

Offence

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Journalism that is rigorous, robust and searching may occasionally offend parts of the audience.

This is particularly true with global broadcasters who aim to reflect world affairs as they are and in doing so cover all aspects of human experience.

The bottom line is that journalists must ensure that the material they cover has a clear editorial purpose.

Where that material is likely to offend, there need to be clear signposts warning people of what is coming up.

However, journalists need to be careful that offence is not used to prevent them from digging for stories.

Just because someone is offended doesn't mean the topic should not be investigated.

Television can observe a watershed --- a time set when material which is more graphic and possibly shocking and offensive can be broadcast --- in the UK that is set at 9pm. Online is different, particularly global news sites that are viewed around the world 24x7. Violence

The vulnerable, in particularly children, can be upset by the portrayal of both real and fictional violence . Such content must be clearly labelled.

However, we must not shirk from telling and showing the full impact of a story where real life violence, or its aftermath is an integral part. In cases such as these we need to strike a balance between the demands of accuracy and the dangers of causing distress.

Editorial judgement needs to be used in the following cases:

- violence that is true to life and may also reflect personal experience
- violence in places normally regarded as safe such as the family home, hospitals and schools
- unusual or sadistic methods of inflicting pain, injury or death
- incidents where women and children are the victims
- violence without showing the effect on the victim or the consequences for the perpetrator
- sexual violence
- suicide, attempted suicide or self harm

We should never be seen to condone or glamorise violence or anti-social behaviour. Sex

Journalists have a responsibility to ensure that all material exploring sexual issues is treated sensitively and is editorially justified.

Producers should provide support when online interactive areas encourage teenagers to discuss their problems. This could include addresses of a range of relevant web sites or the phone numbers of authoritative helplines, however we need to always be aware of who is running the helplines and whether they are genuine organisations or not. Language

Judgements about the use of offensive language must be taken in the tone and context of the programme output. Different words cause different degrees of offence in different parts of the world.

Language that causes most offence includes:

- sexual swearwords
- terms of racist abuse
- terms of sexual and sexist abuse or abuse referring to sexuality
- pejorative terms relating to illness or disabilities
- casual or derogatory use of holy names or religious words and especially in combination with other offensive language. Religion & politics

Some will try to limit freedom of expression, and in turn media freedom, but claiming that an investigation offends their religious beliefs.

Here a clear line needs to be drawn. You can offend what people are (size, race, sexual preference etc) because that is what the person is, but it is harder to justify offence when it relates to what people think (beliefs, political persuasions etc).

In all cases, be careful not to be too ready to give up the precious and hard-fought fundamentals of media freedom just because it upsets someone's religious or political beliefs. Portrayal

A media organisation should aim to reflect the needs, concerns, and issues affecting all the people and cultures in its audience. Content may also reflect the prejudice and disadvantage which exist in society but programme makers should be seen to perpetuate it. In all cases they should avoid offensive or stereotypical assumptions. People should only be described in terms of their disability, age, sexual orientation when clearly editorially justified. Alcohol, smoking and drugs

It is never editorially justified to encourage, glamorise or condone the use and abuse of illegal substances. We need to take particular care when the programme item is likely to be seen by children under eighteens. We also need to make sure that all the legal and social aspects of the issue are made clear. Suicide and self-harm

Suicide, attempted suicide and self-harm should be portrayed with great sensitivity. Care must be taken to avoid describing or showing methods in any great detail. The term "commit suicide" is considered offensive by some people. Some prefer the terms "took his life" or "killed herself".

Again, we need to be careful that the vulnerable, particularly children, are not influenced. Scenes that show hanging or attempted suicide must only be used if there is a clear editorial reason and they should not be shown at times when children are likely to be the main audience. Tragic events

Coverage of the aftermath of a tragic event, particularly the anniversaries of rail crashes, bomb blasts or child abductions need considerable sensitivity. We need to balance the news justification with the likely personal suffering of those involved. Children

Children and young people need help making sense of the world in which they live. The challenge for journalists and programme makers is to ensure that they inform without leading or corrupting. Output aimed at the young needs to be challenging, educative, enjoyable and interesting. In all cases we must safeguard the welfare of all who contribute to our output.

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This site has used the BBC's Editorial Guidelines as the basis for these short modules on values and ethics. We sought and were given permission to quote from the guidelines and to develop the themes to the extent that they are no longer

an accurate reflection of the BBC's stance. These guidelines contain a mix of regional experiences and sensitivities which have been used to develop the guidelines and give them local relevance. These pages are not endorsed by the BBC. MHM would like to thank the BBC for allowing us to use its material.