

Shock/ Value

A MEDIA GUIDE
FOR
ETHICAL
ENGAGEMENT
WITH CULT
SURVIVORS

CENTERING CULT SURVIVORS IN THE CONVERSATION

For many years, media portrayals of cults have focused on shock - relying on tropes that obscure the realities of coercive control. These narratives may generate attention but often ignore or distract from the systemic, ongoing nature of harm.

Survivors face long-term impacts, often compounded by the way our stories are extracted or distorted for entertainment. When experiences are reduced to spectacle, the result can be re-traumatisation, loss of agency, and distorted public understanding. These portrayals silence the voices most needed to guide reform.

Shock/Value is a survivor-informed guide for journalists, content creators, policymakers, and researchers. It outlines core principles for ethical engagement and offers practical tools to support respectful, accurate, and constructive storytelling.

PRINCIPLES FOR ETHICAL ENGAGEMENT

1. Do No Further Harm

Trauma-aware storytelling avoids re-traumatisation and prioritises survivor wellbeing. Ethical engagement respects boundaries, avoids sensationalism, and upholds dignity.

Survivor stories are not public property.

2. Make sure the survivor is supported

Every survivor has a story worth telling. Their story has also likely come at a deeply personal cost. Media exposure can bring up old trauma. There are survivor groups, advocacy bodies and therapists they can connect with for support before and after the fact.

Supported survivors are safe survivors.

3. Manage Expectations

Is this interview aimed at raising awareness, pushing for change, exposing current harms, or something else? Communicate your audience, angle and likely outcomes with the survivor so they know what to expect, and what not to expect.

Disclosing intent can avoid disappointment.

4. Centre Survivor Expertise, Not Just Experience

Survivors are more than sources of trauma. They can be experts in coercive systems and in recovery. Ethical practice means engaging survivors as peers, not subjects.

Lived experience is not supplementary, it's central.

5. Prioritise Accuracy Over Entertainment

Tropes about “cults” may draw interest, but they obscure how group-based coercive control actually works. Responsible storytelling communicates nuance, context, and systems of harm.

Shock without insight misinforms the public.

6. Contextualise Harm as Systemic, Not Fringe

Cultic abuse is not limited to fringe spiritual groups. It is embedded in a diverse range of settings, in ideological, relational, and institutional dynamics. Ethical stories reflect this breadth.

Coercive control is not rare; it is patterned, cumulative domination often hidden in plain sight.

7. Treat Consent as a Process

Informed consent is ongoing. Survivors must understand how their words will be used, have space to revise or withdraw, and retain the right to say no at any stage.

Consent doesn't end once the mic is on.

8. Avoid Exploitation

Journalists and content creators hold power. Ethical practice requires recognising this and ensuring survivors are not tokenised, extracted, or platformed without support.

The story is not more important than the person telling it and their right to wellbeing and safety.

9. Ensure Accountability and Aftercare

Storytelling doesn't end at publication. Survivors deserve a say in how their stories are edited, titled, and followed up.

Ethical storytelling includes debrief, follow-up, and space for correction.

10. Avoid Both-Siderism

While there is a journalistic obligation towards factual reporting, cults may use 'right of reply' to silence, invalidate, or ridicule survivors and to push their own message. This may be harmful minimisation at best, or dishonest and traumatising at work. Approach this carefully.

Cults can continue to abuse survivors even after they leave.

11. Reflect Diversity

There is no single way to survive, speak, or heal. Some survivors are still processing, some don't use the word "cult", and many navigate intersecting forms of marginalisation.

Ethical storytelling makes space for many truths, not just familiar ones.

FRAMING AND LANGUAGE USE

How a story is framed matters. Language can inform, but it can also distort, reinforce stigma, or further entrench harmful tropes. This section outlines core considerations for language and framing when reporting on cultic abuse, coercive groups, and survivor experiences.

Use language that respects complexity

Focus less on labels or *belief-based* frames (e.g. “cult,” “sect,” “extremist”) unless relevant to legal or organisational context. Instead, emphasise *behaviours*, patterns of coercive control, absence of safeguards, and cumulative harm.

Avoid defining groups by their *beliefs* alone - the problem is how those beliefs are used to justify or conceal *abuse*.

Use accurate, neutral terms like “high-control group,” “group-based coercive control,” or “cultic abuse.” Focus on describing *behaviours* and dynamics rather than *beliefs*.

Avoid framing survivors as broken or gullible

Steer clear of infantilising language (e.g. “they didn’t know any better,” “they were easily led”).

Emphasise resilience, insight, and the systems of control that made leaving difficult.

Avoid spectacle and sensationalism

Refrain from using survivors as clickbait, through overemphasis on salacious details, photos, or headlines.

Don’t reduce a survivor’s identity to their trauma.

Avoid reinforcing fascination with unusual beliefs or rituals at the expense of deeper patterns of harm.

Consider what your headline, hook, and visual framing communicate

Does it reinforce stereotypes, or create value?

Does it centre the group, or the survivor?

Does it imply that harm is over, or enduring?

Reflect lived experience without exploitation

Quote survivors with context and preserve the meaning of their words.

When using anonymity or pseudonyms, explain why.

Avoid selective editing that distorts the tone or purpose of their contribution.

Be clear about who has power in the story

Do not position group leaders or perpetrators as charismatic or brilliant.

Avoid giving undue airtime to denial, minimisation, gaslighting or further abuse through the media.

Centre those who experienced the harm, not those who caused it.

Examples

Avoid

"Inside a terrifying cult horror story"

"Why didn't they just leave?"

"The bizarre world of cult rituals"

"Brainwashed victim speaks out"

"Dark secrets behind crazy cult leader's grip"

"Cult survivor breaks silence on trauma"

"Disgruntled ex-members speak out"

Try

"Uncovering patterns of coercive control and psychological abuse"

"Why leaving coercive groups is rarely simple or safe"

"How cults reinforce control"

"Survivor explains how control was maintained over time"

"Exposing the methods used to dominate and isolate"

"Reflections on harm, recovery, and rebuilding autonomy"

"Former members describe long-term impacts of coercive control"

These examples aim to retain narrative impact while shifting focus toward coercive behaviours, systemic control, and cumulative harm.

For further information, contact us: hello@socchg.org