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Conflict resolution in Journalism and Media

Professional Learning Suite
For Journalists and Communication Professionals

Section: LANGUAGE

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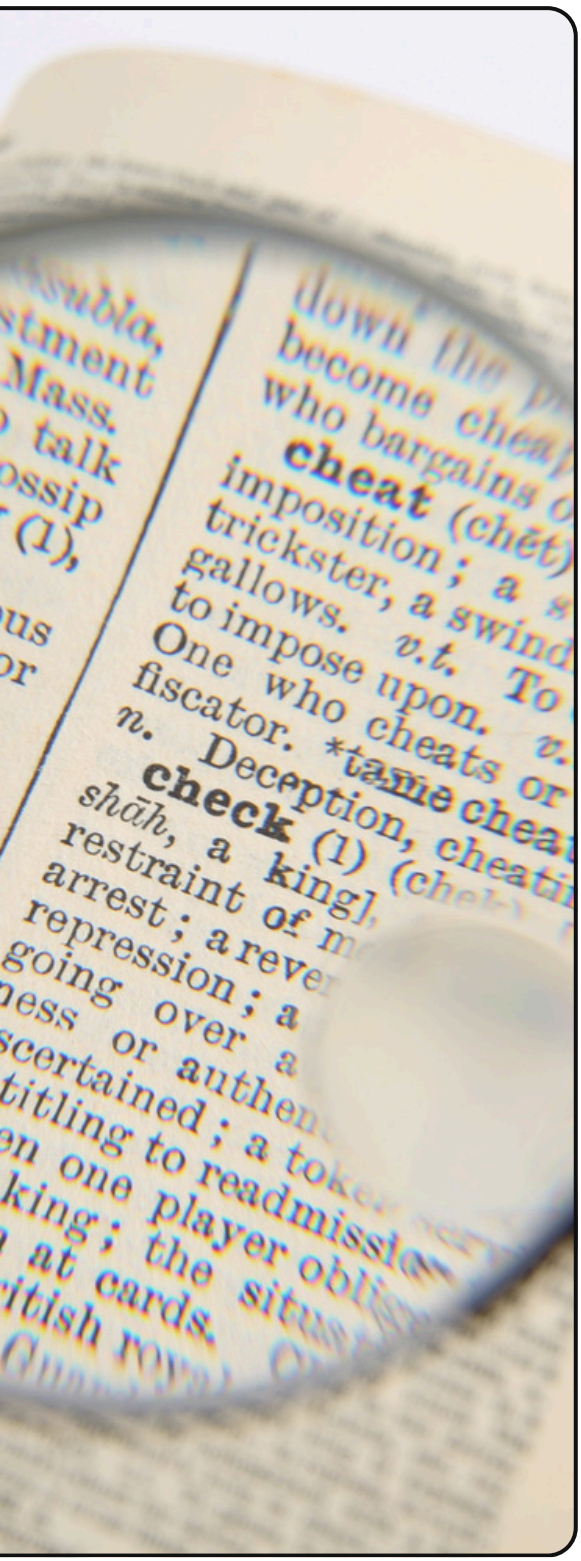
1. Why this subject matter

“Conflict resolution is a critical competence for journalists as it supports responsible, accurate, and balanced reporting. In cases involving gender-based violence, journalists often face cognitive and linguistic biases that can distort representations of victims and events. Understanding these biases, together with techniques for conflict de-escalation and ethical framing, ensures media coverage respects the dignity, agency, and safety of survivors. Developing conflict resolution skills enables journalists to manage contentious situations, reduce sensationalism, and contribute to informed public discourse, thereby reinforcing trust in the media.”

2. Learning Outcomes



01

Identify and analyze sources of conflict in media narratives.

02

Apply conflict resolution techniques to enhance ethical journalism.

03

Recognize cognitive and linguistic biases and their impact on reporting.

04

Implement strategies for fair, gender-aware coverage of sensitive topics.

Definitions

Conflict resolution in journalism is the process of managing disagreements or tensions—between journalists, sources, or within stories—by using good communication, careful thinking, and ethical decisions. The goal is to reduce bias, avoid escalating conflicts, and produce fair and accurate reporting.

2.Psychological and neurolinguistic mechanisms

Journalists may unconsciously use mental shortcuts that affect how they see events. For example, they may favor information that supports what they already believe or use language that influences how readers think.

When people face conflicts, their brains often rely on cognitive shortcuts, known as biases. These mental shortcuts help make quick decisions but can also distort reality. Emotions, past experiences, personal values, and cultural background all influence how people perceive conflicts. In journalism, understanding these psychological mechanisms helps avoid mistakes such as misrepresenting facts, stereotyping participants, or emphasizing dramatic details over truth.

3.Typical errors in journalistic practice

- Sharing extreme or unverified opinions from social media.
- Giving equal weight to false claims in “both sides” stories.
- Using words that blame or shame victims.
- Simplifying complex situations or ignoring context.

Conflicts escalate when individuals focus on “winning” rather than solving the problem. Common mistakes include:

- Personal attacks: blaming or insulting others instead of discussing the issue.
- Ignoring real needs: focusing on positions (what someone says) rather than interests (why they want it).
- Refuse to compromise: being rigid can make solutions impossible.

In media, errors include:

- Reporting both sides equally when one is clearly misleading.
- Presenting simplified “good vs. bad” narratives.
- Ignoring underlying causes of conflict, which can engender misunderstandings. For instance, during social debates on policy issues, media occasionally focus on heated statements rather than exploring the motivations and concerns of each group. This can increase formation of opposites instead of informing the public.

4.Impact on media narraives on gender-based violence

Mistakes in reporting can lead to victim-blaming, false ideas, or making abuse seem less serious. Poor framing can mislead the public and reduce trust in the news.

Media narratives shape public understanding and can either escalate or de-escalate conflict. Misrepresentation can happen when:

- Journalists overemphasize conflict for attention.
- Important social or cultural context is ignored.
- Sources with extreme views are given undue prominence.

For instance, reporting on gender-based violence requires careful framing: focusing on victims' dignity and agency while providing context about social, cultural, or systemic factors. Using conflict resolution principles ensures the story informs, educates, and encourages empathy, rather than sensationalism.

5.Positive reframing

Good conflict resolution in journalism means:

- Using empathy and careful thinking when writing headlines or stories.
- Respecting survivors' rights and dignity.
- Including social, cultural, and structural context.
- Avoiding sensationalism and unfair bias.
- Showing responsible ways to cover conflicts that help the public understand the issue.

The Thomas-Kilmann model describes five main strategies:

1. **Collaborating** – find solutions that fully satisfy all parties.
2. **Compromising** – each side gives up something to reach an agreement.
3. **Accommodating** – yield to others to maintain harmony.
4. **Competing** – prioritize personal goals at the expense of others.
5. **Avoiding** – delay or sidestep the conflict.

Other techniques include:

- "I" statements: express your feelings without blaming, e.g., "I feel frustrated when deadlines are missed" instead of "You never meet deadlines."
- Focus on interests, not positions: discuss the underlying reasons behind requests.
- Regulate emotions: stay calm, take breaks if needed, and avoid reactive statements.
- Identify the real issue: look beyond immediate disagreements to find root causes.

6.Positive reframing in Media

Journalists can apply conflict resolution to improve reporting by:

- Highlighting accuracy, dignity and intervention of participants.
- Providing context to prevent sensationalism.
- Using empathy and critical thinking when crafting headlines or interviews.
- Promoting public understanding rather than intensifying bias.

Practical approaches include:

- **Clarifying the true issue:** ask what the main problem or concern is for each party.
- **Humanizing participants:** show how conflicts affect people, not just events or statistics.
- **Mapping conflicts:** identify needs, fears, values, and objectives of each side.
- **Exploring options:** encourage creative solutions before judging which is the best. For example, in reporting workplace conflicts, journalists can show the underlying structural issues (like lack of resources or unclear communication) rather than blaming individuals. In community disputes, highlighting common goals can promote understanding and reduce tension.



By integrating these strategies, media professionals can transform conflict reporting into a tool for constructive dialogue. This approach encourages fair representation, cultivate empathy, and strengthens trust between the public and journalists.



8. Case study

Scenario: Digital Media and Misinformation

During a conflict, social media becomes a main source of information. People actively share news, but some of it is false or exaggerated. Unverified information spreads quickly and increases tension between groups. Hate speech may also appear, making the conflict worse. Journalists and media outlets must decide how to respond to this situation. A responsible approach includes fact-checking and informing the public. The need to regulate the digital environment is also emphasized. This helps reduce the impact of misinformation and prevent the escalation of conflict.

Discussion

Open questions for reflection:

1. How do you think social media affects people's perception of events during a conflict?
2. What actions could media or journalists take to reduce the spread of misinformation and hate speech?
3. How would you react if you encountered false or sensational information in a conflict situation?
4. How can individuals verify information before sharing it, and why is this important during conflicts?

9. Practical Exercises

01
Forum Theatre method

What is forum theatre?
Forum theatre is a method developed by Brazilian playwright Augusto Boal as part of the Theatre of the Oppressed system. It is used to discuss complex social issues by allowing participants to find solutions to real-world problems through role-playing and collective collaboration.

Objectives:
·Development of empathy: participants learn to understand different points of view.
·Finding solutions: the method allows for safe experimentation with approaches to conflict resolution.
·Awareness of the consequences of actions: participants see how their choices affect the development of the situation.
·Critical thinking training: problem analysis helps to understand their nature and possible solutions more deeply

Duration:40-60 minutes

Materials: Situation description; role cards; paper and pens; whiteboard or sticky notes for writing down ideas; a space where you can move freely and act out scenes.

Instructions (step-by-step):

1. Divide the participants into small groups (3-5 people).
2. Each group shares experiences of situations in which they have encountered this problem in their lives or use the given situation description.

3.Choose a main topic that is relevant to your audience. Examples:

- The influence of propaganda on the family.
- Telephone scammers.
- Disinformation as a method of polarizing society.
- Hate speech.

4.The group chooses one story to be presented in a short performance.

5.**Groups prepare a short episode (3-5 minutes) that reflects the main situation:**

- Who is the main character?
- Who is the antagonist?
- How do events develop?
- The performance should show a conflict or problem related to the chosen topic.

Expected Output: First performance - each group demonstrates their performance from beginning to end.

After the performance, the trainer **encourages** a **discussion**:

- Who is the hero?
- Who is the antagonist?
- What emotions did the situation evoke?

Interactive performance

- During the second performance, any spectator can raise their hand, stop the action and go on stage to replace the main character.
- The new task: to offer their own solution to the situation, remaining within the framework of the conflict.
- The antagonist's actions remain unchanged. The participant changes only the main character's reaction and actions.

Debriefing / Reflection Questions:

- How did the forum theatre help to look at the problem differently?
- What insights did the participants gain?
- How can the experience be applied in real life?

02

The role-play - The Newsroom Negotiation

Objective: To apply conflict resolution strategies (Thomas-Kilmann model) and "I" statements to defend journalistic ethics against commercial and editorial pressures without escalating the conflict.
Duration: 30–40 minutes
Materials: Role cards, pens, and paper.

1. **Divide participants** into pairs. Assign one person the role of the "Journalist" and the other the role of the "Editor".
2. **Present** the **Scenario**: The Journalist has just submitted an in-depth, systemic article about a recent femicide. The original headline is factual and respectful: *"Local woman killed; experts point to systemic failures in protective orders."* The Editor, facing pressure for higher web traffic, wants to change the headline to something highly sensational and click-driven: *"Tragedy of Jealousy: See the chilling final messages before the crime of passion!"*



3. **The Negotiation** (10-15 minutes):

The pairs must negotiate a final headline and framing.

- Journalist's goal: Defend the ethical framing, avoiding victim-blaming and sensationalism, by using "I" statements (e.g., "I feel uncomfortable using the word 'jealousy' because it excuses the perpetrator") and focusing on interests (ethics, long-term credibility).
- Editor's goal: Push for reader engagement and clicks, focusing on the immediate business position.

4. **Resolution**: The pair must reach a compromise (Collaborating or Compromising strategy) that respects the victim's dignity while still addressing the Editor's need for a compelling, widely-read story.
5. **Expected Output**: Participants practice separating the person from the problem, defending ethical boundaries assertively but professionally, and finding mutually acceptable solutions in the newsroom.

Debriefing / Reflection Questions:

What conflict resolution strategy did you lean toward (Avoiding, Accommodating, Competing, Compromising, Collaborating)?

How difficult was it to use "I" statements instead of blaming the Editor for being "unethical"?

What was the final compromise, and does it respect both media ethics and audience engagement?

03

Conflict Scenario - Managing the Digital Flame

Objective: To practice de-escalation techniques, audience negotiation, and boundary-setting when facing digital backlash, polarization, and victim-blaming in social media spaces.
Duration: 45 minutes
Materials: Handout with sample hostile comments, whiteboard or flipchart.

Instructions (step-by-step):

1. Divide participants into small groups (3-4 people). They are now the "Digital Editorial Team" of a prominent news outlet.
2. Present the Scenario: Your outlet just published a well-researched article on economic violence and coercive control. Within an hour, your social media comment section is flooded with polarization and hostile "rage-bait" comments.



3. The Task (20 minutes): Provide the groups with a handout containing three types of aggressive comments:
   - Comment A (Skeptical/Hostile): "This is just feminist propaganda. What about men's rights? You are biased!"
   - Comment B (Victim-Blaming): "If it was so bad, why didn't she just leave him? She obviously wanted his money."
   - Comment C (Hate Speech): Extremely abusive language directed at the journalist and the victims mentioned in the article.

4. The team must decide on a concrete conflict management strategy for each comment:
   - When to use Accommodating/Collaborating (e.g., replying publicly with neutral, factual data to de-escalate and educate the silent audience).
   - When to use Avoiding/Competing (e.g., setting firm editorial boundaries, deleting hate speech, or banning users to protect survivors and staff from psychological harm).
   - Draft the exact public replies for the comments they choose to engage with, using de-escalation language. Expected Output: Participants develop digital resilience, learning how to handle audience disagreement constructively while maintaining a safe, ethical environment for public discourse.

3. Debriefing / Reflection Questions:

- How do you decide the line between a "disagreement" that requires engagement and "abuse" that requires moderation?
- How does replying calmly to a hostile user affect the rest of the audience reading the thread?
- Why is setting firm boundaries (blocking/deleting) sometimes the most responsible ethical choice in gender-based violence reporting?

Checklist time!

Conflict resolution & De-scalation checlist

Before responding to a provocation, an editorial pressure, or a hostile comment, pause and ask yourself the following questions:

1. Newsroom Negotiation (Editors & Colleagues)
   - Am I separating the person from the problem by focusing on shared interests (e.g., journalistic credibility and accuracy) rather than rigid personal positions?
   - Am I using "I" statements (e.g., "I am concerned that this angle might be harmful...") instead of attacking or blaming my colleague?
   - Is this a situation where I must firmly defend an ethical boundary to protect a survivor's dignity, or is there room for a constructive compromise?
   - Am I regulating my own emotions to maintain professional assertiveness without escalating the disagreement into a personal argument?

2. Audience Management (Social Media & Public)
   - Does this hostile comment provide an opportunity for a factual, de-escalating reply that educates the broader audience, or is it simply "rage-bait"?
   - Am I reacting out of personal frustration, or am I applying a strategic editorial response?

Checklist time!

Conflict resolution & De-scalation checlist

- Does this user's interaction cross the line into abuse or hate speech, requiring me to set a firm boundary (e.g., deleting, hiding, or blocking) to protect survivors and staff?
- If I choose to engage, will my response reduce the tension and promote public understanding, or will it inadvertently fuel a polarized conflict?

3. Source Management (Interviews & Testimonies)

- If a source becomes defensive, reticent, or agitated, am I remaining calm and avoiding a reactive or defensive stance?
- Am I actively trying to identify the underlying fears or needs driving the source's resistance, rather than just reacting to their words?
- Have I clearly, transparently, and empathetically communicated my journalistic boundaries and the publication process to prevent misunderstandings from escalating?

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

Resources

1)Conflict resolution in media, available:
https://www.crnhq.org/conflict-resolving-media/
https://latvijasradio.lsm.lv/public/assets/userfiles/Sabiedrisko%20mediju%20kara%20un%20konfliktu%20vadlinijas%202022.pdf
2)Diversity of the media environment, available:
https://eszf.lu.lv/fileadmin/user_upload/szf_faili/Petnieciba/Latvijas-mediju-vides-daudzveidiba-small.pdf
3)Best practices and techniques to resolve conflicts in journalism, available:
https://polsci.institute/conflict-resolution-peace-building/best-practices-responsible-journalism-conflict-reporting/
4)The Thomas-Kilmann model five main strategies, available:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A31iAHGT5Ug
5)What is Forum Theatre, available:
https://medijpratiba.neplp.lv/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/ROSINOSIE-TRENERI_MEDIA-LAB_LV01-1.pdf
https://voiceofjsirri.wordpress.com/january-2018/forum-theatre-scenarios/
6)“Handline rewrite” method, available:
Liz and John Soars, Headway Intermediate, Oxford University Press.
7)Social Media Scenario Role play, available:
UNESCO – Journalism, Fake News & Disinformation: Handbook for Journalism Education and Training (2018)
https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000371785
https://jauns.lv/raksts/arzemes/287744-indija-whatsapp-izplatas-baumas-ka-rezultata-tiek-nolincoti-cilveki

Resources

8) Githaiga, J., & Yusuf, A. (2018). Investigative journalism as a tool for peacebuilding.
9) Hanitzsch, T., & Hoxha, A. (2014). Generic and conflict-related influences on news production.
10) Ogan, C., & Willnat, L. (2019). Media, transparency, and accountability in Africa.
11) Sambuli, N., & Wong, C. (2016). Digital media and early warning systems for conflicts.
12) Zeng, J., et al. (2019). Media platforms and citizen journalism in conflict resolution.

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REWRITING MEDIA NARRATIVES ON GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

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