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## Journalism in times of war: challenges and opportunities in the digital age

### Журналістика під час війни: виклики та можливості в епоху цифрових технологій

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Written by:

**Gaiana Iuksel<sup>1</sup>** <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0894-7544>**Anzhelika Dosenko<sup>2</sup>** <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5415-1299>**Oleksii Sytnyk<sup>3</sup>** <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0853-1442>**Liudmyla Yuldasheva<sup>4</sup>** <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6561-8827>**Vitalii Zakharov<sup>5</sup>** <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-0267-4097>

#### Abstract


The current conditions of journalistic activity demonstrate the importance of the ability to work properly in times of conflict and instability. The peculiarities of such work determined the purpose of the article - to study the problems of conflict-sensitive journalism as one of the trends of our time. This goal was achieved through the use of scientific methods. First of all, we are talking about the method of content analysis of professional scientific literature, the use of methods of generalisation and systematisation.


The results of the study show that for objective coverage of events, it is recommended to use the idea of a 'just' war, to carefully assess the opinions and views of different segments of the population regarding the war, not to be in the position of propagandists, to focus on the coverage of the process, to demonstrate the interests and concerns of the warring parties, avoiding the understanding


#### Анотація


Сучасні умови журналістської діяльності демонструють важливість вміння правильно працювати в умовах нестабільних ситуаціях. Особливості такої роботи зумовили мету статті – дослідити проблеми конфлікто-чутливої журналістики як одного з трендів сучасності. Цією метою було досягнуто завдяки використанню наукових методів. Насамперед, мова йде про метод контент-аналізу фахової наукової літератури, використання методів узагальнення та систематизації.


Результати дослідження свідчать, що для об'єктивного висвітлення подій рекомендується використовувати ідею «справедливої» війни, уважно оцінювати думки та погляди різних верств населення на війну, не займати позицію пропагандистів, зосередити увагу на висвітленні процесу, продемонструвати інтереси та занепокоєння

<sup>1</sup> PhD in Philology, Associate Professor of the Department of Journalism, Educational & Scientific Institute of Philology and Journalism, V.I. Vernadsky Taurida National University, Ukraine.  WoS Researcher ID: AAB-2490-2021

<sup>2</sup> PhD in Social Communications, Associate Professor, the Head of Department of Journalism, Educational and Scientific Institute of Philology and Journalism, V. I. Vernadsky Taurida National University, Ukraine.  WoS Researcher ID: Z-1396-2019

<sup>3</sup> PhD in Social Communications, Associate Professor, Department of Publishing and Editing, Educational and Scientific Institute of Journalism, Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, Ukraine.  WoS Researcher ID: ABB-3181-2021

<sup>4</sup> PhD in Philology, Associate Professor of the Department of Slavic, Roman and German Philology, Educational and Scientific Institute of Philology and Journalism, V.I. Vernadsky Taurida National University, Ukraine.  WoS Researcher ID: Y-6026-2019

<sup>5</sup> PhD in Philology, Senior Lecturer, Department of Television Journalism, Faculty of Cinema and Television, Kyiv National University of Culture and Arts, Ukraine.  WoS Researcher ID: KQV-4806-2024



of war as a concept of struggle for the same ideas. As shown in the article, it is important to avoid 'hate speech', which is the basis for the development of discriminatory policies. The conclusions note that journalistic work should not be understood as entertainment or selfish practice.

**Keywords:** ethics of conflict portrayal, media literariness, influence of social media, conflict-sensitive journalism, emotional intelligence.

## Introduction

Contemporary scholarly discourse has established that journalism plays an important role in covering current complex problems and tense situations in today's society. At the same time, journalism is currently undergoing serious changes due to the emergence of the phenomenon of 'media convergence', i.e. the expansion of the audience in all possible ways (Antonopoulos et al., 2020; Johnson et al., 2020). Thus, this affects the transformation of the methodology of covering events and the basic principles of journalism.

In their materials, journalists may not adhere to ethical professional principles and standards when writing about conflict-sensitive topics. At the same time, the events of the Russian-Ukrainian war have demonstrated the importance of the media in a modern democratic society (Skurtul, 2023). In times of war, there is an urgent need for accurate and high-quality information, without which democracy cannot function effectively (Zhytnikova, 2023).

On the other hand, intense competition and active transformational digital changes require journalists not only to have professional skills, but also to have a detailed understanding of the main trends in the modern globalised world. This article will examine the main aspects of conflict-sensitive journalism and its principles in modern media. Thus, given the current realities, it is necessary to comprehensively study the problem

ворогуючих сторін, уникаючи розуміння війни як концепції боротьби за ті самі ідеї. Як показано в статті, важливо уникати «мови ненависті», яка є основою для розвитку дискримінаційної політики. Розгляд елементів інтеграції соціальних медіа в журналістику показав важливість поглибленого фактчекінгу як основи роботи з цим сегментом. Водночас інструменти цензури можуть бути неефективними і їх слід замінити елементами налагодження якісної комунікації з суспільством. У висновках зазначається, що журналістську роботу не слід розуміти як розвагу чи егоїстичну практику. Через значний вплив на прийняття рішень конфліктно-чутлива журналістика має дотримуватись етичних принципів роботи, які можуть бути закріплені у відповідних нормативно-правових актах.

**Ключові слова:** етика висвітлення конфлікту, медіаграмотність, вплив соціальних медіа, конфлікто-чуттєва журналістика.

of conflict-sensitive journalism, which will determine the main purpose of the study.

At the same time, modern technologies used in modern information wars involving the media deserve important attention. All these aspects make this problem extremely relevant for study. Therefore, the main tasks include highlighting the aspects of conflict-sensitive journalism, identifying the negative effects of hate speech, and determining the updates of journalistic work with social media.

The structure of this paper consists of an introduction, a systematic review of the literature, which summarizes the main work of the authors and trends in modern journalism, results and conclusions. In the results section, the main principles of conducting conflict-sensitive journalism and its importance during the war are described. The conclusions summarize the practical features of using emotional-conflict journalism and describe directions for further research. Therefore, this study is aimed at solving a topical and not fully researched topic, and the conclusions demonstrate the importance of avoiding hate speech when conducting journalism in conditions of war.

## Literature Review

Given the above-mentioned relevance of this issue, contemporary authors have outlined the

theoretical aspects of studying sensory journalism in the digital age. Today, this area is not well represented in research. The analysis of the possibilities of sensitive messages is devoted to studies that highlight the role of empathy in journalistic material (Howard, 2015). In general, Howard's (2015) work is devoted to the theoretical concept of conflict-sensitive journalism, and the author outlines the main practical tips on how modern professional journalists should cover sensitive topics, especially in view of the conflict situation in different regions. However, the limitation of this study is a theoretical review of the basic principles of conducting conflict-sensitive journalism; however, the author does not delve into practical solutions. Changes in Ukrainian culture in the era of the Russian-Ukrainian war are also highlighted in separate studies (Kurok et al., 2023; Romaniuk et al., 2023). These studies are important in the context of this topic given the important role of Ukrainian culture and its development during the war.

As for conflict-sensitive journalism in a broader sense, this topic is present in theoretical studies that contribute to the development of methodology and monitoring of sensitivity in relation to certain groups of people (Hackett, 2012; Lipschultz, 2020). At the same time, Owino & Karani (2022) in their empirical study, based on the analysis of media reports, characterised the observance of ethical norms in modern media resources. The authors also proved that the media play an important role in conflict resolution and peace-building. The strength of the study is its empirical approach, however, the local nature of the study can be highlighted as a limitation.

At the same time, modern scholars argue that digital communications in the online environment, as well as the widespread development of audio and television media, allow for the free dissemination of any, and in some cases, inaccurate information about the actions of certain social groups or individuals (Choi & Yang, 2021). This is an important problem for modern journalism. In general, modern authors have explored various possibilities of digital journalism, in particular, the study by Antonopoulos, Konidaris, Polykalas & Lamprou (2020) analyses the phenomenon of online journalism through the prism of analysing individual news websites. The strength of this study is the empirical measurements and characterization of practical areas of journalism implementation, at the same time, this study is also local in nature, as the authors analyzed the

news websites available to them. Cheruiyot (2022) proved the importance of media literacy for the modern audience. The same problem is covered in detail in Dadakhonov (2024), who outlines the importance of media literacy based on an empirical study of this issue. Guta (2021) outlines the importance of journalistic ethics in sensitive reporting. The strength of the study is its extraordinary approach to the coverage of this problem, however, the author generally approached the chosen topic.

The development of conflict-sensitive journalism is presented in Jimoh & Kayode (2018). These authors have identified the peace journalism model as an important way for journalists to practice their craft. These authors also showed the basic background and contexts of conflicts and highlighted some peace initiatives in news coverage of conflicts. The strong point of the study is the raising of an actual topic, which is currently not fully researched. However, some of the statements made by these authors need to be revised and clarified. Thus, although contemporary studies have developed theoretical aspects of conflict-sensitive journalism, this topic is not fully covered and needs to be clarified in view of current challenges.

## Methodology

The study was conducted on the basis of a content analysis of modern scientific literature. This method allowed for a qualitative approach to this study and a comprehensive characterisation of the issue.

## Data collection

Data collection was carried out using the main scientometric databases of international and national importance in order to include a variety of sources. First, key words such as 'journalism', 'conflict-sensitive journalism', 'digitalisation', 'Ukraine', 'war', 'journalism trends' were entered into the scientometric databases. After a critical superficial analysis of the topics and annotations, the most relevant sources were selected - 50 items in total.

After that, the criteria for including the literature were formed:

1. The article deals with general trends in the development of journalism.
2. The article describes the digitalisation of journalism.

3. The main theoretical aspects of sensory journalism in the modern informative space are investigated.
4. The qualitative and quantitative data of a conflict-sensitive journalist are described.
5. Preference was given to both qualitative and quantitative research.
6. Inclusion of relevant and contemporary literature.

The date range of the sources included included literature from 2012 onwards. At the same time, the main focus was on the analysis of contemporary literature (from 2019).

### Date Analysis

The paper uses the method of content analysis of the literature, which was carried out in stages. In

**Table 1.**  
*Some aspects of implementing conflict-sensitive journalism*

| Aspects                                 | Description  |
|---|--|
| Avoiding the logic of a 'tug of war'    | The use of descriptions of war as a conflict between several parties fighting for the same goal is inappropriate in journalistic work. Among the negative aspects of this aspect is that its implementation leads to further escalation, the formation of competition and the denial of the need for cooperation. Usually, confrontations are not that simple. One of the important tasks of sensitive journalists is to find and analyse the activities of all stakeholders. The grouping of interested 'players' into two warring parties is replaced by exploring the interests and needs of all parties, which carry equal weight, regardless of status. |
| Process orientation                     | Conflict-sensitive journalism requires a focus on the process, not just on the coverage of events. The importance of the process is determined by the characterisation of the history of events, contexts, circumstances and conditions, coverage of the details of violence, etc.   |
| Caution in assessing opinions and views | Caution in assessing opinions and views In the course of journalistic work, it is important to avoid generalising and presenting the opinions of the elite as the only possible and existing ones. There is a need to study the parties and their views regardless of their power and social status, and it is also important to present the views of ordinary citizens.   |
| Understanding the injustice of war      | Conflict-sensitive journalism refuses to accept narratives of a just war. Instead of discussing the possible reasons for justifying war, it should demonstrate the cost of warfare, its outcome and impact on social life, reveal the real face of war, and demonstrate the destructive impact of conflicts in the modern world.   |
| Countering propaganda                   | The two-sided geometry of war coverage does not imply taking a neutral position. Using this method, a journalist must take sides. Theoretically, using rational arguments, they can counteract the other side's propaganda. However, focusing on the demonstration of violence can lead to simplification of facts and can lead to propaganda.   |

Source: Rudenko & Kharkov (2023), Tkhorzhevskaya (2023)

An important trend may be the use of 'hate speech'. It is widespread in public and private life, and there are many discussions about whether it is possible to regulate this issue in law. In a broad sense, hate speech means any expression that denies the existence of the principle of equality of all people. Such a construct can describe and hierarchically

particular, first, an initial analysis of the main annotations from the selected literature was carried out, and then the main results were analysed. Thus, the main trends in the development of modern journalism were identified. Also, based on the systematic method, the author characterises conflict-sensitive journalism as a phenomenon that evolves in accordance with modern globalised challenges.

### Results and Discussion

Conflict-sensitive journalism has been undergoing significant changes for a long time. With regard to the problem of implementing it in practice, researchers have identified a number of aspects that need to be taken into account (see Table 1).

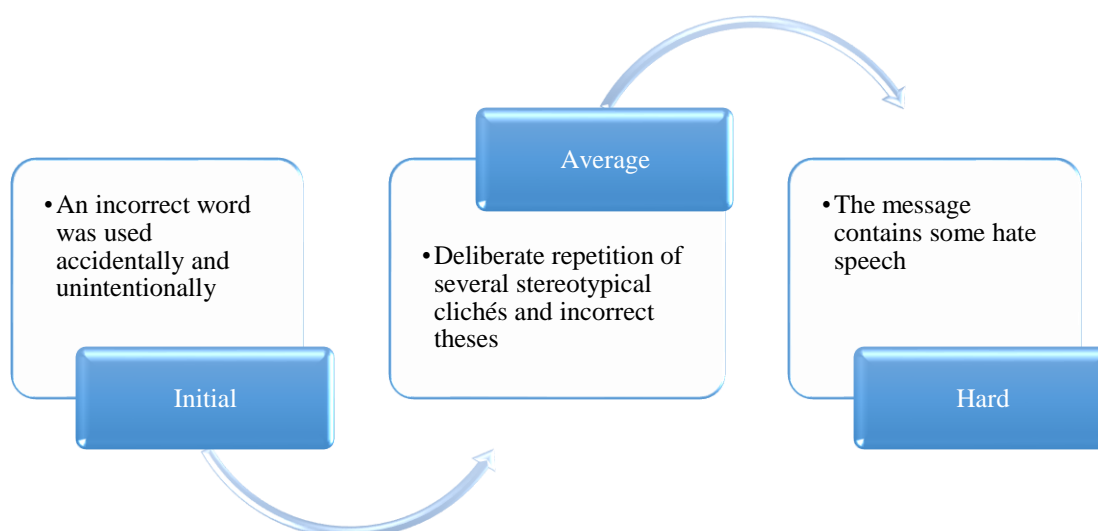
compare different groups of people and evaluate their personal qualities based on their membership in one group or another. Negative stereotypes or prejudices can become the main underlying hate speech (Nilsen, 2014). The latter are spread to justify discrimination, most often ethnic or 'racial' (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Elements of ‘hate speech’  
 Source: Nilsen (2014), Said-Hung, Montero-Díaz & Sánchez-Esparza (2023).

The main targets of such rhetoric may be groups of people, including ethnic groups, residents of certain territories or regions, internally displaced persons, migrants without official documents, drug or alcohol addicts, people with disabilities, representatives of certain religious groups and representatives of certain professions, which may be ambiguously treated by society. In particular, messages containing hate speech may use stereotypical names for social groups, such as Gypsies rather than Roma, Jews rather than Jews. This problem can be particularly acute in times of global challenges or conflict (Said-Hung et al., 2023).

For example, in Ukraine, many people have had to leave their homes and become displaced, and are more vulnerable and may be affected by various media headlines on displacement or refugee issues (Skurtul, 2023). In some contexts, the use of IDPs, displaced persons instead of Ukrainians, especially in topics related to their stay abroad, can be vulnerable. In particular, the news item titled ‘An IDP-coloniser detained in Lviv region’ has a negative connotation. In this context, journalists should find a line when it is really necessary to emphasise that a person is an IDP. When it does not play a significant role in the text, it is not necessary to focus on such details. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that hate speech can take several forms (Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** Forms of ‘hate speech’  
 Source: Author’s development

Thus, the use of hate speech elements may affect the professional activities of journalists. They should adhere to the Code of Ethics for Ukrainian Journalists. It is also worth remembering that crimes are committed by criminals, and not focusing on social status. Special attention in the work of journalists should be paid to the competent use of the potential of social networks and messengers, as these areas of cooperation with the public are extremely difficult to regulate through censorship or other actions of state authorities. The experience of the Russian-Ukrainian war has demonstrated that Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, TikTok, messengers (primarily Telegram, which is popular in Ukraine) can become platforms for the rapid dissemination of information.

The ability to communicate easily, show images of destruction and casualties, and avoid unnecessary expert opinions and judgements imposed by media holdings, make it possible to show the real face of war without embellishment (Kostrubitska, 2022). Due to the efficiency and close integration of digital technologies into everyday life, information can be updated in real time, and the audience will grow exponentially. This has a tangible advantage - the ability to demonstrate the reality of military operations and the associated deprivation, pain and suffering. Moreover, this demonstration will be served directly to viewers/followers, without unnecessary censorship in most cases. However, the use of social media in journalism can also become a powerful source of disinformation.

Caught in the crossfire of disinformation, the audience on social media faces a difficult choice of trust/distrust. The situation is further complicated by paid-for content, the use of a huge number of bots that spread the desired opinions across the web, and the purchase of previously trusted accounts, which increase the risks to journalistic work. Given the possible scale of the problem, researchers believe that modern society lives in a 'post-truth' era, in which additional skills are required to detect deception. Among them is fact-checking, the ability to verify and analyse the information received. Perhaps one of the tasks of conflict-sensitive journalism is to facilitate this sector of work: journalists should independently check the materials for their relevance to reality before publishing them, making it easier for the public to identify false information.

There is also a popular opinion among researchers that journalists should understand the crucial role of journalism during military

operations (Kostrubitska, 2022). It is argued that in times of war, simply working to present information objectively or to cover opposing views is not enough, as such activities can lead to a deeper escalation and trigger new rounds of violence. Journalists in times of war are required to have more information about the root causes of conflicts, the process of conflict emergence, development and termination, as well as to be aware of the cases in which wars end and the ways in which such scenarios can be realised. Researchers acknowledge that conflict-sensitive journalism should be based on the understanding that the problem of war in the modern world is beyond the scope of any situation and has a fundamental basis that needs to be critically examined (Kostrubitska, 2022).

Therefore, when implementing the concept of conflict-sensitive journalism, there is a need to use facts that take into account broader contexts, i.e., demonstrate a holistic picture of the larger whole based on specific facts and stories that have become a complex matrix of the military present, which is constantly changing and transforming. Conflict-sensitive journalism should carry out the process of uniting society in times of war, responding to the spread of disinformation and deliberate hostility (Kostrubitska, 2022). According to current opinions in the scientific literature, even in times of military danger, journalists should provide the public with opportunities for political assessment of military realities and the consequences of war.

The findings demonstrated that modern conflict-sensitive journalism plays an important role in covering military events, informing society about the causes and consequences of wars, and taking an objective approach to reporting. At the same time, journalists should not turn into preachers of peace, but rather act as neutral intermediaries who possess and transmit objective information (Martylenko et al., 2023). Similarly, media outlets should not be subject to harassment or restrictions, but should follow the usual standards of operation that have guaranteed high quality work in peacetime.

For this reason, there is no need to impose additional restrictions on journalistic activity in times of war. On the other hand, it is worth noting the opinions of researchers that the objectivity of taking into account all points of view during wartime is a complex and partially unsolvable problem (Rudenko & Kharkov, 2023). The vivid example of Russian propaganda has demonstrated that such estimates are much closer to reality, as the free dissemination of biased and

fake information will turn journalistic work into a constant provocation of conflict. Obviously, such methods of work are not acceptable for conflict-sensitive journalism. The main trends in the development of journalism in Ukraine are covered by Karpchuk & Makar (2023) and Starkova & Yaresko (2020). Zhytnikova (2023) describes the communication capabilities of journalists in the era of war. The phenomenon of cultural journalism and its development is described in detail in a comprehensive study by Silva (2016). This author described the main models, practical solutions and opportunities of this area of journalism.

Analysis of journalistic work in the media point out that there may be several possible options for journalists in times of open war. First of all, it is about the possibility of journalists to accelerate the adoption of necessary political decisions by simultaneously drawing attention to the problem on many information resources. The reverse process is also likely, when the media can make it difficult to implement planned decisions, achieve political goals due to the degree of emotional assessment of the situation or even disclose plans for military operations (Vasilenko, 2021).

The example of the overly active PR of the counter-offensive of Ukrainian troops in 2023 clearly demonstrated the short-sightedness of journalists and experts, which led to the spread of aggression, scepticism and pessimism in Ukrainian society (Derviş, 2023). Thirdly, journalistic work can influence the formation of the political agenda (Kostrubitska, 2022). Understanding these options will allow experts to develop and formulate common standards for the presentation of events during martial law in the media. There is also a need for such principles to be enshrined at the state level in an appropriate administrative and legal act. However, given the changing situation and the active integration of new digital opportunities for disseminating information, such initiatives should be constantly adjusted to take into account the emergence of new practices that are detrimental to real journalistic work.

The findings also highlighted that hate speech can play an important role in modern journalism, which modern journalists can use both accidentally and intentionally. According to Baider & Constantinou (2020), racism in the linguistic framework is shaped by socio-cultural changes and contexts. In particular, preliminary comparisons of social media journalism about Greek Cypriots and Greek online data showed

that the two communities use different means to express their hostility towards each other, and that Greek messages may be more offensive. The findings are also consistent with Johnson, Thomas & Kelling (2020), who found that ethnicity can be an important sensitivity and resource for hate speech. Other studies also confirm that the existence of hate speech concepts is an important challenge.

In particular, based on the analysis of Spanish messages, it was determined that inappropriate translation of certain ethnic phrases can serve as a valid reason for the use of certain hate speech constructs. At the same time, contemporary scholars also agree that modern digital technologies have changed the way journalism is conducted. Contemporary scholars also identify the significant impact of these digital technologies, including multimedia for better audience outreach (Antonopoulos et al., 2020; Salaverría, 2019). However, according to Vasilenko (2021), new professional journalism in Ukraine has every opportunity to develop only if there is a public demand for it, i.e. joint efforts of scholars and practitioners are important to inform readers, viewers, listeners about new methods of presenting material and test them in modern online media.

## Conclusions

Therefore, conflict-sensitive journalism is an important tool for organising journalistic activities during military conflicts. In particular, for objective coverage of events, it is recommended to avoid certain aspects. First of all, it is about rejecting the idea of a 'just' war, being careful in assessing the opinions and views of different segments of the population regarding the war, the importance of not falling into the trap of propaganda and not becoming a propagandist yourself, focusing on the coverage of the process in assessments, demonstrating the interests and concerns of the warring parties, avoiding the understanding of war as a concept of struggle for the same ideas. An important aspect of working in conflict-sensitive journalism is avoiding the use of 'hate speech'. There are no legislative mechanisms to regulate its use, so the existence of such a construct makes it possible to characterise events and individuals with elements of denial of the principle of equality of all people. As a rule, negative stereotypes, which are the basis for discrimination, including racial discrimination, become the basic elements of hate speech.

Another important issue is the integration of modern social media into journalism. The experience of the Russian-Ukrainian war has demonstrated that online platforms have become platforms for the rapid dissemination of information. This provides conflict-sensitive journalism with an important advantage - the ability to demonstrate the real consequences of the war, which will somehow contribute to a negative perception of the war. Moreover, this demonstration will be presented directly to viewers/subscribers, without unnecessary censorship in most cases. At the same time, there is a need for in-depth fact-checking, as the availability of certain information, the spread of bots, the purchase of accounts, etc. can introduce disinformation. In such circumstances, a journalist can turn into a mediator who performs part of the tasks of combating propaganda.

It is important that journalistic work should not be seen as entertainment or a selfish practice. Due to its significant impact on decision-making, conflict-sensitive journalism should adhere to ethical principles of work, which can be enshrined in relevant regulations. However, the introduction of censorship in the coverage of modern warfare is ineffective, as it is impossible to block all channels of information dissemination, and providing truthful information is a better option than silencing tangible problems.

However, this study also opens up new directions for further research. In particular, it is important to conduct an empirical study that would confirm the effectiveness of the implementation of individual components and principles of conflict-sensitive journalism during the war.

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