

Reporting on Crime

NB: These documents are for guidance purposes. For legal issues, please contact studentmedia@qmul.ac.uk

Crime reporting has long been a central part of news coverage in societies with a free press., This is because crime stories are usually newsworthy and in the public interest.

Associates of convicted persons, such as relatives and friends, should be kept anonymous. Vulnerable groups, such as minors (under the age of 18), victims or witnesses should not be identified in any way. This could cause later problems in legal proceedings.

For general guidance on reporting on crime, click [here](#).

Defamation

Defamation is defined as the oral or written communication of a false statement about another that unjustly harms an individual's or organisation's reputation.

Unlike contempt of court, defamation is a civil matter. Although civil, litigation can result in high penalties. Outlets should refrain from producing any content which enables readers to identify a person involved in the case, even if the identification is false. For example:

"The allegation is against a 50-year-old, male English professor at the University of Fibchester..." If there are three professors by matching description, they may be able to claim defamation as their reputation was potentially damaged by an untrue allegation..

Contempt of Court

Contempt of court is the offense of being disobedient to- or disrespectful toward- a court of law and the officers thereof. This may be in the form of behaviour that opposes or defies the authority, justice or dignity of the court.

Media Outlets can report on ongoing criminal cases, however, this must be done carefully. Any impediment on court proceedings is a criminal offence. When done carefully, reporting on court proceedings is profoundly important to the public as it shows whether justice has been served. This is commonly known as 'open justice'.

Statutory law bans the publication, including on the internet and social media platforms, which might seriously prejudice active legal proceedings, particularly if it will bias a jury.

An active proceeding is when any of the following occur:

- A person is arrested
- A warrant is issues
- Summons has been issues
- A person has been charged
- All of the above remain in place until they are acquitted or convicted

Civil cases become active when a hearing date is set. Further examples of contempt of court can be found [here](#).

Journalists can report on court proceedings providing all the information is factual and there is no opinion or bias.

If a case is about to or very likely to go to court as an offence, Outlets should avoid publishing content relating to the case in any format. If you do, you risk the possibility of a judge finding the Outlet, and Students' Union, in contempt of court, which can result in a conviction and custodial time.

Anything which could be in contempt of court, should receive legal guidance. In this case you should contact su-studentmedia@qmul.ac.uk who will ask for legal advice.

You can find guidance [here](#) on court reporting; further guidance [here](#) is on reporting restrictions in the criminal court.