Reporting on political and territorial conflict
Reflections and suggestions on journalism treatment
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This document is a compendium of suggestions for journalists working on themes related to political and territorial conflicts. It is a product of a research project that analysed fifty media and hundreds of information and opinion articles on various political conflicts between 2010 and 2013. In the preparation of this document ideas were extracted from the overall results of these analyses and a group of researchers and experts in journalism and ethics was consulted. This compendium is not exhaustive and is not intended to replace what is stipulated in legislation or in professional codes of ethics. Its purpose is to offer recommendations and encourage reflection on matters of professional practice. Although some points are strikingly obvious, it is important to state them given what arises from the observations made in the results.

**Public interest and news agenda**

Define and prioritize the socially responsible principles for each medium by adapting the general codes of ethics to each situation and characteristics. This makes it easier both to establish professional routines and to monitor the journalistic processes that place social responsibility and the interests of the citizen above electoral or private interests.

Discern which aspects are really in the citizen’s interest out of all of the topics received from press offices and institutions with party or private interests. This is especially important when the work has to be done immediately, such as on the radio, television or the Internet.

Do not consider geographical proximity as the only news value: pay attention to relevant affairs that are currently open in other cultural regions or political communities well as to local or national topics. Try to formulate information from alternative perspectives or from perspectives that expand the target audience’s cultural or regional outlook.

Consider the centre-periphery logic used for selecting topics, defining the news agenda, and drafting the news item. Analyse which social sectors, communities or geographical areas are located by default in the “centre” of the information and which are located on the “periphery”. Try to break the asymmetry and inequality generated by this dynamic.

**Stereotypes and coexistence**

Avoid any simplifying generalizations that lead to stereotypes or the construction of a group such as “the others”. Explain conflicts by dealing with the issue in all its complexity and by revealing the plurality or diversity of views that exist within the parties at conflict.

Do not exacerbate or exaggerate the differences that separate the groups involved. Avoid presenting a biased, alarmist or polarized representation of the facts and do not resort exclusively to sources that express extreme views. Avoid presenting the “radical” as the “normal”.

Inform based on proximity. Take into account the collective interests of the receiving community but do not lose sight of the issue as a whole or neglect reflective objectivity. Proximity means taking “the global” or “the different” to the target audience but this should not be done at the expense of presenting different visions from those of the receiving community.

Avoid dichotomous and Manichaean representations. Promote an open debate that encompasses the complexity and richness of society and captures its cultural and linguistic diversity. Include alternative views of groups to those that are habitually presented of them.

**Pluralism, impartiality and independence**

Encourage awareness of political pluralism and safeguard freedom of expression by constructing debates on conflicts in a way that promotes a balanced representation of different ideological points of view. Seek the opinions of all the parties involved in the conflict and ensure that no party is ignored or silenced.

Incorporate alternative or uncommon opinions that present quality or coherent arguments. Include opinions and positions that are expressed with clarity and insight—even if they contradict the editorial lines of the media—not.

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just the radical, extreme, confusing or incomprehensible ones. Incorporate opinions that reasonably explain positions expressed from the other side of the argument.

Do not explain only the divergent interests that bring the parties involved into conflict; include points on which the interests of the parties converge and on which their positions are closer. Journalism in this sense is not limited to presenting two opposing parties or conflicting versions. Rather, it offers keys to understanding these positions, arguments, and rationales.

**Structure and quality of the information**

Present the events and political or institutional declarations in context; do not provide information about sporadic anecdotes without describing the general situation in which they are framed. Avoid turning the “sporadic” (a case)—e.g. a single heated declaration, an isolated violent incident, or one-off aggressive attitude—into the “general” (a category).

Avoid representing the facts in a way that the parties involved appear to be inevitably heading for conflict rather than overcoming their disagreements. Conflict is just one story’s frames of meaning; it is not the only one.

Consider the relevance and political nature of the conflicts and inform about demonstrations and other related events in a proportionate way. The political nature of conflicts should be considered in context and understatements and exaggerations should be avoided. Consider any positive aspects that may also be associated with the process of change generated by the conflicts beyond the difficulties or challenges these produce.

When preparing the report, pay attention to which individuals or agents present themselves as active subjects and which play passive roles in the events. Evaluate whether this same structure is always repeated and consider other possibilities.

Diversify the sources and viewpoints that stand out as the protagonists of the news story (the subjects of the verbs used in the narration). Avoid excessive officialism. Vary the voices that are associated with the origin, development and resolution of the conflicts.

**Responsible use of language**

Make sure the range of language used does not present the facts in an exaggerated or biased manner. Do not artificially radicalize the conflict in order to sensationalize or add journalistic interest to the story.

Be wary of vocabulary and metaphors that emphasize lack of understanding and symbolic violence in the discourse. As well as reaffirming weak language stereotypes, the semantic fields of war, sport and bullfighting—which are often used in metaphors to describe conflicts—contribute little to the information and reinforce a structure of confrontation and social division.

Be especially vigilant with metaphors that attempt to explain a fact or refer to a political representative using semantic fields that are very distant from the referent; for example, using metaphors of natural disasters to refer to a political expression.

Find alternative lexical fields and metaphors that offer new images of communities and political leaders. Do not uncritically reproduce the terminology of any of the parties in conflict—or their perspectives or values—and remember that journalism often involves an ethically responsible reframing of the issue by the professional.

Offer a respectful and coherent presentation of the parties in conflict, paying special attention to elements of discourse that serve either to legitimise or devalue them; for example, the use of expressions such as “in his/her opinion” and “he/she now thinks”, and the use of irony and adjectives with strong connotations.

**The role of journalism**

Observe at all times the responsibility journalism has in maintaining quality of information and knowledge regarding political conflicts. When relating such conflicts, journalism does not simply mediate or relate in a sterile fashion but it interprets, emphasizes and even invisibilizes when, given the limits of production, it discards topics or opinions. Good journalistic practice is only at odds with these circumstances when it takes advantage of them to satisfy the objectives of interests that are exogenous to the profession.