# Vice Media Group

## Introduction

### *Overview*

Vice Media Group is an international-recognized digital news and media company, guided by our mission to tell the stories that no one else will. With our goal to deliver impactful, underreported stories to a young and diverse audience, Vice's investigative journalists undertake challenging stories in often volatile and dangerous locations. We cover stories that investigate sensitive topics, challenge powerful entities and organizations, and provide a unique lens to otherwise ignored and neglected topics. This approach carries inherent risk, necessitating the creation of an appropriate crisis communication plan.

### *Purpose*

To address the inherent risk applied to our investigative journalist, this plan will outline potential crisis scenarios, provide guidelines for internal and external communication, and include specifics for managing these crises. This plan will focus on the potential arrest of a journalist in a foreign country as an example of how the crisis communication plan should be applied. This plan will be consistently updated to reflect the ever-changing world of investigative journalism. It will require reading by all Vice employees to ensure a prompt and effective crisis response.

### *Goals*

In the event of a crisis, Vice will reference and abide by the conditions of this crisis communications plan. Through this plan, Vice seeks to accomplish several goals and mitigate the risks of crises.

1. Protect the safety of our journalists and employees.
2. Maintain the trust of our audience and stakeholders.
3. Reinforce our reputation for responsible, provocative, and fearless journalism.
4. Minimize negative impacts of crises.
5. Ensure prompt, accurate, precise, timely, and responsive communication during crises.

## Crisis Communications Team (Effective August 2024)

### *Composition and Hierarchy*

1. **CEO – Bruce Dixon**
    - Final decision-maker, approval for communication strategies
    - Liaison with the Board of Directors
    - Email: Bruce.Dixon@vicenews.com
2. **CTO – Jesse Knight**
    - Oversees technical aspects of crisis response
    - Oversees website, social media, and data protection measures
    - Email: Jesse.Knight@vicenews.com
3. **Editor-in-Chief – Jesse Angelo**

- Oversees editorial response
- Ensures journalistic responsibility and integrity during a crisis
- Email: Jesse.Angelo@vicenews.com

4. **Head of Public Relations – Sarah Broderick**
    - Primary spokesperson
    - Develops communication strategies, manages media relations
    - Email: Sarah.Broderick@vicenews.com
5. **Legal Representative – David Harleston**
    - Provides legal and risk assessment
    - Coordinates with legal authorities in foreign jurisdictions
    - Contact: David.Harleston@vicenews.com
6. **Head of Human Resources – Susan Tohyama**
    - Reviews internal communications
    - Coordinates with employee assistance programs
    - Email: Susan.Tohyama@vicenews.com
7. **Regional Editor – Dependent on Crisis Location**
    - Head of Vice News office where the location is occurring
    - Liaison with subject matter experts in the local region

**Stakeholders**

The following stakeholder analysis provides an overview of the groups and entities that can be affected by a crisis involving Vice Media Group. Depending on the group and the crisis, each stakeholder may require a variable level of engagement and specific approaches.

1. **Internal Stakeholders**
    - Employees, contributors, freelance journalists, Board of Directors, investors, legal counsel, VICE Wellbeing Group
2. **External Stakeholders**
    - Target audience - 18-35 year-old, educated, middle to high-income
    - Advertisers, whistleblowers, sources, partner organizations, financial institutions
3. **Government and Regulatory Bodies**
    - Federal Communications Commission, Securities and Exchange Commission, foreign governments, international organizations
4. **Media and Peers**
    - Competition – Vox Media, Buzzfeed, Mashable
    - Partner Organizations – IHeartMedia, Center for Employment Opportunities, National Urban League, and other collaborators for content creation
    - Society of Professional Journalists, National Union of Journalists
    - Media watchdog groups
5. **NGOs**
    - Reporters Without Borders, Committee to Protect Journalists, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International

**Potential Crises**

Heydari et al. (2021) define a crisis as a situation of extreme and sudden danger. This danger can affect beyond physical risk, applying to organizational concepts such as reputation, brand, finances, and other related aspects that factor into the success of a business or organization. Potential crises relevant to Vice include:

- **Journalist Safety and Freedom:** Vice journalists are at an exceptionally high risk of arrest, detention, and harm due to their work's intense and investigative nature. Related crises include arrest, kidnapping, hostage-taking, assault, expulsion, and denial of press credentials.
- **Editorial Integrity and Reputation:** News and media outlets constantly risk damaging their reputation and credibility through accusations of ethical journalism, editorial integrity, and inaccuracies in reporting. Related crises include allegations of unethical or biased reporting, publication of inaccurate or misleading information, sensationalism accusations, and conflicts of interest involving journalists or Vice executives.
- **Financial Challenges:** Vice has faced significant financial challenges, including filing for bankruptcy in 2024 and the subsequent sale to Fortress Investment Group. Related crises include bankruptcy, financial losses, job loss, allegations of fraud, and major advertiser withdrawals.
- **Workplace Conduct:** Allegations of a toxic work environment and sexual misconduct can threaten to derail Vice if left unchecked. Related crises include Sexual harassment, discrimination, toxic workplace culture, and executive misconduct.

- **Ethical Dilemmas in Content:** Vice consistently covers provocative, boundary-pushing, and unapologetic stories from around the world, which can often lead to public outcry, allegations of ethical neglect, and challenges in maintaining public trust (Sandman, 2012). Related crises include backlash from graphic or disturbing content, ethical considerations about investigative journalism methods, national security concerns against the public interest, and endangering sources and informants (Breakwell, 2000).
- **Digital manipulation:** With advancements in machine learning, artificial intelligence, and extensive misinformation campaigns, Vice is particularly vulnerable to digital manipulation. As a digital media company, its image, reputation, and brand are heavily influenced by its online presence and the public's perception of the organization (Liu & Fraustino, 2014). Related crises include Viral misinformation about Vice, coordinated social media attacks, deep fake videos and imagery implicating Vice News journalists, and allegations of AI use in reporting.

## Crisis Response Procedures

The following response procedure should be followed promptly during the crisis.

1. **Immediate Assessment (00:00 - 00:30 after notification):** As a crisis is identified, the reporting employee must notify the Editor-in-Chief immediately. The Editor-in-Chief will employ the CAUSE model for crisis communications with the Head of PR before determining if activating the crisis team is necessary, effectively taking the following steps (Rowan et al., 2008):

a. **Confidence –** Assess Vice's current credibility, identify areas of conflicting information, and determine the appropriate communication channels with the Head of PR (Rowan et al., 2008).
b. **Awareness –** Identify challenges to information dissemination, assess the current reach of Vice's communications, and plan for means to amplify awareness (Rowan et al., 2008).
c. **Understanding –** Evaluate the nature of the crisis, identify potential stakeholder misunderstandings, and develop clear and concise messaging about the crisis (Rowan et al., 2008).
d. **Solutions –** Prepare additional messaging to address stakeholder concerns, anticipate doubts about Vice's strategy, and ensure that the audience sees solutions as practical and realistic (Rowan et al., 2008).
e. **Enactment -** Identify barriers to the commencement of strategy and plan for means to encourage support for the crisis response (Rowan et al., 2008).

2. **Crisis Team Activation (00:30 – 01:00 after notification):** Should the crisis team be activated, the Editor-in-Chief will assemble the team through a secure video conference within one hour. During this conference, the team will be informed about all aspects of the crisis, the CEO will provide initial guidance, and the Head of Public Relations will brief the team on potential communication strategies (Coombs, 2010).
3. **Public Statement (1:00 after notification):** The Head of PR will write a concise statement acknowledging the crisis for the CEO, who approves and releases it. The statement is immediately posted on Vice's social media channels, websites, and other means of distribution.

4. **Strategizing (01:00 – 03:00 after notification):** The crisis team will determine which communication means will be used, such as press releases, social media updates, and website updates, and discuss the Vice's messaging on the topic, reflecting the organization's official position. Strategies will primarily be aligned with the Image Restoration Theory, which prioritizes action to ensure that a positive reputation is upheld through an appropriate tactic from the following: denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification (Triantafillidou & Yannas, 2020). Should this strategy be deemed ineffective, the Head of PR will suggest strategies appropriate for the crisis.
5. **Internal Communications (03:00 – 04:00 after notification):** All employees, contributors, and board members will be alerted to the crisis by the CEO through email. Internal communications will provide an overview of the crisis, steps taken to address the situation, and a brief disclaimer on how to interact if approached about the crisis (Haupt, 2021).
6. **Plan Rollout (04:00 – 06:00 after notification):** The primary communication materials will begin to be created by the Head of PR's team while the website's team integrates any updates to the crisis as appropriate. Materials will be disseminated through appropriate social media channels, and two-way communication will be implemented by the Head of PR to interact with Vice's audience. The PR team will also be the primary point of contact for any traditional media outreach. Audience reactions and perceptions of the crisis and crisis response will be continually monitored (Haupt, 2021).

7. **Ongoing Crisis Response (06:00 after notification – Crisis Resolution):** The crisis team will respond to any media or stakeholders that inquire about the crisis, providing transparent and regular updates to both internal and external stakeholders. The strategy and tactics will be adjusted in this phase, which will depend upon continued monitoring.
8. **Post-Crisis:** The team will determine when the crisis has effectively been contained, then conduct a post-crisis analysis, assessing how the company, crisis team, and employees reacted to the crisis. The crisis plan will be updated to address any miscalculations or errors in the crisis team's response.

**Crisis Case Study Example – Journalist arrested in Belarus**

***Scenario***

On August 01, 2024, at approximately 21:30 local time, Sofia Barinova was arrested while covering anti-government protests in Minsk, Belarus. Barinova was detained by Belarusian KGB agents, charged with espionage, and has been detained in Minsk Detention Center No. 1, notorious for its harsh conditions, overcrowding, and reports of torture for political prisoners and journalists.

***Immediate Response***

At 15:45 EST (22:45 in Minsk), Editor-in-Chief Jesse Angelo activates the crisis team upon receiving news of Barinova's arrest. Angelo implements the CAUSE model, focusing on the following:

- **Confidence:** Assess credibility by focusing on Vice's 15 news articles on Belarus published within the past year, noting two interviews with the opposition. Identify conflicting reports by comparing the arrest report with evidence posted on social media detailing Barinova's arrest.
- **Awareness:** Evaluate communication challenges by noting the intermittent cellular coverage in Belarus, government censorship of media, and public apprehension due to oppression. Brainstorm means leveraging Vice's two million Twitter followers and partnerships with five major international news outlets to amplify reach.
- **Understanding:** Analyze the espionage charges with legal experts. Note that Belarus' criminal code Articles 356 and 358 have broadened the definition of espionage (PEN Belarus, 2024). Prepare stances for Barinova's family, worried advertisers, and human rights organizations.
- **Solutions:** Emphasize Barinova's integrity by focusing on her 2022 Edward R. Murrow award for her coverage of war crimes suffered by Ukrainians in 2021. Engage with the U.S. Secretary of State, Anthony Blinken, to assist in Barinova's release.
- **Enactment:** Prepare for a potential Belarusian media blackout, similar to their actions during the 2020 protests (Newman, 2020). Coordinate with the Committee to Protect Journalists and Reporters Without Borders to leverage their networks to enact a #FreeSofia social media campaign.

Simultaneously, CTO Jesse Knight immediately directs his team to encrypt internal communications. At 30 minutes after activation, Legal Representative David Harleston initiates

contact with the United States Embassy in Minsk, establishing and confirming the whereabouts and condition of Barinova. Belarusian legal representation is attained within an hour of activation. Head of PR Sarah Broderick prepares a holding statement to the public, set to be released 45 minutes after activation.

### *Communication Strategies*

At one hour after the crisis begins, the crisis team determines to use a combination of the denial and reducing offensiveness tactics of the Image Restoration Strategy, denying the espionage charges and referencing Barinova's journalistic integrity (Triantafillidou & Yannas, 2020). CEO Bruce Dixon emails all 2,850 employees across Vice Media Group at three hours, detailing the situation, Vice's response plan, and immediate employee guidance. Simultaneously, Jesse Angelo calls Barinova's family in Brighton Beach, Brooklyn, offering support, resources, and continuous updates as to Barinova's condition. At three and a half hours past activation, Bruce Dixon convenes an emergency board meeting to brief the Board of Directors. At four and a half hours, Sarah Broderick coordinates with Christophe Deloire, the Secretary General of Reporters Without Borders, and Jodie Ginsberg, the President of the Committee to Protect Journalists, to determine potential interventions.

### *Plan Rollout*

At six hours, Sarah Broderick creates and distributes a press release concerning Barinova's situation, highlighting her past award-winning coverage of the War in Ukraine and Vice's consistent reporting on oppression and human rights abuses in Belarus since 2010. Simultaneously, Bruce Dixon prepares for an interview on BBC the following day, in which he will detail the crisis, emphasize continued efforts and communication, and reaffirm Vice's

commitment to free reporting through a call for the U.S. Congress to pass H.R. 8329, the Belarus Democracy, Human Rights, and Sovereignty Act of 2024, an appropriations bill designed to ferment democracy in Belarus (Congress, 2024).

### *Ongoing Crisis Response*

Within six hours, CTO Jesse Knight adds the "Free Sofia Barinova" page on Vice.com, providing live updates and related news articles. Within seven hours, the social media team implements the #FreeSofia campaign, prioritizing Twitter, TikTok, and Instagram to target Vice's young adult audience. Each day, the campaign highlights a distinct piece of journalism that Sofia Barinova reported on, highlighting its importance in promoting journalistic ideals, challenging convention, and amplifying unheard voices. Within 24 hours, Vice's documentary team begins production of "Captured: The Sofia Barinova Story," to be aired through Vice's streaming partners and on YouTube. The crisis team holds twice-daily meetings to reassess the situation and implement any needed changes.

### *Post-Crisis*

After securing Barinova's release, the crisis team will conduct a thorough after-crisis report, assessing the effectiveness of the response and making necessary changes. Vice will further assess means to enhance journalist safety in foreign and potentially hostile countries.

**Sample Crisis Materials**

***Press Release***

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

**Vice News journalist detained in Belarus, organization demands immediate release.**

WASHINGTON – Vice News calls for the swift and unconditional release of Sofia Barinova, a veteran journalist detained in Minsk, Belarus, on August 1, 2024, while covering protests critical of Alexander Lukashenko, the President of Belarus.

Barinova, an award-winning reporter renowned for her coverage of international conflicts, was arrested at approximately 21:30 Moscow Standard Time and charged with espionage. Vice News vehemently denies these allegations as falsehoods attempting to silence free and independent journalism.

“[Barinova] was in Minsk fulfilling her role as a journalist, providing a street-level view about the ongoing protests in Belarus,” said Bruce Dixon, CEO of Vice Media Group. “This arrest is a direct assault on the freedom and safety of the press, and we are using every resource possible to secure her safe release.”

Barinova's reporting has been instrumental in shedding light on human rights abuses and oppression across Eastern Europe since the onset of the War in Donbas in 2014. She won the 2022 Edward R. Murrow Award for coverage of war crimes in Ukraine, demonstrating her commitment to journalistic ideals, integrity, and truth.

Vice News is working in close coordination with the U.S. government, international human rights organizations, and legal entities to secure Barinova's release and raise awareness of all journalists who risk their safety and freedom in pursuit of the truth.

“We will not cease until Sofia is free,” said Dixon. “The rights and freedoms of the press are sacred and should not be infringed upon by any state actors.”

For updates on Barinova’s situation and to support press freedom, visit www.vicenews.com/freesofia

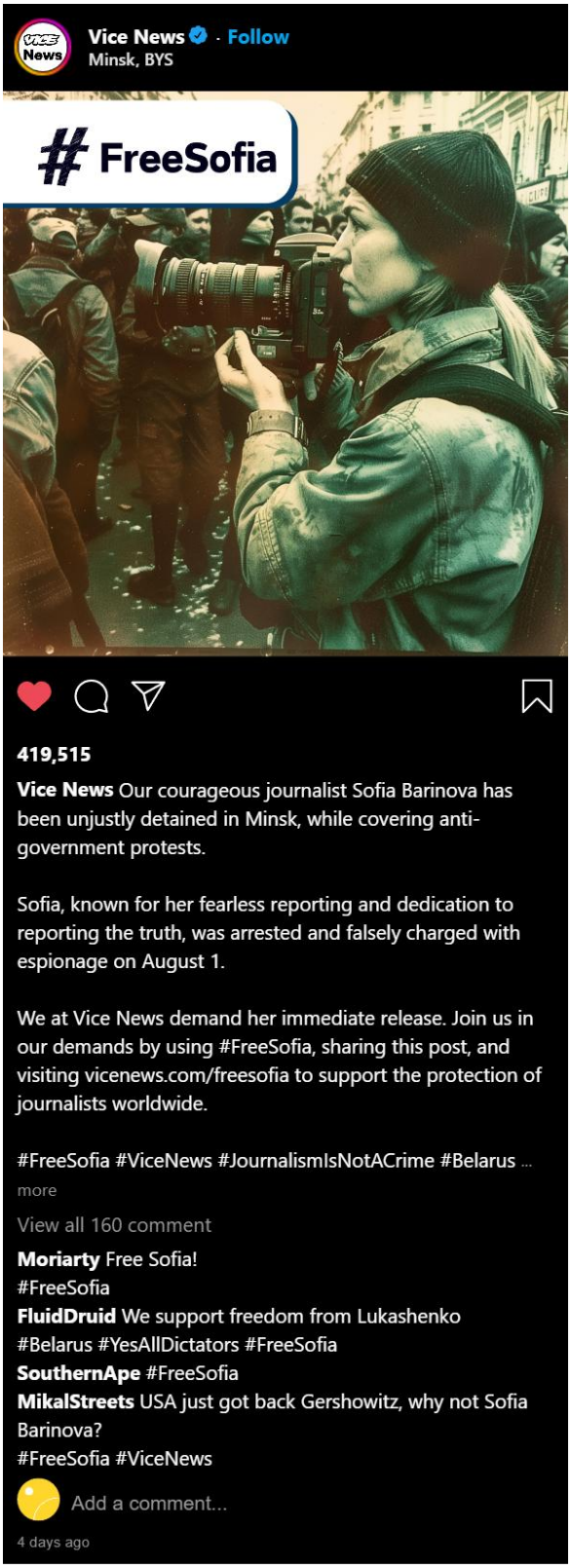
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*Instagram Post*



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