

GOOD CONFLICT
HOW TO GUIDE



NAVIGATING DIVISIVE TOPICS THROUGH **LOCAL TV** **NEWS** STORIES

TABLE OF CONTENTS

01

Start Here

02

The Good Conflict Methodology

03

Good Conflict in Local TV News

04

Story 1: Abortion & Faith

05

Story 2: The Missing Perspective

06

Story 3: Changing Opinions

07

Good Conflict & Your Newsroom

START HERE!

We believe there is a different way, a better way, to report on conflict that doesn't reduce people to stick figures.

WHAT'S GOOD CONFLICT?

Good Conflict makes controversy useful and engaging rather than destructive. It's a methodology that applies insights from neuroscience, mediation, solutions journalism, and social psychology to the storytelling process.

WHY SHOULD NEWSROOMS INCORPORATE GOOD CONFLICT?

Good Conflict stories are more surprising, more interesting and more trusted. This approach to covering controversy helps to rebuild the relationship between news outlets and their communities by unwinding "us vs. them" narratives, challenging stereotypes, locating hope, and telling high-impact stories that open people up to different ways of thinking about themselves, others, and what divides us.

WHAT DOES GOOD CONFLICT DO?

Good Conflict helps journalists adapt their work for our current age of political polarization—using specific tools designed to generate more accurate and insightful narratives across existing divides.

HOW DO I USE THIS GUIDE?

Using three real-life long-form TV news stories created using the Good Conflict methodology, this guide offers insights for local TV newsrooms looking to cover conflict differently. It includes production tips, story ideas, and lessons learned from these specific stories alongside tips from other TV journalists, and perspectives from a focus group of viewers.

ONE MORE THING...

ANYTHING ELSE I SHOULD KNOW BEFORE I DIG IN?

Yes, so glad you asked! Parts of this guide upend traditional rules and norms for local commercial television newsrooms. That's intentional. We're offering a different way to produce high-impact journalism through conflict fluency. If done effectively, these stories can illuminate commonly misunderstood or misrepresented issues in a way that is helpful to the communities we serve. The stories can also encourage deeper dialogue and exploration of solutions to deep-rooted problems.

This approach is always evolving. It's based on what we've learned working alongside thousands of journalists worldwide. Reporters say this methodology makes them feel more equipped to take on their most daunting stories. Sources tell us it makes them feel more seen, heard, and willing to share their experiences. And community members we talked to say Good Conflict stories are unlike others they've seen on television and online; these stories teach them something new and intriguing. They illuminate rather than outrage.

If you'd like a deeper dive into Good Conflict, whether a live training for your newsroom, coaching or a virtual course, please connect with us. We'd love to meet you and learn how we can support your work.



Good Conflict

THE METHODOLOGY



1

Identify the high conflict & map it.



2

Investigate the under-story.



3

Illuminate the issue through your reporting.



4

Infuse good conflict into the community.

IDENTIFY & MAP THE CONFLICT.

STEP 1

Intractable conflict researchers often start by mapping the conflict. Just like outlining a story, a conflict map gets the issue out of your head and onto paper. The map identifies all the parties and forces involved in any given controversy, so you can figure out who (or what) matters—but has not yet been featured in previous coverage.

Technique:

- *Create a Conflict Map.* Get input from your colleagues and the community to help identify sources and angles that have not been well covered.

INVESTIGATE THE UNDERSTORY.

STEP 2

The under-story is what the conflict is really about—rather than what it appears to be about. For example, a dispute over whether a book should be banned is usually about more than the plot of the book. It's often about fear or a desire to be heard or to be safe. Excavating and revealing the under-story helps viewers see a hard problem with fresh eyes, reviving complexity and curiosity where there was none.

Techniques:

- *Looping.* A four-part communication technique that shows listening and a desire to understand one's experience and perceptions. [Click for looping resource.](#)

- *Ask Good Conflict Questions.* We have a list of revealing questions encouraging sources to share more intriguing information. [Click for list of questions.](#)

Good Conflict

THE METHODOLOGY

ILLUMINATE THE ISSUE. **STEP 3**

Understanding is what's missing from most traditional conflict coverage today. Why are people doing what they're doing? Illuminating the motivations and emotions in your reporting means revealing what is unknown and hidden. The revelation comes through your writing and how you choose to tell the story.

Techniques:

- *The Reveal*. A way to share the under-story in your work using the element of surprise.
- *Break the Binary*. A way to share stories that don't "fit" into the us-versus-them categories of the conflict by incorporating one or more of the following:
 - a. **Data** that reveals more than one or two groups
 - b. An **unsure source**
 - c. A **changed source**--someone who has changed their mind about an issue
 - d. A **"misfit" source**--people who don't fit into our stereotypes of different groups
- *Rightsize the Problem*. Think: "Out of how many?" "Compared to what?"
- *Widen the Lens*. A way to understand the conflict by looking at it from afar, from a different geographic location, or at a different time in history.

GOOD CONFLICT IN YOUR COMMUNITY. **STEP 4**

With complicated topics, it's crucial we turn our news stories into vessels for collaboration, curiosity, and learning. Infusing Good Conflict into the community is about radical engagement. It involves developing creative ways to partner with your community to create a deeper understanding of the issue and explore options to address it collectively. Relationship researcher John Gottman has found that healthy marriages need a "magic ratio" of positive and negative interactions to keep conflict healthy. Apply that same principle to your coverage: For every one negative experience your newsroom has had with the community, could you generate five positive encounters?

Techniques:

- *Live Storytelling*. Make the community part of the storytelling by hosting a live storytelling event (virtually or in-person). Invite people to share their own stories about the conflict your newsroom covered and how it's personal to them. Be sure to include these ancient gathering rituals: food, music, and humor.
- *Follow-Up Stories*. Good Conflict presumes you're in a long-term relationship with your community which involves doing follow-up stories. Communicate this with your audience and tell them you want their input. Ask community members what questions remain for them.

GOOD CONFLICT FOR LOCAL TV NEWSROOMS

OUR APPROACH:

In the summer of 2022, we partnered with a local digital newsroom and local TV anchors/journalists in Western New York to develop a list of conflict topics relevant to communities around the country. From that list, we selected three issues we felt were timely and often framed in an us-versus-them way: faith & abortion, the Black Lives Matter movement, and the debate over teaching U.S. racial history in public schools.

We then set out to report on those topics in the greater Rochester, New York, community. Why Rochester? The area is home base for one of our Good Conflict team members (Hélène Blandudi Hofer), who has worked in local TV news in that region. It is also a diverse Rust Belt city of over 200,000 people, with a million people in the larger metropolitan area. We felt like this was an ideal place to learn how to help local television newsrooms incorporate Good Conflict stories into their coverage. This pilot series also helped us understand how to engage local communities in Good Conflict reporting and events (Step 4 from the Good Conflict methodology).

What follows is a bite-sized timeline for producing each story, our learnings, ideas for incorporating a similar story into your newsroom, and feedback from community members.

Side Note: Our process for capturing feedback was unscientific yet practical for our purposes. We cast a wide net in the Rochester region for feedback, seeking diversity in age, gender, race, ethnicity, political affiliations, and news media attitudes. We recorded 12 one-on-one interviews with community members. They have allowed us to share their perspectives throughout this guide.

"If I could wave a magic wand, I'd make Good Conflict training required in every newsroom."

~Jennifer Brandel,
Co-Founder of Hearken,
Democracy SOS, Election
SOS



STORY 1.



GOOD CONFLICT PRESENTS

THE INTERSECTION OF ABORTION & FAITH



WATCH NOW



The questions we asked ourselves before exploring this story:

- How do those with a faith-based position on abortion view the beliefs of religious people who disagree with them?
- Is the abortion debate as simple, as "black and white" as it's often framed, or are there nuances to this issue?

STORY TIMELINE:

Pre-Production: 6 hours
Production: 7 hours
Post-Production: 13 hours

Total: 26 hours (3+ days)

TECHNIQUES USED:

- Looping
- Good Conflict Questions
- Live Storytelling (through an intimate community gathering)

LEARNINGS & DISCOVERIES

Key takeaways from reporting on abortion & faith from a Good Conflict lens.

BE UPFRONT ABOUT YOUR AGENDA

The sources we contacted were more responsive after we explicitly told them that our goal was to explore the nuances behind people's beliefs on abortion--and how their religion informs those views. They were reassured to hear that we were not trying to sensationalize the debate or criticize their religion.

SHARE YOUR QUESTIONS IN ADVANCE

Providing a list of the Good Conflict interview questions in advance for sources to review helped them understand that we were really trying to do this differently. We believe it also set the stage for more open, vulnerable interviews.

LISTEN IN WAYS PEOPLE CAN SEE

One faith leader said the questions asked, combined with the looping technique, compelled him to share personal stories he had not previously discussed publicly.

PLAN AHEAD FOR B-ROLL

It was challenging to capture relevant b-roll because we interviewed the faith leaders during non-religious service hours. We could have returned to each place of worship and prayer with more time and resources to get in-the-moment footage. We also could have spent more time in pre-production planning to discuss b-roll opportunities with the sources.

STAY FLEXIBLE ON STRUCTURE

We opted to script and edit the story as a Q&A news piece after hearing the complex responses we received to the Good Conflict questions asked in the interviews.

GO LONG (WITH CARE)

Instead of a traditional TV news story length (40 seconds to 2.5 minutes for a feature), more complicated and divisive topics need room to breathe. If done right, more time can result in more understanding of issues where there is often misunderstanding. This story, and all the others in this guide, are 10 minutes long. This is risky, we know! But when we asked community members about this, 100% of the respondents said the stories were not too long.

COMMUNITY FEEDBACK

CURIOUS & HOPEFUL

01.

Curious and hopeful were words used by most community members to describe how they felt after watching this story. Other words include compassionate, surprised, and personal.

CHALLENGED BELIEFS

02.

Some community members said their assumptions and beliefs were challenged watching this story: "I feel like I learned not to be so quick to judge somebody," one told us.



LEARNED SOMETHING NEW

03.

The majority of respondents said they learned something new from the story. Many were uncertain of how different religions, other than Christianity and Catholicism, viewed abortion. They were also pleasantly surprised by the complexity of the responses and how some faith leaders could be flexible in their beliefs--have strong opinions about abortion and make room for the thoughts of others.

WANT THE STORY GOAL CLARIFIED

04.

Other viewers wanted the goal of the story to be more precise: "...if the story was to reconcile how faith and belief systems can understand and meld and view the practice of abortion and even accept it, then absolutely hit the nail on the head...but it also seemed like it had somewhat of a target in the sense of it wanted to show that abortion could be reconciled with multiple faiths." - Community Respondent

A STORY FOR LOCAL TV NEWS

05.

Overall, this was a story community respondents said was unlike others they'd seen on abortion. It's a story they wanted to see on local TV because of the diverse perspectives and depth of those standpoints. They appreciated watching people thoughtfully talk through their opinions on a contentious topic--versus shouting their viewpoints and condemning those who disagree.

STORY 2.



GOOD CONFLICT PRESENTS

THE MISSING PERSPECTIVE IN THE SCHOOL CURRICULUM DEBATE



WATCH NOW



The questions we asked ourselves before exploring this story:

- How should public schools teach the long history of racism in America, including the legacy of slavery and its impact on everyday life?
- Why do we predominantly see and hear adults in the debate over teaching race and racism in public schools?

STORY TIMELINE:

Pre-Production: 5 hours
Production: 3 hours
Post-Production: 11 hours

Total: 19 hours (2+ days)

TECHNIQUES USED:

- Conflict Mapping
- Looping
- Widen the Lens

LEARNINGS & DISCOVERIES

Key takeaways from reporting on teaching U.S. racial history from a Good Conflict lens.

AMPLIFY MISSING VOICES

Conflict stories often feature the same voices, over and over. One way to discover fresh material is to identify and amplify voices that have been neglected. In education, this almost always means talking to students, who are rarely heard from in traditional coverage.

TO FIND MISSING VOICES QUICKLY, BUILD RELATIONSHIPS WITH COMMUNITY GROUPS

It can take school districts days to respond to interview requests with students and teachers if they respond at all. It took us less than an hour to book the interview with Teen Empowerment ambassadors because of a relationship strengthened over time with the organization.

DO A PRE-INTERVIEW

We sent questions for the students to review in preparation for their interview. However, the most helpful way to get them comfortable was a 15-minute in-person conversation before the interview—explaining the story's purpose, answering any questions, and chatting about life.

CONSIDER A GROUP INTERVIEW

When interviewing people who don't often get interviewed (such as students), it can help to meet with them as a small group, in certain cases. It feels less formal and more dynamic than one-on-one interviews. When interviewed together, the students felt comfortable bouncing off and weighing in on each other's comments.

"The way you guys scoped the information & delivered is amazing to see! We need more realistic reporters & teams like you all to empower communities."
-Amarah, Teen Empowerment Source

COMMUNITY FEEDBACK

REFRESHING & INSPIRING

01.

Community members told us it was refreshing to see young people as the primary news story source and to hear their passionate and articulate perspectives. Inspiring, hopeful, enlightening, and curious were the words used to describe this story.

GROUP INTERVIEWS

02.

The group interview format was a highlight for respondents. Several said they'd like to see TV news outlets incorporate it more into their broadcasts when examining controversial topics, with the journalist serving as a moderator or guide for the discussion. They found value in listening to the interview subjects respond to the thoughts of others at the table.



HISTORY & IDENTITY

03.

When asked if they learned something from this story, several respondents said it helped them understand how history directly affects one's identity. It also opened their eyes to their community's racial history, specifically redlining in Rochester.

OTHER PERSPECTIVES

04.

Some community members said they would have liked to hear an educator's perspective weighing in on the students' comments. Others thought hearing from white students would have been beneficial.

MORE GROUP INTERVIEWS WITH YOUTH ON LOCAL TV NEWS

05.

Every respondent said they'd like to see this news story style on their local TV news station: "I just loved how encouraged I felt by these students and just how powerful their words were when they were being interviewed. And I think it'll just show people that it's not really a debate of the administrators and what they want or the parents; it's these students. They're the ones being impacted most by this." -Community Respondent

STORY 3.



WATCH NOW 

The questions we asked ourselves before exploring this story:

- How have perceptions and understanding about the Black Lives Matter movement evolved with time?
- What's happening locally with the Black Lives Matter movement and in other towns and cities?

STORY TIMELINE:

Pre-Production: 7 hours
Production: 7 hours
Post-Production: 13 hours

Total: 27 hours (3+ days)

TECHNIQUES USED:

- Looping
- Good Conflict Questions
- The Changed Source

LEARNINGS & DISCOVERIES

Key takeaways from reporting on changing opinions of the BLM movement from a Good Conflict lens.

CHANGED SOURCES CAN BE RELUCTANT TO TALK

After contacting dozens of community members to weigh in on this story, only two agreed to an interview. It took time to build trust. After a few email exchanges and a couple of phone calls explaining the purpose of Good Conflict, what we hoped to learn from this story, and creating space for the sources to share their concerns and ask questions, they agreed to an interview.

ASK DIFFERENT QUESTIONS

Both interview subjects said the Good Conflict questions invited deeper reflection and caused them to access stories and emotions they may otherwise not have shared.

BE VULNERABLE AND DIRECT

Sharing personal experiences for a "Changed Source" can be a vulnerable experience, especially with an issue considered to be highly political. A pre-interview phone call (involving looping) can help draw out helpful information for the sit-down interview. At the start of the sit-down interview, remind your sources of the pre-interview conversation and the story's goal. Tell them you'll check in to clarify and ensure you understand their experiences and views.

GET ANSWERS

Considering the number of questions our sources were grappling with about the Black Lives Matter movement, an interview with a BLM representative responding to those questions could have been an asset to this story.

NUANCE CAN BE CLICKY

This was the 2nd most visited story of the year for one of our digital news partners, who shared the story with their online audience.

COMMUNITY FEEDBACK

CURIOUS & ANGRY

01.

Many of the interviewed community members said this story made them curious. Others said it made them angry and sad, partly because of what they viewed as a lack of solutions for this issue.

MORE QUESTIONS THAN ANSWERS

02.

Most respondents said they couldn't remember seeing a TV news story with people who had changed their opinion about an issue. Regardless of how they felt about the views of the sources, hearing from people who had more questions than answers made them feel validated about their own confusion with the topic.



LESS PROBLEMS, MORE SOLUTIONS

03.

While respondents appreciated hearing from people wrestling with their opinions on the issue, some felt they were hearing the same criticisms of the Black Lives Matter movement and would have liked more information on solutions to racial injustice and police brutality.

ANSWERS PROVIDE CONTEXT

04.

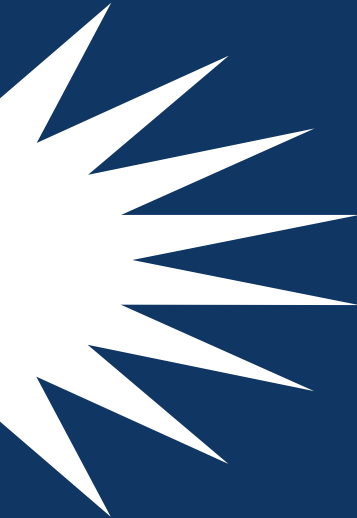
Some community members wanted the questions raised by the sources answered to help provide more context. Others said answers to the questions could be used in follow-up stories: "You let the people tell their stories and just saw where the conversation went, and then you can do a follow-up piece on any or all of the things they raised. But I thought that it was good to just hear other people in the community share their ideas and what they're feeling." -Community Respondent

CHANGED SOURCES IN TV NEWS

05.

Respondents said they'd like local TV news stories to show interviews showing people wrestling with their opinions on an issue: "There were so many questions but no answers in the story, and I think that was sort of the point. That's how they sort of flipped and flopped. They received information, and then they go, 'oh, let me just attune my ideas to that.' And that felt right. That felt like, well, that's what we're always doing." -Community Respondent

INCORPORATE GOOD CONFLICT IN YOUR COVERAGE




We asked current and former TV anchors, reporters, and producers to weigh in on ways to integrate Good Conflict news stories into your coverage with the understanding that time (story length and bandwidth) is limited. Below are some of their creative ideas.

A Newsroom Series.

Create a special series where you examine a conflict in-depth from multiple perspectives in your community to enrich and deepen their understanding. Engage the audience early in the storytelling process by having them help map the conflict so you can identify new and intriguing viewpoints. Get a community mediation group to help you organize and lead storytelling gatherings in the community after the stories have aired to discuss personal reflections and brainstorm potential local solutions to the conflict you covered.

Turn sweeps pieces into Good Conflict stories as a way to test them out with your audience and see if there's interest for more. Connect an event to one of your sweeps stories to gauge impact and interest.





We know that for every TV newsroom, community engagement is essential and plays a role in ratings. Talk to your newsroom and station leaders about creating a Good Conflict initiative for the community. These stories could be vital in community engagement efforts and fulfilling components of your station mission.

Multiple segments.

We understand that 10-minute news stories are too long for most commercial TV stations. Consider sharing the entire piece online, then, for broadcast, break the 10-minute story into smaller 2-3 minute segments that do one or more of the following:

- a) advance different viewpoints
- b) reveal the under story
- c) widen the lens and offer solutions
- d) lead to a live community storytelling event

If your news station embraces experimentation and has the resources, one former cable news producer suggests turning your 5:30 pm slot into a 30-minute Good Conflict news show.

A Good Conflict Beat.

Encourage your newsroom to create a Good Conflict beat. The stories could have a semi-regular appearance in the B block, for example, where feature stories often live. Or, they could be digital-first stories that get promoted through teases or mini on-set dialogues in the studio. One journalist offers: "Or, maybe the 2-3 minute stories are written as teases to get people to watch the full story online? Emphasize to your audience that these stories are vital and that your news station is working to normalize content that tells complete stories."

Weekend News Show.

If your station has a weekend news show with longer packages and studio interviews, that might be the right vehicle for building Good Conflict stories and conversations into your coverage. From a TV anchor: "Perhaps these can be seen as 'beyond the lead,' 'beyond the breaking news,' 'behind the top story,' type pieces, and reporters are given the resources and clear direction on how to approach a topic or subject that generates conflict in the community."

THAT'S A WRAP

We're eager to hear your thoughts and creative ideas regarding Good Conflict stories for local TV news. This work is an ever-evolving process. We're constantly experimenting, learning, and growing and this kind of journey is much more enjoyable and instructive with others alongside us. That said, we want to connect with you. Share your stories with us, and let us know how we can support you in this work.

www.TheGoodConflict.com
info@thegoodconflict.com



The Good Conflict TV News pilot project was made possible by the generous support of the Einhorn Collaborative, Rachel Pritzker, and the Knight-Lenfest Local News Transformation Fund.