

Your Voice, Your Choice: A Survivor Media Guide

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Introduction - Why A Survivor Media Guide

The voices, faces and stories of survivors of gender-related violence are critical to creating lasting social and legal change — and the media can help us amplify those voices in powerful ways. But how can survivors speaking to the media do so most effectively? What things do you need to consider before agreeing to take part in a journalistic story? How do you weigh the risks versus the rewards of coming forward? What are effective strategies for using *individual* stories to illuminate *systemic* injustices? What new challenges will survivors encounter in our social media-driven world? “Your Voice, Your Choice” was created to help survivors and their allies think through questions like this, while preparing survivors for strategic media engagement.

A desire to speak out is important, but preparation is key. Survivors of rape and abuse can talk about the issue of gender-related violence with unique authority. And for many who have lived through such violence, the act of sharing their stories can be transformative, and even healing. And yet. Speaking publicly about an issue that the world is still largely unwilling to confront can be a harrowing and even re-traumatizing experience. At CounterQuo, we believe that the best way to embark on a media journey that you will not regret is to think through the challenges you may encounter before you come forward. That’s what “Your Voice, Your Choice” is all about.

For additional information that can help you think about and prepare for speaking publicly, we invite you to explore the resources we have highlighted on our website. <http://counterquo.org/resources/>

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I. Whether to Speak to the Media

A. Personal Considerations

Your words will likely live forever. Expect that anything you say or write in any public forum – on video, radio or print – will likely end up on the Internet.

You become accessible to everyone from your past, present and future. Once you are on the Internet, anyone searching your name can find your comments and learn your story. This includes any family member (whom you may not want to tell about the sexual violence you lived through), employers, potential romantic partners, old friends and more. Consider how comfortable you are with having that information and label of you out there for all to see.

Anonymity is not guaranteed. Even if you choose to share your experiences anonymously, those who wish to uncover and expose your identity may be able to. You can become “outed” and will then have to deal with consequences from that.

Anyone can comment on you, your statements and your experiences. Many online forums have comment sections. Along with positive and supportive comments, you may also get negative and nasty comments, even threats against you. These can be quite upsetting.

Your assailant - or friends or acquaintances - may decide to tell their version of the story in public also. Consider that if you tell your story, you may be opening the door for others to dispute your experience, and for there to be a virtual trial.

The media may not be your friend.

“If a journalist were completely honest with a source about what it means to be interviewed for this sort of story, it would go something like this: you are going to tell me about the worst day of your life, because you think there is value in sharing that story with the rest of the world. You need to trust me, but you need to know I am not your friend. I will seem as sympathetic as I can be, but I will also note the exact moment you start crying so I can write about it. I will ask questions that might make you uncomfortable. I will call other people and tell them what you're saying about them. I will open you up to the judgment of the entire world. And then I will walk away. And if you aren't ready to deal with that, you shouldn't talk to me.” - Libby Nelson, vox.com, December 5, 2014

There is no such a thing as a risk-free interview or encounter with the media. There are always risks, even if you are 100% prepared for the interview and the potential consequences. There is an unbreachable power dynamic between the journalist and the interviewee, even though social media has leveled the playing field somewhat.

You will not have full control over how you are portrayed, or even what you say. Journalists will edit your words. They will choose what to share with their audience based on the angle or story they wish to convey. Your message, your point of view, even some facts you relay might not come out as you said or intended them. Even if you are speaking live on television, it is possible that the way you and your experience are portrayed will not feel true, and might even show you in a negative light.

Protecting your emotional, mental and physical health is paramount. On the day of an interview, check in with yourself, and be honest. You will need to decide whether you are in a good enough mental and emotional space to speak to a journalist at any particular time. If you think that talking with a journalist might stir deep emotions and memories that you are not ready to handle or relive at that moment, do not go through with the interview. If you do participate in an interview, consider having a support person with you.

B. Social Media Considerations

Tweeting, posting a picture on Facebook, or Snapchatting with a friend all feel like the most normal of activities to partake in. However, after sexual assault, these social media platforms need to be navigated carefully. Remember, nothing is private on the Internet.

Remaining authentic is key to one's personal 'brand', particularly on social media. There is a delicate balance between your needs and the potential risks associated with being authentic in all spaces. Trust yourself that - depending on where you are in your healing process, the strength of the support networks you have established IRL and online, and legal considerations - social media may become a viable option for your healing at various points in the timeline.

Social media can be a really powerful tool for you in the aftermath of a sexual assault.

Where my peeps at? Talking about the sexual assault and the healing experiences can create a sense of community with others who have experienced similar trauma. Also, an online community can be crucial for those who live in isolated areas or feel isolated in their offline community.

Strength in numbers. Remember learning about participatory democracy? And, remember reading about the variety of movements that created social change? The same can be said about movements that started online or are reinforced online. Your experience, and the sharing of that experience, can help change the law or school policy (e.g. #YesMeansYes.) When more people shatter the silence surrounding sexual violence, more change will happen.

And then there are the watch-outs, because social media may not always be your friend.

Cookies. Screen Shots. Data Mining. When posting anything on social media, be conscious of how quickly items are culled by strangers and, sometimes, those in your social media network. Once tagged, screenshots are easily taken, saved, and shared immediately. Savvy tech people can also assist in data mining your footprints (e.g., cookies) and see what was posted and deleted.

140 characters or less may not be worth it. Even though you may be a native in going to social media to process a triggering event, it may not be the right choice for this event. Your words can be used against you.

Sharing photos may have unintended (negative) consequences. Even if you think you can get a handle on the privacy controls in the social media avenues you have, sharing a photo may pose a risk: it could be used in future litigation. For example, you decide to file a civil protection order (CPO) in your state against the perpetrator. In writing the CPO petition, you state that after the rape, you have been experiencing high levels of anxiety. A few days after the rape, you continue to move on with your life and go to an event, where individuals, including yourself, take pictures of the night. Defense counsel may suggest that you aren't *really* suffering since you can go out a few days after and be at a "party." Fact-finders can be influenced by those pictures, even with a strong argument that survivors of these crimes attempt to move on in different ways.

Threats be thy name. Cyberbullying is real, and if you haven't experienced it before, you may when you use social media to discuss the sexual assault. Online harassment is becoming more and more prevalent, particularly against women who speak out about a multitude of issues, including sexual assault. Much of this harassment targets women as women, and often includes rape-related threats. Even though you may know your network, there's no guarantee that everyone will allow your thoughts to be accessible only through you. A variety of features (RT, "sharing", etc.) allow for those outside of your network potentially to know what you are thinking. And those who disagree with the sentiments may start saying things about you that are hurtful, shaming, blaming, and potentially threatening to you or your family.

There are two resources we strongly recommend you consult before you start speaking publicly. They each provide sound advice on ways to keep you safe(r) online, and how to handle threats, harassment and bullying that might occur.

[Speak Up and Stay Safe\(r\): A Guide to Protecting Yourself From Online Harassment](#). 2015. By Anita Sarkeesian, Jaclyn Friedman, and Renee Bracey Sherman

[Online Abuse: Tactics, Legal Issues, and Impacts of Online Abuse](#). 2016. The Women's Media Center, WMC Speech Project, Ashley Judd and Soraya Chemaly

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C. Legal Considerations

Check with an attorney. If you are currently, have previously, or are even considering starting a disciplinary complaint in your school, an administrative complaint about your school (campus sexual violence survivors), or a civil or criminal lawsuit or protective order (all survivors), please check with an attorney about the advisability of speaking publicly and what you should and shouldn't say. Do this *before* you do an interview or write a piece for publication about the sexual violence you lived through.

The biggest legal risk of speaking in public? You might say something that is, or sounds, inconsistent with something else you've said. If you ever do end up in the legal system, someone may say that your inconsistent statements show that you are lying or making things up.

This doesn't mean you should never speak in public. People understand that reporters can select your words out of context or use them in misleading ways.

You can try to minimize the risk of inconsistency by limiting what you talk about. For instance, if improving your school's response to sexual violence is your goal in speaking out, but a criminal investigation into the assault itself is currently underway, then you may choose to tell reporters you can talk about your school but not the assault.

Think carefully about whether you want to name your assailant(s) publicly. Naming your rapist to anyone in public opens up the possibility that your rapist will sue you for defamation, which can be expensive, time-consuming, and exhausting to fight even if you win. You may decide this is a necessary cost of achieving social justice, or someone else may have named him or her already. But if you have other goals that naming your assailant doesn't achieve, like making other survivors feel less alone, then naming him or her is an unnecessary risk. If you decide not to do it, be careful when providing anyone with documents related to your situation, and be sure to redact any unnecessary names and identifying information from them.

II. How to Speak to the Media

A. Getting Ready

Prepare for your interview. This is homework you really really want to do.

The last thing you ever want is to engage in an interview without being ready to do so. There's usually a very strong correlation between the quality of your preparation and your happiness with the outcome of the interview. (If for some reason the interview occurs on the spot, keep your responses very short, decline to talk, or let the journalist know she caught you in the middle of something, determine her deadline and then make sure you or someone else gets back to her in a timely fashion.)

Before you agree to an interview, do research to get a sense of how your experience might be treated. Find out who the reporter is, how she frames her stories, her way of thinking about sexual violence, and learn to read between the lines. Read, listen or watch the outlet she works for. It's *transparent*: how the journalist thinks will be evident in the reportage. There is no such thing as journalistic objectivity.

Ask the journalist if she knows how the story will be "played." Cover story? What section of the paper/site or segment of TV/radio? A sidebar (if yes, of what other main story?) If part of a larger piece, who else will be interviewed? Who writes the headlines? If online, will there be multimedia? Will the comment section be open? If the comment section is open, will it be moderated? By whom? How the story is played, the prominence it has, can impact your emotional state.

If you do not trust the reporter, the outlet, or anything about the potential experience, don't give the interview. Remember, you decide with whom you share your story. Survivors might need journalists and the media to spread their messages, testimonies, raise awareness, and influence public discourse and policy, but journalists/the media also need survivors for their stories. In this sense, the relationship is more reciprocal than you think. You have agency, never forget this.

You have a right to opt out. If, at any point in the process, even the day of, you feel uncomfortable, you can decline the interview. Even after you speak with a journalist (unless it's a live broadcast), you can decline to have your account used. Ethically, journalists should honor your request. In reality, however, there are some who might not.

Develop a short list of key messages that are most relevant to you. Then list all the questions you can possibly anticipate, including hostile ones, and practice your responses – integrating key messages where appropriate. Practice role-playing with a friend, a family member, your lawyer - someone you trust. Have them ask you difficult and uncomfortable questions. Be prepared for the unexpected.

B. General Interviewing Techniques

Consider an interview as an opportunity to discuss specific issues on your mind.

Instead of merely reacting to the journalist's questions, remember you want to introduce your key messages into the conversation at every credible opportunity. Listen carefully to each question; pause for a beat if you need to. Think about the question, the issue being addressed, and answer with your own words and information.

Try not to give short, reactive answers to questions. Answer each question directly (in a positive way that suits your purposes) and, whenever possible, bridge to your key messages.

Stay way from saying 'I think' or 'I believe' to preface your remarks. They water down the impact of the point you are making and make you seem less confident.

Flag your key messages. Call attention to them with signal phrases like:

- "Something we haven't talked about before..."
- "What's really interesting about all of this is..."
- "What's really important here..."
- "The critical point..."
- "Something I'd like to emphasize..."

When confronted with an uncomfortable question, politely explain why you can't give her specifically what she asked you for. Instead, tell the journalist something you are comfortable revealing (something closely related.) In particular, you can respectfully decline to go into the details of the assault itself if it doesn't advance your key messages or your emotional well-being.

However, don't be evasive and remember never to say "no comment." Don't decline to answer a question unless you explain why you can't respond. Audiences believe that interviewees who say "no comment" have something to hide.

If you don't know the answer to a question, don't guess. Don't be afraid to say "I don't know" and tell the journalist you will try to find out.

Reporters often look for drama and conflict in a story. Consequently, journalists might do more than their share of searching for negative drama and conflict. But reporters will make good use of the positive as well.

III. Interviewing Tips

Most of the time, reporters will ask you straightforward questions to obtain information. But sometimes journalists use different interview techniques to probe an issue and/or to elicit information when you are not providing material that will survive the editing process.

Following are several techniques used by reporters and how to deal with them.

How to Answer a Negative Question When the Reality is Actually Positive

Wrong	Right
Repeating negative or sensational words journalists may use in their questions.	
Q: Are you angry about the jury’s verdict? A: No, I’m not angry.	Q: Are you angry about the jury’s verdict? A: On the contrary... I felt justice was done and most importantly, I hope this encourages other survivors to come forward and... (go on to elaborate)
If you do say that, you could end up reading a headline like: “Rape Victim not Angry.” It’s in the same ballpark as “I’m Not a Crook, insisted Nixon.” The only two words people remember are “Crook” and “Nixon,” even though he was denying it.	There are different ways to enable yourself to respond in the positive to a negative question. The phrase “on the contrary” is valuable as used in the above example – it helps you spring into the positive.
So, don’t respond by denying negative words or phrases. When faced with a general negative, come back with a general positive and bridge to your key messages.	You could also use a word like “actually” or phrases like “the fact is,” “the reality is,” “as a matter of fact” or “quite the opposite” in a similar way.

How to Answer a Negative Question When the Reality is Actually Negative

If a journalist asks a negative question that is specific in nature and the reality is actually negative, coming back with a general positive is not a valid option. It makes you seem evasive and you come across as someone who is not really answering the question. That can antagonize the journalist and alienate your audience.

Wrong	Right
<p>Q: You lost a case where the evidence seemed clearly aligned against the alleged. That has to be very disappointing. A: Actually, the public attention to this case yielded a few good things. For example...</p>	<p>Q: You lost a case where the evidence seemed clearly aligned against the alleged. That has to be very disappointing. A: We're definitely fixing the problems that led to those results in our appeal.</p>
<p>Coming back with a general positive just makes you seem shifty when the question was specific in nature, especially when the journalist knows his or her facts are true.</p>	<p>Come back with a problem/solution response, where you incorporate the problem and the solution in the same brief nutshell. For example, "We've fixed that problem" or "We're fixing that problem" so they can't be easily separated in the editing process. You admit the problem but then focus on the solution for the rest of your answer.</p>
<p>Q: You lost a case where the evidence seemed clearly aligned against the alleged. That has to be very disappointing. A: Yes. We lost the case and it was because of two main problems with the way we approached this. We made a mistake on X and we also dropped the ball when it comes to Y. The good news is we will address both of those problems in our appeal. Here's what we've done...</p>	<p>The benefit of this approach is that you are being forthright. You are not being evasive. You will portray yourself as proactive and dynamic rather than reactive and negative.</p>

Hypothetical/Speculative Questions

As soon as you hear "if" or "what if," you know the journalist is asking you to speculate. Stick to "what is," not "what if." Don't speculate or answer hypothetical questions. The best way to respond is, "It's tough to speculate on hypotheticals and "what if" scenarios, but what I can tell you is..."

When They Expect You to Know Everything

Tell the journalist it's outside your area of expertise and that you'll try to find that information. After the interview, find out and get back to the reporter before their deadline.

Multi-part Questions

When a journalist asks you more than one question at a time, answer the one you want or address the main issue raised.

Nondisclosure Information

Sometimes, journalists ask for secrets or nondisclosure information. Explain why you cannot give specifically what they asked you for and then respond with what you can share. This is something, closely related, that is for public consumption.

Interruptions

If a reporter interrupts you or doesn't let you complete your point, either 1) let her interrupt you and come back to answer the original question later, or 2) stop, listen patiently to the new question and say you'll address it in a moment. For example: "I'll get to that question in a moment, but it's important that I address your previous one first..."

Paraphrasing

The journalist unfairly and incorrectly restates what you say. Don't get angry. Just restate your position clearly. "Jane, I guess I didn't make myself clear..."

Silence

Reporters sometimes use long pauses or silence between questions to encourage you to talk more. Either fill those voids with positive points, or don't say anything at all. Be on guard for this technique and don't feel pressured to say any more than you want to.

Humor

Be careful about using humor. It can backfire when an interviewer quotes you out of context. Best case, people do not understand your wit. Worst case, you truly offend a key audience.

"Off the Record"

Journalists are ethically bound to keep something off the record as long as the interviewee says that the information is off the record *before* offering it. However, like most ethical principles, this is not absolute. Best is to assume that nothing you say is "off the record." Reporters may also quote you even if they're not writing down notes.

If you don't want to read it, hear it or see it, don't say it. In fact, the toughest questions often come near the end or after the interview. Be prepared for the "casual" question after the interview is presumably finished.