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MEDUSA



REWRITING MEDIA NARRATIVES ON GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Work pressure and professional integrity

Professional Learning Suite
For Journalists and Communication Professionals

Section: MEDIA

Module No. 1

by: Novi Sad School of Journalism

NOVOSADSKA NOVINARSKA ŠKOLA
NOVI SAD SCHOOL OF JOURNALISM

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1. Why this subject matter

“

Journalistic work implies that reporting will be influenced by numerous factors that are not exclusively related to the story itself. Editorial decisions are influenced by deadlines, audience expectations, available resources, and the priorities of the media outlet itself. These factors shape which stories receive attention and how they are presented to the public. In reporting on gender-based violence (GBV), they can affect the choice of sources, framing, the amount of context provided, and the overall interpretation of events.

Workplace pressure is not always easy to identify, as it is often embedded in everyday newsroom practices and the routine tasks journalists are expected to perform. Journalists quickly learn what attracts attention and what receives editorial support. They also learn which topics are difficult to pursue and which approaches are more likely to be approved. This module examines how such pressures influence reporting on gender-based violence and shape editorial decision-making.”

2. Learning Outcomes



01

Identify the economic, institutional, and social pressures that influence editorial decisions, and recognize how these pressures specifically affect coverage of gender-based violence;

02

analyse how commercial, editorial and/or institutional pressures influence story selection, framing, sourcing, and headline writing;

03

Identify individual and collective strategies for maintaining editorial independence and professional standards under workplace pressure.

Definitions

Work pressure in journalism refers to the set of economic, institutional, and social forces that constrain a journalist's ability to report freely and ethically. These include financial precarity, editorial hierarchies, audience engagement metrics, advertiser influence, and competitive dynamics between outlets. In the context of GBV reporting, work pressure often manifests as an implicit or explicit expectation to prioritize emotional impact over factual accuracy, to simplify complex stories for maximum reach, or to avoid topics that may alienate advertisers or audiences.

Professional integrity refers to the ability to maintain editorial judgement and professional standards when facing economic, organizational, political, or commercial pressures.

3. How pressure shapes our choices and common workplace dilemmas

Journalists may find themselves adapting their reporting to what attracts attention, satisfies editorial demands or fits available resources, often without consciously recognizing how these pressures influence the final story. Journalists covering gender-based violence regularly encounter situations where workplace pressure and professional standards pull in different directions. Some of the most common dilemmas include:

- **The click-bait headline.** An editor requests a title that emphasizes drama or victim details. The journalist knows it is reductive but fears that refusing will cost them the assignment or damage the relationship.

- **The advertiser concern.** A journalist uncovers information that reflects negatively on a company that provides significant advertising revenue to the outlet. An editor suggests softening the angle or delaying publication until additional comments are obtained. The journalist must balance commercial realities with the responsibility to report relevant information in the public interest.

- **The speed-accuracy conflict.** Breaking news culture rewards speed. A story about a violent incident may be pushed to publication before fact verification, formulation of context for the story, or consideration of the potential impact on survivors and their families.

- **The assignment refusal**. A journalist is asked to cover a GBV story in a way they consider harmful. Refusing may mean losing the assignment, the income, or professional standing.

There is no single correct answer to any of these dilemmas. What matters is recognizing how workplace pressures shape editorial choices and developing practical strategies for responding to them without losing professional judgement.

5. How economic pressure shapes narratives on GBV

Media economics can shape editorial decisions about gender-based violence. In digital media environments that depend on audience traffic, stories that generate strong emotional reactions often receive greater visibility. This can encourage a focus on dramatic incidents, sensational details, and immediate impact. As a result, coverage may devote less attention to the social, economic or institutional factors that contribute to gender-based violence.

At the same time, in-depth investigative reporting on the systemic causes of GBV such as labor precarity, housing insecurity, lack of legal protection, is expensive to produce and slower to generate engagement. It is therefore structurally disadvantaged in ad-driven media environments.

The result is a media landscape that tends to over-represent dramatic individual incidents and under-represent the social and institutional conditions that enable violence.
This kind of distortion narrows public understanding, limits political pressure for systemic change, and leaves survivors without the context they need to recognize their own experiences as part of a broader pattern.

Journalists who understand this dynamic are better equipped to push back against pressure.

6. Strategies for maintaining professional independence

Maintaining professional independence includes finding practical ways to navigate newsroom pressures without compromising the integrity of reporting. Journalists can strengthen their position by documenting editorial concerns and proposing alternatives using evidence, research, and editorial guidelines to support their arguments.

When time constraints threaten the quality of reporting, a useful strategy may be to negotiate for additional reporting time or the opportunity to publish a follow-up story that provides greater context and depth.

Peer consultation before publishing sensitive stories and mentoring arrangements can also help journalists to consider alternative approaches and assess the potential consequences of editorial decisions.

Such mechanisms are particularly valuable when journalists face tight deadlines, uncertainty about framing, or pressure to prioritize speed and audience engagement over context. Additional form of support could be provided through professional associations and journalist networks, especially when journalists face professional or personal consequences for insisting on accurate and responsible reporting.

They may offer legal support, professional guidance, public advocacy, and access to networks of colleagues who have faced similar pressures.

7.What good practice looks like

Education leads to professionalism

The Serbian organization **Fenomena** organized a training for media professionals on **responsible reporting on violence against women**, aimed at strengthening professional standards while respecting the core principles of ethical journalism and basic human dignity.

The training placed particular emphasis on developing a reporting style that is both **professionally responsible and adaptable to the editorial practices of tabloid media,** recognizing that tabloids are among the most widely read outlets in Serbia and therefore play a significant role in shaping public narratives.

Representatives of **23 media outlets across Serbia** participated in the training, including several of the country's most widely read tabloids.



The impact of the training was assessed through an analysis of **138 articles on gender-based violence** written by the trained journalists after the program. The results showed that **90% of these articles complied with the four key principles introduced during the training:**

1. The article **does not justify the violence or the perpetrator**.

2. The article **does not place blame on the victim.**

3. The article includes the information: *"If you are experiencing violence or know someone who is, call the SOS hotline 0800 35 00 36."*

4. The article includes a **statement from a competent expert on domestic violence,** such as a representative of an SOS service, a lawyer, a psychologist, or another relevant professional.

This example demonstrates **how targeted training and clear editorial guidelines can significantly improve media reporting practices**, even in highly competitive and sensationalist media environments, contributing to more responsible public discourse on gender-based violence.



8. Case study

“Serbian tabloid Telegraf.rs (Telegraf, 2025) published a breaking news report on a femicide in the Jarčujak neighbourhood of Kraljevo in which a man killed his wife before taking his own life. The victim’s elderly mother-in-law, who was also present, survived by escaping to neighbours.

The headline described the event as an “unprecedented horror” and a “bloodbath,” and foregrounded the unusual weapon used. The article was structured around dramatic sub-headings including “Bloody End in the Yard” and “Neighbors in Disbelief: ‘He Was a Quiet Man.’” The text provided a detailed sequential account of the violence, named both parties by initials and ages, specified the street and neighbourhood, and identified the perpetrator’s profession and the weapon as a crossbow. Neighbour testimony was used to frame the

the perpetrator as a “hardworking and peaceful” person and to express disbelief that “a man who spent his life saving others” could commit such an act. The closing paragraph framed the femicide as the outcome of a “morning argument that escalated,” locating the cause in a domestic dispute rather than in a pattern of violence. No support organisation, specialist voice, or statistical context on femicide or intimate partner violence was included. The word “femicide” did not appear.

Discussion

- The headline emphasises the weapon and uses the words “horror” and “bloodbath.” What editorial logic is likely to have driven these choices? Which of the work pressures described in Section 4 of this module do you think most plausibly explains the framing, and what evidence in the text supports that reading?

- The article closes by describing the killing as the result of a “morning argument that escalated.” How does this framing relate to the speed-accuracy conflict described in Section 4? What structural context would a journalist need time and editorial support to include, and how would its inclusion change the story’s meaning?

- Neighbour testimony is used to characterise the perpetrator as a “quiet man” who “spent his life saving others.” This is an example of the humanisation of the perpetrator at the expense of the victim. Imagine you are the journalist who gathered this testimony under deadline pressure. How would you use the professional integrity checklist from Section 9 to decide whether and how to include it?

- The word “femicide” does not appear in the article. What difference would its use make to how the public understands this story? What institutional or commercial pressures might lead a newsroom to avoid it, and how would you argue for its inclusion to a reluctant editor?

- Rewrite the opening paragraph and headline of this article applying the principles from Section 7. Include at least one element of structural context and remove at least one sensationalist framing choice. Be prepared to explain each editorial decision you made.

9. Practical Exercises

01
Mapping your pressures

Objective: Identify the specific pressures present in your current or most recent work context (financial, editorial, competitive, social) and recognize how they shape your editorial choices when reporting on gender-based violence (GBV).

Duration: 20 minutes

Materials: A large sheet of paper and a pen (or a digital whiteboard).

Instructions (step-by-step):

1. Draw a large cross on your paper to create four distinct quadrants. Label them as follows: Financial Pressures, Editorial/Newsroom Pressures, Competitive Pressures, and Social/Audience Pressures.
2. Spend 10 minutes listing the specific daily stressors you face in each quadrant. Be concrete. For example, under "Competitive," you might write the need to publish the news before rival outlets.
3. Freelancer Focus: If you are a freelance journalist, explicitly use the "Financial" quadrant to map the pressure of "making a story sellable to an editor" or "getting paid per click/article."

4. Review your completed map. Take a red pen and circle the top two pressures that most frequently tempt you to rush a story, skip verification, or compromise the dignity of a GBV report (e.g., writing a clickbait headline to satisfy audience pressure).

Expected Output: Learners produce a personal "pressure map" and identify which specific pressures most affect their GBV coverage decisions.

Debriefing / Reflection Questions:

1. Look at the pressures you circled. How does the financial pressure of being a freelancer (or the newsroom need to generate clicks for ad revenue) specifically change the way a GBV headline is written?
2. When editorial pressure demands immediate publication to beat competitors, what is the first journalistic standard or verification step you are most likely to skip?
3. How does mapping these pressures help you separate your professional integrity from the structural constraints of the media industry?

02

The negotiation role-play

Objective: In pairs, practice negotiating with an editor who is requesting a harmful framing strictly due to time constraints and competitive financial pressure.
Duration: 30 minutes.
Materials: A timer and the scenario brief.
Instructions (step-by-step):

1. Divide into pairs. One person plays the Journalist, the other plays the Editor.
2. The Scenario: A high-profile femicide has just occurred. A rival news outlet has already published a breaking news alert. The Editor, driven by the financial need to generate immediate web traffic, demands that the Journalist quickly publish a piece using a sensational, victim-blaming headline (e.g., "Tragedy of jealousy: she wanted to leave him").
3. The Task: The Journalist must push back against the Editor's request. The goal is to negotiate a compromise that maintains professional integrity and respects the victim, without ignoring the newsroom's genuine need to publish quickly.
4. Run the roleplay for 7 minutes. The Journalist must use constructive, non-confrontational arguments (e.g., proposing an alternative, fast, but factual headline).
5. Switch roles and repeat the scenario for another 7 minutes.

Expected Output: Learners develop language for pushback that is constructive rather than confrontational, and test different strategies to defend editorial integrity against financial and time pressures.

Debriefing / Reflection Questions:

- How does the extreme pressure of "the rival outlet published first" make it harder to defend your professional integrity?
- During the roleplay, which practical arguments worked best to convince the Editor to drop the clickbait framing without sounding insubordinate?
- How often do editorial constraints (like word counts or SEO demands) secretly force you to alter the framing of a GBV story?



03

Reframing under pressure

Objective: Take a sensationalist GBV headline and rewrite it three times — once for speed, once for accuracy, once for systemic framing — to recognize how editorial logic, driven by extreme time constraints and the financial need for web traffic, alters reporting choices.

Duration: 25 minutes.

Materials: Pen, paper, and a stopwatch/timer.

Instructions (step-by-step):

1. The trainer provides the group with the following sensationalist baseline headline (or a real local equivalent): "Jealous lover snaps: passionate tragedy in the city center after she tries to leave."
2. Round 1: Speed & Clicks (1 minute). The scenario: A rival outlet just broke the story. Your editor yells that you have exactly 60 seconds to publish an alert that generates immediate clicks. Rewrite the headline prioritizing speed and audience engagement over nuance.
3. Round 2: Accuracy (3 minutes). The scenario: You have slightly more time to update the homepage. Rewrite the headline to strip away the romanticized excuses (e.g., "jealous lover", "passionate tragedy") and deliver only the strict, verified facts.

4. Round 3: Systemic Framing (5 minutes). The scenario: You are writing a follow-up feature piece without the pressure of breaking news. Rewrite the headline to accurately frame the event as a systemic act of gender-based violence.
5. Compare the three headlines in pairs.

Expected Output: Learners practice seeing the same story through different editorial logics and identify where the ethical line sits for them under structural constraints.

Debriefing / Reflection Questions:

- At what specific point does the editorial demand for "speed" turn into an unacceptable compromise for your professional integrity?
- Look at your Round 1 headline. How often is the excuse of "we were in a rush" used in real newsrooms to justify publishing biased, victim-blaming content?
- How did having 5 full minutes (Round 3) change your cognitive approach to the story compared to the 1-minute deadline?

Checklist time!

Professional integrity checklist

Before publishing, check if your article contains:

- Was this story selected because of its public importance or because it was expected to generate attention?
- Did deadline pressure influence the angle of the story?
- Did fear of conflict with editors, colleagues, sources, or audiences influence any reporting decision?
- Did audience metrics influence the headline?
- Did commercial considerations influence the framing?
- Did resource limitations affect the diversity of sources included in the story?
- Was important context removed because of time or space constraints?

If one or more boxes are ticked, revise the article!

Resources

- Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma Guides on ethical reporting on violence, including specific resources for journalists covering GBV under newsroom pressure. dartcenter.org
- International Federation of Journalists - *Safety Guidelines Resources for journalists on professional protection, including guidance on resisting editorial pressure.* ifj.org
- Council of Europe - *Journalism at Risk Reports and recommendations on the economic conditions affecting journalistic independence in Europe.* coe.int
- Telegraf.rs. (2025, July 13). U*nprecedented horror in Kraljevo: A retired firefighter brutally killed a woman with a crossbow*, and then blew himself up. https://www.telegraf.rs/vesti/hronika/4279902-nezapamceni-horor-u-kraljevu-penzionisani-vatrogasac-samostrelom-zverski-ubio-zenu-a-onda-se-razneo

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Authors

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medusa.erasmusproject@gmail.com

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