

Survivors Against SESTA:

Guide to Responding to Reporter Requests

When a reporter reaches out to you or your organization about a story, it's called "reactive media" because you must react to a story that a writer is already working on; you aren't in control of the direction of the story or creating your own media. This document is a guide to dealing with reactive media - there will be a separate document focused on how to generate the stories you want told through "earned media."

To Consider Before You Talk to a Reporter

Approaches to Being a Source

- **On the record vs off the record:** If you are talking to a reporter, always assume that you are on record. Don't ask to go off the record. Reporters are reporting - don't give them anything you don't want attributed to you, with the exception of...
- **Speaking "on background":** Unquoted material in an article often comes from sources. As part of educating a reporter you can agree to speak on background - this helps make sure their basic facts are in place and their writing about sex work is as accurate as possible. You build a relationship with the reporter by making their job easier. And, you can split up the duties of answering questions - one person does all the sex work 101 stuff on background, another person tells a personal story "on the record."
- **Being an advocate vs identifying as a sex worker:** Consider whether you want to speak as an advocate or as a sex worker (more on identities below). You can juggle between these two identities for different stories - just make sure you use separate names, email accounts, and phone numbers for the identities. Something to consider: once you disclose that you're a sex worker, the reporter is often more interested in your personal stories of woe than any political opinions you have.

FAQ About Managing Identities

- **What name should I use?** Consider keeping your work names, legal name, and activist/media names separate, particularly if some of the sex work you do or might do in the future is (or could become) criminalized. Using several names is harm reduction, it's not a guarantee of anonymity. Always consider what actions you would take if someone connected the dots between your names. This is a strong possibility if you have Facebook accounts under several names because the algorithm is designed to nonconsensually connect people.
- **How can I protect my identity?** Ask if you can answer questions over email - that way you can use whatever email you want and carefully consider your answers. Speaking on the phone, skype, or in person can make you more vulnerable because you are giving a lot more information about yourself. If you meet in person, even if you are using a pseudonym, the reporter may describe you and the place you meet. One sex worker I know was outed to her family by a reporter's description of her tote bag.

- What if the reporter wants my real name?** Do not give your legal name if you are not comfortable with having that published. Always negotiate identity before starting the interview. If the reporter insists that they need to use your legal name (*The New York Times* and the *Washington Post* will put a lot of pressure on you to use your real name) - ask if you can make an appeal to their editor for you to use a pseudonym. There is almost always a possible exception - sex work is increasingly criminalized, activists have been targeted by anti-sex work advocates and law enforcement, and reporters should want to protect their sources. I have found that reporters sometimes need these reasons spelled out and are happy to ask their editors once they understand. If you have an “established” pseudonym that could plausibly be a legal name, when the reporter asks if it’s your real name, just say yes.

Questions to Ask Before The Interview

<i>Ask yourself...</i>	<i>Ask the journalist...</i>
How do I feel today – am I able to negotiate with the journalist/news source and stand up for myself in an interview?	What is your deadline and your angle? (They won’t always be precise about the angle, but it’s a good question to see how they are coming at the story)
Who is my support system – do I have someone to discuss talking points with and someone to help me debrief and relax after the interview?	Who else are you interviewing? Can I recommend some people for you to talk to? (This can help you understand their angle further and help you plan talking points)
What are the potential harms that could come to me personally and professionally if I engage in this interview? What are the benefits? What is my support system for the worst case scenario?	What steps do you take to protect your sources? Can I use a pseudonym?
What are my boundaries around my identity for this interview? What are red flags I will be looking for to end the interview or not do it at all?	Can I answer your questions by email or read them in advance of our interview? Can I get final approval on my quotes?

Sometimes if you say no to an interview and no one else is willing to do it, there will be no sex worker voice represented. This sucks in the the short term, but is FINE in the long term. Do what you need to do to take care of yourself and maintain your boundaries. Do not do an interview when you’re in a bad place or something else seems off. There will always be more stories.

The Interview

An interview with a reporter is not a social conversation, but they might make it feel that way so you say more if you feel comfortable (or awkward). The quotes I've regretted most are things I said casually at the end of an interview, when I thought the "real" interview was over. You are each there to do a job - they need to get their questions answered and you need to get your talking points across. It is ok to be like a politician, not answer their question, and instead provide them with a quote you want to get across. Don't wait for the question they may never ask. Shape your responses so you get your ideas across.

Sharing Personal Stories

Facts are excellent to have alongside your talking points, but personal stories can make an issue come alive. Prepare a few one- to two-sentence stories to help illustrate your points.

Know your boundaries - what are the things you don't want to talk about? Personal experiences of assault? How much money you make? Be prepared for questions like this and have an answer, even if it is a polite but firm, "I'd rather not discuss that" (but also be prepared for the reporter to ask the same questions again in a different way).

Hostile or Manipulative Reporters

Techniques reporters might use to catch you off guard and how to respond:

- You're told the interview is about one thing but it's actually totally different once you start. Or the tone is different. Or they use inflammatory language designed to make you overreact.
 - **Your response:** Take a deep breath. Smile and answer with your talking points. DO NOT ENGAGE. Do not let their agenda throw you off from yours.
- The framing of the reporter's question is inaccurate.
 - **Your response:** Don't automatically agree with with the premise/framing. Question the premise.

Interview Stress Management for Verbal Interviews

Everyone gets nervous when talking to the press. Concentrate on ways to mitigate it.

- Practice! Take turns taping interviews with your friends and watch and critique them together. Or, before an interview, ask someone to prep talking points and rehearse questions you might be asked.
- Write down your talking points before the interview - usually two or three points you want to make, including an opinion, a fact or stat, and a personal story. If you find they aren't asking questions that lets you answer with talking points, redirect with "I think what's really important here is..." and answer with your talking point.
- Take your time and speak slowly. You speak more quickly when you're nervous, and this doesn't give you enough time to think or make your points clearly.
- Be brief! Most people get tongue-tied by over-explaining. Less is more, and a longer answer means you are likely "off message" and giving the reporter an opportunity to pick

and choose what message they want to use, rather than what you want. When you're done, stop talking, even if they let the silence linger.

- At the end of the interview, you can ask to share any talking points you did not get across, "One more thing..." or "We didn't cover this but..."

When the Story Comes Out

When You Love It

This is pretty straightforward: if you like a story that you participated in, tell the journalist so, and if you have access to them, tell the editor or the journalist's supervisor. Also, tell the internet! Link to the piece and refer other people to it--publications keep track of how many people have read a piece. If you read a story that you didn't participate in and you like it, think of it as an opportunity to make a connection with a journalist who could be a good contact in the future. Write the journalist a brief email with a few specific compliments about what they did well in the piece. You can also introduce yourself and say you'd be happy to be a source in future stories.

When You Hate It

Sadly, this is much more common. When you hate a piece that you or members of your community were portrayed in, you need to make a distinction between portrayals that are inaccurate but merely annoying and portrayals that are downright harmful. Portrayals that are annoying (i.e. use of slang or puns, sexualized descriptions) are often a characteristic of particular media outlets' treatment of their subjects, and they are unlikely to offer a correction. Remember that headlines (which are rarely great) are almost always written by the editor, not the journalist. Be mad at the editor, not the writer. For the majority of annoying portrayals, snark about it, move on, and use your energy for other work.

Portrayals that put you at risk of harm (i.e. identifying information when a subject was supposed to have their identity concealed) should be taken very seriously and a correction or retraction should be issued. You may also wish to put the journalist or outlet on your blacklist and not have further contact with her. Email us at survivorsagainstsesta@protonmail.com with a description of what happened and we'll put them on our blacklist too. Your first contact to request a correction or retraction should be written and with the journalist who interviewed you. Explain what your problems with the piece are. Explain concretely how this piece is harmful to people in the sex trade and *specifically* how the journalist can fix it. If you are unsatisfied with the journalist's response – including if she says that the editor made final changes that she had no control over (which is often true, but the journalist still needs to be held accountable when her byline is on it) – it's time to go to her editor. Contact the editor of the appropriate section, forward your previous correspondence, and make your ask. Common asks include:

- removing identifying information
- correcting incorrect information
- removing details or incorrect information and editing the piece in the online archive
- publishing a correction

For ethical reasons, all newspapers have an “ombudsman,” a person who is responsible for overseeing the ethics of the news outlet, particularly when it comes to journalists’ interactions with sources. If you are unsatisfied with the journalist’s and editor’s responses, you can escalate to the ombudsman.

This document is adapted by Audacia Ray, Lola, J Leigh Brantly, and Goddess Venus from the Red Umbrella Project’s *Speak Up! Guide to Media Tactics to Amplify the Voices of Sex Workers*, published in 2013. [Access the full guide as a PDF here:](https://survivorsagainstsesta.org/media-training/)
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