

# Conflict sensitive journalism

A handbook by Ross Howard



*Professional journalists do not set out to reduce conflict. They seek to present **accurate and impartial** news. But it is often through good reporting that **conflict is reduced.***

*Ross Howard*

## Preface

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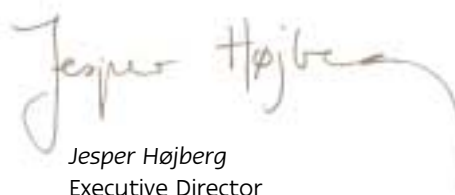
This publication seeks to contribute to the theoretical refinement and practical realisation of conflict conscious journalism as a tool for usage by media practitioners in conflict-affected areas. With this goal in mind, the handbook is designed to be both a practical everyday guide for those already familiar with the subject, as well as an introduction for those unfamiliar with such practices.

The handbook has been produced in partnership between IMS and IMPACS, as well as the Centre for Policy Alternatives in Colombo and the Nepal Press Institute in Kathmandu, to whom IMS and IMPACS would like to express special thanks. In addition, the in-country research and workshops conducted by the author, Ross Howard, have been instrumental in developing and refining the concepts and tools outlined in this publication. One of these workshops, held by IMPACS-IMS and the Centre for Policy Alternatives in Sri Lanka in June 2002, provided substantial input to this publication.

IMS and IMPACS are pleased to be able to present this handbook alongside their partners and hope that those reading it, whether as a refresher to a workshop or for the first time, find it a useful guide to the conceptual basis and practical everyday use of conflict conscious journalism.



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# Conflict Sensitive Journalism

## Introduction

Good journalism is difficult work at the best of times. There is never enough information and not enough time. Reporters rely on their training and standards to overcome these difficulties and deliver news which is accurate and impartial. That is the traditional role of journalism — to enable the public to make well-informed decisions.

However, when a society is threatened by violent conflict, journalism faces greater difficulties. Opposing sides seek to control the media. Information can be unreliable or censored. There is personal risk. But this is also when good journalism is most important.

To provide reliable information to the public in a time of violent conflict requires additional journalism skills. Reporters need to understand more about what causes conflict, and how conflict develops and ends. Reporters need to know where to look for these causes and solutions. By providing this information, journalism makes the public far more well-informed about the conflict beneath the violence, and can assist in resolving it. Reporters need to be aware of this crucial role that journalism can play in a time of conflict.

This handbook offers journalists an introduction to these skills and understanding. It is based on workshops presented by International Media Support (IMS) and IMPACS for experienced reporters and editors in conflict-threatened societies. Its intended function is to be a reminder for the workshop participants later in their work. For other journalists, this handbook can provide a starting point for new skills and new knowledge for reporting on conflict. This knowledge — called conflict sensitive journalism — can make a difference in societies affected by conflict.

Much of this handbook is derived from the important work of innovators in media training and peacebuilding, including Jake Lynch and Annabelle McGoldrick, at Tatlow Court and [conflictandpeace.org](http://conflictandpeace.org) and their Reporting The World and other publications; Fiona Lloyd and Peter du Toit's Reporting for Peace for Internews; the Institute for War and Peace Reporting; Robert Karl Manoff of the Centre for War, Peace and the News Media; Melissa Bauman at the Media Peace Centre in South Africa; and the original research of IMPACS — The Institute for Media, Policy and Civil Society.

Thanks are also due to the participants in IMS Conflict Sensitive Reporting workshops in Sri Lanka and Nepal; to the Centre for Policy Alternatives (CPA) in Sri Lanka and the Nepal Press Institute; to Sunanda Deshapriya, Chiranjibi Khanal, and Binod Bhattari and others; and to IMS and IMPACS and partners for launching these initiatives.



# Understanding conflict

Professional news reporters, whether being aware of it or not, are specialists in conflict. For reporters, change is news. And when there is change, there often is disagreement or conflict. There is conflict among those who like the change and those who do not, or those who want more change and those who oppose change. So journalists deal with conflict very often in their work. But many journalists know little about the idea of conflict. They do not know the root causes of conflict, or how conflicts end. They do not know the different kinds of conflict.

For more than 50 years diplomats, negotiators and social scientists have studied conflict and developed a sophisticated understanding of it, just like medicine, business or music. But few journalists have any training in the theory of conflict. Most journalists merely report on the conflict as it happens. By comparison, medical reporters do not just report on a person's illness. They also report on what caused the illness and what may cure it. News reporters can have the same skill when it comes to reporting conflict.

Having the skills to analyze conflict will enable a reporter to be a more effective professional journalist and a more aware individual. This is called Conflict Sensitive Journalism.

## What is conflict?

Conflict is a situation where two or more individuals or groups try to pursue goals or ambitions which they believe they cannot share.

Not all conflict is violent. Conflict is normal when there is change. Some people want change, but others disagree. If their disagreement or their conflict is managed peacefully, it can be a positive process. But when conflict is not managed properly, it becomes violent. In violent conflict, people fear for their safety and survival. When we say conflict, we are usually referring to violent conflict.

## What causes conflict?

Almost world-wide, it is predictable that conflict will arise where:

- Resources are scarce and not shared fairly, as in food, housing, jobs or land.
- There is little or no communication between the two groups.
- The groups have incorrect ideas and beliefs about each other.
- Unresolved grievances exist from the past.
- Power is unevenly distributed.



Consider the likely sources of conflict in your country. Consider what caused the conflict to become violent.

## Understanding violence

Violent physical conflict is easily identified and described by journalists. Individuals or groups in conflict try to hurt or kill each other and there are victims. But there can be other kinds of violence which do great harm in a society and these are more difficult for reporters to see and to explain.

**Cultural violence** can be the way a group has been thinking about another group for many years. It can include talk, images or beliefs which glorify physical violence. These include:

- **Hate speech:** Different ethnic or cultural groups openly speak badly of each other. One group blames the other for difficulties or problems it is suffering. Violence is encouraged to eliminate the blamed group.
- **Xenophobia:** A people's or a country's hatred or fear of another country creates misperceptions and encourages policies which promote conflict with that country.
- **Myths and legends of war heroes:** A society whose popular songs and history books glorify one side's ancient victories can build hatred for the other side.
- **Religious justifications for war:** Extreme intolerance of other beliefs promotes conflict.
- **Gender discrimination:** To allow practices and laws against women that are not accepted against men is a form of violence.

**Structural violence** is harm which is built into the laws and traditional behaviour of a group or society. Harm is permitted or ignored. It can include:

- **Institutionalized racism or sexism:** Laws and practices which allow unequal treatment based on race or sex.
- **Colonialism:** A country's lack of self-determination. A foreign authority forcibly assumes control over all important decision-making processes.
- **Extreme exploitation:** Such as slavery.
- **Poverty:** The world's leading cause of violent conflict.
- **Corruption and nepotism:** Governmental decisions are influenced or decided by bribery, favouritism and family or tribal connections.
- **Structural segregation:** Laws which force people to live in separate groups or places against their will.

These kinds of violence are extremely important to identify when reporting and analyzing conflict. Often they are the real cause of direct physical violence. Ending the physical violence will not be enough. It will happen again if the cultural and structural violence is ignored.

Consider your country: is there cultural and structural violence? Is it reported in the media? Do the victims have a voice in the news?



# Journalism and conflict

## The power of the media

Almost all societies have developed ways to regulate conflict without violence. Usually, a fair-minded person — a village elder or a judge or an international tribunal — is given authority by the community to decide how to resolve the conflict. The decision is respected by everyone. If the decisions seem unfair and are not accepted, the conflict may become violent.

Many professionals, such as counselors, community leaders, diplomats, negotiators and scholars, have been thinking deeply about what it takes to end a violent conflict. These professionals have discovered that in any conflict — whether it is within a family, between neighbours, among groups within a country or across borders — certain things must occur for the conflict to end. Conflict does not end by itself.

One of the most important things to take place is communication. For two sides in a conflict to move towards a non-violent resolution, they must first talk. This is where good journalism comes in.

## Journalism's unconscious roles:

Professional journalists do not set out to reduce conflict. They seek to present accurate and impartial news. But it is often through good reporting that conflict is reduced.

These are several elements of conflict resolution that good journalism can deliver, automatically, as part of its daily work:

### 1. Channeling communication:

The news media is often the most important channel of communication that exists between sides in a conflict. Sometimes the media is used by one side to broadcast intimidating messages. But other times, the parties speak to each other through the media or through specific journalists.

### 2. Educating:

Each side needs to know about the other side's difficulty in moving towards reconciliation. Journalism which explores each side's particular difficulties, such as its politics or powerful interests can help educate the other side to avoid demands for simplistic and immediate solutions.

### 3. Confidence-building:

Lack of trust is a major factor contributing to conflict. The media can reduce suspicion by digging into hot issues and revealing them so there are no secrets to fear. Good journalism can also present news that shows resolution is possible by giving examples from other places and by explaining local efforts at reconciliation.

### 4. Correcting misperceptions:

By examining and reporting on the two sides' misperceptions of each other, the media encourages disputing sides to revise their views and move closer to reducing conflict.

**5. Making them human:**

Getting to know the other side, giving them names and faces, is an essential step. This is why negotiators put the two sides in the same room. Good journalism also does this by putting real people in the story and describing how the issue affects them.

**6. Identifying underlying interests:**

In a conflict both sides need to understand the bottom-line interests of the other. Good reporting does this by asking tough questions and seeking out the real meaning of what leaders say. Good reporting also looks beyond the leaders' interests and seeks the larger groups' interest.

**7. Emotional outlet:**

In conflict resolution, there must be outlets for each side to express their grievances or anger or they will explode in frustration and make things worse. The media can provide important outlets by allowing both sides to speak. Many disputes can be fought out in the media, instead of in the streets, and the conflict can be addressed before it turns violent.

**8. Framing the conflict:**

In a conflict, describing the problem in a different way can reduce tension and launch negotiations. In good journalism, editors and reporters are always looking for a different angle, an alternative view, a new insight which will still attract an audience to the same story. Good journalism can help reframe conflicts for the two sides.

**9. Face-saving, consensus-building:**

When two parties try to resolve a conflict they must calm the fears of their supporters. By reporting what they say, the media allows leaders in a conflict to conduct face-saving and consensus-building, even reaching to refugees and exiles in far-away places.

**10. Solution-building:**

In a conflict, both sides must eventually present specific proposals to respond to grievances. On a daily basis, good reporting does this by asking the disputing parties for their solutions instead of just repeating their rhetoric of grievances. Good journalism is a constant process of seeking solutions.

**11. Encouraging a balance of power:**

Conflicting groups, regardless of inequalities, have to believe they will be given attention if they meet the other side in negotiations. Good journalism encourages negotiation because the reporting is impartial and balanced. It gives attention to all sides. It encourages a balance of power for the purpose of hearing grievances and seeking solutions.

*Good journalism is a  
**constant process**  
of seeking solutions.*

## Understanding our influence

These 11 activities are only part of what goes on in reducing conflict between persons or groups. Journalism does these things, as part of its normal good reporting. But when we understand the effect of what we do, we can better appreciate how important our role is in a conflict. We must get our facts right and choose our words carefully.

It also helps us as reporters to be aware that these activities are going on in many closed-door negotiations or peace talks. Knowing this, we can report what we learn about the negotiations with greater understanding. In Sri Lanka, when negotiations first began, the negotiators were concerned that the media did not understand the process and would create misperceptions and destroy confidence.



Ask yourself: which two or three of these 11 essential elements are being practised by the media in your country? Has there been much reporting about solutions? Are journalists pressing leaders from both sides for details of their solutions? Are journalists reporting on the real, underlying issues?

## How is conflict resolved?

It is important to know that there is more than one way to end conflict.

Think about this imaginary conflict. Two groups are in conflict over an orange. The orange tree is on one group's land. But the orange is on a branch hanging over the other group's land. Both groups want the one orange.

There are at least four ways for this conflict to end.

### 1. One party prevails:

- a. The two groups could fight violently and the stronger one wins the orange. The loser is angry and wants revenge.
- b. A judge settles the dispute in favour of one group. But the judge may be corrupt, slow or expensive. The loser is unsatisfied.
- c. Compensation. One group pays the other and keeps the orange. But this could be expensive.

### 2. Withdrawal:

- a. One or both groups simply walk away. But the conflict is unresolved and neither group is satisfied.
- b. One group destroys the orange, or gives it away. Destroying the orange could include violence. And both sides lose the orange.
- c. Both groups do nothing. But the valuable orange will rot, and is lost by both groups.

**3. Compromise. A more useful way:**

- a. Cut the orange, so each group gets at least some part of it.
- b. Peel the orange and each group takes the pieces one after the other. Now the orange is a different resource which can be shared, perhaps unequally, but satisfying both groups.
- c. Squeeze the orange into juice. This is a different way of seeing the orange. It is now a resource with a different value. The juice can be shared, perhaps unequally, but satisfying both groups.

**4. Transcendence. Real resolution of conflict:**

- a. Get more people to claim an interest in the orange, so no one group has a right to the whole orange. The local neighbours of the two groups in conflict may decide that the orange is a community resource, and they encourage the two sides to resolve the conflict without violence.
- b. Get another orange. The community of neighbours goes to the market or to the world and finds someone with a surplus who can share oranges with the two sides and ease the conflict.
- c. The two groups agree, perhaps with community encouragement, to bake an orange cake, sell it in the market and divide the money between the two groups. The orange now is seen differently. It is a resource by which the groups profit.
- d. The two groups plant the orange seeds, make an orange grove and together the groups become the prosperous orange supplier to the larger community. A perfect solution.

This is not to suggest that the neighbours in the community can just march in and tell the two groups in conflict what to do. But it is important to listen to the larger community's proposals for a solution and to seek community assistance in achieving a resolution.

**What is the point of this analysis?**

It is obvious: conflict should be looked at in more than one way.

- When the source of the conflict is seen as a resource which can be shared, the conflict is less likely to become violent.
- When the larger community takes an interest, there is more pressure not to use violence.
- When there are several alternative ways to resolve the conflict, violence is less attractive.

### More alternatives means less conflict

One way of achieving more alternatives in a dispute is by bringing more people into the conflict. It produces more ideas for seeing the conflict differently. It helps discover different solutions to be shared. When two sides are deadlocked, other members of the community, such as religious leaders, the business community, the civil society, a friendly neighboring country, or international organisations, can bring different visions and alternative solutions.

Conflict resolution can be highly complicated. After 30 years of war, the conflict between two groups in Mozambique was resolved in 1992.

- Fourteen different parties, six countries and six non-governmental organizations were involved.
- There were so many parties and ideas that it became difficult for either group to walk away.
- In the Mozambique peace talks, there were groups inside and outside the negotiations, helping the two sides communicate, prepare ideas and respond.
- Everyone started by finding a small agreement. Then they worked on bigger agreements.

### Conflict analysis for journalists

What does conflict analysis mean for journalists?

- Journalists should seek out other parties and other points of view. They should not only repeat old grievances by the old elites.
- Journalists should examine what the parties are seeking and the possibility for withdrawal, compromise or transcendence. Journalists should write about these possibilities.
- With conflict analysis, journalists can understand what diplomats and negotiators are trying to do, and can report it more reliably.
- With conflict analysis, journalists can identify more sources to go to for information.

*By providing this information, journalism makes the public far more well-informed about the conflict beneath the violence, and can assist in **resolving** it.*

## Good journalism, around the world

For citizens in a conflict to make well-informed decisions and perhaps resolve their conflict, they must have good journalism. Around the world, professional journalists have developed principals and basic standards by which they try to achieve good journalism. Unfortunately there are many places where journalists have to work under different rules imposed by governments or by powerful interests. But wherever professional journalists come together to freely consider what they do, and to guide themselves, they refer to these professional standards.

There are more than 50 professional journalists' associations around the world with similar codes of conduct or standards. Many can be found at [www.uta.fi/ethicnet](http://www.uta.fi/ethicnet). One example is the International Federation of Journalists ([www.ifj.org](http://www.ifj.org)).

### Good journalism. What it should not do:



- **Defamatory:**  
Good journalism does not tell lies and twist the truth about people.
- **Derivative:**  
Good journalism does not simply repeat what has been reported somewhere else. Copying others' news may repeat false information.
- **Malicious:**  
Journalism is powerful. News reports can ruin reputations, put people in danger, or cause public panic. Good journalism is not used to intentionally harm other persons.
- **Corrupt:**  
Good journalism does not accept bribes. It does no special favours for anyone. Good journalism is not for sale.

### What good journalism should include:



#### 1. Accuracy:

Getting the correct information is most important of all. Everything which is reported must be described accurately — the spelling of names, the facts as they happened, and the real meaning of what was said. Before they report it, good journalists seek the evidence and accurate facts.

A good journalist will rush to get the news first. But first, the journalist must get it right. People will not talk to journalists if they fear journalists will not repeat their words accurately, or will not describe things as they really are.

#### 2. Impartiality (balance):

Almost every code of good journalism puts importance on impartiality, on not taking sides. To do this, a good journalist will seek to produce a report which is balanced. To be balanced is to include both sides. There are always two sides in any story involving conflict. Citizens need to know what the other side says, and how it will affect them.

Balance is as important in every story as accuracy. People will not talk to a journalist who only reports one side of the story.

Impartiality also means that the professional journalist is not an active leader in any political group or movement. Impartial journalism is an important defence for reporters in a time of conflict. Journalists should be respected because they take no sides.

### **3. Responsibility:**

Journalists have obligations to the people they report about, and to the society to whom they report the news. Journalists have a responsibility to protect their sources. Many people will not tell journalists important news if they fear they will be revealed.

Good journalists also use only honest methods to obtain the news, which means they do not break the law.

## *Accuracy + Impartiality + Responsibility = Reliability*

These are the basic standards that produce journalism which the people can trust. It is called reliable journalism. All reliable reporting should be accurate, impartial and responsible. It applies to every aspect of the job — assigning stories, editing copy or sound bites, writing headlines, directing, producing, or managing newsrooms.



At any time, good reporters ask themselves: does my work meet the test of reliable journalism? Does my report have accuracy, impartiality and responsibility in it?

### **Reliable journalism and democracy**

It is reliable reporting which earns journalism a privileged place in many countries' constitutions and laws. Through the media, the people can exercise their right to free speech guaranteed in Article 19 of the International Declaration of Human Rights. Where there is free speech and reliable journalism, citizens can make well-informed decisions in their own best interest. That is an essential element of democracy.

### **Reliable, diverse and independent**

But for democracy to properly flourish and bloom, the media must not only be reliable but also diverse. No single media outlet can do enough. It takes many media outlets to ensure that competing points of view and different reports are brought to the public's attention.

The reliable and diverse media must be independent. The media must be free of government or powerful interference that blocks the reporting of other voices and other interests. An independent media must be supported by laws and courts and independent regulators, who protect the media from interference.

An independent media must also discipline itself, and submit to laws and regulators which are honest and non-partisan.

Photo: Joanna Vestey / Panos Pictures



*Conflict sensitive  
journalists  
choose their words  
carefully.*

## Conflict Sensitive Journalism

Some journalists say it is not our job to take responsibility for what happens when we report the news. We just report the conflict the same way we report on a soccer match — we just describe it. But this is not enough for conflict sensitive journalism.

### No bare facts

Many journalists today recognize that we are more than just professional spectators and distributors of the facts. We are aware that other people know how to create facts for us to report. They have a media strategy. They choose certain facts to tell the media, to use the media to influence the public's view of the conflict. Good journalists know there are no bare facts.

If we only report the bare facts about violent conflict, citizens will only understand the conflict in those terms. But if we search for news beyond the bare facts, and present more information to citizens, including possible solutions, they may see the conflict in different terms. If a car bomb went off yesterday we should not just report it and repeat what the usual leaders say about it. We should also report how it affected ordinary people's lives and seek their opinions about the conflict. We should also report on new attempts to end the conflict and provide information which exposes the bare facts.

The news we report can be destructive for a community, by promoting fear and violence. Or our news reports can be constructive, by making citizens better informed, and possibly safer, by also reporting on efforts to promote conflict reduction. This is conflict sensitive journalism.

A conflict sensitive journalist applies conflict analysis and searches for new voices and new ideas about the conflict. He or she reports on who is trying to resolve the conflict, looks closely at all sides, and reports on how other conflicts were resolved. A conflict sensitive journalist takes no sides, but is engaged in the search for solutions. Conflict sensitive journalists choose their words carefully.



Photo: Henrik Saxgren / BAM



### A checklist for conflict sensitive journalism

- Avoid reporting a conflict as consisting of two opposing sides. Find other affected interests and include their stories, opinions and goals. Interview merchants affected by the general strike, workers who are unable to work, refugees from the countryside who want an end to violence etc.
- Avoid defining the conflict by always quoting the leaders who make familiar demands. Go beyond the elites. Report the words of ordinary people who may voice the opinions shared by many.
- Avoid only reporting what divides the sides in conflict. Ask the opposing sides questions which may reveal common ground. Report on interests or goals which they may share.
- Avoid always focusing on the suffering and fear of only one side. Treat all sides' suffering as equally newsworthy.
- Avoid words like devastated, tragedy and terrorized to describe what has been done to one group. These kinds of words put the reporter on one side. Do not use them yourself. Only quote someone else who uses these words.
- Avoid emotional and imprecise words. Assassination is the murder of a head of state and no-one else. Massacre is the deliberate killing of innocent, unarmed civilians. Soldiers and policemen are not massacred. Genocide means killing an entire people. Do not minimize suffering, but use strong language carefully.
- Avoid words like terrorist, extremist or fanatic. These words take sides, make the other side seem impossible to negotiate with. Call people what they call themselves.
- Avoid making an opinion into a fact. If someone claims something, state their name, so it is their opinion and not your fact.
- Avoid waiting for leaders on one side to offer solutions. Explore peace ideas wherever they come from. Put these ideas to the leaders and report their response.

As journalists, our most powerful tools are the words we use. And the pictures and sounds. We can use our tools to build understanding instead of fears and myths.

## Examples of conflict sensitive journalism

### Traditional reporting

Skopje, UPI — *Peace talks aimed at ending the conflict in Macedonia lay in ruins last night after the massacre of eight policemen by Albanian rebels who mutilated the bodies.*

*The atrocity took place at the mountain village of Vecje, where a police patrol was attacked with machine guns and rocket-propelled grenades, said a spokesman. Six other men were wounded and three vehicles destroyed.*

*The bodies were cut with knives after they died, he said, and one man's head had been smashed in.*

*The attack was believed to be the work of the National Liberal Army terrorists from the hills near Tetevo. Ali Ahmeti, a political leader of the NLA, said that his men may have fired "in self-defence."...*

### Conflict sensitive reporting

Skopje, UPI — *There was condemnation across the political spectrum in Macedonia after a police patrol suffered the loss of eight men.*

*Both the main parties representing the country's minority Albanians distanced themselves from the killings, believed to be the work of the self-styled National Liberation Army.*

*Ali Ahmeti, a political leader of the NLA, denied that his men had attacked the patrol, saying they may have fired "in self-defence".*

*But the Macedonian government said it had done nothing to provoke the machine-gun fire and rocket-propelled grenades which destroyed three trucks.*

*A spokesman added that the bodies appeared to have been cut with knives and one man's skull caved in ...*

## EXAMPLE # 1

## See the difference?

### Traditional reporting

- The news is all bad, it is violent news and it does not seek other sides or points of view. It declares the worst: "peace talks...lay in ruins."
- It uses emotional and unnecessary words: massacre, mutilated, atrocity. It emphasizes the violence with words such as "mutilated bodies."
- The traditional reporting takes sides: it describes the event from the point of view of the army spokesman. He says the patrol was attacked.

### Conflict Sensitive Reporting

- The report goes further than violence and it reports people who condemn the violence.
- The news is balanced quickly: the NLA denies it attacked the patrol, but admits there was a battle.
- The other side is given the name it calls itself: the National Liberation Army.
- The violence is not hidden or ignored. But it is stated as a claim and not as a fact.

**EXAMPLE # 2****Traditional reporting**

Yoho City, YNS — *The Prime Minister of Yoho has condemned a bomb blast in Yoho City by Atu terrorists which killed ten tourists yesterday.*

*The prime minister said he has created a special army squad to track down the perpetrators of the massacre.*

*Police say the explosion occurred when terrorists from an Atu assassination squad brought a huge bomb into the Tourist Office in the city square. The bomb was probably located in a suitcase, said police captain Joe Blow.*

*The terrorist-guerilla Atu Front early this morning issued a statement denying it planted the bomb. But government sources say eye-witnesses saw Atu Front leader Sam Green at the city square yesterday. It is believed he coordinated the attack ...*

**Conflict sensitive reporting**

Yoho City, YNS — *A mysterious explosion which killed 10 tourists was the work of an Atu separatist movement, the Prime Minister of Yoho claimed yesterday.*

*Police investigators are still examining the shattered city square where the blast occurred while tourists were getting off a tour bus at the Tourist Office yesterday.*

*The prime minister blamed the explosion on the self-styled Atu Front, which is fighting government forces in rural areas and demanding a republican government.*

*In a telephone interview Atu Front leader Sam Green denied any connection with the explosion and called it a tragedy.*

*The tour bus recently arrived from the nearby country of Butu, where a civil war is waging ...*

**See the difference?****Traditional reporting**

- The news is full of blame and accusations with no proof. It takes the prime minister's side. It says the attackers were Atu terrorists. How does he know?
- It uses emotional language: massacre, terrorists, assassination squad.
- It reports a claim by the police captain without proof. It reports unnamed government sources who say other unnamed people say they saw the Atu leader and blame him. There is no proof of this.

**Conflict sensitive reporting**

- It reports only what is known. The bomb is a mystery. It uses words carefully. It says the prime minister makes a claim. It says he blames Atu separatists.
- It calls the Atu separatists by the name they use. It seeks both sides' explanation and comment.
- It does not report emotional words like massacre. It does not report police speculation and police claims, which do not include names of witnesses.
- It reveals more possible explanation. The bomb may have been on a bus from another country in conflict.

# Newsroom cultures

## Professionalism versus patriotism

No journalist can be completely objective. Journalists, like everyone, carry the values of their home country, their religion and their ethnic group. That is why professional journalists have standards for accuracy, impartiality and responsibility, to remove our personal values and bias.

But when there is a violent threat in a society the media sometimes takes sides. This happened in Nepal. The government declared a State of Emergency against the Maoist threat. The main media agreed and did not concern itself that the Emergency took away media freedoms. And the media used the government words to describe the Maoists as terrorists. Very quickly the media became a voice of the government against the Maoists. And it was more difficult for journalists to independently report on and analyze the government or the Maoists. Journalists censored themselves and lost impartiality.

In Sri Lanka the two main ethnic groups, the Sinhala and the Tamils, live together in the capital city but each side has completely separate media that rarely makes positive reports about the other side. The media creates suspicion, distrust and potential for conflict.

When a newsroom reports the news by looking at everything only from one side against the other side, it thus hinders the reporters from thinking independently. Reporters accept one side's word for what is happening on both sides. But if we do not talk to and report the other side, how will we know when it has changed? We will lose the values of reliable journalism and will no longer communicate and educate and dispel myths.

## Reaching the other side

One way professional journalists can help bridge the barriers between the opposing sides is to search for stories about what is common to both sides. For example, it can be news about common environmental concerns, business prospects, health concerns or new farming techniques. And the stories report solutions that can be shared by both sides.

Another way of breaking the barriers is to write stories about trans-ethnic identities, or people who are national heroes. These are people who rise from one group or region to represent the whole country, in business, or international politics or education.

The most important way is to remove stereotypes and assumptions from our news. Stereotypes always report what is different about the other side, such as race or religion or caste, as if it is important. Such reports give the assumption that the other side always acts in certain ways and never changes. Stereotypes blame the other side's religion, caste or culture for whatever happens. Such reports are often wrong and create prejudice and conflict.

Always ask yourself: is race or religion or caste important in my report? If not, remove it.



**EXAMPLE # 1****Traditional reporting**

Yoho City, YNS — *New battles in the city's ethnic gang war left seven youths dead and a warehouse destroyed on Tuesday night.*

*Gun-fire and Molotov cocktails were exchanged between rival gangs of Yoho and Atu young men for nearly 20 minutes in what one policeman called "an ethnic shoot-out."*

*One resident said a young Atu man screamed "we'll kill you all" as he threw a petrol bomb into a car full of Yoho young men parked outside the warehouse.*

*The young man was shot dead by a Yoho man firing from a window of the warehouse, said another resident.*

*Other Atu gang members were seen throwing petrol bombs into the warehouse windows and the building was destroyed by fire. The two gangs have been waging an ethnic war in the area for several weeks, police officials said ...*

**Conflict sensitive reporting**

Yoho City, YNS — *The illegal narcotics trade plaguing the city triggered a gun-fight on Tuesday night between two groups over drug dealing in a downtown area.*

*The shoot-out which killed seven people involved young men recruited by rival narcotic dealers trying to control the area, according to local residents.*

*Four of the dead were Yoho youths hired to guard a warehouse that residents believe was a drug distribution center, said Jane Brown, chairperson of the East-Side Citizens Association.*

*Other drug dealers trying to take over the East-side have recruited unemployed young Atu men and have armed them with guns, said Ms. Brown.*

*"The police have refused to deal with the drug trade which makes our street into a battleground. We need a police station, money for treatment centers and ...*

**See the difference?****Traditional reporting**

- The report begins with vivid details of violence and blames it on ethnic groups. It repeatedly names people's ethnic group.
- The report uses the opinion of an unnamed policeman as a fact.
- The report gives more details of the violence, but no explanation for the violence.
- The report does not seek out other interests or points of view.

**Conflict sensitive reporting**

- The report carefully avoids ethnic identity in the lead because it is not most important.
- The report shows the violence, but explains drug dealers are the real cause.
- The report reveals ethnic identities, but shows they are victims.
- The report seeks out other sources of information, with solutions.
- The report shows the failure of the police to provide solutions.

## Check-list against prejudice

Examine this list, adapted from The Sunday Times of South Africa, for ways to guard against stories which encourage prejudice.



- Is this necessary news? What is the public interest in this report? Is it news only because it is about the other side?
- Even if the facts are correct, will this report encourage prejudice? Can it be reported differently?
- Are there enough different voices in the report? Did we ask enough different opinions from ordinary people and experts?
- Are there words and comments in the report which offend people or cause prejudice? Are these comments balanced by other comments?
- In crime news, are we reporting the race or culture of the offender and the victim? Is this information necessary and in the public interest? Why?

### Traditional Reporting

Yoho City, YNS — *Another Atu tailor shop was fire-bombed yesterday in the continuing wave of ethnic hatred in the city.*

*The Atu shop at 21 Main Street was burned to the ground and the owner's family narrowly escaped death after the attack.*

*Nearly half of the tailor shops in the city are owned by Atu residents. At least 9 shops have suffered vandalism and attacks in the past three months.*

*The recent attacks are linked to the wave of tension between Atu and Yoho residents in the city, reflecting the civil war between Atu separatists and the government in the northern part of the country.*

### Conflict Sensitive Reporting

Yoho City, YNS — *A 52-year-old man who sells sewing equipment has been arrested in connection with a fire-bombing of a tailor shop in the city.*

*The man is accused of telling shop owners to buy his equipment for their shops and threatening them if they did not.*

*The man was charged with extortion yesterday, nearly two weeks after an Atu shop on Main St. was set on fire at night and destroyed. Police are investigating to see if the man had connection to other recent fires at Atu or other tailor shops.*

*At least 9 Atu shops have been attacked recently. Atu shop owners claimed they were victims of Yoho prejudice.*

### EXAMPLE #2

## See the difference?

### Traditional reporting

- The report gives ethnic identity importance. It assumes that ethnic conflict is the cause. There is no proof.
- The report does not seek out any other sources or opinions. It gives no sources.

### Conflict sensitive reporting

- The ethnic identity is not reported immediately, because it is not important.
- The report reveals it was extortion and not ethnic conflict.

## Newsroom diversity

Reliable journalism is accurate, balanced and responsible. Culture, race and religion should have no influence on our reporting. We are supposed to be colour-blind. And our newsrooms and offices should represent many colours of race, religion or culture. We should be diverse.

But often our newsrooms are not diverse. We have no reporters from "the other side", culture or race. We do not put reporters of different race, religion or culture together as a team, in order to counter-balance prejudices. We should.

We have no contacts with "the other side". We have no sources on the other side. We do not report from other parts of the country. We should.

We have very few female reporters. We do not report issues of importance to women. Our reporting does not represent the reality of our country. We treat women differently. We should treat women equally.

The diversity in a newsroom and in the news is an important measure of the media's role in conflict. The media can lead society by example, or can increase divisions in society.



### A diversity checklist

- In our reporting, does the amount of news about the other side or other culture equal the other side's proportion in our society?
- Do positive reports about minorities only appear in certain sections of the news, such as sports?
- Who in the newsroom has good contacts or reliable sources on the other side?
- Are reporters recruited from minority communities and are they given a mentor and skills upgrading?
- Are there guidelines for achieving more diversity in the newsroom and in the news we report? Are the plans led by a respected person with authority to make diversity happen?

*Few journalists have any training in the theory of conflict. Having the skills to **analyze conflict** will enable a reporter to be a more **effective professional** journalist.*

*Ross Howard*

ISBN 87-989502-0-7

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Published in Denmark by IMS and IMPACS

March, 2003

Design and production: Nanette Vabø Grafisk Design  
Print: De Facto A/S

Frontpage photo: Jewel Samad / POLFOTO



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