



## GOOD PRACTICES FOR ADDRESSING COMMUNICATION WITH THE MEDIA FOLLOWING AIRCRAFT ACCIDENTS

(version 1, 25 October 2023)

### Introduction

1. Before navigating to the intricate landscape of media relations following aircraft accidents, it is important to recognise that communication demands a nuanced approach, distinguishing between fatal accidents involving commercial airlines and those within the realm of general aviation. This guidance material will equip you with the insights, strategies, and good practices necessary to manage public perception, maintain transparency, and uphold the integrity of the safety investigation, ensuring that accurate information is disseminated while respecting the unique sensitivities of each context.
2. In the event of an aircraft accident, communicating with the media requires careful planning and execution. The way information is shared can have a significant impact on the aircraft accident victims and their families, and on the public perception of the occurrence, with potential risks for the image and reputation of the accident investigation authority and other stakeholders involved in the safety investigations.
3. Addressing media communication following aircraft accidents is the focus of one of the recommendations arising from the ICAO Symposium on Assistance to Aircraft Accident Victims and their Families (AAAVF 2021) held from 1 to 3 December 2021 at Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, Spain<sup>1</sup>.
4. In the aftermath of an aircraft accident, it is essential to communicate effectively with the media to ensure the accuracy of the information provided and maintain public trust in the aviation industry and accident investigation authorities. A well-planned and executed communication strategy can go a long way in minimising negative publicity and ensuring that the facts are reported in a timely and accurate manner.
5. This document considers good practices for addressing communication with the media following aircraft accidents and provides in the **Appendix** a series of good practices and recommendations on how to handle media inquiries, how to balance transparency with confidentiality, and how to ensure that the investigation's integrity is maintained throughout the communication process.

### Discussion

6. Accident safety investigations are essential in identifying the causes of aircraft accidents and preventing similar future occurrences. However, when conducting such an

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<sup>1</sup> Recommendation No 2 on "providing guidance on how to address communication media when an accident occurs and how to continue providing verified, on-time information for public release, while protecting the investigation process".

investigation, it is important for accident investigation authorities to consider the newsworthiness of the event and the level of media interest that it generates.

7. The communication aspect and the media relationship should be covered from the first minute of the accident, because wrong information can affect the basis of family assistance, such as the notification of the involvement of each responsible authority (e.g., airport, airline, civil aviation authority, accident investigation authority etc.). This could lead to psychological trauma with the effect of even exacerbating an already difficult situation.

8. Typically, media interest will be higher in the first two days following the accident. However, the level of media interest and coverage can vary depending on the specific circumstances of the occurrence (e.g., location, number of victims and their nationalities, circumstances of the accident), some accidents having "higher media profile" than others. When there are significant casualties or if a well-known public figure is involved, media interest is often high, leading to increased public scrutiny and pressure on the accident investigation authorities to provide updates and information. In such cases, it is essential for the authorities to manage the flow of information carefully and communicate with the media in a timely and accurate manner.

9. At the same time, authorities must also consider the expectations of other involved parties, including the aircraft accident victims and their families, airline and aircraft manufacturer representatives, and other stakeholders. They must balance the need to provide information with the need to protect the privacy and dignity of those involved in the accident.

10. In instances involving high-profile or major accidents, it is imperative to uphold communication authority and speak with "one voice". Despite the substantial proliferation of information (especially on TV and on social media), maintaining a calm and trustworthy, professional approach, without leaving room for speculations or fake news, would be essential to ensure the effectiveness of media communication. Particular attention should be given on how to convince the public that the most accurate information is provided by the official spokespersons.

11. In some cases, because of the high media pressure, the responsible authorities might want to release as much information as possible. However, an uncoordinated approach might lead to miscommunication that could have a negative impact on the victims and their families. It would therefore be a good practice that, whenever possible, a single communication officer be appointed, who would be responsible to coordinate in advance with the other communication officers from the involved authorities, and to implement a plan on sharing specific information at the several stages after the accident and during the investigation.

12. Effective communication during an aircraft accident investigation requires clear communication objectives that are flexible and adaptable to the different stages of the safety investigation. These objectives will likely evolve as the investigation progresses, depending on the information gathered and the stakeholders' needs.

### **Communicating with media**

13. In the early stages of the safety investigation, when investigators are on the accident site gathering evidence, the communication objective may be as simple as reassuring the public that an independent investigation is underway to understand what has happened and why. Focus during this phase should also be on explaining the investigation process. In most circumstances, the authorities would not be able to disclose sensitive or confidential details, so focusing on the process is essential. This is important

for maintaining public confidence in the aviation industry and demonstrating the authorities' commitment to safety.

14. As the investigation progresses and more information becomes available, the communication objectives may become more specific. For example, the objective may be to explain the findings of the investigation and, if available, the safety recommendations made based on those findings. This is critical for ensuring that the public understands what happened and why and what steps are being taken to prevent the occurrence of similar accidents in the future.

15. The communication objectives may focus on ensuring that the media reports on the wider systemic findings of the investigation rather than just focusing on the actions of the aircraft crew. Also, judicial authorities would be able to provide answers on specific responsibilities or liabilities, whereas the accident investigation authorities would focus on the causes of the accident, technical findings and safety recommendations issued in the safety investigation reports. This is important for providing a comprehensive understanding of the circumstances and factors that contributed to the accident and identifying areas for improvement in safety practices.

### **Communicating with aircraft victims and their families**

16. In addition to communicating with the media, it is equally important for accident investigation authorities to communicate effectively with the accident victims and their families. During such a difficult and emotional time, it is critical to provide regular updates and clear and factual information to the families about the progress of the investigation and any new developments.

17. A good practice for communication with accident victims and their families would be to assign a dedicated family liaison officer to act as a point of contact and provide regular updates on the investigation's progress.

18. Also, it is important to communicate with the families in a sensitive and compassionate manner, taking into account their cultural and religious beliefs, as well as any language barriers that may exist. By communicating effectively with the accident victims and their families, accident investigation authorities can demonstrate their commitment to supporting those affected by the accident and ensuring that they are informed about the investigation's progress.

19. To achieve these objectives, it is important for accident investigation authorities to establish a clear communication plan that outlines the key messages and stakeholders to be addressed at each stage of the investigation. The plan should also identify the appropriate communication channels, to ensure that the information is disseminated effectively and efficiently.

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## APPENDIX

### GOOD PRACTICES FOR ADDRESSING COMMUNICATION WITH THE MEDIA FOLLOWING AIRCRAFT ACCIDENTS

#### Communication planning

1. When planning communications, the following practices should be taken into consideration:
  - a) *Identify who* from the accident investigation authority will communicate with each stakeholder group, including victims and their relatives, government officials, state authorities, and the media.
  - b) *Plan the timing of the communications*, especially when communicating with aircraft accident victims and their families. Relatives should receive information from the accident investigation authority before it is released to the media. This may not always be possible in the early stages of an investigation, but it should be considered when releasing interim reports, and it is mandatory when releasing final reports. For major accidents, it could be a good practice to establish a fixed schedule to provide updates to the press in order to avoid being overflown with questions.
  - c) *Show empathy and compassion* when communicating with aircraft accident victims and their families. Listen to their concerns and address them respectfully and transparently.
  - d) *Be transparent and truthful* in all communications with the media and other stakeholders. Provide accurate information and avoid speculation or assumptions. It is very important to avoid expressions that can lead to open-ended, rushed and/or subjective interpretations by the media and public.
  - e) *Train spokespersons* to communicate effectively and handle challenging questions with confidence.
  - f) *Monitor social media* channels and respond promptly to questions or concerns from the public.
  - g) *Avoid making insensitive comments* that could offend accident victims and their families or other stakeholders.
  - h) *Provide regular updates* to all stakeholders to keep them informed of the investigation's progress and any findings.
  - i) *Ensure consistency of information* across all stakeholder groups. The information conveyed should be the same, to avoid confusion and misinformation, even if the key messages or the communication channels might be different, with the purpose of addressing different public. Any additional classified information provided to government officials should be clearly marked with the appropriate security classification.

## Choosing the communication channels

2. It is important to publish only information that can be publicly disclosed, and this should be done by using one main communication channel. All other channels then serve as feeders. Thus, it is not necessary to manage all communication channels individually. Finally, three basic rules for crisis communication should be followed: talk the walk, walk the talk, and talk the talk.

3. By using the communication channels effectively, accident investigation authorities can ensure that all stakeholders are kept informed about the investigation's progress and findings, and that their concerns and questions are addressed appropriately:

- a) *Press releases:* These are formal statements provided to the media and the wider public to provide updates on the investigation's progress and findings.
- b) *Media briefings:* These are formal meetings held with the media to provide updates on the investigation's progress and findings, answer questions and address concerns.
- c) *Social media updates:* These are updates provided through social media platforms such as Twitter to provide real-time information and engage with the wider public.
- d) *Dedicated website/webpage:* Creating a dedicated website or a dedicated page to the website to provide information on the investigation's progress and findings, including background information on the aircraft and crew, a timeline of events, contact points, and frequently asked questions.
- e) *Family liaison officer:* This is a point of contact appointed specifically for the victims and their families to provide regular updates on the investigation's progress and address their concerns and questions. The liaison officer should be trained in crisis communication and have the necessary skills to communicate effectively with the families and address their concerns and questions.
- f) *Phone calls:* These are direct communication channels that can be used to provide updates to the victims and their families and address their concerns.
- g) *Email updates:* These are written updates that can be sent to the victims and their families to provide regular information on the investigation's progress.
- h) *In-person meetings:* These are face-to-face meetings that can be arranged with the victims and their families to provide updates and address their concerns.
- i) *Translation services:* These are services that can be provided to ensure that language and cultural barriers are overcome when communicating with victims and their families.

4. The choice of communication channels will depend on the specific circumstances of the accident and the preferences of the stakeholders involved. However, it is important for accident investigation authorities to establish a clear communication plan that identifies the most appropriate channels for each stage of the investigation and ensures that all stakeholders are kept informed.

## **Media trainings**

5. Media training is essential for investigators who may be approached by the media near accident sites, even if they are not designated spokespersons. It helps investigators to convey key messages effectively and manage potentially difficult or sensitive questions from journalists. Ultimately, effective media training helps investigators to communicate key information clearly and accurately to the public and media, ensuring transparency and trust in the investigation process.

6. Training should cover topics such as body language, tone of voice, and message delivery to ensure investigators come across as confident and credible in media interviews. Some tips for media interviews may include being concise, staying on message, avoiding speculation or conjecture, and maintaining a calm and professional demeanour.

7. The goal of media training is to equip investigators with the skills and knowledge needed to communicate effectively with the media and protect the integrity of the investigation.

8. Basic media training should be provided to all investigators to ensure they are prepared to say a few words to the media, if necessary. Nominated spokespersons should receive specific media training to prepare for interviews or press briefings.

## **Guidelines for spokespersons**

9. The spokesperson has a special responsibility for maintaining a continuous and coherent dialogue with the media, and therefore needs to have theoretical and practical knowledge in the field of communication, to have or to develop appropriate skills of a good communicator.

10. Spokespersons should:

- a) Have a thorough knowledge of the organisation and functioning of the accident investigation authority and the specific activities of each department within it.
- b) Present information in an accessible way and avoid technical language or professional jargon that may be difficult for the public to understand.
- c) Understand and anticipate the expectations of the media representatives and structure responses effectively.
- d) Answer questions correctly, completely, safely, and firmly by thoroughly documenting and mastering the accident investigation authority's field of activity.
- e) Avoid "no comment" reactions and acknowledge honestly if information is not immediately available with an indication of when it will be provided. If there is an imperative legal prohibition in force, such as the prohibition to disclose sensitive/confidential information or personal data, explain that it cannot be provided.
- f) Avoid entering into controversy with journalists and maintain a calm and professional demeanour, even when difficult or uncomfortable questions are asked.

- g) Coordinate the activity of making press kits, press releases, press statements, and other materials for the press released by the accident investigation authority.
- h) Inspire confidence with a pleasant voice, balanced intonation, clear diction, and empathetic body language to emphasize the ideas from transmitted messages, and create a good relationship with journalists.
- i) Show readiness to provide the media with required information even outside of working hours, but manage relationships with journalists respectfully to avoid being requested for non-urgent information or data that can be easily obtained from the accident investigation authority's official website or requires laborious documentation.<sup>2</sup>
- j) Develop a broad network of contacts with specialised press beforehand, so there is an atmosphere of trust between the journalists and spokespersons during crisis situations. If one tries to create this trust during the crisis, it is too late and a very difficult to accomplish.

### **Communication with the media in case of a major/high profile accident**

11. A major or high-profile aircraft accident is an event that captures widespread attention from the media and the public due to its severity, the number of fatalities or injuries, or the involvement of high-profile individuals. In such cases, the media coverage is often intense, and the public interest is high.

12. Communication with the media is essential in the aftermath of a major or high-profile aircraft accident. Effective communication can help to provide accurate and timely information, address concerns and questions. However, poor communication or misinformation can exacerbate the situation, increase anxiety and confusion, and damage the reputation of the organisations involved.

13. Therefore, it is very important to have a well-prepared communication strategy and to ensure that all involved parties are properly trained to communicate with the media. This strategy should prioritize timely, accurate, and consistent information. Additionally, it is essential to establish clear lines of communication and to designate specific individuals or teams to handle different aspects of the communication process.

14. With particular reference to a major/high-profile aviation accident, the following procedures could be considered good practices when communicating with the media:

- a) A crisis communication team should be established. It usually consists of the head of the accident investigation authority and/or, in the case of a multimodal authority, the head of its aviation branch and the head of the press/communication department.
- b) Depending on the type of occurrence (or the aircraft involved) the crisis communication team may also include the investigator-in-charge (IIC) and/or other investigators with specific knowledge or skills.
- c) The head of the accident investigation authority and/or, in the case of a multimodal authority, the head of its aviation branch will usually be the spokesperson and will be supported by the head of press/communication

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<sup>2</sup> European Civil Aviation Conference (ECAC), *Communication best practice for safety investigation authorities (SIAs)*, November 2019

department and by investigators with specific skills (normally the IIC). However, the role of the spokesperson may be delegated to the IIC, who will receive operational and behavioural instructions to interface with the media.

- d) The crisis communication team prepares the information content and the manner in which it will be released to the media.
- e) The accident investigation authority should establish contacts with the communication officers of the other authorities involved.
- f) The accident investigation authority, if required by the circumstances, participates in finding a local site for media contact (e.g., a site for the press at the accident location or a site for the press where media briefings, media interviews or press conferences might be organised); the area identified must not hamper the operational activities directly related to the aircraft crash.
- g) It is preferable to hold press conferences in coordination with other involved entities (e.g., civil aviation authority, prosecutors, police, civil protection, fire services, airport/aerodrome representatives etc.) within their respective competences.
- h) If possible, inform all the media at the same time.
- i) The news released during the press conference should be immediately published on the official website of the accident investigation authority.<sup>3</sup>

### **Final considerations**

15. Communication with different stakeholders (e.g., government authorities, media, accident victims and their families) must be coherent and consistent, taking into account their different expectations.

16. Breaking news of an aviation accident will usually appear first in social media, even before the accident investigation authority is officially notified, so it is necessary to be prepared to respond immediately.

17. Poor communication with the media or victims/families can worsen a crisis or even cause it, so it must be handled carefully.

18. Refusing or failing to communicate information to the media can harm the image of the accident investigation authority, management reputation, can boost media speculation and even put at risk the investigation activities.

19. While it needs to be acknowledged that no authority can control the release of information or speculation on the part of others, it can and should concentrate on controlling the release of its own information.

20. Statements made by the spokesperson, particularly in public settings, will be understood as representing the official stance of the organisation.

21. As soon as possible after an aircraft accident, a representative of the accident investigation authority should issue a press statement, providing the preliminary information that can be shared with the public (e.g., date and hour of the accident,

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<sup>3</sup> European Civil Aviation Conference (ECAC), *Communication best practice for safety investigation authorities (SIAs)*, November 2019



location, aircraft type, fatalities/serious injuries, etc.) and announcing when the next update will be provided. This will help limit media speculation that could jeopardize the investigation and put pressure on other authorities involved.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> European Civil Aviation Conference (ECAC), *Communication best practice for safety investigation authorities (SIAs)*, November 2019.