

# Editorial Policy



## Guidance Note

### Reporting Risk

*This guidance note should be read in conjunction with BBC Editorial Guidelines ([www.bbc.co.uk/editorialguidelines](http://www.bbc.co.uk/editorialguidelines)) Section 3: Accuracy.*

*In cases of doubt, further assistance can be sought from the duty Editorial Policy Adviser by telephoning 0870 333 4550 or BBC extension (02) 81819.*

*All Guidance Notes can be found at [edpol.gateway.bbc.co.uk/guidance\\_notes.shtml](http://edpol.gateway.bbc.co.uk/guidance_notes.shtml) (BBC internal link) or [www.bbc.co.uk/guidelines/editorialguidelines/advice/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/guidelines/editorialguidelines/advice/).*

### Introduction

The reporting of issues of risk, such as health scares and crime, can have an impact on the public perception of that risk.

**We should report statistics and risks in context, taking care not to worry the audience unduly.** It may also be appropriate to report the margin of error and the source of figures to enable people to judge their significance. This may involve giving trends, taking care to avoid giving figures more weight than can stand scrutiny.

Our reporting of crime and anti-social behaviour must not add to people's fears of becoming victims of crime when statistically they are very unlikely to be so.

### Reporting Risk Checklist

#### **Sue English and Roger Harrabin, July 2003**

Research carried out by BBC journalists and the Kings Fund indicated concern amongst scientific experts about the potential of media coverage to distort risk and create disproportionate fear. Using the following checklist can help ensure the context is clear and avoid distortion of the risk.

- What exactly is the risk, how big is it, and who does it affect?
- Can the audience judge the significance of any statistics or other research? Is the reporting clear about how any risk has been measured - for example the

size of any research sample, margin of error, the source of any figures and the sponsor of the research?

- If you are reporting a change in the level of risk, have you clearly stated the baseline figure? (A 100% increase or doubling of a problem that affects one person in two million will still only affect one in a million.)
- Is it more appropriate and measured to ask “How safe is this?”, rather than “Is this 100% safe?”
- If a contributor’s view runs contrary to majority expert opinion, is that clear in our report, questions and casting of any discussion?
- We should consider the impact on public perceptions of risk if we feature emotional pictures and personal testimony.
- Is there an everyday comparison that may make the size of the reported risk easier to understand? (For example, “it’s as risky as crossing the road once a day”)
- Would information about comparative risks help the audience to put the risk in context and make properly informed choices? Consider for example, causing undue worry about safety of the railways could lead audiences to migrate to the roads unaware that the safety risk is many times greater.
- Can the audience be given sources of further information?

**This Editorial Policy Guidance Note was first produced on 6 May 2005.**