N. 2025-1-IT01-KA220-VET-000350227

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REWRITING MEDIA NARRATIVES ON GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Ethical responsibility and privacy management in reporting on gender-based violence

Professional Learning Suite
For Journalists and Communication Professionals

Section: MEDIA

Module No. 7

by: Novi Sad School of Journalism

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1. Why this subject matter

When journalists report on gender-based violence, every editorial choice carries legal and ethical weight. Naming victims, publishing identifying details or reproducing traumatic content without consent can cause lasting harm and may violate European law.

The General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), the Istanbul Convention, and national press codes all impose obligations on media professionals to protect the privacy, dignity, and safety of survivors and vulnerable persons.

This module introduces the regulatory frameworks and key principles that help journalists make informed decisions in these situations.

2. Learning Outcomes



01

Identify and apply key European legal frameworks relevant to reporting on gender-based violence, making informed decisions about privacy and data protection;

02

Identify legal and privacy risks in GBV reporting and apply appropriate anonymization and data protection measures;

03

Assess whether published content complies with data protection principles, privacy requirements, and public-interest exceptions.

3. Definitions

Privacy
The right of individuals to control information about themselves. In the context of gender-based violence, it includes protecting identity, location, images, and personal data that could expose them to danger or stigma.

Personal data (GDPR)
Any information relating to an identified or identifiable natural person. This includes names, photos, IP addresses, and descriptions detailed enough to identify someone, which all subject to strict processing rules under the General Data Protection Regulation.

Public interest
The legal and ethical justification for publishing information that would otherwise be private. Not all stories about violence automatically qualify and editors must demonstrate that publication genuinely serves the public good, and that the benefit is proportionate to the privacy intrusion.

Data minimization
A core GDPR principle requires that only personal data that is adequate, relevant, and limited to what is necessary for the stated purpose may be processed or published. In journalism, this means asking whether every identifying detail in this article is genuinely necessary for the story.

4. The legal framework - the European context

Journalists working in Europe operate within a layered legal framework that governs how personal data, especially sensitive data relating to vulnerable individuals, may be collected, processed, and published.

General Data Protection Regulation - GDPR (2018)

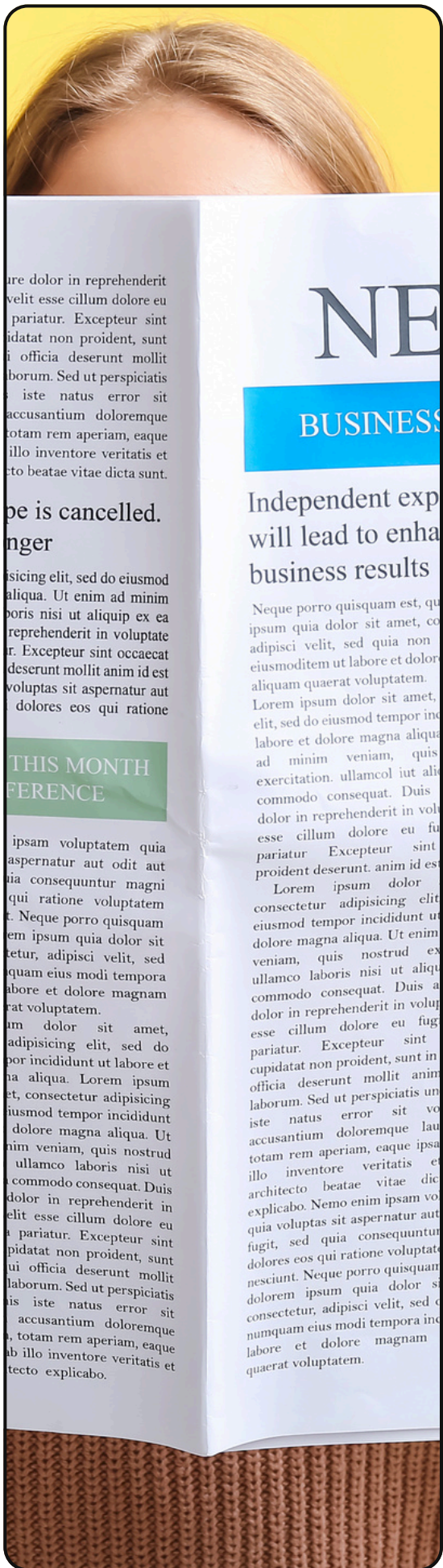
The GDPR applies across all EU member states and establishes strict rules for processing personal data.

Key provisions for journalists include:

- **Article 9** prohibits processing of special categories of data (information about a person's private life, sexual behavior, or criminal involvement) without explicit consent or a clearly defined legal basis.
- **Article 85** grants member states the power to provide exemptions for journalism in the public interest, but only to the extent necessary to reconcile data protection with freedom of expression.



- **The principle of data minimization** (Article 5) requires that no more personal data than is strictly necessary for the purpose be published.
- **Violations** can result in fines of up to 4% of annual global turnover or €20 million, and civil liability to affected individuals.



Istanbul Convention (Council of Europe, 2011)

The Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence has been ratified by most EU member states. Article 17 specifically addresses the role of the private sector and media, requiring state parties to encourage media professionals to adopt self-regulatory standards that avoid stereotyping and victim-blaming. It also requires states to ensure that educational and awareness-raising content does not re-traumatize survivors.

European Convention on Human Rights - Articles 8 and 10

The ECHR requires a balance between two fundamental rights:
Article 8: Right to private and family life: protects individuals from publication of identifying details, location, or private information without justification.
Article 10: Freedom of expression: protects journalistic reporting in the public interest, including critical coverage of institutions and public figures.
The European Court of Human Rights has consistently held that neither right is absolute. In cases involving GBV, courts tend to give significant weight to the victim's right to privacy where there is no overriding public interest in identification.

5. Common ethical failures in media

Media professionals frequently compromise privacy and ethical standards through patterns that are often unconscious or normalized within newsroom cultures. The following are the most recurring failures in media coverage of GBV.

Identifying victims without consent
Publishing full names, photographs, or location details of survivors, particularly in cases of sexual violence, exposes them to further harm, social pressure, and potential contact from the perpetrator or third parties. This violates both GDPR and the majority of European press codes, and can constitute a criminal offence in some jurisdictions.

Unnecessary graphic detail
Describing the circumstances or method of violence in graphic detail, without journalistic necessity, can re-traumatize survivors and their families, and violates the principle of minimizing harm.

Inconsistent anonymization

Using initials in the text while publishing a clearly identifiable photograph, or combining anonymized name with neighborhood, profession, and age, effectively defeats the purpose of anonymization. Editors must apply privacy protection consistently across all identifying elements, such as text, images, captions, and metadata.

Republishing personal data from social media

Journalists sometimes assume that information or images from social media can be freely reused in news coverage. However, public availability does not remove privacy risks. Republishing personal data without clear public-interest justification may expose survivors to harm. Journalists should assess whether such content is necessary and whether it can be used without revealing personal details.

6. How privacy violations creat legal and practical risks

- Privacy breaches in reporting on gender-based violence can have serious consequences for both the individuals involved and the media organizations that publish the information. Even when names are omitted, a combination of details may allow a person to be identified. This can expose survivors and witnesses to unwanted attention, harassment, social stigma, or further contact from perpetrators. The risk is particularly significant in digital environments, where content can be archived and reproduced long after the original publication.

- European legal frameworks therefore place strong emphasis on necessity, proportionality, and data minimization. Journalists should assess whether each piece of personal information contributes meaningfully to public understanding of the story and whether the same journalistic purpose could be achieved with fewer identifying details. The fact that information is accurate, publicly available, or obtained from official sources does not automatically justify publication.

- Privacy violations may also create legal and professional risks for media organizations. Publishing excessive personal data can lead to complaints before regulatory bodies, civil liability, or breaches of professional standards established by press councils and self-regulatory mechanisms. Privacy aspects should therefore be considered throughout the reporting process rather than only at the final stage of publication.

7.What good practice looks like

"Psychologist on female students' testimonies: Trust in doctors and the healthcare system is crucial" - Tampon Zona Lokal, January 2026 (Aleksandar Djokić)

This article, published on the independent Serbian media platform Tampon Zona, demonstrates several hallmarks of ethical, trauma-informed reporting on gender-based violence in healthcare settings. Journalist Aleksandar Djokić interviewed Dr Milica Ninković, a research associate at the Department of Psychology, University of Belgrade, as part of a series documenting student testimonies about gynaecological examinations in Serbian student health clinics.



Why it exemplifies good practice

1. **Survivors are protected.** The article does not name, photograph, or otherwise identify any individual student who shared a negative experience. Testimonies are presented collectively and anonymously, fully consistent with GDPR data minimisation principles and Serbian press code obligations.

2. **A specialist voice shapes the narrative.** Rather than relying solely on institutional sources (health authorities, police), the journalist centres an academic psychologist who contextualises the testimonies within established research. Ninkov's expertise frames harmful practices not as individual failures but as symptomatic of systemic gaps in medical training and institutional accountability.

3. **The piece is constructive and empowering.** Alongside the critique of systemic failures, the article provides concrete, actionable guidance for young women, including preparing written questions for appointments, bringing a trusted person, and knowing the right to halt a procedure. This reflects the principle of serving the public interest without causing further harm.

4. Class and structural inequality are named explicitly. The article highlights that access to respectful, dignified healthcare is not equally available. Women who can afford private clinics effectively "buy" privacy and choice, while those reliant on the public system bear a greater risk of mistreatment with fewer mechanisms for redress. This intersectional lens is consistent with the Istanbul Convention's requirement that coverage address the structural drivers of violence and inequality.



8. Case study

“On 15 March 2026, Serbian tabloid Telegraf.rs published a report on a domestic violence incident in the Belgrade neighbourhood of Kanarevo Brdo. A woman had been physically attacked by her husband in a public street, hospitalised with serious injuries including a broken jaw, and had subsequently spoken out about years of ongoing violence in front of her three children. The article was published the same day as the attack.

The article identified both parties by their initials, ages, and exact street address. It described the method and sequence of the physical attack in graphic detail. The headline used the phrases “jezivi detalji horora” (horrific details of a horror) and “stravičan slučaj” (terrifying case).

The article reproduced the survivor's own public statement in full, including a precise description of her injuries. No specialist, support organisation, or structural context on domestic violence was cited.

The case was presented as a standalone incident with no reference to the systemic patterns or prevalence of intimate partner violence in Serbia. The publication did not moderate reader comments beneath the article and published comments included statements questioning why the survivor had remained in the relationship and had children with the perpetrator.



Discussion

- Which GDPR principles does this article violate? The article identifies both parties by initials, age, and exact address. Does partial anonymisation of this kind satisfy the legal standard of data minimisation, or does it defeat the purpose of anonymisation entirely?

- The headline describes the incident as a “horror” and the article provides a graphic, sequential account of the attack. Assess this against the principle of minimising unnecessary harm. What journalistic purpose, if any, is served by this level of detail?

- The publication did not moderate reader comments that questioned the survivor’s choices. Does editorial responsibility for a GBV report extend to the comment section? What obligations, legal or ethical, does a publication have in this regard under national self-regulatory and European frameworks?

9. Practical Exercises

01
Privacy audit

Object: Review a published news article on GBV and identify every item of personal data included. For each item, assess: (a) was it necessary for the story? (b) was it legally justified? (c) could it put the individual at risk?

Expected outcome: Learners develop the habit of scrutinising data use before publication and can articulate the legal basis for each editorial decision.



9. Practical Exercises

02
Consent mapping

Object: Given a fact sheet containing sensitive personal details about individuals involved in a GBV case, journalists decide what to include, what to anonymise, and what to exclude entirely, citing the relevant legal standard (GDPR Article, press code guideline, or ECHR principle) for each decision.

Expected outcome: Journalists practise proportionality and data minimisation in editorial decisions, linking abstract legal principles to concrete journalistic choices.

03
Rewrite workshop

Object: Rewrite a problematic article excerpt (provided by the facilitator), applying GDPR principles, press code standards, and non-violent language guidelines to produce a compliant, ethical version. Include a brief annotation explaining each significant change.

Expected outcome: Journalists integrate legal and ethical frameworks into concrete editorial practice and can articulate the reasoning behind specific language choices.

Checklist time!

Legal and ethical compliance card

Before publishing, verify the following::

- The article presents personal data identifying a survivor or witness without documented consent or a clearly stated public interest justification.
- The article presents images, location details, workplace information, or family details that could expose individuals to risk.
- The article shows graphic detail that exceeds what is necessary for public understanding of the story.
- The article applies inconsistent anonymisation (e.g. name redacted but image unblurred, or anonymised name combined with identifiable profession and neighbourhood).
- Publication of this article exposes the media outlet to legal complaints or regulatory sanctions.
- The interviewee was not adequately informed about how their personal information would be used.

If any item applies, revise before publishing.

Resources

- European Union. (2016). *Regulation (EU) 2016/679 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 27 April 2016 on the protection of natural persons with regard to the processing of personal data and on the free movement of such data (General Data Protection Regulation).* Official Journal of the European Union. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32016R0679

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Resources

- Telegraf.rs. (2026, March 15). „*Godinama me tuče pred troje male dece!“ Jeziva objava kruži mrežama, otkriveni stravični detalji nasilja u Rakovici [“He’s been beating me for years in front of our three small children!” A horrifying post is circulating online, revealing chilling details of abuse in Rakovica].* https://www.telegraf.rs/vesti/hronika/4289531-jezivi-detalji-horora-u-rakovici-oglasila-se-zrtva-nasilja-godinama-me-tuce-pred-troje-male-dece

Co-funded by the European Union

N. 2025-1-IT01-KA220-VET-000350227

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© May 2026 – Skill Up Srl, Hochschule Wismar, INDEPCIE sca, Innovation Frontiers IKE, Latvian Zonta E-klubs, Novi Sad School of Journalism.
This publication was carried out with the financial support of the European Commission under Erasmus + Project "MEDUSA-Rewriting media narratives on gender-based violence", N. 2025-1-IT01-KA220-VET-000350227.

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