

The Visegrad Guidelines

Five years of discussion in workshops in Visegrad and Tihany, Hungary, funded by the British Embassy, Budapest, helped create the following guidelines. They are exactly that, guidelines, not rules. They seek to set a standard all journalists should aspire to. The full version of The Visegrad Guidelines is available in its handbook format (English and Hungarian versions) and electronically. For further details, please contact Caledonia Media

Editors must have absolute independence in choosing the topics they want to cover

Editorial independence encourages and is cradled by editorial discretion and judgement

Editors must maintain an arms-length relationship with politicians

Journalists must be free to report without fear or favour, and without intimidation or threat

Journalists have an absolute duty to be balanced in his or her reporting

It is a duty of all journalists to support the liberalisation of the Press

It is the duty of a politician or official to leave journalists to be free to broadcast and report without interference or threat or intimidation

Journalists must exercise their freedom responsibly

Editorial responsibility must be exercised whenever deciding to cover any given press conference

Opinion must be clearly distinguished from fact. Judgement will always be called for

Any news, given in whatever form, must be presented with due accuracy and impartiality

The rules of neutrality apply equally to public and commercial broadcasting

Journalists cannot remain neutral where basic human and democratic rights are concerned and where they are being undermined

Do not be bullied by politicians. If you are reporting fairly, accurately, impartially and responsibly – then he or she has no grounds to intimidate

Do not discriminate between the way you portray people at home or overseas

Do not report disadvantaged people in such a way that they look either unusual or extreme

It is not appropriate for a readily recognised news presenter to endorse a product

The journalists' endorsement of any given charity or organisation must not be seen to be an endorsement by the broadcaster.

The personal views of the presenter should not be transmitted either on-air during the programme or through involvement in meetings or events in the public domain.

Journalists should not be active members of any political party

It is unacceptable to take or expect gratuities or gifts or to seek discount

News presenters and journalists must never coach or train politicians or officials or others likely to be interviewed in how to handle interview techniques.

Accuracy is the basis of authority and reliability, whatever the medium

Where possible, report directly from the scene of an event or events

When you make a mistake, rectify, clarify, apologise and move on

Whenever you use archive footage, label it thus

Carefully consider the usage of archive material from a catastrophe

The use of a hidden camera must always be carefully and thoroughly discussed before giving approval to its deployment

When you transmit material obtained from a hidden camera, you must say so both verbally in the script and also with an on-air label

Always label reconstructions and use them with sensitivity in news programmes

Do not lead a news programme with the findings of a single opinion poll

It is vital to be able to clearly define public interest when considering and subsequently justifying the transmission of graphic material

It is the responsibility of the broadcaster to clearly label or signpost programmes and to do so by warning viewers that the transmission may be likely to offend by dint of language, nudity, sex or violence

There is no place in professional broadcasting for gratuitous bad language, sex or violence

The broadcaster has a responsibility to ensure that people are neither humiliated nor degraded in the name of entertainment programming

If a person is in the public eye, then he or she must accept there will be a degree of interest in them as a private person and in what they say or do privately

People in a public place cannot expect the same degree of privacy as they can demand in their own homes

Report crime in context - don't let reporting crime get out of all proportion

When reporting crime, it is relevant to say that the suspect or offender belongs to any particular race, religious or other minority only if it will give a clearer understanding of the event or events

Legitimate public interest, however, does not justify sensationalism

Reporting on ethnic minorities should not lead to their being put into a journalistic ghetto

Avoid prejudicial or pejorative reference to a person's race, colour, religion, sex or sexual orientation or to any physical ornamental illness or disability

Do not broadcast or otherwise transmit details of a person's race, colour, religion, sexual orientation, physical or mental illness or disability unless these are proven to be directly relevant to the story

Impartiality is a badge of honour. You are the reporter or the correspondent and whilst you must develop the ability to correctly interpret what a politician is saying, your own political opinion must be left at home

The politician dispenses the propaganda; the journalist is the watchdog, the public servant.

Emotive words and descriptions like "terrorist" and "responsibility" are to be avoided

Do not report bomb warnings – or you will give the lunatic fringe in society the opportunity to get on air with all manner of scare stories that are in fact false

Interviews with terror suspects must be approved by the Head of News and carefully viewed before transmission

Language when covering violence must be dispassionate and neutral

Do not use violent material simply because it is available

It is the duty of a journalist to protect his or her sources. If you promise confidentiality, then you must maintain that promise

Branded products should not, as a general rule, be referred to in audio by brand name, or shown in close-up or from an angle that displays the branding to best advantage, or for any significant length of time

Visegrad Voices

Journalists and politicians from Hungary and the United Kingdom have worked together in the unique programme that evolved from the Visegrad series into The Visegrad Guidelines. What made the series different from other conferences and meetings was that from the outset there was a clear directive that it should not be just another talking shop; rather, it should be a place to generate action. These are some of the voices that brought us to The Visegrad Guidelines...

"Politicians will have to come to terms with the reality of a critical, unbiased media. It is a challenge for you to understand that, to welcome its development and to take it as a sign measuring your success in creating a democracy that is on its way to maturity."

Rt Hon Michael Portillo MP

"Politicians and the government should, by all means, guarantee that the laws and principles which ensure the media's independence will be observed."

Janos Horvat

"The broadcasting system must be self-confident enough to make mistakes, mature enough to admit when it has done so, and brave enough to take the same risks again."

Rt Hon Menzies Campbell MP

"That is a very good, very British idea (to place a senior British journalist in MTV to restructure the news and current affairs). It is very necessary. I think we have made mistakes, here in Hungary...but we didn't have the courage to make these mistakes, we just made them. Thank you very much for this very important distinction between the two processes."

Elemer Hankiss

"We have to dare to walk on air. We have to dare to be creative. We have to dare to be bold. We have to dare to be independent. And we have to let the audience know we are all those things."

Phil Harding, Controller, BBC Editorial Policy

"Visegrad is a milestone in Hungarian broadcasting history."

Charles Fletcher

"The Visegrad gatherings filled my fellow Hungarians with envy, seeing the bantering ease mixed with real toughness that underpins the relationships between journalists and politicians in the UK. It is a very different relationship here."

Peter Pallai

"We would lay down certain guidelines, certain basic principles to observe which a self-regulating body would enforce by its sheer moral weight, at least we hope so, the Visegrad Guidelines."

Vilmos Both

Extract from The Visegrad Guidelines by Charles Fletcher

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