



## **Working with the news media: practical tips for investigators**

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## **Introduction**

The aircraft accident investigator is required to be many things as they attempt to identify the causes of accidents, make recommendations for change and inform affected parties such as family members. Their work is usually conducted in confidence and yet simultaneously very much in the public eye. Among the many pressures, especially in the early stages of an investigation, is the need for informing society of progress through the news media. In 2000, David Learmount, Operations Safety Editor for *Flight International* was the Awards Night speaker at the ISASI Seminar held in Shannon. He warned that as far as the news media went, "...it's part of your job to deal with it. It may not have been your job in the past, but it is now – or if it's not, it soon will be. Things are changing, you may have noticed". In the fourteen years since this presentation, the news media has grown beyond 24/7 rolling news coverage and into social media broadcast by anyone and often from the scene of an accident. This provides new opportunities and challenges for an investigation team, which will be discussed in this paper in terms of practical tips.

## **How to decide what interviews you will or won't do**

The news media has an insatiable appetite and although it has the power to educate the travelling public and policymakers alike, the investigator can risk being consumed by demands for interviews or comment. A policy of 'no comment' can help to reduce the demand and control the flow of information. There is no law that says that anyone has to speak to the news media, regardless of the freedoms of the press. However, as Learmount (2001) noted "the one thing they cannot cope with is no information at all. It is a lack of information that causes them to fill the news vacuum with speculation and rumour." This vacuum remains a factor, but the desire for instant news has only increased its strength.

There are many different media organisations ranging from large news agencies or wire services such as Reuters, Associated Press (AP) and Agence France-Presse (AFP) who gather news reports and sell them on to newspapers, magazines, radio and television broadcasters, to freelance journalists who prepare articles for individual publications, blogs or webpages. An interview conducted for the former may be picked up by a variety of customers around the world either in its original form or for further editing. The speed of the internet means that images and video can be shared easily across networks.

Major news stories can lead to fierce competition between networks to increase viewer numbers. CNN was widely criticized for its high level of coverage following the disappearance of Malaysian flight 370, but was rewarded with viewing figures on a par with the 2012 US Presidential election coverage. With a 24-hour news channel to fill, the need for content is huge. This is one of the reasons that interviews with investigators, emergency responders and operators are often supplemented by survivors, politicians, technical experts and industry commentators. Even when the first choice of the investigator in charge has been

achieved, the demand for variety and sheer volume of news leads to what can be a bizarre array of experts and enthusiastic amateurs.

The selection of some of these so-called experts can seem bewildering to trained investigators, especially when 'veteran' is used to describe someone who is 'old' and 'qualified' can simply mean 'attended a course'. Some will volunteer their services to media organisations; some work for a fee and some will do it out of a sense of professional duty.

Certain media organisations have greater reach than others. BBC's global news service, for example, reaches 256 million people each week (BBC, 2013) using radio, television, internet and foreign language channels; CNN International is broadcast in more than 200 countries. The demographics of who is tuning in are significant too. Programmes may have smaller audiences, but carry greater influence because of the type of people watching or are broadcast in countries related to the accident. The style of the news they carry tends to reflect this, which is a factor in deciding which interviews to accept.

Although large media organisations may appear to be in direct competition, some will share or syndicate their coverage. Therefore an interview that is initially for, say, BBC News could also be on-sold and broadcast by ABC in Australia, CBC in Canada and so on. A clip can be edited into a 'new' news package, which means that the context can change with little or no control for the interviewee. A news package is rarely, if ever, shown to the contributor before broadcast and in some cases is still being edited as the news bulletin commences, so it would be unrealistic to think that an investigator can check content. Even recorded interviews are rarely shown to participants for editorial approval, except perhaps for longer lead-time documentary projects such as 'Air Crash Investigation'.

A specialist with media knowledge can be a huge help to a large investigation organisation in terms of fielding and prioritising interview requests, agreeing ground rules and being ready to interrupt a recorded interview if an answer is going badly. (It is far better to spoil an answer as you start to deviate than it is to complete the sentence and ask to record it again. Editors have a nasty habit of 'accidentally' using the wrong answer.) A specialist would be able to advise which programmes have the greatest influence or at least what the audience is likely to be. For example, in the UK an interview on the Today Programme (BBC Radio 4) will be a very serious and probing discussion and if scheduled for 0810 is the main story for the day. In contrast, an interview on the Drive programme (BBC Radio 5Live) at 1700 will be a more general discussion with questions such as 'why is a black box called a black box?'

### **Tricks and traps employed by the news media**

As one news agency picks up a story, others will be trying to find their unique angle, competing not only against the formal media, but also social networking, forums and the wider web. Indeed, the first notification and images from

accidents are appearing on social media platforms such as Twitter before the 'professionals' even know there is an event.

Forums such as the PPRuNe – the professional pilots rumour network provide a valuable source of information following an accident, even if to the educated reader, much of what is written is of apparently dubious quality. It is used by journalists as a way of gaining background information and leads as well as checking facts with an 'educated' audience. For example, in 2008 when the BBC received phone calls from various staff at Heathrow Airport to say that aircraft were not taking off and there were a lot of vehicles driving fast with flashing blue lights, a producer posted a message on PPRuNe asking for information (see image 1). In return, he started to receive information and later, pictures from the scene which began to inform the story. Other journalists who were less willing to share their identity started to ask deliberately leading questions in order to tease out information. For example, one asked whether it was true that there had been multiple birdstrikes only for various experts to respond with snippets of evidence.

The investigator need not concern themselves with the rumours of forums (although some will find themselves featured in the discussion), but if resources allow, they can be the source of information or at least images that may not be available elsewhere. Some of these images may be relatively transient. For example, images that appeared of the British Airways 777 that landed short at Heathrow on [www.heathrowpix.com](http://www.heathrowpix.com) and which were used by the BBC news, disappeared soon after. The BBC had tried to get permission to use the images, which were taken inside the cordon, but having failed to receive a response in a reasonable timescale, decided to do so without permission – as their code of conduct allows them to do. After the images had been broadcast, the owner contacted them to ask them not to do so again and swiftly shut down the site, presumably when they realized that they could be traced and should not have been taken or distributed in the first place.

777 heathrow accident ... A wing and a prayer T... BA B777 Incident @ Hea...

**PPRuNe**  
Professional Pilots  
Rumour Network

**PARAMOUNT**  
AVIATION RESOURCES GROUP  
FLIGHT CREW LEASING  
AND RECRUITING SERVICES  
CAPTAINS NEEDED!

(Include up to 13 months FREE accommodation)

PPRuNe Forums > Flight Deck Forums > Rumours & News  
**BA B777 Incident @ Heathrow (merged)**

Welcome, Groovy.  
You last visited: 8th February 2008 at 1  
Private Messages: Unread 0, Total 0.

User CP PPRuNe Email FAQ Calendar Advertise New Posts Search Quick Links Log

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17th January 2008, 12:58

**shoey1976**  
Join Date: Feb 2007  
Location: London, UK  
Age: 32  
Posts: 74

**BA B777 Incident @ Heathrow (merged)**  
we're receiving tipoffs of something going on at LHR. anybody know anything?  
thanks  
Ian Shoesmith  
BBC News  
020 8624 9505  
[ian.shoesmith@bbc.co.uk](mailto:ian.shoesmith@bbc.co.uk)

Ads by Google  
**International Students**  
professional pilot program, CPL DGCA

Figure 1 – BBC news producer request for information via PPRUNE

## The merits of live versus pre-recorded interviews

An interview or press conference delivered live is a daunting experience for anyone including investigators who may have limited experience in front of a camera / microphone, will be focused on other things and who can compromise an investigation if they share incorrect or privileged information. A live interview would seem to offer little control over what is asked and a hesitation in reacting to a question can be enough to provide 'an answer'.

This can be balanced out, particularly in the case of a one-to-one interview by a prior discussion with the presenter or researcher about which questions will be asked. It may well be that the investigator can manage expectations about questions that will definitely not be answered, but equally journalists may say that the question will stand and that they understand that the investigator will not be able to give them exactly what they want. A good example would be that the presenter may ask if the investigator knows the cause of the accident, but they would expect them to say that it is too early to tell or that information cannot be shared until certain people have been informed. Another trick is to let the interviewee know most, but not all of the questions that will be asked. For example, they brief four questions and then ask five with the last being the stinging question after the interviewee has settled in to the first four. This could be a question designed to entrap or at least surprise the interviewee such as 'what is the similarity between this and X previous event' or 'were you aware that an eye witness saw Y'?

All of the techniques that an investigator may use to gain information from witnesses can be applied and with that comes all of the bad techniques that can taint a witness. Leading questions, multiple questions and uncomfortable silences all help to create news, even if it is not necessarily accurate. Nonsensical or ignorant questions may be a deliberate technique to provoke an interviewee into a response or may simply be because the interviewer does not understand the field. In a live interview in front of an audience of approximately 7 million regarding the fan cowl detachment which occurred to a British Airways A319 in May 2013, the author was faced with the first question "Someone stuffed up didn't they?". Having explained that in a safe system like aviation there are several checks that would have had to be missed for an event like this to occur, the presenter responded "So several people stuffed up?". Undeterred, the author went on to explain that if people had made errors or committed violations then the investigation would want to determine whether this was because of poor procedures, design and so on. The response from the presenter; "So you're saying that Airbus stuffed up?" Remaining impartial, dispassionate and evidenced is hard under such cross-examination, but not impossible if the investigator is prepared and has thought about the message they want to deliver. It may also lead an investigator to wonder "why bother" which is why it is important to choose interviews carefully.

Depending on the nature of the occurrence, a media or press conference is the most effective way to provide information to multiple news networks and formats simultaneously. However, the number of people involved can become huge, especially when radio, television, print and online media gather together. As Figure 2 from the NTSB press conference regarding Asiana flight 214 in 2014 shows, a press conference may involve dozens of people all wanting a clear view, power, telephone network and possibly an internet connection. Such a cohort of people are capable of becoming 'lost on the way to the toilet' or other such euphemisms for wandering around the building in pursuit of a scoop. They need to be well managed and it is best to assume that they want a better story than any of their colleagues.



Figure 2 – NTSB Chair, Deborah Hersman briefs the media about Asiana flight 214

If the investigator would like their press conference to be delivered live then they should consider the timing carefully. Some journalists advocate the ‘plus 3 rule’ whereby a press conference timed to begin at exactly three minutes past the hour can be broadcast right from its start. The logic being that as new bulletins go out on the hour, include time for headlines and the backstory to the main news item, it is then possible to “...go live to X where the investigation team are about to give a press conference”.

### **Understanding what angle is likely to be taken**

By its very nature, most news is not predictable. However, certain events are anticipated and planned for as the basis of the news. For example, anniversaries of significant events, the release of reports, manifestos, financial results and new products or sporting occasions. News organisations will research and prepare for these events and have enough content to deliver news bulletins without the need for breaking news. As new stories emerge, so coverage will shift and stories will be dropped. This can mean that a big story one day will not feature on another, or that a story remains prominent because of a ‘slow news day’. For example, in the UK, the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the fatal accident at Kegworth was 8<sup>th</sup> January 2014 and early morning stories and interviews about the accident were subsequently dropped when the Inquiry into the fatal shooting of Mark Duggan gave its findings. (Mark Duggan had been shot by police in 2011 which led to the worst riots in modern British history)

Accidents involving local operators, those which carry strong images or those that link to other events make particularly interesting news. The number of lives lost is not necessarily a good indicator as lives lost in road accidents, for example, do not compare with a small number or indeed no lives lost in a

spectacular aircraft accident, as the British Airways 777 event at Heathrow in 2008 proved. When an EC135 helicopter crashed in Glasgow in November 2013, it followed five accidents in four years in the Scottish North Sea and a fatal helicopter accident in Vauxhall, Central London. Stories posted on internet news pages included links to previous accidents and speculation about the operator (who had been involved in 3 of the previous accidents) and manufacturer (who had been involved in 5). Whilst these factors are beyond the investigator's control, they provide an indication of how interest can develop in a particular story.

### **Avoiding becoming the scandalous sound bite**

According to Wikipedia, "... a sound bite is characterised by a short phrase or sentence that captures the essence of what the speaker was trying to say, and is used to summarize information and entice the reader or viewer." The open source encyclopedia also acknowledges "Due to its brevity, the sound bite often overshadows the broader context in which it was spoken, and can be misleading or inaccurate. The insertion of sound bites into news broadcasts or documentaries is open to manipulation, leading to conflict over journalistic ethics."

The sound bite may be delivered unintentionally – a slip of the tongue or as an instant reaction to an unexpected or unreasonable question. It can also be something that is not only intentional, but designed to be helpful. For example, from the Air France 447 wreckage search; "It's like trying to find a shoe box in an area the size of Paris, at a depth of three thousand metres and in a terrain as rugged as the Alps," said navy spokesman Hugues du Plessis d'Argentre". Another example from the same investigation; "The French air accident agency BEA has said that the jet's speed probes, made by French firm Thales, gave false readings and were "one of the factors" in the crash but "not the sole cause"."

Investigators should bear in mind that a sound bite can be part of a sentence and as such there is the risk that a carefully edited half sentence can mean something quite different. For example, the quote "accident investigation is not my area of expertise" from David Learmount carries a different meaning to the original sentence "accident investigation is not my area of expertise, so what can I offer that's any use to specialists like you" and the context that he was deferring to an assembled audience of accident investigators! Similarly, Deborah Hersman's comments following the Asiana 214 accident were not without problems as she reportedly used the phrase "... so we can hit the ground running." (which was tweeted with the hashtags #gaffe #SFO) and "we don't know what the pilots were thinking." which can be interpreted differently depending on where the reader places their emphasis. It is very easy to create news unintentionally if someone else wishes to play with the words.



## **What the technology is doing to news**

Rolling news coverage, 'breaking news' streamers and more recently the popularity of Twitter exacerbates the sound bite culture. With 140 characters, the latter is designed for sound bites and with the use of hashtags (#) can connect news from numerous sources. Passengers and first responders alike seem compelled to broadcast news from the scene of an accident as the tweet in figures three and four show.

Again, although unlikely to be high on the investigator's list of priorities, a search of relevant hashtags, youtube or instagram keyword can yield images or videos that otherwise would be unavailable. Indeed, this can include content that is not deemed appropriate for broadcast by the mainstream media as was illustrated by the tweeting of images of passports from those killed aboard Malaysian flight 17 in July 2014.



I just crash landed at SFO. Tail ripped off. Most everyone seems fine. I'm ok. Surreal...

— **David Eun** at **San Francisco International Airport (SFO)** (Airport)

Figure 3 – passenger tweet from the scene of the Asiana flight 214 accident



Figure 4 – firefighter helmet camera view of Asiana flight 214 accident

As an illustration of the power of this network, in the first four days following the disappearance of Malaysian flight 370, an artificial intelligence tool (AIDR) scanned for English-language tweets using the keywords/hashtags: Malaysia Airlines flight, #MH370 #PrayForMH370 and #MalaysiaAirlines - it recorded well over 850,000 tweets.

According to Wexler (2014) “...the moment when Twitter was truly cemented in history occurred five years ago when US Airways Flight 1549 was forced to make an abrupt landing in the Hudson River, and the first news "reporting" came from Jānis Krūms, a rescuer who took a picture of the passengers standing on the wings of the plane and shared on Twitter as fellow rescuers were heading towards the plane.” Indeed, BBC News found out about the accident initially because one of its staff received a tweet from a friend on a New York ferry that was diverted to pick up survivors.

The NTSB used Twitter extensively following the crash of Asiana flight 214, posting 86 tweets between 6<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> July. During this time @NTSB followers went from just over 20,000 to 40,000. According to NTSB’s Director of Public Affairs, Kelly Nantel, “We try as hard as we can to deliver timely, factual information as quickly and as widely as possible. We have found this to be successful in helping the media and community stay informed about rapidly changing events.” (Twitter, 2014) News agencies such as CNN then used the twitter feed as a source of information, photos and video.

Whilst this was regarded by many as a success story in terms of fast dissemination of news from the investigation it also opened up the opportunity for misinterpretation or concerns about the information that was being shared so early in an investigation. The difficult balance is between confirming things that are clear to all versus taking the time to be methodical and avoid the risk of releasing privileged information. In a system that is built in trust such as aircraft accident investigation, care must be taken to ensure that this is not lost in the rush to share information

## **How not to look like an idiot whilst avoiding speculation**

To be considered a credible expert does not mean speculating or sharing privileged information. Some journalists will attempt to befriend their expert by deferring to their great expertise and suggesting that "...surely they would know exactly what has happened?" It is easy to be drawn into agreeing or offering an insight which, in the cold light of day, was little more than guesswork. Comments such as "Aviation consultant X said he understood the pilot was very skilled, so mechanical causes might be to blame" are not based on evidence and can create unnecessary anguish for family and friends.

An investigator who has a clear message, comes across as credible (which may include how they are dressed, what they say and how they say it) and who understands the limits of what they are able or willing to say need not fear the news media. It is far better to say less or acknowledge that they do not know the answer than it is to try and guess the right answer or work solely on probabilities. Fellow investigators will understand that speculation is unhelpful, against the ISASI code of ethics and likely to damage the trust in the profession. However, a wall of silence when there are facts that can be shared can also start to erode the credibility of the experts. Where a vacuum exists, others will fill it so a strategy for what can be shared can start well before an occurrence.

Simple information about what will happen next; who will be involved; and how long will the process take are of value to the news media and their viewers. The 'message' may be that a professional agency is there to do its job and can be relied upon to find the correct answer and recommend sensible changes within a reasonable timescale.

Finally, it is worth remembering that there is no such thing as 'off the record'. Such information supplied to a journalist will be interpreted as 'please use this information, but please don't use my name'. A journalist is never off duty and the bars and lifts of the investigators' hotel remain a hunting ground for eavesdropped comments. Long-range lenses and microphones are increasingly capable and even if the investigator has no intention or authority to act as a spokesperson, an unguarded comment or even facial expression may be enough to make the news. Modern news is omnipresent with every smartphone and e-mail account owner a potential newsgatherer and as Learmount said back in 2000, "it's part of your job to deal with it."

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