Protect Democracy

OVERZERO

POLARIZATION & EXTREMISM
RESEARCH & INNOVATION LAB
SCHOOL *of* PUBLIC AFFAIRS

Institute for
Constitutional Advocacy and Protection
GEORGETOWN LAW

Covering Political Violence: Reporting on Extremism

Covering violent extremist groups or movements presents newsrooms with clear challenges. Media coverage can inadvertently provide them a platform to amplify their messages, recruit new followers, spread false narratives, or fuel hate and conflict. Reporting in line with best practices can help to mitigate these risks.

Core Principles of Covering Political Violence

☑ Use precise language to avoid signaling that the violence on the ground is more widespread or accepted than it is, or that the ongoing threat level is more severe than is supported by evidence.

☑ Provide appropriate context and framing about the causes of the violence, including any intersection with extremist political movements and conspiracy theories.

☑ Engage with targeted communities to ensure coverage also addresses how the violence has affected them, their responses, and their needs.

☑ Avoid providing platforms for inflammatory rhetoric, misinformation, or extremism.

☑ Highlight responses to address and mitigate the violence.

☑ Keep the public informed with up-to-date information so they can have a clear understanding of the risks and mitigation efforts.

Guidance for Covering Violent Extremists

■ **Provide clear and accurate information about the threat violent extremists pose without allowing them to use mainstream media to shape or amplify their narrative.**
  ○ What details about a story serve the public interest and provide an unbiased picture of the group?
  ○ How does the risk of amplifying extremist organizations or their ideas weigh against the benefit of public information about the group, its underlying ideology, and its motivations? Can the group be covered with appropriate context but without inflating the reach or impact without reference to specific events or ideologies that might otherwise remain at the margins?

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    - Considerations for this cost-benefit analysis include, for instance, the group's existing reach and platform, the venue for the event or activity, existing public awareness of a group's prior history, and whether coverage risks normalizing an ideology or making it seem more widespread than it is.
  - Where coverage of social media activity is part of the story, what context do readers need to understand its significance? Note: Paraphrase or caveat core messages without amplifying extremist ideals or platforms and avoid linking directly to social media posts or accounts. Doing so may inadvertently increase their reach.
  - Note: repeated exposure to violent imagery can have negative effects on viewers, impacting their personal health and increasing their susceptibility to extremist messaging. Images should be selected with caution and avoid including graphic (i.e., bloody) scenes. See our guidance on [headlines, images, and social media](#).

- **Carefully describe extremist groups to reflect their ideological motivations, rather than alternative labels that could equate extremists with mainstream groups or views.**
  - How do neutral third party researchers or organizations describe the group? Note: many groups adopt "platforms" or describe themselves in seemingly-mainstream ways that obscure the ideologies that motivate them. **Repeating their self-description or directly quoting members without context only amplifies their message while providing readers incomplete information.**
  - If there are well-established connections between extremist groups with more mainstream actors, what are the specific contexts in which they exist?
  - What is the historical or social context of the group's origins or ideology? Engage third-party experts rather than relying on a group's self-description and note the outlying or fringe nature of the ideology if appropriate.
  - Were actions coordinated or orchestrated to cause violence in any given instance, even if a group claims otherwise? Does the group have a history of provoking or initiating violence?
    - Have any responses to the extremist group themselves been violent? Note: vigilante activity in response to political violence can also be unlawful and lead to an escalation of conflict.

- **Underscore messages that violence is not inevitable or acceptable and highlight responses from communities and leaders.**
  - Who are the targets of the group's rhetoric or action? How are they responding? Note: stories that depict the full humanity and perspective of those targeted by extremist groups can defuse extremist rhetoric.
  - What is being done to address violence? Who is condemning violence? Are these responses coming from different ideological backgrounds, including individuals whose condemnation might be unexpected? Ensure these perspectives are included in the coverage.
  - Are there local and national prevention efforts that coverage can highlight, including those to prebunk disinformation, build resilient communities, and strengthen democracy?

Examples

Don't

Do

❌ Give extremist groups a platform or potential legitimacy by simply [repeating their ideologies](), self-descriptions, or details of planned campaigns or events. Also avoid naming the groups' leaders, particularly in headlines

✔ Refer to groups for what they are, using accurate descriptive terms and information from third-party researchers and experts.

Also minimize direct mention of individual extremists in stories when possible, including by paraphrasing rather than quoting directly, even if you must interview group members for a story.

Example: [Proud Boys are a dangerous 'white supremacist' group say US agencies]()

❌ Report on events that could amplify extremist groups or ideologies when doing so does not outweigh the benefit of public information.

✔ Consider covering extremist organizations or ideologies without making uncontextualized reference to specific events or ideologies.

Example: [Beware the extremist, dangerous and unconstitutional "constitutional sheriffs"]()

❌ Downplay the intentionality of violent actions or uncritically accept extremist organizations' claims that an event "got out of hand."

✔ Be clear in reporting if and where actions are coordinated and orchestrated to cause violence, including when there is intersection with more mainstream actors.

Example: [How the 'Great Replacement Theory' Has Fueled Racist Violence]()

❌ Discuss targeted violence without engaging with and amplifying voices from the communities being targeted.

✔ Focus on the impact and victims. Highlighting the impact on victims and communities rather than focusing on the extremists themselves can shift the narrative away from the perpetrators and towards the consequences of their actions, while also elevating targeted communities' perspectives and any requests for support.

Example: [How Buffalo is ensuring the Black Community Isn't Left Behind after Mass Supermarket Shooting]()

❌ Talk about violence without condemning it or highlighting actions taken in response.

✔ Use third-party sources to describe the damage caused by violence and Include information about what is being done to address it, including condemnations from community leaders of different ideological backgrounds.

Example: [These Ohio Groups Are Working to Prevent Extremist Violence]()

Example: "The arson threw Eugene's environmental community into an uproar. Small-scale sabotage, like pouring sugar into a bulldozer's gas tank, had always been part of radical-environmentalist culture. But arson was something different... The Sierra Club offered a reward for information that led to the arsonists' capture." - [New York Times]()

❌ Repeat the groups' inflammatory or group-targeted rhetoric, especially without context and additional information about those condemning such rhetoric. Avoid including this rhetoric in headlines.

✅ Report in ways that showcase the stories and perspectives of those targeted by the extremists, while also taking care to present necessary elements of extremist ideology without glorifying or legitimizing it, even unintentionally.

Example: How Orlando's LGBTQ Latino community is healing and mobilizing five years after the Pulse massacre

Further Resources on Reporting

10 Tips for Covering White Supremacy and Far-Right Extremists
Denise-Marie Ordway for The Journalist's Resource

The Oxygen of Amplification
Whitney Phillips for Data & Society

Further Resources on Violent Extremism

Polarization & Extremism Research and Innovation Lab
American University