



**ETHICAL
MEDIA
REPORTING
GUIDE
ON LGBTQI
ISSUES
AND HIV**

This informational product was developed within the framework of the project “Strengthening Inclusive Communications and Ethical Media Engagement in Eastern Europe and Central Asia”.

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**WHY
WORDS
MATTER**

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Maria is a heart surgeon. Precise hands, calm voice. She saves lives — every single day. Her colleagues respect her. Her patients trust her.

At home, there's Svitlana — and a cat who insists on sleeping between them. They've been together for six years. They dream of a small wedding, maybe a child one day. But in their country, two women can't marry. Can't adopt. Can't even be open without fear.

At work, Maria keeps quiet when someone cracks a joke about "those people." She smiles, though it hurts. At family dinners, she says she's too busy for a boyfriend. And when she scrolls through the news, she sees stories that turn love into scandal — stories that make her smaller, even when she's done nothing wrong.

She knows words can heal. She uses them to calm patients before surgery. But words can also wound — and journalists know that better than anyone.

Each story can close hearts or open them.
Each word can make someone hide — or breathe freely.

You decide which it will be.

**This story is fictional. Any resemblance to real people is coincidental — though thousands across the region live through something very similar every day.*

1.2 GLOBAL CONTEXT: SHIFTS IN POLICY AND RHETORIC

Over the past two years, several countries that have long been seen as committed to equality have publicly revised their stances on LGBTQ+ rights. Campaigns for equality have been met with increasing push-back: anti-gender bills, "family values" laws, and hate speech legislation emerge in legislative agendas. This shift from progress to retrenchment signals a broader trend: equality is no longer being taken for granted.

At the same time, public language around LGBTQ+ people is changing. Words that once belonged to the margins have started to appear in mainstream debates and media stories — sometimes as open hostility, sometimes disguised as "concern" or "tradition." This shift affects how millions of people are seen and treated. For journalists, it's a reminder: every word matters. Reporting is never neutral when human dignity is at stake.

1.3 SILENCE AS SURVIVAL: BEING LGBTQ+ IN EASTERN EUROPE AND CENTRAL ASIA

In Eastern Europe and Central Asia, being open about one's identity has long been far more difficult than in many other parts of the world. Even before the current wave of conservative backlash, LGBTQ+ people in this region faced layers of stigma, discrimination, and silence. Legal protections are scarce; in several countries, same-sex relationships remain criminalized, while "anti-propaganda" laws restrict public discussion of sexuality and gender identity.

But the hardest barriers are often social, not legal. Prejudice runs deep, reinforced by religious narratives, political populism, and decades of moral panic. Media coverage has frequently amplified these biases — portraying LGBTQ+ people as a problem to be debated, not as human beings to be understood. Sensationalist framing still fuels fear and hostility, making visibility itself an act of courage.

Against this backdrop, the problems can feel overwhelming — too vast, too global, too tangled in politics and power. Across borders, hate spreads faster than understanding. Silence still feels safer than the truth. And in the face of all this, it's easy to wonder: what difference can one journalist make? One voice, one small newsroom — against a world so loud with prejudice?



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**CORE
PRINCIPLES
OF ETHICAL
REPORTING**

Short, practical principles designed for real newsroom conditions — especially in environments where LGBTQI topics are politicized, sensitive, or risky for those involved.

2.1 ACCURACY OVER ASSUMPTIONS

In a region where misinformation spreads faster than facts, accuracy is protection — for your audience, your credibility, and your sources.

DO:

- Verify terminology, legal status, statistics, and quotes from multiple reliable sources.
- Ask people how they want their identity described — and use their exact wording.

DON'T:

- Don't rely on public opinion, political rhetoric, or social media comments as factual evidence.
- Don't generalize entire communities (“they are...”, “they always...”).

2.2 RESPECT PRIVACY AND CONSENT

In many EECA countries, being publicly identified as LGBTQI can lead to job loss, violence, or social exclusion. Consent is not paperwork — it's harm reduction.

DO:

- Discuss visibility levels: face, voice, name, location, relationship details.
- Re-confirm consent before publication, especially for photo and video.

DON'T:

- Don't include details that could unintentionally out someone (background items, neighborhood shots, workplace context).
- Don't pressure anyone to “be more open” for the sake of a stronger story.

2.3 MIND THE LANGUAGE — AVOID STIGMATIZING OR SENSATIONALIST TERMS

Words shape narratives. In polarized political climates, the wrong term can reinforce myths or fuel hate.

DO:

- Use neutral, precise language (“a gay couple”, “a transgender woman”).

- Choose verbs that describe, not judge (e.g. “lives with HIV” vs. “suffers from”).

DON'T:

- Don't use moralizing or sensationalist framing (“scandal”, “deviant”, “propaganda”).
- Don't imply causation between LGBTQI identity and HIV.

2.4 GIVE VOICE, NOT LABEL

LGBTQI people are often framed as issues, not individuals. Let people speak for themselves rather than speaking about them.

DO:

- Include direct quotes and perspectives from affected communities.
- Treat LGBTQI people as experts of their own experience.

DON'T:

- Don't reduce a person to their identity label (“a transgender”, “an HIV case”).
- Don't let officials or commentators speak instead of communities when they can speak for themselves.

2.5 CONTEXT MATTERS — REFLECT SOCIAL AND POLITICAL REALITIES

In regions where laws are shifting, discrimination is widespread, and public debates are tense, stories cannot be separated from the environment that shapes them.

DO:

- Explain relevant legal frameworks, political developments, and social attitudes.
- Highlight how these factors affect real people's safety, rights, and everyday choices.

DON'T:

- Don't present discriminatory statements as “two equal sides of a debate.”
- Don't ignore power dynamics — a marginalized community and a government official do not have the same platform.

2.6 PRIORITIZE BALANCE — SHOW RESILIENCE, NOT ONLY RISK

LGBTQI people in EECA are often portrayed only through suffering. This reinforces stigma and erases the full reality of their lives.

DO:

- Include stories of resilience, joy, community, and contribution.
- Show LGBTQI people as multidimensional — professionals, parents, activists, volunteers.

DON'T:

- Don't treat trauma as the only narrative worth telling.
- Don't frame LGBTQI identity solely through danger, victimhood, or conflict.

2.7 BE MINDFUL OF INTERSECTIONALITY — IDENTITIES OVERLAP

LGBTQI people may also navigate challenges linked to disability, ethnicity, religion, displacement, HIV status, or economic hardship. Ethical reporting recognizes these intersections.

DO:

- Ask about factors that shape a person's experience beyond their sexual orientation or gender identity.
- Show how multiple identities interact with each other in restrictive environments.

DON'T:

- Don't assume that all LGBTQI people face the same barriers.
- Don't overlook how policies, health systems, or migration affect different groups differently.

2.8 TALKING ABOUT HIV AND LGBTQI COMMUNITIES — RESPONSIBLY

HIV is still one of the most misunderstood topics in public discourse. And too often, LGBTQI people carry the weight of that misunderstanding. Yes, in many countries LGBTQI communities are considered key populations in the HIV response. That is a public health reality. But turning that fact into headlines about "risk," "spread," or "danger" causes real harm — and does not make reporting more accurate.

DO:

- Use people-first language: “people living with HIV,” not “HIV-infected.”
- Explain why certain groups are more affected — stigma, laws, lack of services.
- Include up-to-date facts: HIV is treatable; people on treatment can live full lives.
- Mention U=U (Undetectable = Untransmittable) where relevant.
- Let people define how they want to be described.

DON'T:

- Frame LGBTQI people as a “threat” or “risk to society.”
- Use HIV status to sensationalize a story.
- Link HIV to morality, “lifestyle,” or blame.
- Publish someone’s HIV status without explicit consent — even if it’s “already known.”



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**SAFE AND
RESPECTFUL
STORYTELLING**

Reporting on LGBTQI people in Eastern Europe and Central Asia isn't just about accuracy — it's about responsibility. In many communities, visibility can bring hope; in others, it can bring real danger. Ethical storytelling means protecting the people who trust you with their lives, not just their words.

3.1 BEFORE YOU START: BUILD TRUST, NOT JUST A STORY

People are not “sources” — they are humans navigating risk.

ASK BEFORE ASSUMING:

- How do they want to be identified?
- What parts of their story are off-limits?
- Who might be harmed if this story is published?

CLARIFY EXPECTATIONS:

- Where will the story appear?
- Will it be reposted on social media?
- Can their voice, face, or location be recognizable?

If someone hesitates — that is your answer. Safety comes first.

3.2 CONSENT IS A PROCESS, NOT A SIGNATURE

In a sensitive environment, consent must be ongoing, informed, and revocable.

DO:

- Explain the risks clearly — digital, social, legal.
- Reconfirm consent before publishing, especially if political conditions shift.
- Offer options: full identification, partial anonymity, or complete anonymity.

DON'T:

- Don't pressure anyone into “being brave.”
- Don't assume consent to interview equals consent to publish their name or image.
- Don't treat consent as a checkbox — treat it as dialogue.

3.3 PHOTOS AND VIDEO: ANONYMITY IS NOT A BLUR FILTER

In some contexts, a face is enough to put someone at risk. In others, even a detail — a tattoo, a window view, a city landmark — can reveal identity.

BEST PRACTICES:

- Use shadow, framing, or silhouette instead of last-minute pixelation.
- Remove metadata from images and videos.
- Avoid filming in identifiable locations unless explicitly approved.
- Never publish raw footage that could be traced back to the person.

If you can't guarantee safety, don't record visuals at all.

3.4 WHEN VISIBILITY BECOMES DANGEROUS

Sometimes, mid-production, a story becomes unsafe: a political shift, a hostile online campaign, a threat from family or employer.

IF DANGER EMERGES:

- Pause the story — indefinitely if needed.
- Offer to modify or remove identifying details.
- Let the person decide what happens next.
- Document threats and connect them (with consent) to local LGBTQI organizations who can help.

There is no award or deadline worth putting someone at risk.

3.5 NAVIGATING ETHICAL DILEMMAS

Good storytelling lives in the grey areas. Decisions aren't always straightforward.

ASK YOURSELF:

- Does this story empower the person — or expose them?
- Am I amplifying their voice — or using their trauma for impact?
- Would I publish this if this were my friend, my sibling, myself?

When in doubt: choose safety. You can always rewrite a story — you can't undo harm.

3.6 DIGITAL SAFETY AND CYBERSECURITY

Reporting on LGBTQI issues increasingly takes place in digital environments that are not neutral or safe. Online harassment, doxxing, hacking, and targeted surveillance are real risks — especially in contexts where LGBTQI identities are stigmatized or criminalized.

WHY IT MATTERS:

- Digital traces can expose sources, activists, or protagonists long after a story is published.
- Messages, files, or metadata shared during interviews can be intercepted or misused
- Journalists themselves may become targets of online attacks after covering LGBTQI topics.

GOOD PRACTICES TO REDUCE RISK:

- Protect communication channels. Use secure messaging tools when discussing sensitive topics.
- Avoid sharing personal data through open or unsecured platforms. Store materials safely. Keep interview recordings, contact lists, and drafts in secure, access-controlled spaces.
- Think about metadata. Photos, videos, and documents may contain hidden information (location, time, device) that can unintentionally expose someone.
- Discuss digital risks with sources. Make sure interviewees understand how and where content will be published — and what that may mean online.
- Take your own safety seriously. Strong passwords, two-factor authentication, and basic digital hygiene are not optional when covering sensitive issues.

In environments where visibility can trigger digital violence, cybersecurity becomes a shared responsibility. Ethical storytelling today means not only choosing the right words — but also protecting the people behind them.



4

**REPORTING
IN THE AGE
OF SOCIAL
MEDIA**

Most audiences today don't read full articles on media websites. They encounter journalism through headlines, previews, screenshots, and short captions on Facebook, Telegram, X, Instagram, or TikTok. For stories about LGBTQI people, this shift matters — a lot.

A carefully written article can become harmful once it is reduced to a single sentence, an image, or a quote taken out of context. Social media amplification often brings additional exposure, including harassment, coordinated attacks, or threats — not only toward communities, but toward individual protagonists and journalists themselves.

WHAT TO KEEP IN MIND WHEN REPORTING FOR SOCIAL PLATFORMS:

- Headlines and captions travel faster than context. Avoid wording that sensationalizes identity, implies controversy, or frames LGBTQI lives as a “problem.”
- Less detail can mean more safety. In previews and social posts, consider whether names, locations, or visual cues are necessary — or whether they could expose someone to risk.
- Comments sections are not neutral spaces. Anticipate backlash and discuss moderation strategies with editors in advance.
- Images matter as much as words. Thumbnails, screenshots, and quotes can unintentionally out someone or reinforce stereotypes.
- Ask one extra question before posting: How will this look when shared without explanation?

Responsible reporting today doesn't end with publication. It includes thinking through how stories are circulated, reshaped, and reacted to — especially in environments where LGBTQI visibility can quickly turn into vulnerability.



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**WORKING WITH
LGBTQI AND
HIV-FOCUSED
COMMUNITIES**

5.1 BUILD EQUAL AND RESPECTFUL DIALOGUE

LGBTQI and HIV-focused communities are not “subjects” of stories — they are partners in shaping them. Approach people and organizations not as sources to extract quotes from, but as collaborators who bring context, expertise, and lived experience.

Respect starts with transparency: explain your angle, potential risks, intended audiences, and where the story will be published. Avoid parachute journalism — the practice of dropping into a community only when you need a dramatic quote or a crisis headline. Communities remember who appears only during scandals or violence.

Instead, invest time in understanding how organizations work, what they prioritize, and what narratives they want to strengthen. When trust is built, stories become deeper, safer, and more accurate.

5.2 AVOID TOKENISM

Tokenism happens when LGBTQI people are included just to “show diversity” rather than meaningfully contribute. It reduces individuals to symbols, flattens their identities, and often reinforces harmful stereotypes.

TO AVOID TOKENISM:

- Do not interview the same “visible” activists over and over simply because they are publicly known.
- Seek out a range of voices — different ages, backgrounds, regions, identities.
- Let people speak in their own words, instead of fitting them into a pre-written narrative.
- Highlight expertise, achievements, and contributions — not only trauma or struggles.

Tell the whole person’s story, not just the part that fits your headline.

5.3 HOW MEDIA CAN BECOME A PARTNER, NOT AN OBSERVER

Journalists often underestimate how much influence they have on community safety, public opinion, and policy debates. Long-term partnership — even informal — can transform both reporting and impact.

MEDIA CAN ACT AS PARTNERS WHEN THEY:

- Maintain contact beyond crisis moments.
- Share upcoming story angles early, giving communities space to raise concerns or offer context.
- Collaborate on identifying positive or underreported stories.
- Amplify campaigns, events, and community initiatives without demanding sensationalism.
- Credit community expertise and work transparently with local organizations.

Partnership does not mean advocacy — it simply means recognizing that responsible storytelling improves public understanding and reduces harm.



6

**LEARN MORE:
USEFUL
RESOURCES
AND
CONTACTS**

6.1 LGBTQI MYTHS AND MISCONCEPTIONS: FACTS, NOT FEAR

Public debates around LGBTQI people are often framed as a conflict between “rights” and “traditional values.” This framing is misleading — and not supported by international human rights standards.

International organizations, including the United Nations, are clear on this point.

HUMAN RIGHTS ARE UNIVERSAL

Sexual orientation and gender identity do not create “new” or “special” rights. They fall under existing human rights protections that apply to everyone — including the rights to dignity, privacy, family life, health, and freedom from discrimination, as outlined by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in its guidance *Born Free and Equal*:

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/publications/special-procedures/born-free-and-equal>

“TRADITIONAL VALUES” CANNOT JUSTIFY DISCRIMINATION

International human rights law is explicit: culture, religion, or tradition may not be used to deny or limit the rights of any group. This position is consistently reaffirmed through resolutions and mandates of the United Nations Human Rights Council, including the work of the Independent Expert on sexual orientation and gender identity:

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/ie-sexual-orientation-and-gender-identity>

LGBTQI EQUALITY DOES NOT THREATEN FAMILIES OR SOCIETY

There is no evidence that recognizing LGBTQI rights harms families, children, or social cohesion. On the contrary, UN agencies emphasize that inclusive societies are safer and healthier for everyone. This is reflected in work by UNESCO on diversity, inclusion, and social cohesion:

<https://www.unesco.org/en/gender-equality>

HIV VULNERABILITY IS DRIVEN BY STIGMA AND EXCLUSION — NOT IDENTITY

In the context of HIV, LGBTQI people are often identified as key populations because of structural barriers such as criminalization, discrimination, and limited access to services. This distinction is clearly explained by UNAIDS, which consistently stresses that stigma and legal exclusion — not sexual orientation or gender identity — increase vulnerability to HIV:

<https://www.unaids.org/en/topic/human-rights>

For journalists, this means one thing: presenting LGBTQI rights as a “controversial demand” or a challenge to “traditional values” creates a false balance. International standards treat equality and non-discrimination not as opinions — but as legal and ethical obligations.

6.2 TERMINOLOGY AND LANGUAGE GUIDANCE

- **UNAIDS terminology guidelines** — the core global reference for accurate, stigma-free language on HIV, health, gender, and human rights. Clear explanations of preferred terms, phrases to avoid, and the rationale behind them.
Link: https://www.unaids.org/en/resources/documents/2024/terminology_guidelines
- **ILGA-Europe glossary** — concise, practical definitions of key concepts related to sexual orientation, gender identity, expression, and sex characteristics.
Link: <https://ilga-europe.org>

6.3 ADDITIONAL TOOLS AND GUIDES FOR JOURNALISTS

- **GLAAD media reference guide** — one of the most widely used media handbooks for responsible and respectful coverage of LGBTQI communities. Includes terminology, interview guidance, and examples of common reporting pitfalls.
Link: <https://glaad.org/reference>
- **Trans journalists' association style guide** — a practical guide offering nuanced recommendations on covering trans communities, with a strong focus on accuracy and safety.
Link: <https://transjournalists.org/style-guide/>
- **ILGA-Europe guidelines for journalists — reporting on LGBTI issues, people and communities.** A practical guide for journalists and communications professionals, developed by ILGA-Europe, containing recommendations on how to cover topics related to LGBTI people and communities in a fair and respectful manner.
Link: <https://www.ilga-europe.org/files/uploads/2022/09/ILGA-Europe-Guidelines-for-Journalists-2022-3.pdf>
- **Witness** — ethical storytelling and informed consent guide. A resource for working with story characters, agreements, visual storytelling, and preventing re-traumatization.
Link: <https://voiceofwitness.org/resource-library/ethical-storytelling-principles/>
- **Front line defenders** — digital and physical security for human rights storytelling. A toolkit for protecting heroes, activists, and sources when publicly covering human rights stories.
Link: <https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/digital-security-resources>
- **UN free & equal campaign** — global United Nations initiative promoting equality and human rights for LGBTI people. The campaign provides accessible educational resources, including terminology guidance.
Link: <https://www.unfe.org/en/know-the-facts/definitions>
Factsheets about LGBT-rights: <https://www.unfe.org/know-the-facts/factsheets/>

- **National Lesbian and Gay Journalists Association (NLGJA) Stylebook on LGBTQ+ Terminology.** The Stylebook on LGBTQ+ Terminology offers guidance on issues of language and reporting to help journalists cover LGBTQ+ communities and the issues affecting them with sensitivity and fairness, without bias or judgment.

Link: <https://www.nlgja.org/stylebook-on-lgbtq-terminology/>

6.4 DIGITAL SAFETY RESOURCES FOR JOURNALISTS

- **ACCESS NOW — DIGITAL SECURITY HELPLINE**

Practical support for activists and journalists facing digital threats, including emergency assistance and security advice.

Link: <https://www.accessnow.org/help/>

- **COMMITTEE TO PROTECT JOURNALISTS (CPJ) – DIGITAL SAFETY RESOURCES**

Guides tailored specifically for journalists working in high-risk environments.

Link: <https://cpj.org/resources/>

- **TACTICAL TECH — DIGITAL SECURITY & PRIVACY**

Accessible explanations and tools for understanding online risks, data traces, and digital self-defense.

Link: <https://tacticaltech.org>

6.5 LGBTQI ORGANIZATIONS OPEN TO MEDIA COLLABORATION

1 STEP BY STEP FOUNDATION

Country of work: Poland

Areas of expertise: LGBTQI rights; HIV prevention and treatment

How they can collaborate:

- Provide expert commentary
- Advise on story accuracy and context

Contact: Dzmitry Bondar, Board Member

Email: Oldcatholik@gmail.com

Languages: Russian, Polish

2 MENZDRAV FOUNDATION

Country of work: Ukraine

Areas of expertise: LGBTQI rights; HIV prevention and treatment; sexual health

How they can collaborate:

- Provide expert commentary
- Advise on story accuracy and sensitive framing

Contact: Oksana Rizova, Communication Officer

Email: Info@menzdrav.org

Languages: English, Russian, Ukrainian

3 INITIATIVE GROUP KOL-KABYSH

Country of work: Kyrgyzstan

Areas of expertise: Combating violence, stigma, and discrimination against LGBTQI people; community empowerment

How they can collaborate:

- Educational seminars for journalists on reporting about trans communities
- Awareness-building and contextual guidance

Contact: Lola, Coordinator

Email: Kolkabys@gmail.com

Languages: Russian

4 DOBERMAN MEDIA

Country of work: Lithuania (international initiative)

Areas of expertise: LGBTQI rights; mental health; legal support; community storytelling

How they can collaborate:

- Provide expert commentary
- Connect journalists with community members and lived-experience voices

Contact: Sergei Sadowskij, Director

Email: doberman.media.mag@gmail.com

Languages: Russian

5 NATIONAL TRANS COALITION (NTC)

Country of work: Armenia

Areas of expertise: LGBTQI rights; HIV prevention and treatment; strategic litigation and advocacy

How they can collaborate:

- Provide expert commentary
- Advise on safe and accurate reporting

Contact: Katrin Hakobyan, Head of Human Rights and Advocacy

Email: ntcoalition.ngo@gmail.com

Languages: English, Russian, Armenian, Spanish

6 DIGNITY HUMANITARIAN NGO

Country of work: Armenia

Areas of expertise: LGBTQI rights; HIV prevention and treatment; social support and community services

How they can collaborate:

- Provide expert commentary
- Advise on story accuracy and safe reporting

Contact: Arman Sahakyan

Email: Arman@dignity.ngo

Languages: English, Russian, Armenian

7 LIGHT

Country of work: Tajikistan

Areas of expertise: LGBTQI rights; legal and human rights support; community protection

How they can collaborate:

- Connect journalists with community members for interviews
- Provide contextual and safety guidance

Contact: Nodir, Advocacy Specialist

Email: nodir0725@gmail.com

Languages: Russian

8 GENDERDOC-M INFORMATION CENTER

Country of work: Republic of Moldova

Areas of expertise: LGBTQI rights; HIV prevention and treatment; legal & social advocacy

How they can collaborate:

- Provide expert commentary
- Advise on safe, accurate, and contextual reporting

Contact: Diana Guja, Communication Manager

Email: diana.guja@gmail.com

Languages: English, Romanian

9 QUN JELESI

Country of work: Kyrgyzstan

Areas of expertise: LGBTQI rights; legal and human rights support; youth and community empowerment

How they can collaborate:

- Provide expert commentary
- Advise on story framing and safety considerations

Contact: Zhanno Zh., Senior Communications Officer & Co-founder

Email: zhanno@qunjelesi.com | office@qunjelesi.com

Languages: English, Russian

10 ECOM — Eurasian Coalition on Health, Rights, Gender and Sexual Diversity

Country of work: Eastern Europe and Central Asia (EECA)

Areas of expertise: LGBTQI rights; HIV prevention and treatment; regional policy and advocacy

How they can collaborate:

- Provide expert commentary
- Advise on regional context and safe reporting
- Connect journalists with community networks across EECA

Contact: Communications Team

Email: contact@ecom.ngo

Languages: English, Russian

Country of work: Kazakhstan

Areas of expertise: LGBTQI rights; Sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR); Legal support / human rights; Youth / young people

How they can collaborate:

- Provide expert commentary
- Advise on regional context and safe reporting
- Connect journalists with community members for interviews
- Review sensitive content for safety risks

Contact: Arsen Aubakirov

Email: werequest.kz@proton.me

Languages: English, Russian

