

# THE TRUTH FRONTLINE

Reporting War Crimes  
in the Age of Disinformation

The Participants Training Manual



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## Reporting War Crimes in the Age of Disinformation

The Truth Frontline Participant Training Manual or Handbook is for journalists, editors, fact checkers, researchers and other media professionals reporting on conflicts, war crimes and violations of international law. It provides practical advice on working in environments where reliable evidence can be hard to find, and where false, misleading or manipulated information can spread as fast as events themselves. The Manual is produced as a continuation of the trainings offered by The Reckoning Project (TRP) and Media Diversity Institute (MDI) in 2026, and it was designed as part of “Media, Justice, and Social Cohesion for Ukraine” project implemented by the Reckoning Project (TRP) and funded by European Union.



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# Introduction

The Truth Frontline Handbook helps journalists, editors, fact checkers, researchers and other media professionals who report on war crimes and violations of international law in an information environment increasingly dominated by disinformation, propaganda and coordinated manipulation.

Reporting war crimes already requires journalists to work with incomplete information, conflicting accounts, vulnerable sources and difficult ethical choices. Disinformation adds another layer: the facts of a conflict can be deliberately manipulated too - false or misleading information can be used to justify violence, hide crimes, discredit victims and witnesses, distort evidence, deny atrocities and undermine accountability.

The Truth Frontline Handbook aims at supporting learning processes combining guidance and techniques of responsible reporting on war crimes and international law violations in the context of continuous and increasingly disinformation-saturated environment.

Both topics - war crimes and disinformation - are of extraordinary importance for journalists and fact-checkers around the world. Those issues are immediate and current for many colleagues working in different contexts and media environments. Although it imposes a real challenge, many journalists, researchers, fact-checkers, and practitioners around the world deal with it continuously and very well. Based on their experience, good practice and honouring their efforts, Truth Frontline Handbook aims to empower rather than problematise the challenge of conflict reporting in the age of disinformation.

The Handbook does not problematise disinformation as a separate topic, but it reflects on its impact in contemporary conflicts. "Russian propaganda is not simply a battle over facts. It is part of the machinery of war: it prepares the ground for violations of international humanitarian law, creates alibis for them, and helps obscure responsibility afterwards. The task for journalists is not only to expose the lie, but to trace the chain between the message, the state structures behind it, and the crime it enables or conceals. Freedom of expression cannot become camouflage for coordinated information operations that aid unlawful acts. If we can document that chain, propaganda becomes not just a media problem, but evidence – and a question of legal accountability," says Peter Pomerantsev, Executive Editor of The Reckoning Project, and an award-winning author specialising in propaganda.

The Handbook asks a practical question - How can journalists establish, document and report war crimes when the information environment surrounding those crimes is deliberately manipulated?

Disinformation can emerge at any stage of a conflict. Before violence, narratives dehumanise a population or present an opponent as an existential threat. During violence, false information denies attacks or civilian casualties, discredits witnesses or portrays victims as perpetrators; after violence, manipulated evidence, staged-event claims, and competing narratives may be used to challenge what happened and who did it.

For journalists, this means that fact-checking individual claims is necessary but not sufficient. A real photograph can be put in a false context; a real statement can be selectively presented; apparently separate claims can reinforce a narrative about who is responsible, who is victim and what the public should believe. "People who are already marginalised or disadvantaged are often the ones most vulnerable to disinformation. And in times of conflict, they can easily become targets, be falsely blamed for the conflict, or be reduced to stereotypes, disinformation campaigns, and simplified, often discriminatory narratives. Responsible conflict reporting must go beyond simply avoiding stereotypes about the 'Other'. We as journalists have to listen to those excluded, disadvantaged, and marginalised voices. We have to make space for them and make sure the marginalised are not spoken about without being heard. This has been an important part of the Media Diversity Institute's work for many years, and it is also one of the key principles behind the Truth Frontline Handbook," says Milica Pešić, Director, Media Diversity Institute Global, Belgium.

The Truth Frontline Handbook inspires journalists to ask not only "Is this claim true?" but also: What evidence is there for it? What's missing? Who produced or amplified it? How has it been framed? What bigger story does it reinforce? What could be the consequences of publishing it?

Journalists can't just report what happened in war crimes - they have to verify what can be verified. They also should be able to understand legal and human context, to judge reliability of sources and evidence, and always responsibly report about people who are vulnerable, traumatised or at risk.

At the same time, journalists and fact-checkers often come across propaganda and disinformation narratives justifying violence and aggression, perpetuate shift blame, discredit victims and witnesses, manipulate evidence or create alternative explanations of events. The purpose of this Handbook is to help journalists deal with these challenges without losing sight of the basic principles of accurate, independent and public interest journalism.

The Manual consists of practical summaries and tips aimed at journalists, fact-checkers and researchers. It is complimentary and refers to the training material from the Truth Frontline Curriculum.

## MODULE 1

# Reporting War Crimes

Reporting in and about the conflict is one of the hardest journalistic tasks because it entails establishing what can responsibly be presented as fact. Journalists are not courts, and they do not determine legal guilt. Their role is to gather, assess and verify evidence, provide context, distinguish established facts from allegations, and make careful editorial decisions about what can be reported, when and how. In the times of wars and conflicts, that can be extremely hard, often dangerous.

Therefore, keep these principles in mind:

- **Know the legal framework.** International humanitarian law and the legal definitions of war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide provide an essential foundation for reporting. You do not need to be a lawyer, but you need to understand the basic terminology and know where to check authoritative definitions.
- **Separate facts from allegations and interpretation.** A claim that a war crime has taken place is not the same as establishing that it has taken place. Be precise about what is known, what is alleged, what remains disputed and what cannot yet be verified.
- **Verification comes before publication.** Check sources, evidence, images, videos, locations, dates and accounts. Ask what is missing and what would be needed to establish the claim more firmly. In a conflict, information can be deliberately manipulated, incomplete or misleading.
- **Be precise with language.** Do not use legal or political labels simply because they are being used by a source, politician or social media account. Explain the evidence and attribute allegations where necessary. When evidence is incomplete, communicate the uncertainty clearly, use phrases such as ‘Witnesses said, Satellite imagery shows, the allegation has not been independently verified.’ Remain vigilant about manipulative narratives and disinformation, especially online.
- **Context matters.** A photograph, video or witness account rarely tells the whole story. Establish when and where something happened, who is making the claim, what independent evidence exists and what is still unknown.

- **Ethics are part of verification.** Think carefully about graphic images, vulnerable witnesses and survivors, victims' dignity, privacy and safety. Ask whether publishing particular material is necessary, proportionate and in the public interest.
- **Do not let political disagreement replace professional judgement.** Reporting war crimes is not about deciding which political interpretation of a conflict is correct. It is about applying consistent journalistic methods to assess information and evidence.
- **Be prepared not to publish.** Responsible journalism sometimes means qualifying a claim, delaying publication or deciding that there is not enough evidence to report something as fact. Explaining what is known-and what is not known-is itself valuable journalism.

**The essential principle:** Do not start with the conclusion, start with the evidence. Establish the facts as carefully as possible, use accurate legal terminology, provide context, acknowledge uncertainty and make editorial decisions that can be explained and defended. Be aware that most conflicts are surrounded by perpetuating disinformation campaigns, false claims, and discriminatory language.

Additional reading - [Killing for a Photo](#), Barabara Matejčić / BIRN, 2025

## MODULE 2

# Countering Disinformation

Disinformation is not simply false information. Information can be manipulated through the way it is framed, selected, presented, attributed or amplified in order to influence how people understand an event or how they behave. In conflict situations, disinformation and propaganda can become powerful tools for shaping narratives, creating enemies, shifting blame and influencing public opinion.

As journalists, the task is not simply to decide whether something is “true” or “false”. We need to understand how information is being used and ask who is communicating it, what evidence supports it, how it is being framed, why it is circulating and what it may be trying to make audiences believe or do. The source or political position of the person communicating information is not, on its own, evidence that the information is false or manipulative.

Keep these principles in mind:

- **Know what you are dealing with.** Distinguish between misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation; understand the difference between propaganda, political communication and deliberately misleading information.
- **Look beyond whether something is true or false.** A genuine photograph can be used in a false context; real information can be selectively presented; a video can be manipulated; and an unsupported claim can become persuasive through repetition.
- **Learn to recognise common manipulation techniques.** These include false context, fabricated content, manipulated images or video, impersonation, false attribution, conspiracy narratives, emotional manipulation, false dilemmas, selective use of genuine information and repetition of unsupported claims.
- **Identify recurring disinformation narratives.** Ask what larger story the information is trying to construct. What does it want the audience to believe about a person, group, event or conflict?

- **Examine the source.** Ask who is communicating the information? Is the source identifiable? What evidence is provided? Can the claim be independently verified? What information is missing?
- **Pay attention to language.** Terms such as “evacuation”, “indoctrination”, “terrorist”, “traitor” or similar labels can carry political or legal assumptions. Do not automatically adopt the terminology used by a source even if it’s official. Describe the concrete actions, evidence and consequences behind the label.
- **Do not let a contested label replace reporting.** If a legal or political qualification is uncertain, focus on what can be established: what happened, who was affected, what evidence exists and which obligations or rights may be relevant.
- **Look for patterns.** Disinformation can be amplified through coordinated accounts, media outlets, official communication, social media and other channels. Repetition does not make a claim more credible.

**The essential principle:** Identify the source, examine the evidence, recognise the narrative and the techniques of manipulation, check the context, and describe what can actually be established. Good journalism does not simply repeat or dismiss a narrative-it investigates how the narrative is constructed and tests it against evidence.

## MODULE 3

# Disinformation Narratives in Warfare

Disinformation narratives are particularly powerful when we consider the issue of disinformation in conflicts and wars. Disinformation narratives have tendencies to connect with existing identities, grievances, fears and emotions. They may exploit divisions around national, ethnic, racial, gender or sexual identity, or use familiar frames such as “elites versus the people”, victimhood, denial of war, delegitimation of leadership, justification of aggression or fear of escalation. Different claims, images or statements may appear unrelated but reinforce the same underlying narrative.

Therefore, we have to look further from a false information, misleading claim, or simply disinformation. This module aims at equipping participants to recognise the disinformation narratives and their goal because in warfare they can be used to justify aggression, shift blame, dehumanise opponents, undermine trust, deepen social divisions and create fear.

Keep these principles in mind:

- **Look beyond the individual claim.** Ask what broader story the claim is helping to construct. Several different pieces of misleading information can reinforce the same narrative.
- **Identify who is being positioned as the victim, enemy or responsible actor.** This can reveal the purpose and emotional structure of a disinformation narrative.
- **Look for the emotions and divisions being exploited.** Fear, anger, humiliation, resentment, and insecurity can make narratives particularly effective, especially when they connect to existing social or political grievances. Disinformation narratives connect with emotions, exploit them, usually add to polarisation of social factors, and become difficult to counter.
- **Recognise recurring warfare narratives.** These can include justification of aggression, victimhood, war denial, blame-shifting, dehumanisation, delegitimation of leaders or institutions, and warnings that a conflict will escalate.

- **Narratives can evolve and adapt.** The same underlying message may appear in different forms-through official statements, social media posts, videos, images, memes or apparently independent accounts.
- **Do not confuse repetition with evidence.** A claim repeated across multiple accounts or platforms is not necessarily independently verified. Consider whether the sources are genuinely independent or simply reproducing the same information.
- **Consider the purpose and potential impact.** Ask what a narrative is trying to achieve and how it might influence audiences, deepen polarisation, legitimise violence or create hostility towards particular groups.
- **Do not reproduce manipulation unnecessarily.** Reporting on a disinformation narrative can inform audiences without giving the false claim more visibility. Focus on explaining the narrative, its evidence and its purpose rather than simply repeating its most provocative elements.
- **Keep the facts at the centre.** Identify the narrative but return to what can actually be verified. Provide sufficient context to help audiences understand how and why the narrative is misleading.

### Disinformation Narrative Checklist

When you encounter disinformation in a form of a manipulative claim, ask:

- What is the claim? What exactly is being said or shown?
- What is the bigger story? What broader narrative does this claim support?
- Who is the victim? Who is presented as innocent, threatened or harmed?
- Who is the enemy or responsible actor? Who is blamed or portrayed as a threat?
- What emotions are being activated? Fear, anger, resentment, humiliation, pride?
- Which existing divisions or grievances are being used? National, ethnic, racial, gender, political or social?
- What evidence is provided? Can it be independently verified?
- Who is spreading or amplifying it? Are the sources genuinely independent?
- What could the narrative achieve? Could it justify aggression, shift blame, undermine trust, dehumanise a group or increase fear?
- How can I report it without amplifying it? What facts, context and evidence should lead the story?

**The essential principle:** Identify the claim, uncover the underlying narrative, examine the emotions and divisions it exploits, verify the evidence and consider its potential impact. Good conflict reporting exposes the structure of a disinformation narrative without becoming part of the narrative itself.

## MODULE 4

# Disinformation and Diversity

Disinformation often targets people and communities that are already marginalised or vulnerable, including migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, and ethnic and religious minorities. Such narratives can reinforce stereotypes and prejudice, encourage hostility and discrimination, and turn groups into convenient targets of conflict-related disinformation campaigns.

Journalists can either challenge the problematic narratives but they can also unintentionally reinforce them perpetuating hate speech and false framing. Inclusive reporting does not mean avoiding difficult stories or protecting particular groups from scrutiny. It means applying the same journalistic standards to everyone, avoiding generalisations and stereotypes, including the perspectives of people directly affected, and providing enough context for audiences to understand the issue. The way a story is framed, the language used, the images selected and the sources included influence our reporting and the image of the world journalists create.

Keep these principles in mind:

- **Be accurate and nuanced.** Avoid simplistic explanations and generalisations, particularly when reporting on communities that are already subject to prejudice.
- **Do not treat a group as homogeneous.** Individuals should not automatically be presented as representatives of an entire ethnic, religious, migrant, gender or other community. Minorities are not monoliths!
- **Apply equal standards of scrutiny.** Ask the same questions about evidence, sources and accountability regardless of which community or group is involved.
- **Include affected voices.** People directly affected by a story should have an opportunity to speak for themselves. Do not allow institutions, politicians or commentators to become the only voices representing a community.

- **Consider who is missing.** Absence can shape a story as much as presence. Ask whose perspective has not been heard and whether that absence affects the accuracy of the report. When asking this question, journalists often realise that the excluded are minority voices.
- **Pay attention to language and framing.** Headlines, photographs, captions and individual words can reinforce fear, prejudice or hostility even when the underlying facts are accurate.
- **Provide context.** Move beyond the immediate incident and explain the wider social, political and historical circumstances when they are relevant to understanding the story.
- **Think about impact.** Ask whether your reporting helps audiences understand an issue or whether it may unnecessarily reinforce an existing harmful narrative.
- **Challenge the narrative, not the people.** When reporting discriminatory or hateful claims, focus on the evidence, the language and the mechanisms through which the narrative is being spread rather than reproducing stereotypes about the targeted community.

### Simple Diversity Check

Before publishing a story, ask:

- Have I avoided stereotypes and generalisations?
- Am I treating individuals as individuals rather than representatives of a whole group?
- Are the sources sufficiently diverse?
- Have I included the voices of people directly affected?
- Who is missing from the story?
- Is my language accurate, neutral and proportionate?
- Does the headline or image reinforce a harmful stereotype?
- Have I provided the context needed to understand the story?
- Are allegations clearly identified as allegations?
- Could my framing unintentionally reinforce an existing disinformation or hate speech?

**The essential principle:** Inclusive journalism is not about being less critical. It is about being more accurate, fair and responsible. Challenge stereotypes, apply equal standards, include marginalised voices, provide context and consider the impact of your language and framing. When marginalised communities are being targeted by disinformation, responsible journalism should not become another vehicle for the same narrative.

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