

2021

Code of Conduct
Improving conflict
sensitive reporting
& journalist safety in
South Asia

Acknowledgments

The Public Media Alliance (PMA) would like to thank UNESCO's International Programme for the Development of Communication (IPDC) and the UNESCO New Delhi Office for their generous support to this project. Also, our thanks to our project partner, Media Action Nepal (MAN) who were key to facilitating our virtual workshops and meetings.

Particular thanks go to PMA's Projects and Membership Manager, Jasmine Chandler, for conceptualising and running the project; to the project facilitators, Mr. Laxman Datt Pant and Dr. Sadia Jamil; and to PMA Journalist Desilon Daniels for her assistance, coordination and research.

PMA is also grateful to the project participants and media stakeholders from Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Sri Lanka for their insight, honesty, and passion in developing this important and regionally relevant Code of Conduct.

Published by the Public Media Alliance
© Public Media Alliance 2021

Ideas and opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors; they are not necessarily those of UNESCO, the Public Media Alliance or Media Action Nepal.

Edited by Sadia Jamil, Laxman Datt Pant and Sally-Ann Wilson

Graphic Design by Kristian Porter

Cover image: A press photojournalist is holding a camera with a zoom lens and is photographing war and conflict. **Credit:** chameleonseye/iStock



Introduction

The media landscape of South Asia is diverse, with each national media system facing unique challenges. Nonetheless, countries like Bangladesh, India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka have some similarities: each country has a history of journalist safety violations as well as a history of conflict. Current press freedom rankings also indicate troubling developments within these target countries – none of them ranks higher than 100 out of the 180 countries in Reporters without Borders' (RSF) 2021 World Press Freedom Index¹, with Nepal ranking at 106th, Sri Lanka at 127th, India at 142nd, and Bangladesh at 152nd.

It is with these contexts in mind that a project to focus on conflict-sensitive reporting and journalist safety for South Asian media was conceptualised. The project, which included a mapping exercise, a three-day workshop, mentoring sessions, and the production of conflict sensitive news reports, culminated with the document set out here: the Code of Conduct to Improve Conflict Sensitive Reporting and the Safety of Journalists in South Asia. This code of conduct aims to strengthen the South Asian media environment in terms of conflict sensitive reporting, journalist safety, and self-regulation.

While the project was undertaken by the Public Media Alliance (PMA) with our local partner Media Action Nepal (MAN) and with the support of UNESCO New Delhi Office, this code of conduct represents the collective inputs of numerous media stakeholders in the target countries. From 28–30 September 2021, thirty fellows were awarded as part of the project – from journalists to academics and editors – they met virtually in a workshop format to network with their regional counterparts, examine their roles in terms of the reporting of conflict, and to devise regional strategies for covering conflict

1. Reporters without Borders. 2021. 2021 World Press Freedom Index. [ONLINE] Available at: <https://rsf.org/en/ranking>. [Accessed 3 November 2021].

accurately, impartially, and responsibly while ensuring their own safety and the safety of others². This workshop was the foundation for the development of the code of conduct, with each participant bringing their local understanding and real-life experiences to guide the development of the code. Following the workshop's conclusion, a consultation meeting was held with additional stakeholders from the target countries (such as press council representatives, media academics, and journalists) to review and offer feedback on the draft Code of Conduct.

This final Code of Conduct is therefore largely the product of our fellows and media stakeholders from Bangladesh, India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. As those most affected by the challenges to journalist safety and conflict sensitive reporting, it was only appropriate that their voices were represented in this document which aims at benefitting the South Asian media landscape.

Our mapping research had also reiterated the need for a more nuanced approach to topics such as the inclusion of a gender perspective in journalist safety; a focus on peace journalism; and the need for practical tips for physical and digital journalist safety.

2. PMA. 2021. Meet the fellows. [ONLINE] Available at: <https://www.publicmediaalliance.org/meet-the-fellows-of-our-conflict-sensitive-reporting-and-safety-of-journalists-in-south-asia-workshop/>. [Accessed 3 November 2021].

Code of Conduct



1 Respect for human rights and democracy

- a. Journalists and mass media should work to enhance the protection and promotion of democracy, justice, equality, freedom, inclusion, humanity, peace, international understanding and fraternity among friendly nations, while at the same time respecting the rights and values guaranteed by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.
- b. Journalists and news media should always remain active and dedicated to safeguarding the rights of citizens to be well-informed.



2 Take account of the law

Holding power to account is a core function of journalism. However, journalists should always be aware of local laws and the way in which these might affect their work. With this in mind:

- a. Media stakeholders and journalists must fully understand the laws of a country as it pertains to their work and their coverage of conflict.
- b. Sensationalism in words or pictures should be avoided.
- c. Journalists must be aware of the law as it pertains to their own safety and the safety of others.



3 Confidentiality of reliable sources

- a. If information is received from a confidential source, then that confidentiality must be respected. A journalist cannot be compelled to disclose such a source; but it shall not be regarded as a breach of journalistic ethics if the source subsequently gives consent of their own volition.

- b. Unconfirmed reports or tips from anonymous sources must be verified before publication. If they remain tenuous or unconfirmed after the verification, they must be withheld from publication.
- c. Unconfirmed quotes or details must be crosschecked. If such elements are deemed to be in the public interest by an editor, then they can be published but only if they are clearly labelled as being “unconfirmed” and not attributed.
- d. Information received from reliable sources may be published in the public interest if the facts presented are considered trustworthy by an editor. If this is the case, then a journalist is to be absolved from any adverse consequence of publication.



4 Use intersectional and impartial approach to lessen the risk to communal harmony

- a. News organisations shall refrain from publishing news that is contemptuous or disrespectful to any caste, creed, nationality, or religion, of any individual or community. For the purpose of upholding societal wellbeing, the publication of communal prejudices and hate speech must be discouraged.
- b. Journalists and mass media should not produce or distribute news material that discriminates or prejudices anyone on grounds of their racial, gender, religious, tribal, or regional identity, or that associated with their linguistic background, political beliefs or physical and mental health.
- c. Journalists and mass media should render special assistance, through the dissemination of accurate information, to vulnerable persons and towards the uplift and development of children, women, elderly citizens, those who are incapacitated, differently able persons, “excluded groups”, community, religious, linguistic, and minority groups.



5 Refrain from social and cultural bias and ensure equal representation

- a. Journalists should ensure respect for social and cultural sensitivities and must avoid expressing their personal opinions and biases when reporting on conflict.
- b. Journalists should ensure their personal opinions and biases do not affect equality of representation for all communities, societal groups, and other identities.



6 Maintain a human rights and gender equality lens

- a. Journalists should respect the fundamental rights of religious identity as well as cultural sentiments and privacy when reporting on conflict.
- b. Journalists should ensure the equal and respectful representations of gender and gender identity.



7 Avoid gendered disinformation to ensure respect for all genders

- a. Journalists should not engage in the dissemination of any information that may cause harm to the self-esteem, reputation, and professional credibility of anyone based on their gender or sexuality.



8 Refrain from publishing content that could incite religious or communal violence

Journalists and news media organisations must:

not give a platform to those inciting violence.

- a. not report stories that may unnecessarily cause offence to religious groups and identities.
- b. not engage in commercial exploitation of the name of prophets, seers, or deities.

- d. not falsely apply a communal angle to incidents.
- e. not report any story that may facilitate the glorification of social problems or violence.
- f. not use language that could inflame or ignite religious or communal tension or violence



9 Accuracy and verification

- a. A reporter should, to the best of their ability, verify the facts in any report. They should also incorporate adequate material to prove the truth of the matter reported.
- b. Do not spread rumours.
- c. Where possible, journalists must use information that has been received through reliable sources. Journalists must state where this has not been possible [See point 3].



10 Do not suggest guilt by association

- a. Journalists should not place blame on those associated with guilty parties unless there is reliable evidence of wrongdoing.
- b. If an aggrieved party refutes a claim made by a journalist or news organisation that proves to be incorrect, it shall be the obligation of the editor to publish a correction or apology.



11 No trial by media

Journalists and editors should refrain from:

- a. Publishing any news that predicts or announces a verdict to any case under trial until after a final judgment has been made by the court.
- b. Reporting in a way that might influence or manipulate a trial or verdict.

12

Exercise caution in the use of language

- a. Avoid representing a conflict as a clash between two sides.
- b. Avoid sharp distinctions, such as “us” and “them”.
- c. Avoid defining a conflict by always quoting leaders or familiar demands. Go beyond the elites and the headlines. If possible, report the words of ordinary people who may have experienced the ramifications of conflict directly, or, voice the opinions of community members, which might be shared by many others.
- d. Take an impartial approach to your reporting. Avoid only reporting what divides each side of a conflict. Ask the opposing sides questions that may reveal common ground. Report on interests from the ground or goals that they may be shared.
- e. Avoid only focusing on the challenges, suffering or oppression faced by one side of the conflict.
- f. Avoid emotional terms such as devastated, tragedy, terrorised, words are powerless, helpless, or pathetic to describe what has been done to one group. Unless used in an opinion piece, such words can be interpreted as bias and undermine the perception of accuracy. Only quote someone else who uses these words.
- g. Avoid placing blame for who started the conflict unless it is explicitly accurate. Instead, try to discover how common problems lead to consequences that were not expected by either side.
- h. Avoid only reporting on violence and describing the “horror” of conflict. Report how people might be blocked, frustrated, or humiliated in everyday life, as a way of explaining the violence and the wider impact of conflict.
- i. Avoid emotional and imprecise words and phrases.
- j. Reporters must take care not to apply personal views. Avoid overly emotive language or language that may undermine impartiality or the accuracy of your report. Aim to describe people by the terms they use to describe themselves.

13 Ensure objective reporting and avoid reporting opinion as fact

14 Avoid welcoming signed documents or ceasefires as something that undeniably leads to the creation of peace

a. Instead, try to report on issues that remain unresolved.

15 Act with due impartiality

a. Journalists should avoid only reporting one-sided expectations for solutions to a conflict. Try to consider and examine all peace initiatives and proposals, no matter where they come from.

16 Be accountable for the content produced

a. Accountability is a two-way process. Journalists must give due consideration to others and ensure that reporting does not unnecessarily have adverse effects on aspects of a person's life such as their safety, cultural and religious sentiments, privacy, reputation, or financial wellbeing. Consider the principles of 'do no harm' and understand the implications of your reporting.

Recommendations for further improvements

- i. News organisations should develop effective HR policies to protect the interests and wellbeing of journalists.
- ii. To introduce more preventative measures against sexual harassment in the workplace and in the field. Create safe spaces for people to report harassment and abuse.
- iii. Implement gender sensitive training for leaders and other staff members.
- iv. Introduce guidelines for reporting when using minors as sources
- v. Introduce codes of conduct for media managers and owners.

