

UNHCR Guidelines on Engagement with the Media

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Introduction

Refugees, forced displacement, statelessness and the politics and heated debates that can surround these are of potentially huge interest to news media and publics in all countries in which we work. Because of this, and because of the far-reaching influence that media narratives can have in shaping public discourse and government policies, UNHCR works closely with journalists and news organizations in telling the story of people on the move from war, conflict and persecution, and in encouraging wide media reporting of these issues. Through this we leverage UNHCR's advocacy, brand and fund-raising.

Like any relationship, UNHCR's relationship with the news media hinges on mutual respect and in journalists being able to trust what we say. At UNHCR we strive on a daily basis to maintain this trust through openness, transparency, and accuracy in the information we provide.

Getting this right is not always easy. Safeguarding lives and confidentiality is inherent to UNHCR's work. And governments and other actors can be sensitive to the presence of journalists or to media criticism. Nonetheless, in the highly competitive environment in which we work communicating effectively has seldom mattered more to UNHCR than it does today – which makes it all the more important that the words we use and the images we choose connect with our audiences and serve to improve the lives of people of concern to us.

Working with UNHCR makes us all, potentially, part of this. We work with refugees and other people of concern every day, and this gives *authenticity* to our voices – something that is key to being compelling as an advocate and communicator. These guidelines are about helping you, and all of us in making the most out of media encounters, and in avoiding some of the more common pitfalls

UNHCR's media guidelines

In principle, all who work for UNHCR may speak to the media in the course of their work. But there are important caveats we all need to be aware of.

1. A starting point is to be familiar with the [Staff Regulations and Rules of the United Nations](#). These set out principles of impartiality and integrity that we must all work by, including the need to exercise discretion in our jobs. They also cover the rules around outside activities such as speaking engagements, publication of articles or books, involvement in film or theatre productions.

2. A further important caveat stems from the Secretary General's Media Guidelines for United Nations Officials (DPI/2189, May 2001) which state that *UN personnel may speak only within the areas of their individual expertise*. This does not mean having to be on constant guard – something that rarely leads to effective media interaction. Instead, it is about keeping us in a place where we can speak comfortably on the basis of our individual strengths and knowledge.
3. Protecting confidences is of course essential. We do not divulge information, identities or share images that may put a person of concern at risk. Nor do we divulge detail of confidential diplomatic processes or negotiations. It pays to maintain close awareness of the approach of your own office when it comes to media interaction. There can and will be occasions when for good reason (for instance a kidnapping or other serious security incident) a Representative may require that you do not engage with media or social media. If in doubt, always check first.
4. Lastly, we do not share details of what one journalist may be working on with another. Journalists and news organizations work in a fiercely competitive environment and we break trust with them if we divulge details of their work. Doing so would be a breach of professional journalistic and media relations ethics.

For all this, UNHCR needs a positive attitude to working with media that is in line with, or ahead of, the best practices in the humanitarian sector. People tend to trust institutions far less than they trust other people. And this is why it is so valuable to us each time any of us is interviewed or appears in an image or is quoted on message. And especially so if this is in an emergency setting and together with refugees. At UNHCR we strive to put a human face to as much as possible of what we do.

Putting this into practice

So how do we put this to use? The following is general guidance and some tips:

- Spontaneous short interviews with TV crews or individual journalists in field and emergency settings (camps, settlements, places where action is happening) are encouraged, unless there's already a Communications Officer on hand for this. If you're asked by a journalist to do such an interview, help if you can but make clear to them in advance of the interview what you are qualified to speak to and what you aren't;
- Leave studio interviews and requests for comment to those authorized to deal with them – eg, Communications staff, Representatives, Senior Managers etc;
- Provide facts and talk about what you know or have seen. Leave opinions or comment to others who are authorized (eg, communications staff, your Representative and their deputies);
- Be yourself. Be human. Be passionate. Be smart (and be presentable!);
- Avoid using humanitarian jargon;
- Become familiar with and make use of social media (but ensure first that you are familiar with UNHCR's guidelines on the personal use of social media);

- Take photos or videos, and if they're good, share them with your PI colleagues. Bear in mind however, that photos of people of concern can put them at risk and should be treated with care;
- If you are in or about to deploy to a location where media are going to be present, consider asking for media training. If demand is sufficient your PI colleagues may be able to help in arranging this;
- Before any interview, always take a moment to decide what point(s) you intend to make. You're not there to answer questions only, and this is your opportunity to help refugees. Keep it simple, one or two points only;
- Remember, the one person who has control of what you say is you. Don't feel pressed into saying you agree with something you don't agree with;
- Be friendly, courteous, and professional;
- If you're being interviewed on-camera, be aware of what's behind you. Stand in front of a UNHCR logo if you can and if it's appropriate to do so;
- If you've just been interviewed, let your PI colleagues know;
- Treat every media interaction as being 'on record'.

What to avoid

- Don't criticize partners or UNHCR. You'll seem mean and ungracious;
- Don't wear expensive jewelry, sunglasses, cameras etc. in an on-camera interview. You will seem out of touch or insensitive;
- Don't get angry at the journalist, no matter what the questions are. You'll alienate the audience;
- Don't feel compelled to agree with the premise of a question;
- Don't get defensive. If you don't know the answer, say so;
- If you've just been interviewed, let your PI colleagues know.

Communications considerations for managers

UNHCR is today embracing communications like never before, but we still have a long way to go if we want to consistently be the best in our field. Behind every media interaction we do, we have to weigh up the pros and cons – whether it will help people of concern to us and our relations with media and other key stakeholders.

Despite their common use at UNHCR so-called "If-Asked" lines are a defensive tool and should not be seen as a substitute for a proper communications strategy or plan. The same is true of 'no comment'

statements which should be avoided. Keeping trust with media and other external audiences means engaging with them, not avoiding them.

All offices should have a communications strategy. Communicating without a strategy can lead to being off-message (or failing to get a message across).

Remember that communications is as much about listening as it is about speaking. Maintain awareness of what is in the news, and seize opportunities to jump in and be part of the conversation where you can. This helps ensure our relevance to the media and others.

With CLEARANCES keep it simple and fast, and ensure you have a deputy to clear when you are not around: Focus on factual errors and political red-lines. Leave the editing to others.

Make a point of getting to know key editors and influential correspondents.

Manage crisis communications by being proactive. When trouble looms, don't wait in silence hoping that no one will notice. Get out ahead of it, alert the DER/Communications Service, take flak if needed, and move on.

UNHCR respects views and opinions that differ from our own. However, media reporting containing significant and damaging factual errors should be immediately referred to Communications Staff to discuss correction possibilities with the media organization involved. Rebuttals usually only work if done quickly.

What else?

Requests for written information and formal interviews should normally be referred to or dealt with by public information staff, including national, regional and global PI. In the absence of a PI officer, the Representative or her/his assigned PI focal point is responsible. As PI officers cannot be experts in all subjects, they will frequently seek help from UNHCR specialists to provide them with information or speak directly to journalists.

Employees approached by journalists seeking to profile them or their work should seek the approval of their Representative or supervisor, and let PI know. Using relationships with journalists for self-promotion purposes can create conflicts of interest and is forbidden.

Personnel asked to write articles or speak at media or public events in any capacity that can be seen as related to their work at UNHCR must seek prior approval from their supervisor and check with PI (this also applies to affiliated staff and interns).

UNHCR does not pay for media coverage or for journalists to attend events. If in doubt, contact the News & Media Unit of DER/ Communications Service.

[These guidelines replace the AI/2014/04 on working with News Media.](#)