

EDITORIAL POLICY GUIDANCE

ANONYMITY

(Last updated: October 2010)

EDITORIAL GUIDELINES ISSUES

This guidance note should be considered in conjunction with the following Editorial Guidelines:

- **Accuracy**
See Editorial Guidelines Section 3: Accuracy: Sources
- **Fairness, Contributors and Consent**
See Editorial Guidelines Section 6: Fairness, Contributors and Consent: Anonymity
- **Reporting Crime and Anti-Social Behaviour**
See Editorial Guidelines Section 8: Reporting Crime and Anti-Social Behaviour: Disguising Identities

SUMMARY OF MAIN POINTS

- When we promise anonymity, we should make sure that we are in a position to honour that promise
- Establish to whom the person wants to be anonymous: the general public or people they know well
- When disguising identities, be aware that some technical solutions can be reversed and that what may appear as tiny idiosyncrasies to you are huge reveals to those familiar with the person

- Care should be taken not to reveal several pieces of information that could compromise a person's anonymity when put together: so-called "jigsaw identification"

GUIDANCE IN FULL

- Introduction
- Granting Anonymity: Best Practice
- Making Anonymity Effective
- Jigsaw Identification

Introduction

Granting anonymity is not ideal for programme makers or for our audiences. Sources and contributors should speak on the record whenever practicable and their identities and credentials made known to the audience so that they can judge the source's credibility, reliability and whether or not they are in a position to have sufficient knowledge of the subject or events. It should also be remembered that the methods by which we disguise identities can sometimes compromise the content we publish visually and/or aurally through blurring the image or distorting the sound, for example.

There are, however, occasions where the reporting of a story or securing a contribution depends upon using a source or contributor who wishes to remain anonymous. The decision to grant anonymity should be taken with great care. The programme maker must consider why the person wishes to remain anonymous. Do they have something to hide beyond their identity?

When it is not self-evident to the audience we should explain to them the reasons why the production granted anonymity to a source. The strongest rationale for granting anonymity is simply to protect the contributor from illegitimate retaliation, harassment or undesirable consequences for providing information.

Granting Anonymity: Best Practice

If it is determined that granting anonymity is editorially necessary then we must ascertain if we can deliver on our promise to do so. We should give careful consideration before offering a blanket guarantee of anonymity because disguising someone's identity completely is difficult to achieve. The most important question to pose to someone requesting anonymity is "Whom do you want to be anonymous from – from the general public or from people who know you well?"

We should keep accurate and contemporaneous notes of conversations with sources and contributors about anonymity. A recording is preferable if possible.

We must ensure when we promise anonymity that we are in a position to honour it particularly when taking into account the implications of any possible court order demanding the disclosure of our untransmitted or unpublished material. We should be aware that materials that name them might have to be disclosed and could compromise anonymity. (This includes notebooks, administrative paperwork, computer files, emails, as well as video and audio rushes.) Before taking any action, a court order should be referred to Litigation to discuss which materials might compromise the anonymity of a contributor or source.

Anonymity also becomes an issue when we are unable to gain consent to show someone identifiably, for example when we are secretly filming for consumer or social research to expose anti-social or criminal practice but the individuals involved are simply illustrative of the behaviour, or not sufficiently culpable or responsible for their actions. In these instances when the person filmed either refuses to give consent or when we are unable to contact them to secure consent, then the effort to disguise their identity should be proportionate to the private information that we might inadvertently reveal.

Making Anonymity Effective

Footage and photos of people who wish to remain anonymous can be used provided the person's face and hair are thoroughly blurred or obscured. Blurring is preferable to pixilation as the latter can be reversed. Filming someone from behind or placing an object to obscure a person's distinctive features can be effective but again it must be done sufficiently to ensure the level of anonymity required. And finally the contributor or source's identity can be disguised through lighting them so that their face is not visible. Again, if using a technical solution we need to ensure that it cannot be reversed so as to reveal the identity of the source or contributor. We need to bear in mind that there may be other details in the image that can lead to identification taking place: A tattoo, an unusual watch, a distinctive item of clothing, the particular way in which someone gestures, or even the location in which we are filming. Be cautious of using footage of someone walking filmed from behind as a person's gait can be particularly distinctive.

When disguising a voice, recording a "voice over" by another person is usually more effective than technically induced distortion or manipulation of voice pitch – both of which can be reversed. Audiences should be told when another person's voice has been used in place of the source or contributor. Whilst programme makers sometimes find that replacing a voice in this way can reduce the emotional impact, this loss should be weighed against the level of anonymity promised.

In relation to reversals as described above, we should consider the likelihood of this happening as most people's identities are revealed by casual viewers. It is rare that someone will employ technical means to try to discover the identity of sources or contributors in our recordings or images, usually only in the case of a criminal or serious whistleblower.

We should remember that whilst the story we are producing may be intended for transmission or publication on a particular BBC outlet or outlets, the story may well be transmitted or reproduced globally on

other outlets without our knowledge or consent. We should always consider the safety of contributors or sources whose identity may be inadvertently revealed internationally, in all media, in perpetuity.

Jigsaw Identification

We should be careful not to reveal several pieces of information in words or images that, when pieced together, could lead to revealing the identity of the individual.

Care may also need to be taken to scrutinise other media as well as our own, to minimise the "jigsaw effect" - where the BBC publishes certain facts, and another media organisation releases others, and the reports, taken together, reveal identity.

It is advisable to copy the details that are in the public domain having already been used on other radio, TV and internet news outlets. But editors need to check that the outlet they are copying from has not used too many details. If it has, subsequent stories should use the same details, but fewer of them... and avoid adding any new information of their own.

We should take particular care across the BBC's news outlets. For instance, a web editor for bbc.co.uk might use someone's age and the town that he lives near. But the news editor of the 6 o'clock bulletin on BBC One might opt to leave out his age, but name the small village he lived in unless there was close liaison between the two editors. Putting the two stories together could complete the jigsaw.