



**WHAT THE CHARITY SECTOR  
NEEDS TO KNOW ABOUT CRISIS  
MANAGEMENT AND TELLING  
MEDIA FRIENDLY STORIES**

# INTRODUCTION

The charity sector has undoubtedly been bruised by some recent high-profile cases.

Oxfam, Save the Children and Comic Relief are just some of the well-known names which have been in the spotlight for all the wrong reasons in recent times. Of course, other organisations in other sectors have also faced many crises. But it has the potential to be far more damaging in the charity sector where supporters and donors invest their trust. So, it is perhaps not surprising that we are being asked to provide more and more bespoke crisis communication and media training to the sector.

But our involvement doesn't stop there.

We've written a lot about charities and how they have handled crises in our regular blogs. Some showcase incidents and stories that have been handled well and others that could have been managed better.

And we thought it was time we put these all in one handy place where spokespeople and communications teams can easily access the tips, advice, examples and lessons.

In this eBook, we will look at how the sector has managed some recent high-profile incidents, the lessons that others can learn from them, and how charities should prepare for crises. And we also look at how charities can use the media to maximise coverage of proactive stories – this section begins on page 35.

## CASE STUDIES – ILL-JUDGED INTERVIEW

When we look back over some of the biggest crises in the sector over the past few years it is hard to ignore the one which engulfed Oxfam

And during that crisis, which saw it face huge public outrage as it moved from rescuer to perpetrator, the charity's then chief executive, Mark Goldring gave a particularly ill-judged interview.

The boss managed to pour more fuel on the crisis engulfing his organisation in 2018 by claiming that the criticism it had received over the sex abuse scandal had been 'out of proportion' and suggesting the charity was being treated as if it had 'murdered babies'.

The startling comments came in an interview in The Guardian a week after the story had been first reported in The Times.

In that time the charity's handling of the crisis had been attracting growing criticism.

But this latest instalment was a case study in how not to manage a crisis.

Mr Goldring said: "The intensity and the ferocity of the attack makes you wonder, what did we do? We murdered babies in their cots?"



## CASE STUDIES – ILL-JUDGED INTERVIEW

Certainly, the scale and the intensity of the attacks feels out of proportion to the level of culpability. I struggle to understand it. You think: 'My God, there's something going on there.'"

Yes, he actually said that.

He also added that everything the charity had said during the crisis had been 'manipulated' and added that the charity had been 'savaged' and that people are 'gunning for Oxfam'.

Trying to deflect attention by detailing the horrendous things you haven't done is a frankly bizarre approach to managing a crisis.

Presenting yourself as the victim and blaming the people who have expressed concern about the way your organisation has acted is not an approach others should follow.

Anyone who has ever managed a crisis media management incident will at some point have probably felt that the media coverage is unfair or questioned why it is getting so much coverage. I know I have in previous roles.

But these views should not be expressed externally.

# CASE STUDIES – ILL-JUDGED INTERVIEW

A media interview during a crisis is no place to express sorrow for yourself or your organisation.

Mr Goldring's interview brought memories of the way BP handled the Deepwater Horizon explosion in 2010. In what turned out to be a catalogue of errors which have gone down in crisis communication folklore, chief executive Tony Hayward famously said 'I'd like my life back' while chairman Carl-Henric Svanberg said 'we care about the small people'.

When an organisation finds itself in a crisis, its leaders need to show that they understand and appreciate the seriousness of the incident and any wrongdoing and are able to demonstrate compassion, authority and honesty.

Mr Goldring certainly came across as being honest in this interview, but the unguarded approach he took was ill-judged.

If you look closely at Mr Goldring's interview, there's something else that stood out in terms of crisis media management.

We are told that Mr Goldring took part in the interview 'unchaperoned by press officers'. We've written before in our media training blog about whether press officers and comms advisers should always sit-in on media interviews.

## CASE STUDIES – ILL-JUDGED INTERVIEW

But while we spoke about the benefits of both approaches, we made it clear that in crisis media management incidents we would always expect a press officer to be present during interviews, no matter how experienced the spokesperson may be.

At the end of what was the worst week in the charity's 76-year history, Mr Goldring's decision to take part in this interview on his own was bold. And it is hard not to think that if a PR or comms person had been involved in this interview, they may have been able to prevent him from being so unguarded and careless with comments.

We are also told in the article that Mr Goldring came close to cancelling this interview because he was fretting that his words would be 'wilfully twisted' to cause Oxfam yet more damage.

While he should be commended for opting not to run away, it is somewhat ironic that the words which came directly from his mouth during that same interview caused yet more reputational damage both to himself and his charity.

# CRISIS LESSONS FROM THE 'WHITE SAVIOUR' ROW

Comic Relief found itself in the media and social media firing line in 2019, facing accusations of 'white saviourism'.

The storm centred on criticism from Labour MP David Lammy who said 'the world does not need any more white saviours' in response to footage of TV personality Stacey Dooley working alongside the charity in Africa.

He added that 'this perpetuates tired and unhelpful stereotypes'.

That tweet generated 13,000 comments, 14,000 likes and nearly 4,000 retweets. It also resulted in some disturbing headlines:

**Stacey Dooley in 'white saviour' row with David Lammy after visit to Uganda for Comic Relief**

*INDEPENDENT*

**Stacey Dooley's Comic Relief filming criticised by MP David Lammy in 'white saviourism' row**

*HUFF POST*

**Comic Relief under fire for 'white saviours'**

*THE TIMES*

# CRISIS LESSONS FROM THE 'WHITE SAVIOUR' ROW

Whether you believe this was a reputational crisis for the charity or little more than a passing drama which ultimately only caused a few red faces behind those red noses, there were lessons others can learn from the way it has been handled.

Comic Relief's response to Mr Lammy's criticism was bold. In fact, you could go further and say it went on the offence.

Not only did it state that it made 'no apologies' for sending Miss Dooley to Uganda, but it also called out Mr Lammy for not responding to its attempts to involve him in making a film in Africa. It said: "We have previously asked David Lammy if he would like to work with us to make a film in Africa and he has not responded. The offer is still open."

Taking an aggressive approach to crisis media management and reputational issues is fraught with risk and can easily make difficult situations worse.

Finding yourself in the middle of a crisis can often trigger a desire to fight back. No-one likes to be seen as a pushover.

If you have been wronged, and it is likely to cause lasting damage, then there is some merit to that approach.



# CRISIS LESSONS FROM THE 'WHITE SAVIOUR' ROW

But in most cases, it is far better to stay well away from implying any criticism of those attacking you and try instead to build bridges and positive outcomes.

Rather than the 'we're right, you're wrong' tactic' taken by the charity, a much better approach for organisations who find themselves in this type of situation is to show a willingness to reflect and consider different viewpoints.

Whether or not you agreed with Mr Lammy's argument, the issue he raised was not a new one. In 2017 Comic Relief faced similar criticism following a video with Ed Sheeran.

For us, its response to the most recent criticism should have recognised that there was a valid conversation to be had on this issue or at the very least show that it was willing to listen to those who do not agree with its approach.

Charities, like other organisations, should be seen as being open to scrutiny and not above being challenged.

One of the most striking things about the whole incident was that it was allowed to be played out on social media in front of an audience of millions, many of whom were only too willing to share their views.

# CRISIS LESSONS FROM THE 'WHITE SAVIOUR' ROW

Not only did it respond to the original criticism on Twitter, but it used the same platform to continue the debate with the politician, who is something of a prolific user.

Social media is a spectator sport and when organisations become embroiled in a head-to-head argument it makes for great viewing and gives issues oxygen.

On our crisis media management and social media training courses, we tell our delegates to take these conversations offline and not to get involved in a tit-for-tat series of posts. Surely someone from Comic Relief could have contacted the MP's office and tried to take the issue away from social media.

Each instalment of this particular saga led to a fresh wave of media coverage. And when organisations do get involved in a social media debate like this it can also become hard to maintain messaging consistency. For example, here Comic Relief went from saying that Mr Lammy had not responded to its requests for him to get involved, to stating that he had two meetings with them on the issue. Not quite the same thing.

# CHARITY SHOWS HOW TO HANDLE A CRISIS

But not all crises involving the charity sector are handled badly.

The Royal National Lifeboat Institution found itself facing the perfect storm of negative headlines and social media outrage yesterday for trying to prevent people from drowning in other countries.

It was triggered by reports it is cutting 135 jobs in the UK while some of the donations to the service are being spent on crèches in Bangladesh and swimsuits for Muslim women in Tanzania.

Here are some of the headlines:

**RNLI buys burkinis for Africans as it axes 100 UK jobs Daily Mail**

**RNLI slammed for spending millions on foreign aid while slashing 135 jobs in Britain The Sun**

**RNLI funding burkinis for Africans while cutting jobs The Times**

Social media users were also quick to share their anger, with many vowing to no longer support the charity.

# CHARITY SHOWS HOW TO HANDLE A CRISIS

Additionally, Conservative MP Nigel Evans, who sat on the Commons International Development Committee, said the organisation was putting its reputation at risk. He said: "I would say 99 per cent of the British public giving them money do not have the faintest idea it's diverted to projects overseas."

Fellow Tory MP Andrew Bridgen, said: "There is an urgent need for the RNLI executive to review this spending. It's not the Royal International Lifeboat Institution."

So, how did the charity respond to the trouble?

Well, it took to its Twitter account to issue a prompt response stating it was proud of its international work and to show that it had not tried to hide this programme.

It said: "In response to the @MailOnline & @thetimes: we are proud of our international work. Its (sic) saves (mostly kids') lives. And we haven't kept it secret - it's in our annual report, on our website and in the media. We spend just 2% of our expenditure on this work."

# CHARITY SHOWS HOW TO HANDLE A CRISIS

That tweet included a link to a detailed and robust statement on its website where it elaborated on those points, tried to show it has been transparent on the issue, and aimed to tackle some of the questions that have been raised, including why it had been paying for burkinis and creches and whether it had misled donors.

In response to that last question, it said: “The RNLI’s international work has been reported in detail in our annual reports going back several years and information is also available from the RNLI website and regularly reported elsewhere. The financial commitment to our international work is reported separately and there has been no sleight of hand.

“The RNLI’s priority is to provide the very best search and rescue service in the UK and Ireland, but we are also proud to use our expertise, knowledge and influence to help others save lives across the world, particularly in countries where drowning rates are high.”

Such was the detailed nature of its response that you get the sense that this was a storm it had anticipated and prepared for – a key part of successful crisis media management.

The other aspect we liked was that when it responded to individuals on social media, it did not just keep using the same line. Often we see

# CHARITY SHOWS HOW TO HANDLE A CRISIS

organisations in crisis media management situations copy and paste the same response repeatedly, making it sound robotic and raising questions about whether it cares as much as it says it does.

The RNLI found different ways to politely respond to both those offering support and those no-longer willing to help it.

One of the key things to note about this story is that it broke over a weekend, yet the RNLI, perhaps as you would expect from an organisation that rescues people around the clock, was able to respond quickly and efficiently.

Crisis media management incidents have a habit of happening outside of normal office hours. It is crucial organisation have crisis plans which identify those people who can update the media, respond on social media and make changes to the website whatever time a crisis strikes.

While there were many on social media vowing to no longer support the charity, a fair percentage of those were likely to be people jumping on the social media outrage bandwagon, rather than genuine supporters.

What was perhaps more telling was the number of people who have vowed to support the charity in future as a result of this crisis and the way it has been handled.

# SPOKESPERSON SHOWS HOW TO HANDLE A TOUGH TV INTERVIEW

Another charity that performed well when faced by a testing situation was the Canal and River Trust and in particular an interview its chief executive Richard Parry gave to Channel 4 News.

The charity, which looks after 2,000 miles of waterways across England and Wales, found itself in the firing line in August 2019 when a dam at Toddbrook Reservoir, in Derbyshire, was on the verge of collapse and residents from the neighbouring town of Whaley Bridge had to be evacuated.

Mr Parry started strongly with an early, sincere-sounding apology for the disruption – a great beginning to an interview during a crisis media management incident.

He said: “We are clearly very sorry for the disruption this is causing to people. It must be awful to have to move out of your home overnight in this sudden way, but it is vital we keep everybody safe and put people’s safety first before we can draw down the reservoir.”

And, importantly, he didn’t get drawn into speculating about how long people may be out of their homes.



# SPOKESPERSON SHOWS HOW TO HANDLE A TOUGH TV INTERVIEW

“It is very hard to estimate because of all the factors involved,” he said. “There are the pumps we have to get into the reservoir to draw the water down and the rate at which they can work; there is still water flowing into the reservoir from upstream and there is also the unknown factor of the weather – if there is more rain that will change things.”

He adopted the same approach to questions encouraging speculation on the cause of the incident.

Asked what he thought the cause might be, he said: “Well, until our engineers have a chance to inspect it, it would be foolish to speculate.”

After a fairly predictable start to the interview, the pressure quickly ramped up and Mr Parry was asked increasingly challenging questions.

These started with probes on whether the dam’s age was a factor and whether the trust has been adapting to climate change.

And interruptions became a regular feature of the interview, with Mr Parry frequently being asked a question before he had finished his answer to the previous one.





# SPOKESPERSON SHOWS HOW TO HANDLE A TOUGH TV INTERVIEW

Many spokespeople struggle with interruption, but Mr Parry retained his composure and stuck to his message.

It was Ms Barnett who sounded frustrated as he avoided the traps of speculation and blaming the government for a lack of funding,

At one point she said: "So, you've got enough money, but you've not said you've done anything differently and you don't understand why this dam has broken in this way and it might still burst – it does sound like there are still a lot of unanswered questions.

Mr Parry replied by saying: "Well inevitably at this stage there are...", before he was again interrupted.

We often tell delegates on our media training courses that if they remain composed under pressure they are more likely to retain the sympathy of the audience and that was the case here with viewers taking to social media to criticise the journalist.

Mr Parry's performance wasn't perfect. He had a tendency to start his responses with 'well', which adds nothing to the answer and can be a little distracting.



# SPOKESPERSON SHOWS HOW TO HANDLE A TOUGH TV INTERVIEW

And he sometimes drifted away from the simple language spokespeople should strive for in an interview.

At one point he started a response by saying: “We have a very rigorous oversight of all our assets and apply a very well-developed asset management regime based on inspecting our assets and prioritising our spend to ensure we keep public safety paramount and make sure the whole canal network operates and is available for people to use.”

The follow-up question to this asked him to answer ‘in English’.

But, I’m not sure we have ever seen a ‘perfect’ media interview. The key in this situation and any interview during a crisis media management incident is to remain calm, apologise early, avoid speculation and show what action is being taken.

And Mr Parry did that expertly.



# CARE

All these examples highlight that the way a charity communicates in a crisis is vital. Communicate well and you can develop some control of the situation and the way it is reported. Get it wrong and your reputation could be in tatters. Getting your messages out quickly, even if initially through a simple holding statement, will show that you are aware of the situation, are taking it seriously and are in control. It will prevent the spread of rumour and speculation. You don't want to be on the back foot responding to questions from journalists.

As the situation becomes clearer and your message develops it will need to include the elements of what we refer to on our crisis communication courses as **CARE**, which stands for **C**ompassion, **A**ction, **R**eassurance and **E**xamples.

**COMPASSION:** You need to show the audience (your supporters, donors and beneficiaries) that you understand the severity of what has happened and the impact it has had.

**ACTION:** Outline what your organisation has already done and is doing to deal with the crisis.

**REASSURANCE:** Put the incident into context and show it is isolated.

**EXAMPLES:** Use examples to illustrate the key message you want to get across.

# SPEED

All of the examples we have mentioned in this eBook required charities to react and respond quickly.

But just how quickly do you have to respond to a crisis?

Well, the general feeling is that you may have as little as 15 minutes.

Does that sound realistic for your charity? It is undoubtedly a daunting figure.

The key is good preparation and holding statements.

On our crisis communication training courses, we always stress the importance of organisations planning for a crisis.

And part of that planning process involves preparing several holding statements that can be used at the start of a crisis.

The important thing to remember is that when the worst happens, social media and journalists will not expect you to have all the information at your fingertips, so these statements do not need to go into any great detail.

# SPEED

But they will expect you to show you are aware of the incident, acknowledge that something has gone wrong and show that you are trying to resolve the situation.

A good holding statement will allow you to do this while buying you a little time to get a better understanding of exactly what has happened before you issue something more detailed.

Responding quickly will also enable your organisation to position itself as a trusted source of information and help control the narrative, rather than letting rumours and inaccurate information set the agenda.

# RISK REGISTER

As well as holding statements, another good form of crisis preparation is to plan for the unexpected.

You are unlikely to be able to predict the exact scenario you will face or foresee every eventuality, but you can take a look at your organisation, anticipate its vulnerabilities and forecast potential storms on the horizon.

What could expose your charity to public attention, intense media scrutiny and damage your reputation?

Identify your organisation's vulnerabilities and create a risk register. If your organisation has a risk manager you will already have a detailed register in place and you should ensure comms is included on it.

For those who don't have one, an example of what a simple version could look like can be found on the next page.

# RISK REGISTER

Event	Person responsible for risk	Comms lead	Risk rating (1-9)	Action taken	Next review
Data breach	IT Director	Jo Bloggs	8	Holding statement prepared Message development and testing training booked with Media First.	

# CHOOSING THE RIGHT SPOKESPERSON

The default position for many organisations, including charities, seems to be to use their CEO as their spokesperson when they find themselves dealing with a crisis. And there are many benefits to this approach. It shows visible leadership and accountability and often the CEO will be an experienced and articulate spokesperson.

But if you use your most high-profile person at the start, how can you escalate your response if the situation worsens? It also creates an expectancy that the CEO will front every media interview during the crisis.

Additionally, subject specialists may be better placed to tackle tough questions from journalists. For example, an IT director could be a better spokesperson in a crisis involving a data breach.

Whatever your charity decides, it is important to know who your spokespeople are before a crisis strikes and to ensure that they have had recent media training. We say 'spokespeople' because many crises are long-running and it would be very difficult for the same spokesperson to continue to front all media interviews.

If your charity operates across multiple sites, consider having spokespeople available at each location. Regional spokespeople can add huge credibility to a response.



# TEAM

But it's not just about the spokespeople.

Good preparation also involves identifying your crisis team.

This is likely to include heads of departments, the senior leadership team, legal advisors and senior comms team members.

Each member needs to have identified roles and deputies. You don't want your crisis plan to collapse because the Head of HR is on holiday and no-one fully understands his or her crisis role.

And because crises have an annoying habit of happening outside of normal working hours, make sure the plan includes out of hours contact details for each team member.



# PUT IT TO THE TEST

Once you are familiar with your organisation's risk register, or have devised your own, and have identified your spokespeople and your wider team, you need to test your crisis communications plan against those risks with some role play and desktop exercises involving realistic and fast-moving scenarios.

This should be a priority – just because something looks good on paper doesn't mean it will work in reality.

We have organised many crisis testing exercises, including with clients in the charity sector.

We stress test plans in a safe, 'behind-closed-doors' environment, expose weaknesses and enable team members to learn from mistakes.

The exercises also help organisations to develop and modify holding statements and anticipate the media questions you would be likely to face.



# QUESTIONS?

Here are the questions we think you are likely to face in the initial stages of a crisis:

- What happened/went wrong?
- Where did it happen?
- When did you become aware of the problem?
- What action have you taken?
- Who is affected?
- Were there any warning signs?
- Who's to blame?

# SOCIAL MEDIA COMPLEXITY

Social media has brought us many communication advantages but it can be an added complexity in a crisis and means that an incident is likely to reach the mainstream media much quicker than before.

It can even be the source of the crisis as more people take to it to share anger and frustrations and reputations can be quickly shattered online.

But it is worth remembering that social media also offers opportunities to get your message across more quickly than ever before.

And in some instances, that can stop something negative turning into a full reputational crisis.

The key with social media is to stick to the key crisis comms principles - respond quickly, provide regular updates, communicate with compassion, concern, honesty and empathy, and be consistent.

It is also a great opportunity for your organisation to communicate directly to its customers and provide them with information first hand.

# DON'T FORGET YOUR COLLEAGUES

In a fast-moving crisis, it can be all too easy to focus on your external message and forget about your internal comms. But a charity's employees are its ambassadors and can be strong advocates. Make sure they are aware of what it is doing to deal with the situation, be honest and ensure visible leadership.

An engaged workforce is less likely to give potentially damaging information to a journalist or post something unhelpful on social media.

It is vital internal comms colleagues are involved in your crisis communications. It is also important to carefully consider who else in the charity could be exposed to the media in a crisis.

Receptionists, security, customer-facing staff and street fund raisers will all often wear branded clothing and are highly visible members of the team and easily accessible to journalists.

Investing in some media awareness training for these colleagues is essential so that they have a basic understanding of what to expect from the media and know how to escalate any interest from journalists.

This level of training does not need to be face-to-face and can be easily delivered through a webinar or a speaker at a work conference.



# OTHER AUDIENCES

The media and employees are just two audiences that will need to be targeted.

An effective plan will also look at how supporters, donors, beneficiaries, trustees, stakeholders and regulators will be kept informed.

You need to make sure that these people hear about the crisis through you and not the media or social media.

This will help to keep them on your side and prevent the spread of rumour.



# THE CRISIS COMMS GOLDEN RULES

We cannot stress enough how important it is for a charity to prepare in advance for a crisis.

While good preparation won't stop a crisis, it will ensure you are in the best place to manage it when happens.

Here are our golden rules to help you get that preparation right:

- Identify and understand your charity's vulnerabilities
- Develop a crisis communications plan
- Create a crisis team
- Identify and train your spokespeople
- Test your plan, team and spokespeople
- When crisis strikes move fast and communicate, communicate and communicate some more

## NOT ALL BAD

But charities do not just need to engage with the media when things have gone wrong. Experts from the sector are regularly needed to offer insight and discuss new initiative and campaigns.

To ensure your organisation gets more media coverage it needs to be able to tell more media-friendly stories.

How do you do that?

Well to start, you need to know who you want to tell your story to.

Without knowing who your audience is your message will fail and you will not succeed.

Think about who you want to hear and see your message.

Then put yourself in their shoes to gain an insight into what they need to know about you and what they want to hear from you.

It will help to look at who the audiences of the UK media are.

In the following pages of analysis, we'll focus on television channels, radio and national newspapers. This will help you begin to identify the media which is most appropriate for your audience.



# WORDS AND PICTURES: THE FIGURES BEHIND TV NEWS

When it comes to news consumption, television is still the most widely used media platform, according to figures published by Ofcom.

70 per cent of adults in the UK report using TV as a source of news. And it increased to 75 per cent when on-demand content is included.

TV news is less popular among younger people (age 16-24), with fewer than half reporting that they use TV to access news - they are far more likely to use social media.

BBC news remains the most used news source, followed by ITV. Facebook takes third spot.

One in five adults also name BBC One as their 'most important' news source.

# RADIO – ON YOUR WAVELENGTH

Radio doesn't have the glamour of TV or the funkiness of the internet and neither does it often create the storms a strident newspaper headline or opinion piece can generate.

And yet, it can grab people's attention like nothing else.

Who hasn't stopped still in the kitchen because of something striking and perhaps moving that they've heard on the radio?

Or waited in their car that little bit longer before going into the house or office to hear the rest of an interview? As we say, the best pictures are on radio.

And more people are listening to radio than ever before. According to RAJAR – the organisation measuring UK radio audiences - 50 million adults tune into the radio each week. That works out as 89 per cent of the UK adult population.

Additionally, the average listener tunes into more than 20 hours of live radio a week.

Most radio stations only provide short bulletins once an hour. But it is worth noting that both BBC Radio 1 and BBC Radio 2 – mainstream music stations – feature in the top 20 sources of news, according to Ofcom.

Flagship news programmes continue to perform well. Radio 4's Today programme has 5.6 million listeners a week. Nick Ferrari's LBC breakfast show has 1.4 million weekly listeners. For Radio 5 Live's breakfast programme, the figure is more than 1.2 million people.

But BBC local radio, where regional content has been cut back, has seen a 10 per cent decline in its weekly reach year-on-year. That figure now stands at 4.8 million people.

The statistics also show that 33 per cent of adults listen to podcasts at least once a month, again highlighting the growing importance of the format. Global's The News Agents podcast, fronted by three former BBC journalists, surpassed 24 million downloads in 2023.

# BLACK, WHITE AND STILL READ ALL OVER?

Print interviews continue to be a crucial component of our media training courses.

But do people still read newspapers? When was the last time you bought a paper?

Has print become a niche medium serving a rapidly shrinking audience?

Circulations have fallen and have been steadily declining for years.

But rather than dying out, newspapers have evolved and attract millions of readers online – alongside those who still want a newspaper in their hands - where their trust and prestige continue to appeal.

More than 24 million people read UK news brands – a term used to reflect how newspapers now reach their audiences – every day. That number swells to 39 million every week and 45 million every month.

And news brands appeal to the young, with 24 per cent of 18-34-year-olds consuming them daily.

So, there is still plenty of life in the old dog.

One of the things we notice during our courses is that it can be easy to put all newspapers – and their digital versions - into one basket.

But their readerships are different, and this may impact who you target and who might cover your story.

# BLACK, WHITE AND READ ALL OVER – A GUIDE TO UK NEWSPAPER AUDIENCES



## THE SUN

The Sun was the country's best-selling newspaper for 40 years. That changed in 2020 when it was overtaken by the Daily Mail amid changes in how newspapers report their circulations. The paper's owners have opted to make its circulation figures private. But before that decision, it had similar figures to the new market leader. The Sun says it reaches more than 31 million people across digital and print every month. A common misconception about The Sun is that it is the paper of choice for 'white van man'. But 32 per cent of its readers are from the ABC1 socio-economic group - the group made up of people with more education and better-paid jobs. And more than 400,000 readers have a family income of over £50,000.

## THE DAILY MAIL

A paper that is controversial and popular in equal measure. It is now the country's best-selling paper. Like all newspapers, its circulation was hit by the pandemic. In March 2024, its circulation was just over 700,000. Circulation on Saturdays swells to over a million. Its digital version, Mail Plus, has a monthly average of more than 80,000 "actively viewed" copies. The Mail's website continues to be a big draw, with its mix of news and entertainment ensuring it has 24.7m monthly unique visitors. It is also the only national newspaper with more female readers than male (a 54 to 46 per cent split). The average age of a Mail reader is 56. And more than 80 per cent of Mail readers are believed to be homeowners, with 69 per cent owning their homes outright. The Mail also owns the popular This Is Money website.

# BLACK, WHITE AND READ ALL OVER – A GUIDE TO UK NEWSPAPER AUDIENCES

## METRO

This free morning newspaper had the largest distribution of any UK newspaper before the pandemic struck. With fewer people travelling to work, it has taken time to rebuild those figures. In March 2024, it has an average circulation of 950,000. There is success online, with more than 18 million unique visitors a month. The publication remains uniquely neutral on the big political issues and has no leading articles, opinion pieces or a Westminster reporter.

## DAILY MIRROR

The workers' paper and the Labour party's most loyal supporter, the Daily Mirror was overtaken by The Daily Mail several years ago. And it has long since stopped being competitive with its old rival. Its circulation is now around 230,000. The picture is better online, with the website reaching more than 20 million people a month.

## EVENING STANDARD

The iconic London title has fallen on hard times and its owners have announced plans to drop its daily print edition and go weekly later in 2024. The paper had become free of charge in 2009. But its circulation has dropped from 850,000 to 275,000 in the past five years, and it has lost £84.5m over the latest six years. Twelve million people access the Standard's digital platforms every month, with half of that traffic coming from outside London and overseas. In September 2024 the paper ceased its daily publication and became a weekly title.

## THE TELEGRAPH

Telegraph readers are more likely to be Conservative, male and wealthy. YouGov research carried out in 2023 said 69 per cent of the paper's readership is male and that more than a fifth are affluent. It also says that almost half the readership (49 per cent) identify as Conservative Party voters. It is another publication that now chooses not to publish its circulation figures. But the last public figure, in December 2019, was 317,000. The paper's focus is now on paid subscribers, and in 2023 it exceeded its target of reaching one million subscriptions.

# BLACK, WHITE AND READ ALL OVER – A GUIDE TO UK NEWSPAPER AUDIENCES

## THE FINANCIAL TIMES

The 'pink 'un' was one of the first newspapers to introduce a paywall. And it hit a milestone in 2019, announcing it has one million paying readers, with digital subscribers now accounting for more than three-quarters of its circulation. Print circulation is now just over 100,000. But the publication says it reaches more than 22 million readers every month – seven million in the UK. Despite the complexity of some issues it covers, the FT has a reading age of around 12-14. Men make up an astonishing 81 per cent of its readership. More than 30 per cent of its readers are C-suite executives, and 75 per cent of readers work for international companies. The average reader income is £221,000.

## THE GUARDIAN

The paper of choice for the intellectual left, healthcare workers and those in local government. It made its circulation private in 2021 when it had fallen to 105,000. Press Gazette estimates that if it followed industry trends, print circulation would now be 60,000. According to PAMCo – the audience measurement for publishers - The Guardian is the most-read quality news brand in the UK, cross-platform, with an average of 22.4 million unique visitors monthly.

## THE TIMES

It is more than a decade since The Times put its online content behind a paywall. Now, The Times and The Sunday Times have more than 500,000 digital-only subscribers. While it has not revealed its print circulation figures since 2020, the paper says it reaches 840,000 readers Monday to Saturday. According to the British Business Survey, The Times is the number one daily newspaper for business readers and reaches 50 per cent more decision-makers than the Financial Times or the Daily Telegraph. Millennials make up a healthy fifth of its readership. Times readers have a mean family income of £55,885.

## THE EXPRESS

A paper with a seemingly endless supply of Princess Diana and health-scare stories (it is sometimes referred to as the Daily Diana Express), the once-mighty tabloid continues to be a fading force. Circulation has now dropped to around 150,000. Its remaining audience is elderly and is mainly based in the north. It is still right-wing and Eurosceptic in its outlook. Migrants, pensions and the weather continue to be regularly covered stories.

# BLACK, WHITE AND READ ALL OVER – A GUIDE TO UK NEWSPAPER AUDIENCES

## DAILY STAR

The paper that takes a lighter-hearted look at the news and looks to lift the gloom from the news agenda. It describes itself as not being anti-Conservative or anti-Labour, but “anti-idiot”. The paper has a circulation of more than 130,000, and screengrabs of its eye-catching front pages often go viral on social media. The paper achieved great success with its ‘who will last longer’ comparison between Liz Truss and a lettuce – a battle won by the lettuce.

## CITY AM

Launched in 2006, City AM covers the latest financial, business and political news and had a circulation of around 85,000. Before the pandemic, it was distributed from 400 commuter hubs around London and the home counties and at more than 500 offices in the City and Canary Wharf areas. Its print operations returned as people came back to the office, and it now has a circulation of around 68,000. It reports its daily readership is just under 400,000. That readership is dominated by men, with a 60/40 male and female split. Readers have an average income of £85,000. More than 65 per cent of its readers are under 55.

## i NEWS

Still the new kid on the block – as the short-lived New Day quickly passed into newspaper history – its circulation is around 125,000. The paper started life as The Independent’s little sister but is now owned by the owner of the Daily Mail, who bought it for £49.6m in 2019. It is aimed at readers with limited time and attracts younger, metropolitan types, including students and those in their first job. Its website has more than nine million monthly visits.

## INDEPENDENT

The UK’s first national newspaper to give up print and go online-only, The Independent attracts more than 22 million monthly UK website visitors. It received more than two billion page views in 2023. Its bold move away from print has returned it to profitability as it has removed the costs of print plants and paper distribution. It has now recorded six years of profit in a row. It also runs the Indy100 website.



# WHAT ABOUT THE SUNDAY PAPERS?

## THE SUNDAY TIMES

Like most Sunday newspapers, The Mail on Sunday relies on a mix of exposés and publicist-placed celebrity stories. Features about health and beauty are also prominent. Its current circulation is 600,000 – about half of where it was in October 2017. But it remains powerful and its coverage can often set the agenda for the week.

## THE MAIL ON SUNDAY

Like most Sunday newspapers, The Mail on Sunday relies on a mix of exposés and publicist-placed celebrity stories. Features about health and beauty are also prominent. Its current circulation is 600,000 – about half of where it was in October 2017. But it remains powerful and its coverage can often set the agenda for the week.

## THE SUN ON SUNDAY

The phoenix that arose from the ashes of the News of the World, The Sun on Sunday has seamlessly inherited the older, London-based male audience of its predecessor. It no longer makes its circulation figures available, but the last published statistics showed a readership of just over one million. Press Gazette estimates that the figure would now be 600,000. Celebrities, exposés and football are still very much the order of the day.

## THE OBSERVER

Stories about social injustice feature prominently in The Observer alongside extensive arts coverage. Its last published circulation was 136,000 in July 2021. It is estimated that if its readership followed the trends of the rest of the industry, that figure would now be 80,000.



# WHAT ABOUT THE SUNDAY PAPERS?

## THE SUNDAY TELEGRAPH

With a reputation for being more conservative than its weekly counterpart, it is perhaps not surprising that almost half of the Sunday Telegraph's readers are in the 65 and over age bracket. Its most recent circulation figures, published in December 2019, stood at 244,000. It is estimated that the figure would now be 125,000. Alongside investigative stories are features about the countryside and issues affecting the middle classes. Its business coverage is well respected. And its comment pages are favoured by the intellectual right.

## THE SUNDAY MIRROR

The Sunday Mirror is another title with a worrying circulation fall, now standing at 175,000, falling below 200,000 for the first time in 2023. In 2000, it had a circulation of two million.

## SUNDAY PEOPLE

Founded in 1881, the Sunday People is one of Britain's oldest Sunday newspapers. But its circulation has now fallen to 57,000, which is below that of City AM in London. The paper also now shares the same editor as the Sunday Mirror. And the two publications share the same content, with only front pages and pages four and five changing.

# ONLINE NEWS

As you can see from our newspaper guide, while circulations are dropping, there is massive demand for news online.

In fact, figures from Ofcom show online sources are the second most used platforms for news behind broadcast TV and are used by two-thirds of UK adults.

And more than 80 per cent of 16-24 year-olds consume news online. They tend to find that news via social media rather than going directly to websites.

Related to this, TikTok has been growing in popularity as a source of news, reaching 10 per cent of UK adults.

The BBC website has the highest reach among those using online sources for news, according to Ofcom.

Press Gazette lists Reuters and Forbes as the UK's most popular websites for business news, reaching 3.8 and 3.4 million people respectively.

They are followed by The Financial Times. Insider Inc (2.9m), Bloomberg (1.8m) and Investing (1.2m) also rank highly.

Are they media outlets you target?

# DON'T FORGET TRADE PUBLICATIONS

Our analysis has not focused on trade media but that does not mean you should ignore them.

Trade publications may not have the mass audience appeal of television, radio and national newspapers, but they have the power to position your organisation as an industry expert to a specific, targeted and focused audience – your customers. They will cover your sector in far greater depth than mainstream media and they are a trusted source of information, with loyal readerships.

They will also be read by the decision makers in your field who are keen to stay abreast of the news in the industry.

During our [media training](#) it's often really obvious which clients have invested time briefing their spokespeople to manage both trade and consumer based media.



# ABC SOCIAL GRADE CLASSIFICATIONS

- A** Higher managerial, administrative and professional  
– 4 per cent of population
- B** Intermediate managerial, administrative and professional  
– 23 per cent of population
- C1** Supervisory, clerical and junior managerial, administrative and professional  
– 28 per cent of the population
- C2** Skilled manual workers  
– 20 per cent of population
- D** Semi-skilled and unskilled manual workers  
– 15 per cent of population
- E** State pensioners, casual and lowest grade workers, unemployed with state benefits only  
– 10 per cent of population

# THE GROWING IMPORTANCE OF ONLINE ONLY MEDIA

Two thirds of adults in the UK now use the internet for news, according to Ofcom, putting it just behind TV as the most used source.

It is the most-used platform for news consumption among 16-24 years-olds and those from a minority ethnic background.

Around two thirds of online news users use the BBC website and app and one in five use Sky News. Increasing numbers of people are also using Google as a news source.

In the charity sector, the Third Sector website has 99,000 monthly unique users and 230,000 monthly page views. UK Fundraising has 60,000 monthly unique users and 8,000 subscribers to its email newsletter.

Equally, bloggers are now as popular as journalists in some sectors, often carrying hundreds of thousands of followers and fans. Their influence is likely to continue to grow.

Research which bloggers are writing about your industry and think about how they could cover your story. Then get out there and build a relationship with them.

Online only media is growing in importance and you cannot afford to leave it out of your media strategy.

# TRUTH

Once you have identified the audience, you need to put yourself in the journalist's shoes and understand what they are looking for in a story.

We describe it as the **TRUTH**:

**T** topical, of the moment, and something people are talking about

**R** relevant to a specific audience

**U** unusual. Not what people already know or expect

**T** trouble. Show how you are solving a problem. Or, if your story is not strong enough, a journalist will look for their own trouble angle

**H** human interest. What is in it for people? What impact will it have on your customers and the journalist's audience?

If a story includes at least four of the five elements of **TRUTH**, you have the basis of something which could attract the interest of the media and become impactful.

# TRUTH

The human aspect is absolutely crucial. The most common phrase you will hear in a newsroom is 'so what?' Journalists will look at a potential news item and ask 'so what does this mean for my audience?'

At the very least they will want to know who the people are behind the story. Take a look at any newspaper, news website or news programme and you will find all the stories have a human angle.

The reason is simple – people are fascinated by stories about people, not policies, initiatives and protocols. So, try to include the human factor in your story and, if you can't, consider how what you are saying will impact your customers.

Facts and figures are also vital. They help to illustrate and strengthen your points.

Once you have **T.R.U.T.H** in place you need to carefully consider how you are going to tell your story. The key here is to use simple language.

The education sector, like many others, is full of abbreviations (in fact it probably has more of these than most), acronyms and phrases which, while meaningful to an internal audience, mean little to a wider one.

Using these in a media interview will infuriate journalists and ensure your message does not get heard by your audience.

# FINAL THOUGHTS

A crisis can strike any organisation at any time – even charities. How it is handled can have short and long-term reputational consequences. Managing a crisis is never going to be easy but you can ease some of the pain by being prepared. Plan well and execute that plan effectively and your charity's reputation may emerge from the storm unscathed or at least avoid needing extensive rehabilitation.

But don't forget, every charity also has a story to tell.

Get it right and you win hearts, captivate minds, evoke emotions about your organisations and raise and maintain its profile. Whether you have a fully developed media strategy in place or are at the early stages of launching your media profile, media training will help.

During training, we often find that different strategies, messages and approaches emerge as our training is delivered by working journalists and television presenters who have a unique understanding of what makes an audience tick.

Some organisations are still cautious about engaging with the media. The key is to remember they are not the enemy. They are absolutely vital in making sure that your story is heard by as large an audience as possible. Engage with them and think like them by putting yourself in their shoes.

Think of it as a mutually beneficial relationship. The media needs stories to fill space in newspapers and airtime on television and radio; you need the media as a facilitator to get your message out to your audience.



# WHO WE'VE WORKED WITH IN YOUR SECTOR

"Media First are always so helpful and accommodating. They take pride in fully understanding individual and organisational needs and make sure that the intervention they recommend / supply meets those needs. I would have no hesitation in recommending Media First."

*Scott Pawsey, Senior Learning and Development Officer at The Royal British Legion*

"Media First make booking bespoke communications and media training a simple and pleasurable experience. Their team of current working journalist tutors never fail to get the most out of our spokespeople which in turn offers us, the communications team, the reassurance we need when putting people forward for interview. We've used Media First for a variety of courses and no matter what seniority the delegates are the course is always well-tailored, effective and enjoyable."

*Louise Robertshaw, Head of Communications and Campaigns,  
The Guide Dogs for the Blind Association*

"I would definitely recommend Media First's training to others. Our trainers were friendly, enthusiastic and professional and all of our group found the day really useful, no matter how much previous interview experience each person had. The day was well structured with lots of discussion and practical exercises and the trainers took care to ensure each person set goals of what they wanted to achieve and that these were met by the end of the day."

*Clare Sterling, Senior Press Officer, International Fund for Animal Welfare*

# ABOUT MEDIA FIRST

Media First has been delivering bespoke media, presentations and communications training for more than 40 years.

In that time, we have delivered a large number of bespoke crisis communications courses to charities and helped them prepare for television, radio and print interviews.

All our courses, whether media training or crisis focused, are bespoke and are delivered by current working journalists.

We believe that people apply their knowledge best when they take an active role in their learning, receive immediate constructive feedback and have fun.

That's why we make our bespoke media training courses as practical as possible.

Training can take place in our own studios in Winnersh, at your offices, or a hired studio or office space.