

Ethical and Inclusive Reporting on LGBTQI+ Topics

A Media Handbook



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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. PURPOSE OF THE HANDBOOK, OBJECTIVES, AND TARGET AUDIENCE

According to data from civil society organizations that continuously monitor the human rights situation of LGBTIQ+ persons, a significant number of reports of hate speech and harassment have been recorded in the digital sphere, particularly on social media and in the comments sections below media articles.¹ Such content includes insults, humiliation, and threats, and its frequency increases during periods of intensified media coverage of LGBTIQ+ topics.

Compared to other Balkan countries and to the European Union average, Montenegro has a relatively advanced legal framework (for example, same-sex life partnerships have been legally recognized since 2020, and a Draft Law on the legal recognition of gender based on self-determination has been prepared). However, public attitudes and dominant narratives, including media reporting, show a more pronounced presence of negative views and stereotypes than in some EU countries. This combination of factors—legal progress on the one hand, and social distrust and negative narratives on the other—means that standards of reporting on LGBTIQ+ topics in Montenegro remain below the level that would be expected in European Union media.

The effect of the dissemination of information from traditional media to social networks is rapid and powerful:

- content spreads faster and has a longer lifespan (e.g. through virality and transformation into memes, particularly on platforms such as “X”);
- the boundary between information, opinion, and manipulation becomes blurred;
- hate speech is masked as humor, irony, or appeals to “freedom of opinion”;
- pressure and harassment become personalized and direct.

¹ LGBT Forum Progres, “Annual Reports on the State of Human Rights of LGBTIQ Persons in Montenegro” – <https://lgbtprogres.me/publikacije/>; Queer Montenegro, Monitoring of Online Violence – <https://queermontenegro.org>

For LGBTQI+ persons, this means that the harm does not end with a poorly worded headline or inadequately framed article. It continues and multiplies through comments under articles, direct messages, targeted harassment campaigns, and a long-term sense that the public sphere has become hostile and unsafe. This continuity of harm is particularly pronounced in the digital environment, where the boundary between media content and user discourse is increasingly eroded.

Findings from CEDEM's analysis of self-regulatory practices in the Montenegrin media landscape² indicate that a significant number of online media outlets lack clearly defined and consistently applied comment moderation policies, as well as functional mechanisms for responsible management of hate speech and harassment on their platforms. In practice, comments are often treated as separate from journalistic content, even though they are precisely the space in which problematic narratives are further radicalized and normalized.

Within such a regulatory and self-regulatory context, the media are no longer merely sources of information, but active generators of narratives that are further amplified on social networks, without editorial filters or clear accountability. The way a topic is initially presented in the media—through headlines, framing, and language choice—largely determines how the content will be interpreted, shared, and commented on in the online space.

Building on this, the handbook is based on a simple but crucial assumption: **ethical and professional reporting on LGBTQI+ topics is not a matter of political correctness, but a matter of genuine social responsibility and the safety of individuals.**

The handbook serves as a practical and normatively grounded tool for improving ethical, professional, and inclusive reporting on LGBTQI+ topics in Montenegro. It was developed in response to long-standing patterns of media reporting which, although often formally aligned with freedom of expression, can in practice produce or reinforce stigmatization, stereotypes, and exclusionary narratives.

The purpose of the handbook is to provide media professionals with clear, applicable, and contextualized guidelines that connect journalistic professional standards, the applicable legal framework of Montenegro, the state's international human rights obligations, and empirical findings on the real effects of media reporting and online discourse.

² Center for democracy and human rights (CEDEM), "Self-Regulatory Practices in the Montenegrin Media Landscape", 2025

The objectives of the handbook are to:

- improve the accuracy, accountability, and contextualization of reporting on LGBTQI+ topics;
- contribute to the reduction of stereotypes, sensationalism, and implicitly discriminatory narratives;
- empower journalists and editors to recognize risks in language, framing, and visual representation;
- offer concrete tools for managing online comments and hate speech;
- open space for understanding the benefits and risks of using AI technologies in reporting on human rights;
- contribute to the protection of the dignity, privacy, and safety of LGBTQI+ persons in the public sphere.

The handbook is intended for journalists and editors in print, online, and audio-visual media, students of journalism and communication studies, as well as other professionals involved in the creation and moderation of media content, particularly in the digital environment.

1.2. HOW TO USE THE HANDBOOK IN EVERYDAY JOURNALISTIC AND EDITORIAL WORK

The handbook is designed as a practical working tool that can be applied across three key phases of the media production process: before publication, during writing and editing, and after publication.

Before writing and publication: The handbook supports the assessment of whether LGBTQI+ identity is relevant to the topic being reported on, the selection of appropriate sources, and the evaluation of potential risks for interviewees and for the public discourse. Particular emphasis is placed on assessing possible consequences in the online environment, including the escalation of hate speech and harassment.

During writing and editing: The handbook serves as a guide for the use of terminology, the formulation of headlines and leads, the selection of visual content, and the overall structure of the text. The focus here is on avoiding sensationalist and stigmatizing formulations that have a direct impact on the tone and substance of readers' comments.

After publication: The handbook provides guidance on responsible comment moderation, responding to hate speech and online violence, as well as correcting errors and communicating with the audience. This approach aligns with contemporary international standards that recognize that editorial responsibility does not end at the moment content is published.

1.3. MONTENEGRO'S CONTEXT

The handbook is based on an analysis of approximately 3,500 media articles and around 35,000 readers' comments published on three Montenegrin news portals (Vijesti, Analitika, and In4C) in the period from 2012 to 2024.³ This period encompasses significant social and political changes, including the first Pride Parade in Montenegro, improvements to the legislative framework for protection against discrimination, as well as phases of intensified polarization of public discourse.

The analysis identifies several key trends:

- a declining number of articles on LGBTQI+ topics over time, alongside a growing concentration of audience interest within the Politics and Society sections;
- a markedly negative tone in comments, with approximately 80% of comments identified as negative in their linguistic expression;
- a gradual transformation of negative narratives—from earlier explicit insults and calls for violence toward more contemporary, implicit patterns that employ the language of politics, ideology, "censorship," humor, and satire;
- a strong correlation between the framing of topics (headlines, visuals, and article structure) and the type of audience reactions expressed in comments.

These findings indicate that the harmful effects of media reporting are not limited to overt hate speech, but increasingly arise from seemingly legitimate discursive frameworks that normalize exclusion and delegitimization of LGBTQI+ persons.

3 Center for Monitoring and Research (CeMI) "Analysis of the Representation of the LGBTIQ+ Community in Online Media (2011–2024)" Podgorica, 2026

1.4. NORMATIVE AND LEGAL FRAMEWORK UNDERPINNING THE HANDBOOK

The guidelines set out in this handbook are based on the applicable legal and ethical framework of Montenegro, as well as on international standards accepted by the state.

At the national level, the handbook draws on:

- **the Constitution of Montenegro**, which guarantees the prohibition of discrimination and respect for human dignity;
- **the Law on the Prohibition of Discrimination**, which explicitly prohibits discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity;
- **the Law on Media and the Law on Audiovisual Media Services**, which prescribe media responsibility for content that incites hatred, violence, or discrimination;
- **the Code of Ethics of Journalists of Montenegro**, particularly the provisions related to the prohibition of discrimination, protection of privacy, and responsibility for the public word;
- **the role of the Protector of Human Rights and Freedoms of Montenegro (Ombudsman)** in procedures related to protection against discrimination and hate speech.

At the international level, the handbook is grounded in:

- **the Universal Declaration of Human Rights**;
- **the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights**, particularly in relation to freedom of expression and the prohibition of incitement to hatred;
- recommendations and standards **of the Council of Europe** on combating hate speech and protecting minority rights;
- relevant **United Nations** documents and guidelines on freedom of expression, non-discrimination, and the protection of LGBTI persons.

The handbook does not introduce new obligations for the media; rather, it translates existing legal and ethical standards into concrete, everyday journalistic and editorial practices, tailored to the specific characteristics of the Montenegrin media and social context.

1.5. PROFESSIONAL SENSITIZATION OF JOURNALISTS AND EDITORS: EXISTING PRACTICES AND IDENTIFIED GAPS

In Montenegro, there are initiatives aimed at strengthening the professional capacities of journalists and editors in the areas of ethics, human rights, and reporting on sensitive social issues. These activities are most often implemented through project-based trainings, workshops, and handbooks organized by international organizations, regulatory and self-regulatory bodies, as well as civil society organizations. Among them are, inter alia, programmes and activities implemented by the Council of Europe, the OSCE, and domestic non-governmental organizations. However, available insights and practice indicate that trainings specifically focused on reporting on LGBTQI+ topics are less frequent, time-limited, and most often implemented on an ad hoc basis, as part of broader programmes on human rights or non-discrimination. There is no systematically mapped or continuous professional development programme that consistently addresses terminology, framing, the digital effects of reporting, and the management of online discourse in the context of LGBTQI+ topics.

Findings from CEDEM's analysis of self-regulatory practices further confirm this gap. Based on responses from media outlets collected through questionnaires and requests for access to information, most newsrooms do not keep precise records of trainings related to professional and ethical standards, nor do they have data on the number of employees who have attended specialized trainings during the year. In a significant number of cases, media outlets were unable to provide data on the percentage of journalists who had participated in any form of training, while trainings on digital ethics, online content moderation, and the management of hate speech were identified as sporadic and unsystematic.

This situation indicates that professional development in the field of sensitive social issues, including LGBTQI+ topics, depends primarily on individual initiatives, civil society projects, or donor support, rather than being integrated into the regular development plans of newsrooms and media organizations.

2. MEDIA NARRATIVES AND THEIR IMPACT

The media do not merely transmit information; they actively shape meanings, priorities, and the boundaries of acceptable public discourse. The way LGBTQI+ topics are framed—through the choice of language, sources, headlines, and visual elements—has a direct impact on how audiences understand these issues and how they react in the online space.

2.1. THE MOST COMMON NARRATIVES IN REPORTING ON LGBTQI+ TOPICS

Analysis of articles published between 2012 and 2024 (hereinafter: the Analysis) shows that reporting on LGBTQI+ topics most often operates within a limited set of recurring narratives, which appear in different variations and with varying intensity:⁴

Marginalization

LGBTQI+ topics are often presented as secondary or incidental, without deeper social, legal, or institutional context. This approach is particularly evident when coverage is reduced to brief news items, without explaining the broader human rights framework or the responsibilities of relevant institutions. The result is a perception that these are not issues of general public interest, but isolated or peripheral matters.

⁴ The terms *marginalization*, *victimization*, *sensationalism*, *exoticization*, and the “controversy” narrative used in this chapter function as analytical categories drawn from media studies, representation theory, and international human rights standards. These terms are used to describe recurring patterns in the media framing of minority and vulnerable groups, rather than as value-based or normative labels applied to individual journalists or media outlets. Their use is consistent with the approaches employed by the Council of Europe, the United Nations, ILGA-Europe, and GLAAD in analyses of media representations of LGBTQI+ persons, as well as with the theoretical framework of critical media studies (e.g. concepts of representation, “othering,” and false balance in reporting on human rights).

Victimization

In a significant number of texts, LGBTQI+ persons appear exclusively as victims of violence, discrimination, or conflict. While it is important to report on such cases, their continuous presentation without broader context, and without space to show agency, resilience, and diverse experiences, contributes to an image of permanent vulnerability and passivity.

Sensationalism

The Analysis shows that articles with sensationalist headlines and leads—using dramatization, implicit value judgments, or allusions to “scandal”—are associated with a higher number of comments and more intense negative discourse. This narrative has proven to be one of the main triggers for the escalation of hate speech and harassment in comment sections.

Exoticization

In some texts, LGBTQI+ identity is treated as “different” or “unusual,” often through stereotypical visuals, emphasis on physical characteristics, or simplified descriptions of identity. Although it may not be overtly negative, this narrative maintains distance and dehumanization, portraying LGBTQI+ persons as exceptions or anomalies rather than as equal members of society.

The “Controversy” Narrative

One of the dominant contemporary patterns is the presentation of LGBTQI+ topics as inherently contentious, placing the rights and even the existence of LGBTQI+ persons within the framework of political or ideological debate. This narrative often produces false balance, in which discriminatory views and the denial of human rights are presented as a legitimate “other opinion.”

2.2. TONE, FRAMING, AND PATTERNS OF SENSATIONALISM

The tone and framing of media content are shaped through a series of editorial decisions that often remain invisible, yet have powerful consequences.

Sensationalism does not manifest exclusively through openly offensive language, but increasingly through:

- value-laden headlines that suggest threat, imposition, or conflict;
- a focus on conflict rather than on facts and context;
- the selective choice of sources that amplify polarization.

Such patterns are problematic because they influence how audiences interpret the causes and consequences of social phenomena, whom they assign responsibility to, and which viewpoints they perceive as legitimate.

2.3. THE IMPACT OF MEDIA NARRATIVES ON PUBLIC PERCEPTION, PREJUDICE, AND SAFETY

The analysis of readers' comments shows that public discourse beneath articles on LGBTQI+ topics is largely negative—approximately 80% of comments display a negative linguistic tone. However, it is important to note that this negativity has transformed over time. In earlier periods, explicit forms of insults, mockery, and calls for violence predominated. In later years, there has been a noticeable decline in the use of such overtly offensive expressions, accompanied by a rise in implicitly negative narratives that employ the language of politics, ideology, censorship, and humor. This type of narrative is more socially acceptable, yet at the same time harder to recognize, which increases the risk of its normalization.

These patterns have real consequences for the safety and well-being of LGBTQI+ persons, as they contribute to the normalization of exclusion and delegitimization of LGBTQI+ persons, a reduced sense of safety in the public space and the withdrawal from public debate and self-censorship.

Forms of narrative minimization and dismissiveness are particularly widespread in public discourse, through which LGBTQI+ topics are trivialized, relativized, or presented as exaggerated, imposed, or “unimportant” in relation to “real problems.” Such an approach does not necessarily produce overt hatred, but it systematically undermines the legitimacy of LGBTQI+ persons' experiences and demands, maintaining a hierarchy in which their rights and safety are framed as secondary or conditional.

3. BASIC CONCEPTS AND TERMINOLOGY

Consistent, precise, and contextually responsible use of terminology is a cornerstone of professional reporting on LGBTQI+ topics. Analysis of media content shows that a large share of reporting problems does not stem from openly offensive language, but from imprecise, outdated, or implicitly value-laden terms that are routinely used in journalistic writing. Such terminology often becomes the starting point for negative narratives and polarization in comment sections.

This chapter therefore covers the terms and expressions most commonly used by journalists in headlines, leads, and articles, providing clear explanations of their meaning, recommended usage, and typical mistakes.

3.1. KEY CONCEPTS IN MEDIA REPORTING ON LGBTIQ PERSONS

Sexual Orientation

Sexual orientation refers to a person's emotional, romantic, and/or sexual attraction to other people. It may include, among others, heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual orientation. Sexual orientation is not a choice, an ideology, or a temporary phase, nor is it reducible to behavior; it represents an integral part of a person's identity.

Gender Identity

Gender identity refers to a person's internal and personal sense of their own gender. It may, but does not have to, correspond to the sex assigned at birth. Gender identity is a matter of self-determination and does not depend on medical interventions, hormone therapy, or legal recognition.

NOTE: Gender identity and sexual orientation are distinct and independent aspects of a person's identity. People of different gender identities may have different sexual orientations, including heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, pansexual, or other orientations. For example, a transgender or non-binary person may be heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, or asexual, just like a cis-gender person.

In media reporting, it is important to avoid assumptions about sexual orientation based on gender identity or gender expression, as such assumptions contribute to the spread of stereotypes and misinformation. Respecting this distinction is a foundation of accurate, professional, and non-discriminatory reporting on LGBTQI+ persons.

Gender Expression

Gender expression refers to the way a person expresses their gender through appearance, behavior, speech, clothing, or other forms of expression. Gender expression does not have to conform to socially imposed expectations of "masculinity" or "femininity" and does not determine either a person's gender identity or sexual orientation.

Cisgender Person (Cisgenderness)

A cisgender person is a person whose gender identity corresponds to the sex assigned at birth. The use of this term is important in order to avoid implicitly presenting being cis(gender) as "neutral" or "normal," and other gender identities as deviations.

Transgender Person

A transgender person is a person whose gender identity does not correspond to the sex assigned at birth. Being trans(gender) refers exclusively to gender identity and does not imply a particular appearance, sexual orientation, nor does it necessarily involve medical or legal transition processes.

Non-binary Persons / Non-binary Identities

Non-binary persons are individuals whose gender identity does not fit exclusively within the binary categories of “male” or “female.” Non-binary identities encompass diverse forms of self-identification and do not constitute a single or homogeneous category.

Intersex Persons / Intersex Variations

Intersex persons are individuals born with variations in sex characteristics—such as chromosomes, hormones, internal or external sex organs—that do not fit typical medical definitions of “male” or “female” bodies. Intersex variations are neither a gender identity nor a sexual orientation.

Queer

Queer is a broad and inclusive term that some people use to describe their gender identity and/or sexual orientation outside heteronormative and binary categories. The term is used exclusively as a form of self-identification, when chosen by individuals or communities themselves, and should not be imposed as a universal label for everyone, as it used to be a slur in English speaking countries.

NOTE: In the public space in Montenegro, it is noticeable that concepts related to gender identity and sexual orientation are often framed as part of “Western ideologies,” as an “import” from foreign social and political contexts, or as something that “does not belong to our society.” Such framing ignores the fact that LGBTQI+ persons have always been part of local communities, but that their lives, identities, and experiences have historically been pushed into the private or invisible sphere.

At the same time, public debate frequently adopts terms from foreign media and social networks without a clear understanding of their meaning, context, and limitations. These expressions are then used in a simplified, ironic, or derogatory manner, as a substitute for genuine discussion about the rights, experiences, and social position of LGBTQI+ persons.

One example is the term “blue-haired liberal,” which originates from Anglophone internet discourse and is used as a stereotypical, often derogatory label for liberal or progressive individuals, particularly those advocating for gender and sexual equality. In its original context, this term does not describe an actual gender

identity or sexual orientation, but serves as a caricature intended to discredit viewpoints, undermine the legitimacy of social demands, and ridicule any deviation from traditional norms. Its use in the local context is often especially problematic, as it is employed without understanding its origin and is transferred as a general insult, thereby encouraging superficial and inaccurate interpretations of LGBTQI+ topics.

In media reporting, it is important to recognize these patterns and avoid the uncritical adoption of terms and narratives from foreign contexts, particularly when they serve to demean or relativize identities and rights. Precise, contextualized, and linguistically responsible use of terminology is a foundation of professional reporting and contributes to understanding rather than to the deepening of divisions.

3.2. TERMINOLOGY MOST COMMONLY USED BY JOURNALISTS – RECOMMENDATIONS AND EXPLANATIONS

In media writing, the following expressions are particularly common and require additional clarification or correction:

- **“LGBT community”** – This may be acceptable as a shorthand term, but it should not be used as a monolithic concept that implies uniform views, interests, or experiences.
- **“Gender ideology”** – A term that has no grounding in professional or human rights discourse and is most often used within a political or ideological framework. Its use in media reporting contributes to the delegitimization of identities and rights.
- **“Sex change”** – The expression “sex change” is considered inaccurate and overly simplistic, as it suggests a one-time or exclusively medical procedure and implies that a person’s “sex” can be entirely changed. In contemporary and professional reporting, the use of this term is discouraged. Depending on the context, more precise alternatives include “gender transition,” “legal recognition of gender identity,” or “change of sex marker in personal documents,” with a clear indication of whether the process is legal, administrative, or medical. Gender transition is an individual process that may, but does not have to, involve medical interventions and cannot be reduced to a single event or procedure. In media reporting, it is important to use terminology that respects a person’s right to self-determination, avoids sensationalism, and clearly distinguishes gender identity from legal and administrative procedures.
- **“Admitted that he/she is gay”** – This formulation implies guilt or conceal-

ment. Neutral alternatives include “said that he/she is gay” or “speaks publicly about their sexual orientation.”

- **“Normal/natural” in contrast to LGBTQI+ identities** – Such formulations are implicitly exclusionary and should be avoided.

3.3. REPORTING ON NON-BINARY PERSONS

Reporting on non-binary persons requires particular care, as these identities are less visible and are often misrepresented in the media.

- **Recommended practices include:**
 - using the name and pronouns that the person themselves specifies;
 - not insisting on “explaining” the identity through binary categories;
 - avoiding sensationalist questions such as “what are you really?”;
 - mentioning a person’s identity only when it is relevant to the topic.

Non-binary persons should not be portrayed as a “new trend,” a form of “confusion,” or an “experiment,” as such framing contributes to delegitimization and ridicule.

3.4. REPORTING ON INTERSEX PERSONS

Intersex persons are often either completely invisible in the media or misrepresented through medicalizing and pathologizing discourse.

Guidelines for responsible reporting include:

- avoiding sensationalist descriptions of bodies and medical details;
- focusing on human rights, bodily integrity, and informed consent;
- clearly distinguishing intersex variations from gender identity and sexual orientation;
- using expert and verified sources when addressing medical contexts.

3.5. NAMES, PRONOUNS, AND “DEADNAMING”

Respecting the name and pronouns a person uses is a basic professional standard. Using a transgender or non-binary person's former name (“deadnaming”) without their consent is considered unethical and potentially dangerous, as it can lead to humiliation, retraumatization, and risks to personal safety.

Legal name change is not a prerequisite for respecting a person's identity in media reporting. When a journalist is unsure which pronouns to use, the professional approach is to ask the interviewee directly or to use neutral formulations until the information is confirmed.

3.6. LANGUAGE IS NOT NEUTRAL (AND IT'S NOT PERSONAL)

One of the key challenges in media reporting on LGBTQI+ topics in the Montenegrin language relates to the structural impossibility of the language being fully gender-neutral. Montenegrin, like other standard languages of the South Slavic group, is based on grammatical gender deeply embedded in its morphology, syntax, and lexical system. Nouns, pronouns, adjectives, and verb forms largely require gender marking, which means that neutral expression is often not possible in practice without disrupting grammatical structure or textual clarity.

In this sense, it is important to emphasize that gender neutrality in language **cannot be absolute**; in practice, it is reduced to strategies for mitigating gender exclusion rather than eliminating it entirely. Such strategies have already been tested experimentally in the region. In Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia, expert and public debates have been conducted on gender-sensitive language, particularly in institutional and media contexts. Recommendations that have proven functional include the use of gender-neutral nouns where possible (e.g. person, citizens, employees in institutional documents), as well as careful sentence restructuring to avoid unnecessary gender marking. At the same time, linguistic practice in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina has also demonstrated clear limitations to such approaches. Attempts to introduce new graphic solutions (such as symbols like “_”, “/”, or “*”) have remained confined to activist and informal spaces and have not been accepted as part of the standard language, nor recommended in official orthographies or language manuals. The expert communities in these countries have largely agreed that such forms reduce readability and are not suitable for media language, which must remain clear, comprehensible, and normatively grounded.

An additional issue in contemporary public discourse is the uncritical adoption of English terms related to gender identity and sexual orientation, for which the Montenegrin language often lacks established or normatively confirmed equivalents. Terms such as *non-binary*, *genderqueer*, *deadnaming*, or *misgendering* are increasingly appearing in the media, even though they are not part of official Montenegrin dictionaries nor terminologically standardized. Their use without additional explanation can lead to misunderstanding, misinterpretation, or the sensationalization of the topic.

In professional media reporting, a cautious and explanatory use of foreign terms is therefore recommended, with a clear explanation of their meaning in Montenegrin or their descriptive translation, particularly when addressing the general public. This approach helps avoid the creation of linguistic barriers and contributes to inclusivity, while also preserving linguistic norms and textual clarity.

Ultimately, the goal is not the “neutralization of language at any cost,” but the responsible and conscious use of existing linguistic resources, with respect for the identities of the persons being reported on and for the norms of the Montenegrin language as the standard language of public communication.

4. ETHICAL AND PROFESSIONAL REPORTING

Ethical and professional reporting on LGBTQI+ topics does not imply special or “lenient” treatment, but rather the consistent application of fundamental journalistic principles: relevance, accuracy, contextualization, respect for human dignity, and responsibility for the consequences of publicly disseminated information. Most real-world consequences arise from **routine editorial decisions** that remain unquestioned—particularly regarding the relevance of identity, the selection of sources, headlines, and visual framing.

4.1. RELEVANCE OF LGBTQI+ IDENTITY IN MEDIA STORIES

The key ethical question is: is sexual orientation or gender identity relevant to the topic being reported on?

LGBTQI+ identity is relevant when it is directly connected to:

- the realization or violation of human rights;
- discrimination, violence, or hate crimes;
- public policies, legislation, and institutional practices;
- issues of visibility, equality, and safety in the public space.

In all other situations, emphasizing identity often serves sensationalism, the “coloring” of a story, or the provocation of emotional reactions from the audience, without genuine informational value. The analysis shows that such articles more frequently generate polarization and negative comments, particularly when placed in the Politics and Society section and framed as a “controversy.”

Professional standards require that identity be mentioned only when it contributes to understanding the topic, and not as an attribute used to increase clickability or conflict.

4.2. PROTECTION OF PRIVACY, AVOIDING “OUTING,” AND RISK ASSESSMENT

Protecting privacy is of particular importance when reporting on LGBTQI+ persons, as “outing”—the public disclosure of someone’s sexual orientation or gender identity—can have serious consequences for personal safety, family relationships, employment, and mental health.

Outing without explicit consent is considered a serious ethical breach, even when the information is:

- available on social media;
- “publicly known”;
- or previously published by other media outlets.

Journalists and editors have a responsibility, prior to publication, to assess:

- whether there is a clear public interest;
- whether the interviewee has given informed consent;
- what the potential risks after publication may be, especially in the digital environment and in smaller communities (which is particularly relevant in Montenegro).

In situations involving increased risk, it is ethically justified to omit full names, exclude visual materials, or remove details that could enable identification. Such measures do not constitute censorship, but rather reflect professional responsibility.

4.3. SOURCES OF INFORMATION AND RESPONSIBLE REPRESENTATION OF INTERVIEWEES

Responsible reporting requires careful selection of sources and a clear understanding of their role within the article. Good practice involves combining:

- community voices, which provide insight into lived experiences;
- expert sources (law, sociology, psychology, medicine), which explain the broader context;
- institutional sources, when reporting on legislation, public policies, and state responsibility.

Balance does not mean giving equal space to all viewpoints. It is particularly important to avoid so-called false balance, in which discriminatory or disinformative positions are presented as a legitimate “other side” without critical context or fact-checking. As the analysis of comments shows, such an approach often leads to the legitimization of exclusionary discourse.

Interviewees should be presented with respect, without reducing their identity to a sensation or a “case study.” Informed consent implies that the person understands how their statements will be used and in what context.

4.4. LANGUAGE, TONE, AND HEADLINES

The language and tone of an article directly shape audience perception and set the boundaries of acceptable discourse in comment sections.

Problematic formulations include those that:

- medicalize or pathologize identity;
- criminalize or implicitly associate LGBTQI+ persons with threat;
- moralize or sensationalize (“shock,” “scandal,” “controversy”).

Precise, informative, and well-contextualized headlines reduce the risk of escalating negative comments, while clickbait and value-laden language often act as triggers for hate speech and polarization.

4.5. PHOTOGRAPHS, VIDEO, AND MULTIMEDIA

Visual content has a strong influence on how audiences interpret a topic. Common mistakes in reporting on LGBTQI+ issues include:

- the use of stereotypical or sexualized imagery;
- visuals that have no direct connection to the article’s content but amplify sensationalism;
- publishing photographs that enable the identification of interviewees without their consent.

Responsible practice involves selecting neutral, contextually relevant visuals, as well as exercising additional caution with video content and archival footage. When there is a conflict between visual appeal and the protection of privacy,

safeguarding the dignity and safety of the individuals concerned must take precedence.

4.6. ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI), CONTENT AUTOMATION, AND THE RISK OF REPRODUCING HOMOPHOBIA

The development and increasingly widespread use of artificial intelligence–based tools in journalism (automated news writing, headline generation, text summarization, comment moderation, audience analytics) raise new ethical questions in reporting on LGBTQI+ topics. While AI tools can improve newsroom efficiency, they are not value-neutral and can reproduce, amplify, or normalize existing prejudices in society and the media environment.

AI systems learn from large volumes of existing content. If these data are marked by stereotypes, implicit negativity, moralizing or exclusionary narratives—such as those identified by the analysis in comments and parts of media discourse—there is a high risk that AI will:

- generalize LGBTQI+ topics as “controversial” or “problematic”;
- prioritize conflict-framed headlines because they statistically generate higher engagement;
- reproduce the language of politics, ideology, or humor that conceals discrimination;
- be less effective at recognizing implicit hate speech than explicit insults.

International research and guidelines warn that AI can be “trained” to be systematically discriminatory—through the data on which it is trained and the optimization criteria used (e.g. clicks, dwell time, audience reactions). In the context of LGBTQI+ topics, this means that algorithms may inadvertently favor content that normalizes exclusion, even when it does not formally violate hate speech rules. UNESCO, in its guidelines on the ethics of artificial intelligence, emphasizes that algorithmic systems can amplify existing social inequalities and discrimination if they are not developed and used with clear mechanisms of human oversight, transparency, and accountability. Similar warnings are issued in United Nations documents related to freedom of expression and digital rights, which stress that automation does not absolve media outlets of responsibility for the content they publish or distribute.

For newsrooms, this implies the following practical obligations:

- AI tools must not make final editorial decisions on headlines, tone, or comment moderation without human review, especially on sensitive topics;
- automated moderation systems should be regularly evaluated to assess whether they fail to detect implicit hate speech or, conversely, censor legitimate community voices;
- data used for training or fine-tuning AI tools must be as diverse and free from systemic bias as possible;
- journalists and editors should be aware that a “neutral” algorithmic output can have very concrete social consequences, particularly in the context of polarized issues such as LGBTQI+ rights.

In this sense, the responsible use of artificial intelligence in journalism is not a technical issue, but an ethical and editorial one. AI can be a useful tool, but it cannot replace professional judgment, contextual understanding, or responsibility for the impact that media content has on public discourse and the safety of marginalized groups.

5. AVOIDING STEREOTYPES, STIGMATISATION AND SENSATIONALISM

Stereotypes, stigmatization, and sensationalism represent some of the most persistent and harmful patterns in reporting on LGBTQI+ topics. They do not appear solely through openly offensive language, but increasingly manifest through subtle narrative strategies—such as framing choices, metaphors, humor, and political language—that may not formally violate professional standards, yet over time normalize exclusion and delegitimization.

Findings from the analysis of media content and readers' comments in Montenegro indicate that negative discourse has transformed over the years: whereas direct forms of insults, mockery, and calls for violence once predominated, contemporary patterns more often employ the language of politics, ideology, "censorship," satire, and purported concern for social values. Precisely for this reason, recognizing and deconstructing these patterns has become a key task of contemporary journalism.

5.1. THE MOST COMMON STEREOTYPES AND HARMFUL PATTERNS MEDIA

There are several stereotypical patterns that most frequently recur in the media landscape:

"LGBTQI+ ideology as a threat"

This pattern appears through narratives about endangering the family, children, tradition, religion, or national identity. It often relies on an alarmist tone, without empirical evidence or contextualization, thereby creating moral panic and legitimizing exclusionary discourse.

"Ideology" instead of people

LGBTQI+ persons are not portrayed as concrete individuals with rights and lived experiences, but as an abstract "ideology" or political project. This framing removes the human dimension and makes it easier to justify discrimination as a "political stance."

Sensationalism and scandalization

The use of dramatized headlines, sexualized descriptions, and implicit value judgments turns human rights issues into entertainment or conflict-driven content. Such articles are strongly associated with a higher number of negative and polarizing comments.

Mockery and humor

Humor and satire are increasingly used as socially acceptable forms of implicit negativity. Although they do not formally contain overt hate speech, such content often receives high levels of audience approval and contributes to the normalization of disparagement.

Reduction to victimhood or incident

LGBTQI+ persons are depicted exclusively through violence, conflict, and problems, without broader social context and without presenting diverse experiences and contributions.

5.2. IDENTIFYING PROBLEMATIC FRAMES AND IMPLICIT MESSAGES

Problematic frames are rarely explicit. They are most often identified through a combination of language, article structure, and editorial choices.

Headlines and leads

Value-laden expressions, suggestive questions, and formulations that imply conflict or threat steer audiences toward negative interpretations before the content is even read.

Selection of sources

Prioritizing voices that spread fear, misinformation, or moral condemnation, without critical context, creates the appearance that such views are legitimate.

Article structure

When accusations or negative frames are presented at the outset and facts and context only later, the damage is already done—particularly in the online environ-

ment, where content is often consumed fragmentarily.

Visual elements

Photographs and illustrations can convey implicit messages that reinforce stereotypes, even when the accompanying text is relatively neutral.

5.3. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR NEUTRAL, CONTEXTUALIZED, AND HUMAN RIGHTS-BASED REPORTING

Instead of stereotypical and sensationalist frames, a reporting approach grounded in human rights, facts, and context is recommended.

This entails:

- focusing on rights, the legal framework, and institutional responsibility, rather than on “controversy”;
- clearly distinguishing facts from opinions and political interpretations;
- including relevant expert sources and community perspectives, while respecting their safety;
- using precise, neutral language without moralization or generalizations.

Such an approach does not constitute advocacy, but rather the consistent application of professional journalistic standards and the state’s international obligations in the field of non-discrimination.

5.4. CHECKLIST FOR IDENTIFYING HIGH-RISK CONTENT

Before publishing an article or broadcast, journalists and editors may use the following quick checklist:

- Is LGBTQI+ identity relevant to the topic, or is it being used to amplify conflict?
- Do the headline or lead suggest threat, scandal, or moral judgment?
- Does the text rely on stereotypes or generalizations about an entire group?
- Are people’s rights or existence framed as an “ideological debate”?
- Are sources contextualized, without false balance?
- Is the language neutral and precise, without medicalization or criminalization?

- Does the visual content amplify sensationalism or stereotypes?

Has the risk of negative reactions and hate speech in comments been assessed?

If the answer to several of these questions is negative or unclear, the content requires additional editorial review prior to publication.

5.5. INTERSECTIONAL APPROACH: MULTIPLE MARGINALIZATION AND MEDIA NARRATIVES IN MONTENEGRO

An intersectional approach starts from a simple but often overlooked fact: people do not live a single identity. Experiences of discrimination, exclusion, or violence rarely stem from one basis alone; rather, they arise from the overlap of multiple personal and social characteristics—such as sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, ethnic background, disability, socioeconomic status, age, or place of residence.

In media reporting, the absence of an intersectional perspective often leads to oversimplification of reality and the invisibility of those who are multiply marginalized.

Multiple Marginalization in the Montenegrin Context

In Montenegro, intersectionality is particularly important due to the specific social context and the overlap of different forms of inequality. In practice, this most often relates to the following situations:

- LGBTQI+ persons from Roma and Egyptian communities are frequently exposed to simultaneous ethnic discrimination, poverty, and stigmatization based on sexual orientation or gender identity.
- LGBTQI+ persons with disabilities are almost invisible in the media space. When they do appear, the focus is often placed on disability as a “personal limitation,” while the additional exposure to discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity is overlooked.
- LGBTQI+ women, particularly in the context of violence, face a combination of gender-based discrimination and stigmatization related to sexual orientation or gender identity.
- Young LGBTQI+ people, especially within the education system, encounter specific forms of exclusion that intersect with age-based dependency, lack

of institutional protection, and pressure from family and their immediate environment.

- Socioeconomic status further affects the visibility and safety of LGBTQI+ persons. Poverty, unemployment, and/or living in smaller communities significantly increase vulnerability and insecurity.

Recommendations for Intersectionally Responsible Reporting

An intersectional approach does not require longer or “more complex” articles, but rather more conscious editorial decisions. Good practice includes:

- asking the question: who else may be affected by this issue, and in what ways?
- incorporating a broader social and institutional context (e.g. education, employment, social protection);
- avoiding stereotypes that are intensified when identities overlap (e.g. exoticization, victimization, moralization);
- consulting organizations and experts who work with different marginalized groups, not only with one segment of a community;
- respecting the dignity of interviewees, without reducing their experience to an “extreme case.”

An intersectional approach helps media outlets report more accurately, responsibly, and humanely on people’s real lives. Rather than fragmenting identities, it enables an understanding of how different forms of inequality intersect—and why such understanding is essential for professional journalism.

6. ONLINE COMMENTS, SOCIAL MEDIA, AND HATE SPEECH

6.1. THE ROLE OF COMMENTS AND SOCIAL MEDIA IN SHAPING PUBLIC DISCOURSE

The analysis of approximately 35,000 comments shows that public discussion beneath articles on LGBTQI+ topics is highly negative, with around 80% of comments displaying a negative linguistic tone. Although the share of openly violent and abusive comments has decreased, there has been a noticeable increase in implicitly negative narratives that employ the language of politics, ideology, censorship, humor, and satire.

It is particularly significant that these implicit forms of negativity often receive greater audience support through likes, indicating their higher level of social acceptability and a stronger potential for the normalization of exclusionary attitudes.

Such dynamics lead to shifts in public perception of LGBTQI+ persons, an increase in negative attitudes toward them, a reduced sense of safety and willingness to participate in public life, and the normalization of discrimination and symbolic violence.

6.2. THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN LEGITIMATE CRITICISM, INSULT, AND HATE SPEECH

One of the most common arguments related to comments is the invocation of freedom of expression. However, professional and legal frameworks clearly distinguish between legitimate criticism, insult, and hate speech.

Legitimate criticism

Is directed at ideas, policies, or actions and does not question the dignity or rights of a particular group. Such comments are part of democratic debate and should not be removed.

Insult

Represents rude or inappropriate expression, but is not necessarily based on a protected personal characteristic. Editorial policy may determine whether such content is tolerated or removed, in accordance with commenting rules.

Hate speech

Includes expressions that demean, dehumanize, or incite discrimination or violence against individuals or groups on the basis of protected characteristics, including sexual orientation and gender identity.

This distinction is consistent with:

- the Constitution of Montenegro (prohibition of discrimination),
- the Law on the Prohibition of Discrimination,
- the Law on Media,
- the Code of Ethics of Journalists of Montenegro,
- standards of the Council of Europe and the United Nations, which emphasize that freedom of expression does not include the right to hate speech.

6.3. GUIDELINES FOR RESPONSIBLE MODERATION OF COMMENTS AND USER-GENERATED CONTENT

Based on the analysis and international guidelines, responsible moderation should be **clear, consistent, and transparent**.

Minimum standards include:

- clearly published commenting rules (defining what is prohibited: hate speech, threats, calls for violence, so-called doxing);
- consistent enforcement of rules, without selectivity;
- a combination of technical filters and human moderation;
- the possibility for users to report problematic content;
- record-keeping of removed content for potential legal proceedings.

It is particularly important to recognize implicit hate speech—comments that do not formally use insults, but through humor, irony, or political language delegitimize the existence and rights of LGBTQI+ persons.

6.4. RESPONDING TO THE ESCALATION OF NEGATIVE OR VIOLENT SPEECH

When escalation occurs, newsrooms should have predefined procedures in place.

Documentation

Before removal, violent or threatening comments should be documented (screen-shots, time, link), as they may serve as a basis for further action.

Reporting to platforms

Social media platforms and commenting services have mechanisms for reporting hate speech and violence. Newsrooms should use these systematically, rather than sporadically.

Contacting competent authorities

In cases involving threats, calls for violence, or organized harassment, it is justified to contact the police or the prosecutor's office, in accordance with applicable legislation.

Cooperation with LGBTQI+ organizations

Cooperation with organizations working on LGBTQI+ rights enables better risk assessment, support for victims, and appropriate responses in crisis situations.

The analysis clearly shows that comments are not a neutral reflection of society, but a space actively shaped by editorial decisions: headlines, framing, moderation rules, and newsroom responses.

For this reason, comment management is an integral part of media professional responsibility and is directly linked to the quality of reporting on LGBTQI+ topics.

6.5. SOCIAL MEDIA, VIRALITY, AND SECONDARY HARM

In the contemporary media environment, the life of a journalistic piece does not end with its publication on a news portal, in print, or on air. Content almost always continues on social media—through sharing, paraphrasing, screenshots, comments, and algorithmic distribution. It is precisely in this process that what can be described as secondary harm occurs: the effects of reporting are multiplied and intensified outside the original context.

Research and international experience show that problematic media narratives are quickly transferred to social networks, where they lose context and nuance, are reduced to a headline, a single sentence, or a visual, acquire an emotional and polarizing frame, and spread faster than they can be corrected.

When it comes to topics closely related to the LGBTQI+ community, this process has particularly serious consequences. Analysis of comments shows that implicitly negative narratives—such as those using the language of “ideology,” “imposition,” “censorship,” or purported concern—often become more explicit, aggressive, and personalized on social media. What may appear “neutral” or “balanced” in a media article frequently turns, in online distribution, into a trigger for mass harassment, hate speech, and targeted attacks on individuals or groups.

Headlines, visuals, and short descriptions (captions) play a decisive role in how content circulates on social networks. Platform algorithms favor content that provokes strong emotional reactions—anger, fear, ridicule—which further increases the visibility of conflict-driven and polarizing material.

In practice, this means that:

- sensationalist or value-laden headlines become viral triggers;
- articles are shared without being read, based solely on a headline or image;
- the original intent or context of a journalistic piece becomes irrelevant compared to the reactions it generates.

For LGBTQI+ persons, this often means that harm does not remain at the level of abstract public debate, but escalates into direct hate messages, threats, and organized harassment.

Media outlets and journalists are not passive observers of this process. When media organizations share content on social networks, choose how it is described,

or decide whether and how to respond to escalation in comments, they actively participate in shaping digital discourse.

Responsible practice includes:

- careful selection of headlines and descriptions when publishing content on social media, without additional dramatization beyond the original text;
- monitoring reactions and responding in a timely manner to the escalation of hate speech or disinformation;
- clearly distinguishing informational content from personal or editorial commentary on official media accounts;
- avoiding the sharing of content that, although formally lawful, may produce disproportionate harm to the safety and dignity of individuals.

6.6. DISINFORMATION AND THE “NORMALIZATION” OF HARM

A particular risk lies in the spread of disinformation and half-truths that build on pre-existing prejudices. When inaccurate or imprecise media claims are multiplied on social networks, correcting them becomes extremely difficult, and their effects long-lasting.

Experiences from other countries show that continuous exposure to negative narratives about LGBTQI+ persons—even when they are not overtly violent—contributes to the normalization of exclusion, a reduction of empathy in public discourse, and an increase in hostile attitudes and offline violence.

Guidelines for Newsrooms

In the context of reporting on LGBTQI+ topics, newsrooms should:

- treat social media publishing as an integral part of the editorial process, rather than as a technical add-on;
- ensure adequate training for staff responsible for social media content;
- assess in advance the potential effects of virality and secondary harm;
- establish clear internal rules for managing crisis situations in the online space;
- ensure that responses on social media are aligned with professional standards, rather than driven by a logic of “engagement at any cost.”

Responsible reporting in the digital age does not end with the publication of an article. It requires awareness that every word, headline, and image can become part of a broader, uncontrolled flow of information—with real consequences for people's lives.

6.7. RULES FOR PUBLISHING AND MANAGING CONTENT ON SOCIAL MEDIA

(for newsrooms and teams managing social media accounts)

In the digital environment, social media function as a machine that multiplies the effects of media reporting. The way content is presented, described, and moderated on platforms can significantly amplify or mitigate harm, particularly when it comes to topics related to the LGBTQI+ community. The following rules aim to help newsrooms manage these risks in a professional and consistent manner.

1. Headlines on social media

Captions on social media must be aligned with the tone and substance of the original article. Adding conflict, irony, or provocation for the sake of increasing engagement poses an elevated risk of hate speech and disinformation.

2. No “poll-style” or binary framing of human rights

Formulations such as “Are you for or against...?” or “What do you think about...?” when referring to fundamental human rights contribute to the relativization of rights and fuel polarization. Human rights are not a matter of voting or debate.

3. Avoid clickbait and emotionally manipulative descriptions

Social media platforms reward emotional reactions, but newsrooms should not adapt their language to algorithms at the expense of accuracy and ethics. The use of fear, mockery, or moral panic is particularly risky.

4. Visuals must meet the same ethical standards as text

Photographs, illustrations, and videos must not sexualize, exoticize, or stereotype LGBTQI+ persons. A visual that is “engaging” but stigmatizing can cause greater harm than a problematic text.

Particular caution is required when using visuals related to transgender persons. It is unethical to focus on bodies, medical procedures, or presumed stages of gender transition (e.g. labeling individuals as “before” or “after surgery”), espe-

cially when such information is not relevant to the topic or has not been publicly shared by the person themselves. Gender identity must not be reduced to physical appearance, medical status, or sensationalist comparison.

It is also essential to clearly distinguish gender identity from performative and artistic expressions such as **drag queens and drag kings**. Drag is a form of stage expression and artistic performance, not a gender identity in itself. Using drag visuals as a universal illustration for LGBTQI+ topics—particularly for topics concerning transgender persons—constitutes oversimplification and can lead to misinterpretation and additional stigmatization.

Visuals should align with the context of the story, respect the dignity of the people depicted, and avoid conveying implicit messages that reinforce stereotypes, sensationalism, or misunderstandings of the identities being reported on.

5. Treat Social Media Posts as Editorial Content

Content published on social media is not a technical add-on, but an integral part of the editorial product. The same rules of verification, responsibility, and professional standards apply as they do to journalistic texts.

6. Monitoring Reactions and Early Intervention

Newsrooms should actively monitor comments and reactions, especially in the first hours after publication. Early identification of escalation enables faster and more effective responses.

7. Responding to Escalation

When there is a sudden increase in hate speech or violent comments, a combination of measures is recommended:

- a pinned comment with factual information and discussion rules;
- removal or hiding of hate speech;
- temporary or permanent closure of comments in extreme cases;
- documentation of content for potential reporting or internal analysis;
- reporting to competent authorities.

8. Clear Distinction Between Information and Editorial Commentary

Official media accounts (which should always be clearly identified as such) should avoid ironic, sarcastic, or personal commentary on sensitive topics. Such a style is often interpreted as institutional support for problematic viewpoints.

9. Managing Disinformation

If inaccurate claims or manipulations appear in comments or shares, the newsroom should, where possible, respond with brief and clear corrections or by referring to verified sources, rather than ignoring the issue or engaging in polemics.

10. Record-Keeping and Learning from Practice

Newsrooms should maintain internal records of posts that have triggered escalation of negative discourse, in order to identify patterns and prevent them in the future. Managing social media is a learning process, not a one-time decision.

International standards of the United Nations and the Council of Europe emphasize that the harm caused by hate speech and discriminatory narratives **is multiplied through digital distribution**, even when the original content does not formally violate the law. Media responsibility in this context is not a matter of censorship, but of risk assessment and **risk management**, given the real consequences such content can have for people's safety, dignity, and equality.

7. GOOD AND BAD PRACTICES IN REPORTING

Practical examples are among the most effective tools for improving professional standards, as they clearly demonstrate how specific editorial and journalistic decisions affect the quality of reporting and audience reactions.

7.1. EXAMPLES OF PROBLEMATIC REPORTING: ANALYSIS OF ERRORS

Problematic reporting on LGBTQI+ topics most often does not stem from an explicit intent to discriminate, but from a combination of sensationalist framing, imprecise terminology, and lack of context. The analysis shows that the same mistakes recur across different formats and media outlets, with their effects being particularly pronounced in the digital environment.

The most commonly identified errors include:

Headlines and leads

Headlines that use terms such as “controversy,” “scandal,” or “threat,” or that suggest conflict and polarization, often predefine a negative interpretative frame for the content. Leads that repeat or further amplify these frames have a strong impact on audience perception, especially in the online environment where articles are frequently shared and commented on without being read in full.

Article structure

When contentious, negative, or conflict-driven viewpoints are presented at the very beginning of an article, while context, facts, and relevant information are introduced only later, readers tend to retain the initial impression. The analysis shows that such a structure significantly contributes to the escalation of negative and aggressive comments.

Selection of sources

The dominance of political or ideological positions, without the inclusion of expert sources and a human rights framework, creates false balance and contributes to the legitimization of discriminatory narratives. The absence of voices from

experts, human rights organizations, or directly affected individuals further impoverishes understanding of the topic.

Language and terminology

The use of inaccurate, outdated, or value-laden terms (e.g. “ideology,” “admission,” “normal”) not only produces a stigmatizing effect, but also opens space for hate speech and derogatory commentary.

Visual content

Stereotypical, sexualized, or contextually unrelated visuals further amplify sensationalism and dehumanization. In some cases, visuals—rather than the text itself—become the primary trigger for negative audience reactions.

7.2. EXAMPLES OF HIGH-QUALITY AND ETHICAL REPORTING

High-quality and ethical reporting on LGBTQI+ topics is characterized by the consistent application of professional standards and a clear focus on the public interest. Analysis of positive examples highlights several shared elements:

- identity is mentioned only when it is relevant to the topic being reported on;
- terminology is precise, up to date, and aligned with international and national standards;
- interviewees are presented with respect, with informed consent and protection of privacy;
- topics are clearly contextualized within a human rights framework, applicable laws, and institutional responsibility;
- headlines and visuals serve an informative rather than a provocative function.

Positive examples from Montenegro, the region, and international media demonstrate that this approach does not reduce audience interest; on the contrary, it contributes to better understanding of the issue, reduced polarization, and higher-quality public debate.

7.3. HOW TO IMPROVE EXISTING MEDIA PRACTICES

Based on the identified problems and positive examples, the following measures are recommended to improve newsroom practices:

- internal training for journalists and editors, focusing on terminology, framing, and online comments;
- mentoring work on specific articles (analysis before and after publication);
- clear comment moderation policies linked to editorial decisions on headlines and visuals;
- cooperation with relevant organizations and experts, for consultation and continuous capacity-building.

Such a systematic approach enables long-term improvements in reporting quality and a reduction of negative effects in public discourse.

8. SPECIFIC SITUATIONS IN REPORTING ON LGBTQI+ TOPICS

Certain reporting situations involving LGBTQI+ topics carry an increased risk of sensationalism, stigmatization, and secondary victimization.

8.1. PRIDE EVENTS, PROTESTS, AND PUBLIC GATHERINGS

Pride marches and other public events are often reduced in media coverage to visual spectacle, isolated incidents, or reactions from opponents, while the political and human rights context is sidelined.

Recommended practices include:

- focusing on the reasons for organizing the event (equality, safety, rights), rather than solely on the act of gathering;
- clearly distinguishing facts (number of participants, official demands, organizers) from reactions and commentary;
- avoiding sensationalist descriptions, caricaturing participants, or sexualized visuals;
- reporting on protests and counter-protests within the framework of freedom of assembly and expression, without relativizing the right to safety.

Pride is not a “spectacle,” but a form of political and social expression in the struggle for equality.

8.2. VIOLENCE AND HATE CRIMES

Reporting on violence against LGBTQI+ persons requires particular caution, as irresponsible approaches can lead to retraumatization of victims and further stigmatization. This is especially important given that violence against LGBTQI+ persons often intersects with gender-based violence, particularly in the case of lesbians, bisexual women, and transgender women, who are exposed to multiple forms of discrimination and violence.

Key principles include:

- protecting the identity and privacy of the victim, especially in smaller communities;
- avoiding detailed descriptions of violence that have no informational value;
- clearly naming the act (assault, threat, harassment, hate crime), without mitigation, relativization, or justification;
- avoiding questions or formulations that imply victim blame (“why were they there,” “did they provoke it”).

In cases of violence, it is important to recognize **elements of hate crimes** when the motive of the attack is linked to the victim’s actual or perceived sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression. Such cases require precise identification and contextualization, in line with applicable legislation and international standards, and in cooperation with the police and prosecution.

Special attention should also be given to forms of **digital and psychological violence**, which are increasingly common but often insufficiently recognized in media reporting. These include blackmail, threats of “outing” sexual orientation or gender identity, and the unauthorized publication or sharing of private photographs, videos, or messages via social networks or messaging applications. Such forms of violence can have serious consequences for victims’ safety and mental health and must be treated as serious rights violations, not as “private disputes” or “online drama.”

In the context of gender-based violence, media outlets should take into account relevant international standards, including the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (the Istanbul Convention), which recognizes psychological, digital, and sexual violence as serious forms of violence, regardless of the victim’s sexual orientation or gender identity.

In addition to police and prosecutorial sources, it is important to include organizations working on human rights, gender equality, and victim support, including specialized organizations working with women and LGBTQI+ persons. This ensures a broader social and legal context, as well as information on available protection and support mechanisms, rather than an exclusively incident-driven or sensationalist approach.

8.3. COURT PROCEEDINGS AND POLICE REPORTING

In cases that are before the courts or at the investigation stage, journalists must exercise particular care with regard to professional and legal standards.

Guidelines include:

- respecting the **presumption of innocence** and clearly distinguishing allegations in indictments from established facts;
- avoiding clickbait headlines that imply guilt or a “scandal”;
- not highlighting the sexual orientation or gender identity of suspects or victims unless it is directly relevant to the case;
- avoiding sensationalist details that could influence the course of proceedings or public perception.

Such an approach is consistent with both domestic legislation and international standards of a fair trial.

8.4. HEALTH

Topics related to the health of LGBTQI+ persons are often burdened by myths, disinformation, and moral panic.

Recommendations include:

relying on expert consensus and verified sources;
avoiding the pathologization of sexual orientation or gender identity;
clearly distinguishing medical facts from personal opinions and political interpretations;
protecting the privacy of interviewees, especially when addressing mental or sexual health.

Health-related topics should be covered in an informative manner, without dramatization or sensationalism.

8.5. EDUCATION

Reporting on LGBTQI+ topics in the context of education is often accompanied by narratives about the “endangerment of children” or the “imposition of ideology,” even though available data and analyses show that these topics are **rarely and fragmentarily addressed** within the formal education system. In most curricula and syllabi in Montenegro, as demonstrated by research conducted by organizations such as Queer Montenegro, the Association Spektra, and the Centre for Civic Education (CGO), issues of sexual orientation and gender identity are not systematically covered, but may appear indirectly within broader content on human rights, non-discrimination, or peer violence.

An additional challenge for LGBTQI+ persons is the use of outdated textbooks and teaching materials, particularly in the fields of law, psychology, and social sciences. Some textbooks still contain formulations that reflect obsolete medical and legal approaches, including implicitly pathologizing language or the complete omission of contemporary standards related to sexual orientation and gender identity. Such content is not necessarily the result of intentional discrimination, but rather of slow textbook revision processes and the lack of systematic monitoring of their alignment with contemporary scientific and human rights standards.

In this context, it is important to emphasize that educational policies related to inclusion and safe school environments are primarily aimed at preventing violence, peer abuse, and discrimination, rather than at the “promotion of identities” or the “ideological indoctrination” of children. Reporting that ignores this distinction contributes to the spread of moral panic and disinformation instead of informing the public.

Good practice includes:

- clearly explaining the objectives of educational policies (violence prevention, inclusion, safe environments);
- distinguishing facts from fears and disinformation;
- consulting relevant experts in pedagogy, psychology, and law;
- reviewing curricula and textbooks before making claims about the “presence” of LGBTQI+ topics;
- avoiding sensationalist formulations that fuel moral panic and stigmatization.

8.6. SPORT

Sport is a particularly sensitive field due to strong stereotypes related to gender and sexuality, as well as the high public visibility of athletes. In recent years, public and media debates in the international sports arena have increasingly focused on the participation of LGBTQI+ persons, especially intersex and transgender individuals, in sports. Although these issues are often presented as abstract or “theoretical” debates, the way they are reported on has direct consequences for real people, including increased stigmatization, online harassment, and pressure on athletes who are already subject to intense public scrutiny.

International institutions and sports organizations warn that simplified, sensationalist, or inaccurate reporting on this topic can lead to the spread of disinformation and the false perception that LGBTQI+ persons themselves are the problem, rather than framing the discussion around the rules, policies, and responsibilities of sports institutions.

Guidelines for reporting include:

- focusing on athletic performance, professional standards, and principles of equality;
- not highlighting athletes’ sexual orientation or gender identity unless it is directly relevant to the sports-related topic;
- avoiding insinuations about “advantage,” “unnaturalness,” or “unfair competition” without clear scientific and legal grounds;
- avoiding the personalization of systemic debates through individual athletes;
- using expert sources when discussing the rules and policies of sports organizations, with clear clarification that such rules are the result of institutional processes, not personal decisions by athletes.

It is important to emphasize that, under international human rights standards, LGBTQI+ persons are rights holders entitled to dignity, privacy, and protection from discrimination. The media have a responsibility to contribute to informed public debate, rather than to deepen divisions or target individuals through simplified and conflict-driven narratives.

9. PRACTICAL TOOLS FOR NEWSROOMS

This chapter brings together concrete tools that help newsrooms consistently apply the principles of ethical and inclusive reporting on LGBTQI+ topics in everyday work. The tools are based on the findings of the analysis, the applicable legal framework of Montenegro, international standards, and good media practices.

9.1. PRE-PUBLICATION CHECKLIST

(“Questions for Assessing Ethics and Inclusivity”)

Before publishing an article, journalists and editors should go through the following questions:

- ☐ Is sexual orientation or gender identity **truly relevant** to the topic?
- ☐ Is the social, **legal, or institutional context** clearly explained, rather than focusing solely on an incident?
- ☐ Has framing the topic as a “controversy,” “ideology,” or “value conflict” been avoided?
- ☐ Is the terminology accurate, up to date, and explained (without outdated or oversimplified expressions)?
- ☐ Are implicit value judgments avoided (moralization, irony, trivialization)?
- ☐ Are the name and pronouns of the person being reported on respected?
- ☐ Is the headline informative rather than alarmist or suggestive?
- ☐ Could the headline, taken out of context (e.g. on social media), lead to a misleading or harmful interpretation?
- ☐ Does the visual content enhance understanding, or does it merely “attract attention”?
- ☐ Could the visual contribute to sexualization, exoticization, or stereotyping?
- ☐ Is there a risk of identification or additional stigmatization of the interviewee?
- ☐ Has the risk of escalation of hate speech in comments and on social media been assessed?
- ☐ Is the content prepared for secondary distribution (screenshots, memes, de-contextualization)?

If the answer to one or more questions is negative or unclear, the content requires additional editorial review.

9.2. GUIDELINES FOR EDITORS

(How to Identify and Correct Problematic Content)

Editors play a key role in preventing harmful narratives. Particular attention should be paid to:

- A pitch based on “controversy”
→ request a clearly defined public interest, facts, and context.
- A headline designed to “attract clicks”
→ rephrase it into a headline that informs precisely, without value judgment.
- A visual that reinforces stereotypes
→ replace it with a neutral or contextual visual, or use an illustration.
- AI-generated content
→ mandatory human review of headlines, summaries, and recommendations, especially on sensitive topics.

Editors should support journalists through clear rules and guidance, rather than ad hoc corrections.

9.3. BASIC MODEL FOR COMMENT AND SOCIAL MEDIA MODERATION POLICY

Every newsroom should have a clear minimum standard for moderation:

1. Public commenting rules

– prohibition of hate speech, threats, calls for violence, and harassment. Where possible, clearly displayed real names of commenters.

2. Consistent enforcement

– the same rules apply to all users and all topics.

3. Combination of automation and human judgment

– technical filters combined with mandatory human review, especially for implicit hate speech.

4. Record-keeping and escalation

– documentation of serious cases and reporting to platforms or competent authorities when necessary.

5. Educational responses

– where possible, use brief informational interventions instead of relying solely on deletion.

9.4. HOW TO CORRECT MISTAKES AND RESPOND TO CRITICISM

Mistakes in reporting are not an exception, but the way they are addressed determines a media outlet's professional credibility.

Recommended practices include:

- prompt and clear correction of inaccurate or inappropriate terminology;
- public explanation of changes without a defensive tone;
- removal of content that compromises privacy or safety;
- internal analysis of the mistake and updating of editorial guidelines;
- a public apology.

In cases of more serious rights violations, cooperation is recommended with:

- LGBTQI+ organizations;
- the Protector of Human Rights and Freedoms (Ombudsman);
- relevant regulatory bodies

10. LITERATURE AND RECOMMENDED FURTHER READING

International Documents and Normative Frameworks

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13. Centre for Civic Education (CGO), NO to Discrimination – YES to Diversity! Guidelines for Media Reporting on the LGBTIQ Community, Podgorica, 2019.
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14. Media Self-Regulation Council of Montenegro, How to Report Responsibly on Hate Speech, Podgorica.
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16. Zagreb Pride, Handbook for Journalists on Reporting on LGBTIQ Topics, Zagreb, 2022.
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