

Copy Approval – a clash of journalism and citizen ethics between Sweden and Britain?

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"The story took a year to work out. It was never told before, less so published. The subject was sensitive and the people interviewed were vulnerable, so I had to compromise a little."

What compromising did Sarah Morrison, then a journalist at *The Independent* have to do? What ethical short-cut did this morally-motivated reporter (who now works for Global Witness, a human rights NGO) have to take to secure the [first every feature length story ever told in British mainstream media about intersex women?](#)

Actually, very little, from my point of view.

(This article by Swedish journalist and Polis Summer School student Raket Lennartsson @RaketEvaMaria)

From my perspective, as a Swedish journalist with experience from both local and national mainstream newspaper as well as the trade press, I was impressed with Sarah Morrison's high sense of integrity when she came to speak to the LSE Polis Summer School.

Even though this was not a story about political or high-powered people. In fact it was told by people who had never been interviewed and it was about a highly sensitive subject. In such circumstances, the first thing I would do would be to tell the interviewees that nothing will be published before she or he had seen the copy first. I would want to make them feel secure, and secure my story.





Intersex women speak out to protect the next generation

One in 2,000 babies does not fit neatly into male or female categories. **Sarah Morrison** meets four members of a new group that's campaigning to change attitudes and to help others feel less alone

Sarah Morrison's Independent article – photos by Abbie Traylor Smith – click on the image for full online article

Afterwards, I brought up the question in class, and Charlie Beckett answered, without any signs of hesitation, that British journalists very rarely give subjects 'copy approval'. This seemed very different to my Swedish experience. To reassure myself that I was not a unique example of degenerated ethics, I conducted an ad hoc mini survey amongst my journalist friends. I contacted about 50 Swedish journalists to ask them about their policy on letting their interviewees see the text before publishing. I got a quite unanimous answer. But, before unveiling the 'Swedish secret' – what did Sarah Morrison do to get the very moving and sensible article through?

She chose to lift all the personal stories out of the core text and wrote small personal portraits instead in first person, as if each of the woman addressed herself directly to the reader. These were read by Sarah to each of the subjects. But she didn't show any printed text before it actually got published. She also told us that she and the photographer, award-winning [Abbie Traylor-Smith](#), had agreed to portray the intersex women as they had suggested: the result was a positive, affirmative picture in a relatively glamorous setting. Both the reporter and photographer adjusted their creativity to the situation, to be able to stick to the higher principle of editorial integrity.



Holly Greenbury

When Holly Greenbury was born, almost four decades ago, doctors spotted a degree of sexual ambiguity. She has XY chromosomes, but also partial androgen insensitivity syndrome, leaving her partly insensitive to testosterone. She was assigned a male sex on her birth certificate, but she did not develop secondary male characteristics during puberty. She knew her gender was female and underwent treatment and surgery throughout her teens. Now, the businesswoman, from south-west England, is in the process of adopting a child. Because she is unable to change her name or sex on her birth certificate, adoption is harder and marriage impossible.

"I've never been completely male nor completely female in my genetics. I didn't masculinise the way a male was expected to, and my body feminised in certain areas. I didn't have the words to express myself; I didn't know how I fitted in. It left me feeling really isolated and, while I tried to identify as male, I couldn't do it. It was like having a series of repetitive panic attacks. Surgery was horrifically damaging and led to huge number of follow-up surgeries. It all could have been prevented if there had been more medical understanding and if there had been less haste in trying to guess which label best fitted. I should have been allowed to be an ambiguous teenager with the freedom to express my natural gender."

In Sweden, I would argue, it would almost be the other way around. Sometimes, when I know the person is going to read my copy before it goes further in the editing machinery, I feel more free to tell the story with a particular point of view. I feel there is less risk that I self-censor myself that way. It seems that I am not a unique case. Swedish journalists seem to practice quite a different policy from their British colleagues when it comes to copy approval. This is how my Swedish colleagues answered the question: "What is your policy when it comes to letting people you have interviewed see the text before publishing?"

Within a day I heard from 13 of my colleges in Sweden. They are aged from around 30 to 67 and work in different positions, from editor to freelance-reporter, and in different media. None of them were surprised by my question. If they saw it as a problem this was only from a practical point of view. So, the Swedish standard seems to be one of untroubled openness with the people interviewed. It plays out on different scales, of course, from mainly sending direct quotes on demand to sending the whole article – sometimes even with headlines. With politicians and other media-trained people, the practice will be restraint. With people who are unused to being interviewed, the practice will be more generous.

This might be shocking to British journalists. But, before judging us, listen to some of the conditions and arguments that Swedish journalist give.

Why It's Good To Give Reader Approval

Firstly, even though most of us are ok with sending most of the text, none of us would be fine with anybody trying to intervene in our journalistic work. "I listened to their viewpoints but I didn't change anything", says one former editor in chief. "I see it as a part of my work", says one reporter that mainly writes in-depth features and long interviews. "I feel that it often gets better if they see the text before publishing", she adds.

So, how can something that is, in principle, never changed anyhow get so much better? I think there are two answers to that question. The first is that words matter and sometimes the changing of one single adjective in one quotation will change a lot for the person who said it who did not realise how it would look in print. Sometimes there are also hard facts that need to be corrected. Some of the journalists I asked pointed out that this extra fact-check was a good thing.

But there is also, I think, a secondary but perhaps not less important answer that has to do with trust. If people know they can read the text before publishing then we are more likely to get people to agree to be interviewed. This helps prevent the constant criticism towards journalists that we do not check our facts. In a time-poor media climate this is a way to lay responsibility back on the audience – they do the fact checking that we haven't time to do. Besides, I think that this has to do with the long term perspective. If we get it wrong the first time we publish anything on

anybody, how likely will this person be to consent to an interview again?

Up to you now, British colleagues: How do you handle the above outlined problems with fact errors and distrust in journalists? How shocked are you with the Swedish consensual model?

I wonder if this issue doesn't say a lot about the differences between the political and press cultures in U.K. and Sweden. In Britain it is more polarised and controversial, whereas the Swedish is more consensual. It seems to reflect back on the very core of journalistic ethics, for better and for worse.

This article by Swedish journalist and Polis Summer School student Rakel Lennartsson [@RakelEvaMaria](#)

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