediately get through, ask for the name of the appropriate person, their direct line and request that they call you back urgently. If they don't, keep trying until you get through to them.

- Phone both local and national television and radio stations and ask them to publicise an appeal for your missing person as soon as possible.
- Missing People has its own website which receives more than 34,000 hits every month, more than 11,000 followers on Twitter and also uses Facebook. We are happy to appeal on your behalf but you may wish to set up your own Facebook page or Twitter appeal.
- Circulate an email to everyone in your address book and ask them to pass it on to everybody in their address book.
- Although you don't have to get permission from the police to work with the media, it can be easier to manage the search effort and co-ordinate information if you have the support of the police in doing so, particularly in the case of press conferences and television appeals.

How do I get the media interested immediately?

- It's an unfortunate reality that the media will be more inclined to publish an appeal for some missing people more than others. The media are more likely to run your story if they think their readers will empathise with the particular circumstances. There may be less interest if the person has gone missing before or has a history of mental illness or addiction.
- Newspapers and magazines often base their stories on a 'hook'. Did your missing person have any special talents? Did they go missing from a specific place or close to the date of a particular event or anniversary? Is their disappearance totally out of character? Do you suspect they may be in a particular area? What message do you want to convey to them right now?
- Social media tends to be more inclusive because there isn't any obvious 'readership' profile – a very wide and diverse range of people use social networking sites. If a newspaper or television programme does not seem interested in running an appeal, don't be discouraged. Publicity on a combination of the Missing People website, Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, YouTube and other chat forums will reach thousands of people who may be able to help.

Summary

Having contacted your chosen media, the ideal outcome is that you manage to get through first time to the News Editor and they agree to run your appeal quickly and sensitively. Unfortunately that doesn't always happen. Editors are often frantically busy or working to a deadline and may not call you back straight away or even seem that keen to help in your search for your missing person.

Try not to feel disheartened or take it personally if one particular publication or programme doesn't show the level of interest that you would like. It might just be that the story doesn't fit their 'readership profile' in terms of the age, history or gender of your missing person but there may be another publication whose readers will be able to empathise more and who will be happy to run an appeal. Social networking sites are another way of reaching a huge audience and enabling anyone with information or possible sightings to respond to you immediately.

Working with Journalists

Journalists want to come and interview me. How can I prepare myself?

As with every profession, there are good and bad journalists. The most important criteria is that you feel comfortable with both the person you will have contact with and the publication he or she represents. If something doesn't feel right, don't agree to an interview. At a time when you are hurting and confused, it makes sense to gain as much knowledge as possible about how the media works in order to minimise additional stress and make it work for you.

Coping with the spotlight

- However much it may work in your favour when searching for a missing person, interacting with the press can feel very intimidating if you are not used to it. It's a good idea to try and set basic ground rules for dealing with journalists based on what you do and don't feel comfortable with.
- It may be a good idea to have someone with you who is more removed from the situation and less emotional to allow them to step in and answer questions if necessary, and provide support.
- If you have reported your person as missing to the police, they may suggest or be able to help you arrange a press conference on neutral territory.
- Never throw your home open to the media without restrictions or boundaries. It's important for your own well-being to try and maintain some privacy.
- You may only feel comfortable being interviewed outside your house or in one room only. If you are not happy being interviewed at home at all, consider asking a close family member or friend whether they would be prepared to let you use a room in their home to meet members of the media.
- Be aware that if you choose to involve the media, you will automatically come under a degree of scrutiny yourself and this can feel intrusive. People may recognise or approach you in the street, supermarket or at the school gates.
- A poster appeal created by Missing People can act as a media pack to give to journalists to save you having to repeat information every time you have contact with the media.

Understanding the technicalities

- Not all publications will agree to it but it's worth asking for what is called 'copy approval' – a guarantee that the journalist will read the finished article he or she writes back to you before publication and allow you to raise any concerns you may have.

- Bear in mind that all reporters have deadlines. The later in the day the interview, the more likely that the article will not be able to appear until the next day.
- Be aware that any photographs of your missing person that you give to a journalist will become public property. Whilst you will obviously need to provide one or two so that people can see what your missing person looks like, it is advisable to protect your and their privacy by not allowing journalists free access to take anything they choose from your photograph albums.
- Any quote you give during the interview can be used for publication. If there is anything you DON'T want included in the media, make a mental note to avoid even mentioning it. Likewise it can be useful to note down any facts you consider vital for the appeal and definitely want published.
- Be aware that if the media do wish to run an appeal, they may approach other people for additional information about your missing person.
- They may also present the story in a different way to what you expect, using a different 'angle' or including a sensational headline.
- You can turn down an interview with any newspaper, magazine or television programme. You don't have to give a reason for doing so.
- If you don't like or feel comfortable during your initial contact with a particular journalist, explain the situation to his or her Editor and ask to deal with someone else you feel more relaxed with.

Summary

The best way of making the press work for you in terms of publicising your appeal quickly and in the manner you want it to appear is to develop a friendly relationship with journalists who want to interview you. However the importance of maintaining boundaries and not being persuaded into doing or saying anything you don't want to cannot be over-emphasised. Answer what you consider to be fair and relevant questions in as much detail as you choose but a simple 'I don't want to go into that' should stop any line of questioning you are unhappy with. Trust your instincts. If a journalist makes you feel ill at ease, you are under no obligation to be interviewed by them or allow them into your home.

Interviews

Where will interviews take place and what kind of questions am I likely to be asked?

One of the first decisions you will have to make is whether or not you are comfortable with the idea of being interviewed by journalists in your own home. Some people may find the familiarity of being on their own territory reassuring. To others the idea of having strangers in their personal space at a time of great distress may feel intrusive. A compromise might be the more neutral space of the home of a family member or friend, or a public space such as a café or park. Either way, a journalist is going to ask you several questions. There will be basic ones to establish a physical description and the age and gender of the missing person but also more emotive ones. These may include 'Has the person has gone missing before?', 'What you think happened to them?' and 'Do you believe they are still alive?'. Below are some of the things you are likely to be asked immediately:

What information will I be asked to provide?

- Their date of birth, full name and any names they are known to use.
- A physical description of your missing person and of the clothes he or she was wearing when last seen.
- The place they were last seen if known.
- The most recent colour photographs you have.
- Details of any identifying features such as tattoos, birthmarks, piercings, scars.
- As much personal information as you are willing to provide.
- A contact number for people to ring with possible sightings. See [What Missing People Can Do](#) to see how Missing people can help with this.

What information should you disclose?

- Any information you disclose to a journalist may become public. How would the missing person feel if details of their relationships, sexuality, financial problems, health or criminal record were made public? Was this information told to you in confidence and would the person wish it to be known generally?
- You may be asked questions about their physical or mental health such as 'Were they depressed?' or 'Had they been diagnosed with any illness?' If you don't want to go into detail, one possible answer is to simply say that they take medication on a regular basis or had been 'unwell' to describe any mental health issue.

- Bear in mind how your missing person might react if he or she heard your appeal. Try to make the message to them positive and encouraging instead of one that might cause them to feel shame, guilt, resentment or pressure.
- Remember that you do not have to answer any questions that seem inappropriate or make you feel uncomfortable.
- Answer what you consider to be fair and relevant questions in as much detail as you choose but a simple 'I don't want to go into that' should stop any line of questioning you are unhappy with.
- It may be a good idea to have someone with you who is more removed from the situation and less emotional to allow them to step in and answer questions if necessary, and provide support.

Summary

It can be hard to know how to respond when you are being bombarded with questions. Part of you probably wants to be as cooperative as possible with journalists because they have the power to run your story quickly in the hope that it will reach your missing person or someone who can provide information or possible sightings.

Whilst it is obviously important to provide details that could help identify the missing person, you don't have to make every aspect of your relationship with them or the facts of their life public. If there are things that you would prefer to keep private, it's fine to do so. If there are things that you are worried that the media may sensationalise, it's fine not to disclose them. If they need regular medication, it's possible to express concern about this without explaining the reason why or revealing any physical or mental health issues the missing person has which may make them even more vulnerable. If you do not feel able to meet journalists alone or in your own home, it's perfectly acceptable to ask someone else to be with you or to schedule interviews over the phone or in another location such as the home of a friend or family member, a local hotel or cafe.

Advice for TV Interviews

By Julie Etchingam (television journalist)



My first piece of advice for you if you're going to be interviewed is try not to be intimidated and try to relax. You are there because people really want to hear your story and your personal experience – you are not there for a grilling! Take it as a great opportunity to tell your story passionately, and make your argument persuasively and clearly.

First of all it's important to understand what type of interview you are being asked to do, and on what type of programme it will appear. A face-to-face chat on the Daybreak sofa is quite different to a down-the-line interview with Sky News. The interview may be broadcast live, or it may be pre-recorded. If it's pre-recorded, the broadcaster may wish to run all of it, or only a short clip. It's important to establish exactly what type of interview it is, so don't be afraid to ask the producer or researcher beforehand.

Live face-to-face

This is likely to be in a studio, where you'll be brought onto the set to sit shortly before the interview begins. It means you may not be able to chat to the presenter beforehand, but you will have an opportunity to speak to a producer, who should be able to let you know how long the interview is likely to be and the areas of questioning.

Before the interview think through the main points you wish to get across, as well as how you'd like to tell your personal story. But don't think about taking any notes on set with you, as you'll be too tempted to look down at them! The interviewer is there to get the best out of you and will quickly step in if you lose track.

If the interview is only two-three minutes long, think carefully about the essential points you need to communicate.

You'll have a microphone attached to you by a sound recordist. For women I would strongly advise wearing a jacket and skirt or trousers - a dress or blouse can be tricky to get the microphone on without running the wire underneath!

Don't look at any of the cameras – just concentrate on looking at the interviewer, or if you are being interviewed alongside someone else – look at whoever is speaking.

Try to be as chatty as possible, but not long winded....and avoid answering a simple yes or no. Make sure you get the best out of your time on air!

Pre-recorded face-to-face.

My advice is pretty much the same as for the above. This interview however may be edited, so make sure you answer in full sentences, in case they lift one clip out of it and put it into a news report. The best soundbites are 15-20 seconds long – so if there is a key message you wish to make, think carefully beforehand about how you can fit it in during that time. For guidance, most people speak at about 3 words per second.

Also – if the item is pre-recorded, don't be afraid to ask to do an answer again if you're not happy with it. Most broadcasters simply want you to express yourself in the best way possible, so if it takes a second go, then so be it!

Again – don't look at the camera – keep looking at the interviewer.

Live down-the-line interview

This is used a lot by news channels. You may find the channel is happy to send a camera crew to your home. If you're happy with this, you may have to find a quiet spot in either a garden or sitting room, with the phones off!

You will need to stand directly in front of the camera and look straight into the lens. A sound recordist will pin a microphone on you, and also give you an earpiece which they'll help you to put in. You'll be able to hear the interviewer, and possibly the gallery but never both at the same time.

You'll need to keep looking straight down the lens of the camera for all of the interview – don't be tempted to look to the side or to look down, as this can look a little strange. And keep looking in for a few seconds even after you've been thanked at the end of the interview.

In conclusion...

These are just a few notes to give you some reassurance before you embark on interviews. By and large, TV newsrooms and feature programmes are very friendly places – so never be afraid to ask if you're unsure about anything, or need more information.

After the Interview

What will happen afterwards?

It's normal at a distressing time to feel emotionally drained after an interview. Talking to a stranger about your feelings and concerns for the safety of your missing person may leave you feeling exhausted and upset.

- If possible, try to pace yourself so you can gather your strength and have some private recovery time in between. Your physical and mental resources are going to be limited right now and the fresher you feel during any dealings with the media, the more effective you will be.
- Do not hesitate to call the journalist if questions or concerns occur to you after the interview.
- Do keep the journalist informed of any new sightings or information.
- Prepare yourself for mixed and heightened emotions when the copy is read back to you or you see the article in print. Some people find this distressing as it confirms the reality of the situation.

A media spokesperson has approached me and offered their services. Should we accept his or her offer?

- There are several advantages in doing so. They will be very media savvy and have extensive contacts and established relationships within the press.
- It will save you the time you would otherwise spend trying to find out who to talk to on a newspaper or television station.
- Using a professional to act as your spokesperson will free you from dealing with journalists if you don't feel able to cope with it.
- Trust your instincts. Is the person someone you wish to have a lot of contact with at the moment? Do you like/feel you can trust them to act in your best interests? Are they genuinely sympathetic and supportive to your situation?
- It may be appropriate for the police to speak with any media spokesperson you are considering employing, in order to gauge whether this individual is appropriate to represent you.
- Consider asking if you can speak directly to anyone else they have helped in a similar situation before making a decision.
- Ask him or her to spell out clearly the terms on which they are offering to help, including any costs that are involved.

- Whilst some media spokespeople may offer their services for free in this situation, be aware that many others will expect to charge you a fee for helping you.
- The main disadvantage is that you may feel you are losing control of the situation. You may also not want someone who is not a family member or close friend and does not know your missing person speaking on your behalf.

Summary

Using the media may help you feel you are doing something positive to try and reach your missing person. However, dealing with the media may also feel exhausting and baffling. You may swing between surges of optimism and dejection whilst you are desperate to find your missing person and are waiting for the appeal to be publicised.

Using a media spokesperson can relieve a lot of these pressures but only if it is someone you feel you can trust and is genuinely going to act in your best interests. Find out as much as you can about their reputation, contacts, whether they have acted for anyone else in your situation and exactly what they are offering to do to help you and how they intend to go about it in order to be able to make an informed decision.

Maintaining Media Interest

How can I keep the media interested in the medium/longer term?

In the first few days after your missing person has disappeared, your contact with the media may be frequent. But if your missing person has not been found within a few weeks, it's important to be aware that the media attention may wane and you will have to work to keep the appeal active and the interest of the public. Here are some things you can do to help:

- Think of ways to move the public to continue support. These might include significant birthdays (especially if your missing person is a child or young person), monthly or annual anniversaries of the disappearance, International Day of the Disappeared on 30th August or International Missing Children's Day on 25th May.
- Prepare a press release to coincide with important or new developments involving your missing person such as birth of a grandchild, events in the life of their children such as graduation, illness in the family. Send it to all the journalists you dealt with when you first launched your appeal.
- Give the story of your missing person a new 'slant'. Consider asking a high profile individual such as politician, media/music/sports personality or celebrity to help by making a further appeal for information and continuing to raise awareness.
- In collaboration with the police, announce any developments, recent sightings or new information separately to help spread coverage over a longer period of time.
- If you have chosen to use the help of a media spokesperson, ask them to suggest fresh ways of renewing the appeal and/or places to run it.
- If you have developed a good relationship with a particular journalist, ask them to help devise ways to get your appeal back in the spotlight.
- Keep a list of the names and mobile phone numbers of journalists you felt comfortable with so you can stay in contact with them should they move from one publication to another.
- If your family member or friend has been missing for some time, you may wish to consider circulating an age-progressed image to raise awareness of how they might look now. Missing People can advise you on how to go about this.

Summary

Missing People will maintain our appeal for information about your missing person for as long as you wish on our website, through our Facebook and Twitter followers and through poster campaigns. However if he or she has not been found within a few weeks media interest may decline. There are a number of strategies you can employ to ensure the media continue to publicise your missing person.

The Media: Your Rights

Dealing with journalists: what are my rights during an interview?

- Put simply – you don't have to say, provide, do or agree to anything you don't want to.
- You should expect to be treated with dignity and respect throughout.
- You can ask that the website address and telephone number of Missing People be published as well as police or other contact details so readers or viewers can report sightings or any other information.
- It's not advisable in the early days to sign any 'exclusivity' contract which restricts you from talking to any other publications or appearing on any other television or radio programmes. You may want as much publicity as possible to try and reach your missing person.
- If you feel that your wishes and dignity are not being respected, you have the right to terminate an interview, ask a journalist to leave your home or complain to their Editor.
- You have the right to end any interview that is making you feel distressed, pressurised or otherwise uncomfortable.
- You can refuse to allow other family members or friends to be photographed.
- You can refuse to allow certain areas or rooms in your home to be photographed.
- You can refuse to allow photographs to be taken of your missing person's room or possessions.

Checklist of questions to ask the journalists

- **What is the name, direct line/mobile number and email address of each journalist I have approached? What is the best time of day to contact them?**

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- **When will the article appear? Later today? Tomorrow?**

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• Whereabouts in the newspaper or programme will it feature? Will it be given priority and be easily visible if in print?

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• Is it going to appear in just one place or does the paper have the right to 'syndicate' (sell articles on to other publications)? If so, which other publications? (Bear in mind you may have no control or choice in this).

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• What kind of format will the appeal run in? Will be it a 'first person' article using only my own words to tell your story or will the writer tell my story in his or her own words? (Journalists report news in their own style and that of the organisation they work for and you may have no control over the outcome).

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• If copy approval has been agreed, when can I expect to have the article read back to me?

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• Can you include Missing People's number for any information or sightings, and make a direct appeal for the missing person to get in contact with Missing People in confidence?

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• Can you include a direct appeal to the missing person? (This may stress that it is not a crime to be missing and that they are not in trouble, or that you just want to know they are safe).

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Additional Notes

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Summary

A professional journalist will try to do their job and put you at your ease at the same time. They may not be able to answer all your questions – what is going to run when and where can change rapidly on a newspaper or magazine depending on breaking news - but should try to be as open as possible about what they are going to write and when it will appear. Journalists should be aware that this is a time of distress and confusion for you and their manner at all times should be sensitive to that. If it isn't, don't work with them. Dealing with someone you feel bullied by or don't warm to is not what you need at the moment.

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For further information and guidance on the issues addressed in this guidance sheet, or for support relating to any aspect of someone going missing, call Missing People's free and confidential 24 hour helpline on **116 000** or email 116000@missingpeople.org.uk

Whilst this information has been provided in good faith, it should not be taken as legal advice. For information tailored to your circumstances, please contact your police force, solicitor or an advisory organisation as appropriate to your query.

Please let us know whether this guidance has been useful, either by answering a few short questions at <https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/MissingPeopleGuidance> or by emailing your comments to policyandresearch@missingpeople.org.uk