

# Cross-border Journalism as a Mindset

“Cross-border journalism is a tool to learn about our blind spots as a reporter.”



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Journalism schools around the world have taught us that **journalists are objective, neutral and impartial** observers of the world. However, this ideal seems flawed.

For instance, sexism and racism have affected Western media coverage, in particular, for centuries. This was acknowledged by two major U.S. American news publications only recently: In 2018, *The New York Times*<sup>1</sup> started a series of obituaries for prominent **women they had overlooked** in the past, while *National Geographic*<sup>2</sup> openly apologized for **racist depictions of people of color** in its magazine.

The historical, cultural, economic and even gendered context of journalism is often **(mis-)taken as a universal norm**. But unconscious bias and a lack of self-reflection can jeopardize cross-border collaborations when reporters with diverse backgrounds and different points of view collaborate at eye level.

“Cross-border journalism as a mindset” has two parts:

**1** Journalism as a framework of thought

**2** Recommendations for better reporting across borders

At Hostwriter, we feel it's crucial that journalists from North to South and from East to West become more aware of **common biases, blind spots and unconscious framing** in their reporting. Collaborating at eye level requires not only specific cross-border journalism skills, it also requires a **specific mindset**.

This training booklet is only the beginning of an attempt to develop criteria for “Cross-border journalism as a mindset.” As part of ongoing research, **Hostwriter is seeking contributions** by its ambassadors, members and journalists or media scholars who are interested in sharing their points of view, experiences or recommendations for better reporting in cross-border journalism teams.

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**Would you like to contribute?** We're excited to hear your perspective at [news@hostwriter.org](mailto:news@hostwriter.org)!

## What we mean by...



**Framing:** According to *Oxford Bibliographies*, news framing refers to “the verbal and visual information in an article that directly or implicitly suggests what the problem is about, how it can be addressed, and who is responsible for creating and solving it.” Framing is a Communication Studies concept that centers around the idea that journalists don’t just present news “as it is,” but rather assemble bits of information in order to create meaning:

“Frames originate with journalists and their beliefs about what constitute news topics and political reality, with the activities of people and groups who sponsor specific interpretations of issues, and with the events and cultural contexts within which they all work.”

— *Oxford Bibliographies*<sup>3</sup>

**Mindset:** Being pigeonholed by others based on one’s gender, race or religion seems to be a common experience that several Hostwriter members have shared. We believe it’s crucial that journalists who collaborate with colleagues across borders adopt a mindset that embraces diversity instead of fighting against it, as different viewpoints that call out our bias as a reporter are indispensable for more accurate cross-border reporting.

# Journalism as a framework of thought


In Part One, we look at the historical, cultural and societal roots that gave rise to Anglo-American journalism that, with some variation in different schools, is still the global norm for journalism today.<sup>4</sup>

**In the second part of the 19th century**, growing advertisement markets in Britain and the United States allowed media publishers to become independent of subsidies by political parties. Journalism was no longer a mouthpiece for political campaigning but slowly found its new role as **societal watchdog!** (However, a growing reliance on corporate advertising funds would soon raise its own challenges to journalistic objectivity.)

In 1852, the British newspaper *The Times* was among the first to proclaim **its journalistic neutrality and objectivity**. According to media sociologist Jean K. Chalaby,<sup>5</sup> this meant that the reporters covered both political factions in parliament – the liberals and the conservatives – with equal interest, without favoring one party over the other.

Chalaby points out how difficult it was for other countries to adopt to this new journalism standard. Taking French journalism from 1830s to the 1920s as an example, he shows that French media outlets continued to depend on political subsidies. Also, the political spectrum ranging from royalists to anarchists didn't allow French journalists to cover "both parties" simply because the political discourse involved many.

# The development of independent journalism



Growing sales and advertising markets granted British and American journalism economic independence from the subsidies of political parties.

The political two-party system allowed newspapers to claim neutrality and objectivity by granting both liberal and conservative parties equal space.

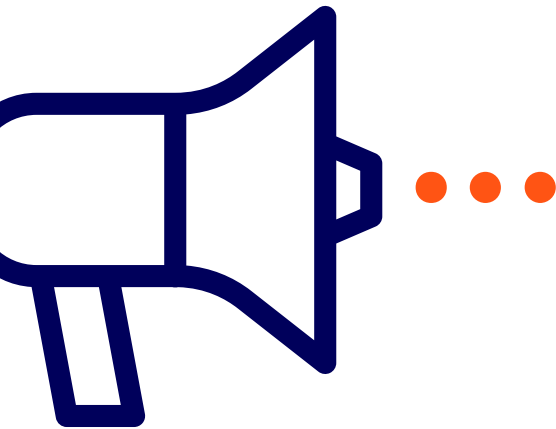
Parliamentary pluralism in France slowed down the adoption of these norms: With political parties ranging from communism to royalism, French journalists couldn't cover politics in the dichotomic terms of reporting "both sides of the story."

Over the years, covering "both parties in parliament" grew into a general reporting standard. Today, journalists are expected to cover "**both sides of a story.**" However, how do you report on "both sides" when your story involves many?

**To take a contemporary example**, what are both sides in the war in Syria, where the Syrian Army, the Free Syrian Army, Islamist fighters from Hezbollah to Daesh, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Russia and Western coalitions have been involved at varying times to varying degrees? How do you investigate the 5Ws of "Who did what, when, where and why" when things are more complex?

At Hostwriter, we believe that the multi-faceted realities of the 21st century force journalists to **define new reporting standards**. When journalists only look at two sides of a story, or attempt to uncover the truth by seeking answers to 5W-questions, they run the risk of presenting to their readers a picture that is either unrealistic or seriously over-simplified. Reality is more complex; we need to overcome the reductionist logic of traditional journalism!

# What we find problematic about today's journalism framework



**The idea that journalists are neutral, objective and impartial** observers fails to take into account journalistic framing. The historical lack of diversity has favored the views and reporting traditions of white, Western, male reporters over the perspectives of people of color, women, etc.

**Reporting both sides of a story** assumes that there are only two sides. This approach no longer encompasses today's complex realities of multilateral policy making, trading in globalized economies, fighting in asymmetrical wars, etc.

**A dichotomic world view** perceives the world in opposites. In journalism, this has led to stereotypical narratives of "good vs. evil," "active vs. passive," etc. This simplification risks feeding polarization instead of making sense of the world in service of pluralistic societies.

**"Go out and find the story"** is a journalistic credo we feel is an illusion. There's no single story waiting to be told. Reporting is an active and creative process based on a selection process. During their research, journalists choose some aspects over others in order to tell a consistent story.

# Recommendations for better reporting across borders

We see cross-border journalism as a tool toward better reporting. When journalists with diverse backgrounds collaborate at eye level, all colleagues have the chance to hear perspectives that might challenge their own. There's no better way to make unconscious framing visible!

The purpose of this training booklet is to initiate discussion and find a common ground for further research. Part Two therefore presents five practical recommendations for how journalists can embrace diversity in cross-border teams as a starting point.





# Know what you're excluding!

To focus on one thing means to exclude another. Selection is a necessary editorial step in order to tell a story.

However, whether it's about gathering the right people for a cross-border investigation or choosing a particular story angle, it's always worth it to take a step back and revisit the criteria the decision was based on. Are there any women on the team? Are all the experts white? Including diversity improves the research; it's not an option but a prerequisite for quality journalism across borders.

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# Be transparent about your mission!

In politically or economically polarized environments, it's likely that you'll encounter journalists who feel committed toward driving social change by doing more than just passing on information to the public. This interferes with the predominant concept of reporters as neutral observers of facts. Transparency and a shared effort to negotiate a common ground for working together might be more constructive than (mis-)taking certain journalism norms as universally valid concepts.

# 2

# Expect to find more than two sides to a story!

By giving equal time to both liberal and conservative parties, media publishers in Britain and the United States first claimed their journalistic objectivity at the end of the 19th century. What started with covering politics grew into a far-reaching dichotomic view of the world that later turned into a general reporting standard. We should expect reality to be more complex: only looking at two opposing sides – e.g., the developing vs. the developed world, good vs. evil, etc. – risks missing the border-crossing interdependencies, temporary coalitions and oppositions that typically define the complex global realities of today.

# 3

## Be aware of narratives!

International cross-border teams are a great way to find out about our own blind spots as a journalist. Such awareness could mean listening more closely to local views that might challenge common narratives like, for example, “technology will help the world to manage hunger or climate change, etc.” – a chimera that might lurk underneath the surface of predominantly progress-oriented media coverage.

4

## Embrace diversity!

It's key to acknowledge and embrace differences within the group with an open mind and collegial interest, instead of judging and questioning each other's professionalism whenever diverse journalism frameworks surface and collide. Diversity should be embraced rather than fought against, as varying viewpoints that call out our bias as a reporter are indispensable for more accurate reporting across borders.

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# Notes & Imprint

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/obituaries/overlooked.html>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/2018/04/from-the-editor-race-racism-history/>

<sup>3</sup> Oxford Bibliographies, accessed at: [www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199756841/obo-9780199756841-0010.xml](http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199756841/obo-9780199756841-0010.xml)

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Schudson, Michael (2003) *The Sociology of News*. W.W. Norton & Company, ASIN: B00LMSU2Y8, Thussu, Daya Kishan (2007) *Media on the Move. Global Flow and Contra-Flow*. Routledge, Gitte Meyer & Anker Brink Lund (2008) "International Language Monism and Homogenisation of Journalism," *Javnost - The Public*, 15:4, 73-86.

<sup>5</sup> Chalaby, Jean K. (1996). "Journalism as an Anglo-American Invention. A Comparison of the Development of French and Anglo-American journalism, 1830s-1920s." In: *European Journal of Communication*, London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi, Vol. 11(3), p. 304.

# Recommended Reading

**Chalaby, Jean K.** (1996), "Journalism as an Anglo-American Invention. A Comparison of the Development of French and Anglo-American journalism, 1830s-1920s." In: *European Journal of Communication*, London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi, Vol. 11(3), p. 304

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