



REGULATORY

Reining in Police Media Briefings: A Rights Compatible Communication Manual

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Introduction

The Hon'ble Supreme Court in the case of Peoples Union for Civil Liberties & Anr. vs. State of Maharashtra¹ directing States to set guidelines and standards to evolve a policy for Media Briefing by taking into consideration the Police Manual for Media Briefing², which was prepared by the Amicus Curiae of the case. A step has been taken by the Supreme Court to make sure that the practice of police media briefing in India be upheld to prevalent international practices, and make a systemic change for media briefings by the police into a principled, rights compatible and investigation safe framework. The court provided the States to do the needful and prepare state specific guidelines within a time period of 3 months.

The Manual is organised across four Parts, each addressing a distinct dimension of police communication: foundational principles, institutional authority and workflow, practical briefing techniques, and enforcement through training and discipline. What distinguishes the document is its insistence on process over narrative the police may communicate what they are doing, but not what they believe.

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Part I

Chapter 1 of the manual establishes the philosophical and constitutional foundation of the Manual. Police communication is justified only where it serves legitimate functions that is public safety, procedural transparency, and trust building without compromising dignity or fair trial. The Manual explicitly rejects commentary on guilt, evidentiary value, or investigative theories, recognising that such disclosures can irreversibly prejudice judicial processes.

A central feature of this chapter is the four pronged disclosure test, which governs every media interaction:

- Legality – disclosure must not violate statutory provisions or court orders.
- Necessity – disclosure must serve a concrete public interest objective that cannot be achieved otherwise.
- Proportionality – information released must be narrowly tailored, with redactions applied to minimise harm.
- Accountability – disclosures must be vetted, approved, and issued only through designated channels.

The chapter further emphasises survivor centric communication, identity protection (including indirect identifiers), non-discrimination, rumour management through verified myth-fact responses, and accessibility standards such as bilingual releases and captioned content.

Chapter 2 clarifies that the Manual applies uniformly across all levels of policing whether it be the State Headquarters, Commissionerates, Districts, and specialised units and covers all forms of external communication, including press releases, interviews, social media posts, and emergency advisories. It also introduces a single source of truth model, requiring coordination through Media Briefing Cells when jurisdictions overlap. In exceptional or rapidly evolving situations, such as terror incidents or mass casualty events, senior leadership may temporarily centralise communication through formal, time bound overrides. An implementation roadmap which prescribes a time bound 90 day implementation roadmap to operationalise the Manual across police establishments. In the first 30 days, institutions must constitute Media Briefing Cells, designate authorised spokespersons, register official social media handles, and standardise templates and holding statements. The next 30 days focus on capacity building through structured training, mock briefings, and activation of media logging and archival systems. The final phase requires validation through live drills, publication of compliance dashboards, and legal vetting of all communication templates. The roadmap makes clear that disciplined police communication is to be institutionally embedded, not left to individual discretion.

Chapter 3 anchors police communication firmly within constitutional and statutory law. It draws from Articles 19(1)(a), 19(2), and 21 to balance the right to information against restrictions necessary for public order, privacy, and fair trial. The Manual integrates criminal procedure and evidence law by prohibiting disclosure of protected materials such as case diaries, witness statements, confessions, and identification parade details. The chapter also addresses the RTI interface, permitting limited withholding under Section 8(1)(h) where disclosure would impede investigation, while encouraging proactive publication of non-prejudicial procedural updates. Data protection obligations, platform governance standards, and alignment with media regulatory norms have also been outlined.

Part II

Part II of the manual states the authority, structure and workflow of the media briefings.

Chapter 5 eliminates ambiguity regarding who may speak to the media. Only formally designated spokespersons are authorised to issue statements, while Investigating Officers are expressly barred from direct media interaction. A delegation matrix assigns responsibility, accountability, consultation, and information roles for various communication actions.

The manual envisages for a Media Briefing Cell (MBC) to be established as the institutional nucleus for all police communication. Each cell comprises personnel responsible for public relations, legal vetting, digital content, archiving, and on scene coordination. The MBC will have a structured workflow from intake of verified facts to drafting, legal vetting, approval, publication, and archiving to ensure traceability and auditability. Mandatory tools, registers, and certification requirements embed communication competence into professional policing standards.

The MBC has to maintain a comprehensive logging of all communications, including unique IDs, timestamps, approving authorities, and distribution channels. Archival standards ensure retention for defined periods, with corrections and rejoinders linked to original disclosures. Monitoring mechanisms prioritise transparent corrections over adversarial responses.

Chapter 8 is operationally critical, prescribing what may and may not be disclosed at each procedural stage from pre-FIR verification to post trial outcomes. Across all stages, disclosure is confined to procedural facts and safety advisories, while evidentiary material, confessions, and speculative narratives are consistently withheld. Arrests and remand are treated as due-process events, not spectacles, and trial stage communication is tightly constrained by sub judice principles.

Chapters 9-13 regulate the media access at incident sites, establish perimeters and staging areas, and prohibit practices that risk evidence contamination. Absolute and restricted disclosure categories are clearly demarcated, with redaction matrices and decision trees guiding permissible release. Special provisions address sensitive contexts such as sexual offences, juveniles, communal incidents, custodial deaths, suicides, cybercrimes, and disasters. Across these categories, the Manual prioritises anonymity, de-escalation, procedural disclosure, and survivor welfare.

Part III

Part III of the manual proposes directions on how to brief the media about the case

Chapter 14 provides the essentials for a press release designating them as the primary and authoritative mode of police communication. The Manual is explicit that press releases, issued through the Media Briefing Cell, are the only citable and verifiable public record of police communication. Informal statements, off the record clarifications, or oral embellishments are discouraged because they dilute accountability and create evidentiary ambiguity. The purpose of a press release is limited to communicating verified facts that the public is entitled to know, without trespassing into evidentiary analysis or narrative reconstruction.

While press releases are the default, Chapter 15 recognises that press conferences may occasionally be necessary, particularly during major public safety incidents, disaster coordination, or to counter serious misinformation. However, the Manual treats press conferences as exceptional tools, subject to a necessity test grounded in public interest. Before convening a press conference, a decision memo must justify why written communication is insufficient. The conduct of the press conference is tightly regulated. The spokesperson must read the opening statement verbatim, limit responses to approved domains, and pivot away from prohibited questions by citing legal constraints such as sub judice rules or privacy protections. Off record exchanges are disallowed, and all accredited media must be given equal access. Recording and publication requirements reinforce accountability. Every press conference must be audio/visually recorded, transcribed, and uploaded promptly through official channels, with captions and archival tagging. In effect, the press conference is treated as an extension of the press release, not a space for improvisation.

Chapter 16 addresses the unique risks posed by real time digital platforms. The Manual treats official police social media handles as repositories of personal data and public authority, not merely communication tools.

Part IV

PART IV ensures that the Manual is enforceable and sustainable, rather than aspirational. It focuses on crisis response, institutional capacity, monitoring, and discipline.

Chapter 17 governs communication during rapidly evolving, high risk situations such as terror incidents, communal tension, disasters, or mass casualty events. The core principle is harm reduction, not narrative control.

Chapter 18 recognises that disciplined communication requires skill, the Manual mandates annual certification for spokespersons, investigating officers likely to interface with media, and digital communications staff. This embeds communicative competence into professional policing standards rather than treating it as an ancillary skill.

Chapter 19 establishes mechanisms for continuous oversight. Media coverage and online discourse are monitored for factual inaccuracies or harmful distortions. Where errors arise, the preferred response is a neutral rejoinder stating verified facts and linking back to the authoritative release. Legal notices are to be treated as a last resort, to be used only where misinformation poses demonstrable harm.

The final chapter closes the compliance loop. Distinguishing between good faith errors, which warrant coaching and process improvement, and deliberate or reckless violations such as leaks, unauthorised statements, or political messaging, which attract disciplinary action under service rules. Repeat non-compliance may result in removal from communication duties, reinforcing the principle that media briefing is a regulated responsibility, not an entitlement.

Significance

The significance of the Police Manual for Media Briefing lies in its transformation of police communication from an informal, personality driven practice into a constitutionally regulated administrative function governed by the four-pronged test of legality, necessity, proportionality, and accountability. By requiring every disclosure to pass this filter, the Manual ensures that transparency serves public safety without prejudicing fair trial rights or compromising individual dignity. Its insistence on structured formats, approval chains, redaction standards, and audit trails replaces discretion with institutional discipline. The Supreme Court's direction to operationalise this framework within a 90 day timeline further raises it from guidance to constitutional expectation. While States are not required to reproduce the Manual verbatim, they are obligated to adopt equivalent systems that embody this four-pronged discipline in substance, thereby embedding rights compatible police communication into everyday policing practice.

For more details, write to us at: contact@indialaw.in

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1. Peoples Union for Civil Liberties & Anr. vs. State of Maharashtra 2026 INSC 79 ??
 2. Police Manual for Media Briefing, Gopal Sankarnarayanan (Amicus Curiae) ??

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