FREE PRESS INITIATIVE

Promoting Free Press, Good Journalism
and Defending Human Rights

A GUIDE TO ETHICAL AND CONFLICT SENSITIVE REPORTING

MENTORSHIP MANUAL

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Target Audience

- Multi-Media Journalists

- General public

- Editors

- Community media trainers

Training Approach

- Town hall meetings

- Virtual discussions

- Group discussions

- Practical case studies (Zambia & regional context)

- Role play and scenario-based exercises

- Peer-to-peer learning

Learning Objectives:

At the end of this mentorship, participants will be able to:

1. Understand the concept of conflict-sensitive reporting and why it matters during the electoral process.
2. Give communities access to directly engage candidates by demanding accountability and participating fully in the electoral process.
3. Identify potential triggers of conflict in electoral contexts and the role of media in mitigating or escalating them.
4. Apply ethical standards, verification, and balance in politically charged reporting.
5. Use conflict-sensitive language and framing in news stories.
6. Engage communities responsibly, including marginalized groups, in electoral coverage.
7. Practice safety, security, and resilience while reporting in high-risk situations.

1. Introduction

Elections are crucial moments in democratic societies but can also trigger or intensify political, ethnic, or social tensions. The media has a powerful influence in shaping public opinion, mediating political dialogue, and maintaining peace. Good journalism is difficult work at the best of times. There is neither enough information nor time. Reporters rely on their training and standards to overcome these difficulties and deliver news which is accurate and impartial. That is the traditional role of journalism to enable the public to make well-informed decisions. However, when a society is threatened by violent conflict, journalism faces greater difficulties. Opposing sides seek to control media. To provide reliable information to the public in a time of violent conflict requires additional journalism skills. Reporters need to understand more about what causes conflict and how conflict develops and ends. Reporters need to know where to look for these causes and solutions. By providing this information, journalism makes the public far more well-informed about the conflict beneath the violence and can assist in resolving it.

The purpose of this manual is to equip Zambian journalists and the general public with the knowledge, skills, and ethical grounding necessary to report and hold accountable leaders responsibly and professionally before, during and after the 2026 general elections. This manual further provides essential tips and strategies FPI will use to devise multi-media content through infographics, explainers and social media posts on platforms such as Facebook, LinkedIn and TikTok.

The content will be produced weekly on conflict-sensitive news features and will run on different social media platforms for FPI and partner media houses.

2. Understanding Conflict-Sensitive Journalism

What is Conflict?

Conflict is a situation where two or more individuals or groups try to pursue goals or ambitions which they believe they cannot share. Not all conflict is violent. Conflict is normal when there is change. Some people want change, but others disagree. If their disagreement or their conflict is managed peacefully, it can be a positive process. But when conflict is not managed properly, it becomes violent. In violent conflict, people fear for their safety and survival. When we say conflict, we are usually referring to violent conflict.

What Causes Conflict?

1. Scarce resources and not shared fairly, for example food, housing, jobs or land.
2. There is little or no communication between the two groups.
3. The groups have incorrect ideas and beliefs about each other.
4. Unresolved grievances exist from the past.
5. Power is unevenly distributed.

Conflict-sensitive journalism would therefore involve identifying and understanding the dynamics of conflict and ensuring that reporting does not exacerbate divisions or violence. Put differently, it is reporting that is accurate, impartial, and mindful of its potential impact on conflict dynamics.

Key elements of Conflict-sensitive journalism:

- Recognizing underlying tensions: acknowledge the multifaceted nature of the conflict, including its historical, social and economic roots.
- Reporting fairly, accurately, and contextually: provide a historical context, give readers a deeper understanding of the conflict's background and evolution. As a reporter, refrain from oversimplifying complex issues or reducing them to binary narratives.
- Including diverse voices and perspectives: ensure that the voices and perspectives of marginalized or underrepresented groups are well included in reporting. Prioritizing local sources and perspectives to provide a more nuanced understanding of the conflict.
- Avoiding inflammatory language or bias: use neutral language, words influence perception and tension. As a journalist, ensure to avoid stereotyping, labelling and inflammatory languages. Be mindful of tone and impact of reporting on conflict-affected communities.

3. Principles of Conflict-Sensitive Election Reporting

1. **Accuracy and Verification**

   - Avoid spreading misinformation or unverified allegations.
   - Cross-check facts, especially from political sources.

2. **Impartiality and Balance**

   - Offer equal access and representation to all candidates and parties.
   - Avoid favoring one group or narrative.

3. **Inclusivity**

   - Represent minority voices, marginalized groups, women, and youth.
   - Cover issues, not just personalities.

4. **Contextualization**

- Provide background and context to help audiences understand the issues and not just the events.

5. **Do No Harm**

- Journalists must consider the impact of your reporting on peace, security, and public perception.

4. Electoral Cycle

4.1 Pre-Election Reporting

In this part journalists are trained to focus on the reporting that ensures that the activities that precede pre-election stage culminate into free and fair elections.

At this stage, journalists' contributions are more important during these times because the most critical feature of any election is that the final results must reflect the will of the people which happens when every adult or registered voter in the voting area is bale to cast their vote according to their own belief of what is right.

Additionally, during this period the general public will be enlightened on the following; Constituency maps, political parties participating in the elections, registration of voters, knowing the Electoral Commission of Zambia (ECZ) calendar, polling stations, candidates they are voting for e.g Mayors, Members of Parliament, president, Councilors etc.

For this process to be transparently fulfilled people must be able to: register to vote in the area where they live; access information from the media and other sources that enables them to make informed choices; vote without intimidation or being subject to external pressures; and, vote in secret. More also, it means that polling stations must be accessible to voters and no one should have to travel vast distances to reach the polls.

Thus, during this period FPI following the Electoral Commission of Zambia Road Map which was released a year before the election date to build the capacity of journalists and enlighten the general public on the following:

A. The accreditation for voter registration
B. Online Voter Pre-Registration
C. Mass (mobile) Voter Registration Exercise
D. Physical inspection of provisional Register of Voters.
E. Certification of Register of Voters for the 2026 General Elections.

Among other things, journalists and the general public will be educated on how to;

- Profile candidates and platforms e.g. tracking records, and manifestos.
- Monitor hate speech and inflammatory rhetoric by reporting responsibly without amplifying dangerous narratives.
- Expose disinformation by collaborating with fact-checkers and digital platforms to counter election-related falsehoods.

The Following resources will be used;

- Case study handouts (regional election coverage examples)

- Zambia Electoral Commission guidelines and 2026 Elections

- Ethics codes (MSCZ, IFJ)

- Safety checklists and digital security guides

4.2 Reporting During the Election

At this stage, the FPI will educate journalists on how to generate content on election day. This will involve tactics and strategies on how to cover all the polling stations in the country which open at 06:00hrs and at most close at

Here journalists will be educated on how to:

- Cover the Nominations at all levels up-to the Presidential level.
- Report facts in real time, cautiously and are taught to avoid speculating about outcomes or reporting unverified claims of voter apathy.
- Cover polling stations in all the poling districts respectfully by paying a close eye to intimidation or interfere with voters from either political party.
- Stay alert to incidents of violence or irregularities but report responsibly without sensationalizing any event.
- Coverage at the National Result Centre.

Additionally, on this day the general public will be educated on their rights to vote freely without intimidation, voting secrecy and also the voting period.

4.3 Post-Election Coverage

This period reflects the time and events that proceed the voting day. The FPI will educate journalists and the general public on the following;

- Results verification and Declaration of Elections Results by using official sources and avoid premature declarations from unauthorized sources.
- Report any Electoral Petitions that may be filed by candidates that may not be satisfied with the outcome of an Election.

5 Ethical Considerations

The journalists will be capacitated to comprehend the following;

- Media ethics and professional codes such as the Zambia Media Council, MISA, international codes.

- Core principles such as accuracy, fairness, balance, independence and accountability.

- Dealing with hate speech, incitement, misinformation, and fake news.

- Covering vulnerable voices: women, youth, minorities, and persons with disabilities.

In addition to journalism safety, the multi-media content will focus on discouraging;

Defamatory Content

Good journalism does not repeat inaccurate allegations and insults or twist the truth about a person. It will encourage journalists not to report allegations and offensive speech, but focus on balanced reporting and provide the right to reply.

Guard against Malicious Content

Journalism is powerful. News reports can ruin politicians 'reputations, put party members in danger, or cause public protest. The content generated will not misuse the power of journalism profession by twisting the true but sticking to professional information sharing.

Guard against Corruption

Professional journalists do not accept bribes. Good journalism does no special favors for any politician or party. Good journalism is not for sale. Whenever possible, the media should pay its own way. These are the basic standards which produce journalism people can trust. It is called professional or reliable

journalism. All reliable reporting should be accurate, impartial and responsible. This applies to everyone involved in producing the news – assigning stories, editing copy or sound bites, writing headlines, directing, producing, or managing newsrooms.

Thus, the content will be around the enhancement of this core not only to journalists but to people so that they are not bought off by any political players.

6 Safety and Security for Journalists and the general public

In order to ensure safety and security, the following are some of the measures that are supposed to be taken;

- Conduct risk assessments before covering or voting from volatile areas.
- Avoid hostile crowds and unsafe locations without backup i.e for journalist inform the editors about your location and for the general public the police can be a backup.
- Secure digital communications and protect sources.

During the mentorship process and town hall meetings, journalists and the general public will have capacity in the following key areas:

• Understanding risks: intimidation, harassment, online abuse, physical violence.

• Safety strategies for field reporting (rallies, protests, counting centers).

• Digital security: protecting sources, data, and devices.

• Psychological resilience and stress management.

7. Understanding Multi-Media Content

Crafting multi-media content for this project will require clarity, accuracy and engagement, this will be best illustrated using infographics and video explainers as power tools that simplify complex electoral information, enhance voter understanding, and increase participation.

Under this project, creation of multi-media content will embrace Infographics for Election Communication by simplifying electoral cycle information such as:

> ➢ Constituency maps
>
> ➢ Candidate profiles
>
> ➢ Electoral timelines
>
> ➢ Do's and Don'ts for voters
>
> ➢ Results summaries
>
> ➢ Voting procedures

The infographics will be made using the visuals and short text making it easy to understand.

Ensure that the infographics are accurate and neutral, devoid of partisanship. Since Zambia is a multilingual country, the prepared infographics should be in the 7 major local languages including Bemba, Nyanja, Lozi, Luvale, Kaonde, Lunda and Tonga, as well as English, the official language.

These infographics should be mobile friendly. Content should also be shared on FPI social media handles. It is important to note that these should be produced in formats compatible for WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram and Tik Tok.

Similarly, Video explainers should be produced to give more details around;

- ➢ Election day checklists
- ➢ Voter registration reminders
- ➢ Polling station directions
- ➢ Turnout updates
- ➢ Results interpretation.

These video explainers will be about 30 seconds to 2 minutes in length for easy communication of the information around the voting process, how ballots are counted, what observers do, what constitutes electoral malpractice and role of women and youths. This will be preceded by the simple-factual-based scripts with a call to action.

Both the infographics and explainers will include subtitles as it increases accessibility, comprehension and inclusive of the deaf viewers.

Furthermore, the video explainers will focus on the following;

- ➢ Electoral cycle overview
- ➢ what voters need to carry
- ➢ Rights and responsibilities of voters
- ➢ preventing misinformation
- ➢ When and how results are announced

Therefore, the multimedia content will focus around promoting unity, community resilience, and peaceful dialogue and safety in election reporting.