

Guidelines on Reporting Hate Speech - Practical Tips for Journalists

From covering a rally to analysing Twitter feeds, part of a journalist's job is to report on what is said. But sometimes people say shocking things. How far should a journalist go when reporting on hate speech? As journalists, most of us have been confronted by hate speech at some time, whether it's a politician bawling racial slurs at an election rally, angry protesters singing derogatory songs about a neighbouring ethnic group, or a prominent religious leader denigrating other faiths on Facebook. The question is, how can we do our job of reporting the facts without being used as a mouthpiece to spread incendiary comments and stir up hate and possibly even violence?

If I'm going to report, what should I keep in mind?

- Do you need to report verbatim exactly what was said? Think about reporting the fact that inflammatory comments were made without directly quoting the person.
- If you are at the event where the inflammatory messages are expressed, ask the person to justify why they made the remarks they did.
- Get critical reactions from those attending the event.
- Get critical reactions from influential figures and/or community heavyweights to underline that the hateful views aren't held by everyone.
- Add context to your report (as you should anyway as a good journalist). Is the person making these statements attempting to draw attention away from other problems? Is there an analyst you can ask to interpret the person's intentions for making such comments? Can you give some background to tensions between certain groups (such as a drought making water scarce)?
- If any of the comments claim to be based on facts, check the validity of those facts.
- Steer away from sensationalized language in your report.

Hate speech versus freedom of expression

During certain periods, such as election campaigns, media organisations play an important role in distributing political messages. Some journalists believe that by not reporting the actual words said by a politician (even if they are hateful), they aren't allowing that person the right to be heard. Although a person has a right to express themselves, this doesn't mean you are obligated to provide a platform to spread offensive and hateful comments about a particular group.

EXERCISE 1. Imagine you are a politician in a fictional town, and create an imaginary character & scenario.

- Write 1-2 paragraphs of a very outrageous statement, with content that could incite conflict.
- Next, think of yourself as a journalist who is reporting on this speech by the politician.
- Write a traditional verbatim report covering exactly what was said.
- Next, rewrite this same information, taking a more conflict sensitive approach.
- Finally, write the article reporting on the inflammatory speech in the best possible way.
- Alternatively use the provided example to complete part 2 and 3 of the exercise.

EXAMPLES

(1) TRADITIONAL REPORTING (Not recommended)

National Party leader William Smith has called Iti people stinking worms who should go back and live in the holes they crept out of. Speaking during a campaign visit to Riverside Village, Smith also said Iti traders had taken jobs away from his people and the parasites should be crushed underfoot and their business burnt.

The leader said that if elected, he would make sure all jobs in the region would be reserved for the Atu people, and the Iti would have to surrender their businesses to the government. During his speech, he also promised to build a new school for the village. ...

(2) EXAMPLE (better)

During a campaign visit to Riverside Village, National Party leader William Smith has insulted the Iti people by referring to them as worms. Union Party leader Gabriel Thyme said Smith's words were "racist" and "irresponsible." "His remarks bordered on genocide," Thyme added, referring to Smith's call for violence action against the Iti people. Thyme said his country prided itself on its diversity and people's ability to live together peacefully.

"Politicians should support unity rather than trying to tear it apart," he said. Villagers living in Riverside Village agreed. Shop keeper Cas Dou said she had many customers and friends in neighbouring Iti village.

(3) EXAMPLE (even better)

Atu in Riverside Village are furious after National Party leader William Smith used a campaign speech to insult the Iti people. "It is unbelievable that a politician in a peaceful country like ours could try to stir up racial tension before an election," village headman Augustine Sumo said. "We live alongside the Iti people in peace and that is not about to change."

Shop keeper Cas Dou said she had many customers and friends in neighbouring Iti village. She said she had attended the National Party rally because she wanted to know more about what Smith would do for the village if he was elected. "He didn't say anything about the bridge we need here," Dou said. Others in the village were shocked by Smith's comments that the Iti were "parasites that should be crushed underfoot". Smith also threatened violence against Iti traders in the region. Reacting to Smith's comments, national footballer Josiah Myers, who is an Iti, said the politician was trying to divert attention away from his party's failure to do anything for the people in Riverside Village during his current term as a politician.

EXERCISE 2.

Select a newspaper article or story that contains dangerous or hate speech and rewrite it to reflect a more balanced, non-inflammatory perspective.

Even when time is scarce, reporters and editors must pause and take a moment to judge the potential impact of offensive, inflammatory content. The dangers of hate speech in journalism are well known and in many parts of the world they have had tragic consequences. In Africa, for instance, some journalists have become foot-soldiers for propaganda and conflict. Many have played a deplorable role in regional conflicts and in some extreme cases -- in Rwanda and Kenya, for example -- they have contributed to acts of unspeakable violence between communities.

Whenever media are manipulated by politicians and others in defence of country, culture, religion and race, they have the potential to do harm. Even the best journalists can sometimes, inadvertently, do damage when they report controversial stories out of context. A failure of principle in the newsroom

and poor understanding of the potential impact of the words and images can lead to acts of journalism that encourage hatred and violence.

While most journalists understand that they have a duty to tell the truth and to report on what is being said and who is saying it, they often fail to balance that responsibility against another widely recognised cardinal principle of journalism, which is to minimise harm. But how do journalists judge what is acceptable and what is intolerable? How do they embed in their daily work routine a way of assessing what is threatening?

To find a way through this minefield journalists must take into consideration the wider context in which people express themselves. They must focus not just on what is said, but what is intended. It's not just a matter of law or socially acceptable behaviour; it's a question of whether speech aims to do others harm, particularly at moments when there is the threat of immediate violence.

The following five-point test of speech for journalism in context has been developed by EJM advisers and is based upon international standards. It highlights some questions to be asked in the gathering, preparation and dissemination of news and information that will help journalists and editors place what is said and who is saying it in an ethical context

ONE: The position or status of the speaker

Journalists and media are regularly trapped by media-savvy and unscrupulous politicians and community leaders. These skilful users of

media stir up disputes and discord in support of their own prejudices and bigoted opinions and rely on media to give coverage to their sensational claims and opinions no matter how incendiary they are. Journalists and editors must understand that just because someone says something outrageous that does not make it news. Journalists have to examine the context in which it is said and the status and reputation of who is saying it. A rabble-rousing politician who is adept in manipulating an audience should not get media coverage just because they create a negative climate or make unsubstantiated and controversial comments. When people who are not public figures engage in hate-speech, it might be wise to ignore them entirely.

Even when people are public figures media have to make sure they do not draw undue attention to politicians and other influential people whose only aim is to create a negative climate towards people whose rights should be respected, particularly those from vulnerable and marginalised groups. Often these rights are recognised under constitutional guarantees at home and globally. In particular, journalists have to scrutinise speakers and analyse their words, examine their facts and claims, and judge carefully the intention and impact of their interventions. It is not the job of journalists to adopt counter positions, but claims and facts should be tested, whoever is speaking.

EXERCISE 3.

Select a recently published story or article and check the content against the following 5 point test:

TWO: The reach of the speech

A private conversation in a public place can include unspeakable opinions, but do relatively little harm and not necessarily breach the test of hate-speech. That changes if the speech is disseminated through mainstream media or the Internet.

Journalists also have to consider the frequency and extent of the communication – is it a short momentary, intemperate burst of invective and hatred, or is it repeated deliberately and continuously? Answering the question of newsworthiness and intention may be helped by considering if there is a pattern of behaviour or if it is a one-time incident. Repetition is a useful indicator of a deliberate strategy to engender hostility towards others, whether based upon ethnic, racial, religious or other form of discrimination.

THREE: The objectives of the speech

Normally, ethical journalists and well-informed editors will be able to quickly identify whether the speech is deliberately intended to attack or diminish the human rights of individuals and groups. They should also know whether such speech is subject to criminal or other sanctions. As part of the reporting process, journalists and editors have a special responsibility to place the speech in its proper context – to disclose and report what are the objectives of the speaker.

The key questions to ask are: What are the benefits to the speaker and the interests that he or she represents? Who are victims of the speech and what is the impact upon them, both as individuals and within their community?

FOUR: The content and form of speech

Journalists have to judge whether the speech is provocative and direct, in what form it is made, and the style in which it is delivered. Lots of people have offensive ideas and opinions. That's not a crime, and it's not a crime to make these opinions public (eg. on social networks), but the words and images they use can be devastating if they incite others to violence. Journalists need to ask themselves: is this speech or expression dangerous? Could it lead to prosecution under the law?

Will it incite violence or promote an intensification of hatred towards others? It might be newsworthy if someone uses speech that could get them into trouble with the police, but journalists have to be wary – they, too, could find themselves facing prosecution for quoting it.

FIVE: The economic, social and political climate

Speech that is dangerous or controversial arises particularly when times are hard, social tensions are acute and politicians are at war with one another. Journalists must take into account the public atmosphere at the time the speech is being made. Journalists have to judge whether expression is fair, fact-based and reasonable in the circumstances.

They should recognise the context including where there are patterns of discrimination against ethnic and other groups, including indigenous peoples and minorities. Where we have doubt about directly quoting hateful speech it may be useful to report that insulting comments were made without repeating the exact terms of the insult.

It is important for journalists to ask themselves: what is the impact of this on the people immediately affected by the speech? Are they able to absorb the speech in conditions of relative security? Is this expression designed or intended to make matters worse or better? Who is affected negatively by the expression?

A Checklist for Tolerance

1/ When dealing with stories where political hate-speech is used it is vital not to sensationalise.

Ethical journalists will ask:

It may be outrageous, but is it newsworthy?

What is the intention of the speaker?

What will be the impact of publication?

Is there a danger of inflaming passions and incitement to violence?

Is the speech fact-based and have the claims been tested?

2/ In gathering and editing controversial material, journalists should avoid a rush to publish. It is helpful to pause, even if only for a few moments, to reflect on the contents of the story:

Have we avoided cliché and stereotypes?

Have we asked all the relevant and necessary questions?

EXERCISE 4.

Share the news article or story from the previous exercise with another member of the organisation or workshop.

Check that it fulfills the following checklist for tolerance, criteria and clarity.

Have we been sensitive to our audience?
Have we been temperate in use of language?
Do the pictures tell the story without resorting to violence and voyeurism?
Have we used diverse sources and included the voices of relevant minorities?
Does it meet standards set in editorial and ethical codes?

3/ One last look and moment of reflection is always useful before pushing the button to publish:

Have we done good work?
Are there any nagging doubts?
And, finally, should I ask a colleague?

Journalist Security & Support / Internews' Project on Conflict and Media, 2012-2014

The project, aimed to examine the role of media in inciting or mitigating violence and atrocities through four activities: 1) media monitoring in Kenya, Kyrgyzstan, and Burma to identify hate speech inciting violence; 2) production of a toolkit on Conflict Sensitive Journalism for journalists working in situations of atrocity violence; 3) production of a paper analyzing digital communications and conflict dynamics in vulnerable societies; and 4) production of a joint chapter with Freedom House on hate speech and media for a USAID toolkit on atrocity prevention.

The Fojo training needs assessment method used at the workshop is based on local ownership, providing the South Sudanese media with a possibility to formulate their proper needs in depth, regardless of the agendas and priorities of donors and other national and international actors.

There is already a fatigue among South Sudanese journalists towards what they call "brief case trainings" – international trainers that fly in, produce a two-day workshop, and fly out - providing a multitude of short, similar trainings with no progression in time. The participants identified the following training needs as prioritized for future – in the following order:

The South Sudanese journalists argue that the best way to build a sustainable and professional media sector is by providing coordinated, long-term training opportunities, based on their own needs and with the objective of building professional national capacity – not only for journalists, editors and media managers, but also for trainers and teachers.

- 1. Investigative reporting**
- 2. Writing skills**
- 3. Basic journalistic skills**
- 4. Media management**
- 5. Newspaper design**
- 6. Conflict sensitive reporting**
- 7. Radio editing**
- 8. TV editing**
- 9. Media ethics**
- 10. Video filming**

LINKS

Ethical Journalism - 5 Point Test for Journalists covering hate speech /The campaign for tolerance in African Journalism <http://ethicaljournalismnetwork.org/assets/docs/018/114/de52912-f230672.pdf>

Conflict Sensitive Journalism <https://www.mediasupport.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/ims-csj-handbook-2004.pdf>

International Media Support (partner with UJOSS & AMDISS) <https://www.mediasupport.org/areas/africa/south-sudan/>

Training needs for South Sudanese Journalists <https://www.mediasupport.org/publication/training-needs-for-south-sudanese-journalists/>

Toolbox for Journalists Covering Violent Conflict and Atrocities, Peter du Toit https://internews.org/sites/default/files/resources/Internews_ReportingAtrocitiesToolkit_2014-11.pdf

NOTES & IDEAS

#defyhatenow is an urgent community peacebuilding, training and conflict reconciliation project aiming to strengthen the voices and support the actions of peace & youth oriented civil society organisations in South Sudan.

#DefyHateNow aims to identify and develop mitigation responses in 3 key areas and target groups

- Awareness - offline grassroots level / peace mobilizers / students
- Social Media Literacy - youth / IT training / teachers / NGOs / lawyers
- Counter-Messaging Skills - correspondents / monitors / experts.



#DefyHateNow is an initiative to combat social media hate speech by the r0g_agency for open culture and critical transformation, Berlin, and the Community Empowerment for Progress Organisation (CEPO), Juba, funded by the ifa – Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen (zivik) with means of the German Federal Foreign Office.



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