

Incendiary Rhetoric from Politicians

Reporting on politicians who use violent or incendiary rhetoric can present newsrooms with unique challenges. Media coverage can inadvertently play into the goals of such rhetoric by platforming it and broadening its audience — all of which can be used to spread false narratives and escalate tensions. 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.
- ✓ 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.
- ✓ Provide appropriate context and framing about the causes of the violence, including any intersection with extremist political movements and conspiracy theories.
- ✓ 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 Incendiary Rhetoric from Politicians

Consider the newsworthiness of the speech.

- Does the public good of knowing about the incendiary speech outweigh the risk of repeating harmful content?
- Additional considerations include: Do you have the time and space in your piece to provide appropriate context, or will coverage result in merely amplifying the reach and impact of the rhetoric? In what venue is the speech taking place; is it being received by a large audience or is it more niche? Is it being perceived as credible? What is the speaker's existing platform, compared to the visibility provided by coverage? Who is the speaker and does the public have awareness of any prior history of incendiary rhetoric?

Describe incendiary rhetoric for what it is, while being cautious about repeating the rhetoric itself.

- What kind of incendiary rhetoric is being used (e.g., racial epithet, fascist slogan, hate speech)? Be clear in naming the rhetoric for what it is rather than perpetuating a norm that it is politics as usual. If you decide the incendiary rhetoric warrants repeating in order to educate the public, follow best practices for correcting mis- and disinformation.
- What is this contemporary and historical context of the speech? Are seemingly innocuous phrases or references interpreted differently in light of that context?

Undermine the false construction of an existential threat.

- Incendiary rhetoric tends to characterize people as vermin, invaders, thugs, criminals, or enemies. It also employs doomsday language to construct the perception of an existential threat that gives people seemingly no choice but to mobilize.
- Reporting should help address the questions: What is the real, underlying problem a particular group is being blamed for? Is an entire group being blamed for the actions of a few? Is the alleged "threat" being used in a way that deflects from a wider social trend or political debate?

Put political tools and tactics in context.

- What impact does this type of incendiary rhetoric typically have? (E.g, conferring more media coverage and attention; normalizing threat and harassment toward opponents; generating fear and justifying more authoritarian political control?) Is there evidence that such rhetoric is degrading broad norms against political violence?
- Does the politician have a history of using incendiary rhetoric against different groups? How has that helped them achieve their goals?
- How widespread is the use of this kind of rhetoric? Is incendiary rhetoric being widely used across different groups? Is it common among a particular group or faction or is it limited to a few individuals?
- Incendiary rhetoric can mislead the public to believe that violence is more widespread than it actually is. Is the violence that is being described actually occurring and to what extent?

Showcase relevant disapproval of and/or accountability for this type of rhetoric.

- The vast majority of Americans oppose political violence. In addition to leaders speaking out against such rhetoric, is there data indicating general public disapproval of the incendiary positions or actions encouraged by it?
- Who is speaking out against this kind of rhetoric, both among influential leaders and the general public? What kind of backlash has this speaker received in response to their rhetoric? Are there any ways in which they are being held accountable for the harm caused? Showcasing these elements of the story can help avoid normalizing this type of incendiary rhetoric.

- It is especially helpful to showcase disapproval from the politician's own political party or those that closely identify with the politician, or from "surprise speakers" — individuals that the audience would not expect to voice disagreement with the speaker or their rhetoric. Highlighting that trusted, credible ingroup members disavow this rhetoric is particularly effective because it demonstrates that you can maintain group or party membership without using or supporting incendiary rhetoric.
- How have others been held accountable for similar rhetoric, including any social and financial costs they have incurred? This might include suspensions on social media, job loss, and compromised personal relationships.

Engage with targeted communities.

- Incendiary rhetoric often scapegoats or dehumanizes a particular group. How are members of the relevant community responding or repairing?
- What stories point to the ways this group has been an active, valuable contributor to social harmony and public life?

Best practices for covering incendiary rhetoric

- ✓ **Do describe rhetoric** for what it is and give historical context.

EXAMPLE

Trump under fire again for violent language and dehumanizing anti-immigrant rhetoric, PBS

EXAMPLE

"Accusing LGBTQ people of 'grooming' or 'recruiting' children to become gay or transgender is an age-old trope that feeds off fear." NPR

- ✓ **Do showcase** relevant disapproval of this type of rhetoric.

EXAMPLE

"Minnesota DFL Chairman Ken Martin issued a statement Sunday saying the party didn't condone such rhetoric...I'm grateful for the work John is doing to combat systemic racism, and I'm glad that he recognizes yesterday's rhetoric was inflammatory, hurtful, and does not help move our state forward in the fight for justice,' Martin wrote." Star Tribune

- ✓ **Do undermine the false construction** of a threat.

EXAMPLE

Why pandemics activate xenophobia, Vox

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- ✓ **Do put political tools** and tactics in context.

EXAMPLE

[GOP candidates use anti-trans rhetoric to rally Christian base, AP](#)

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- ✓ **Do engage** with targeted communities.

EXAMPLE

[Stop AAPI Hate group launches campaign to prevent candidates from using anti-Asian language, NBC](#)

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- [A guide to covering hate speech without amplifying it](#), Abigail Steinberg, Center for Journalism Ethics
- [Hate in the Headlines: Journalism & the Challenge of Extremism](#), PEN America
- [How hateful rhetoric connects to real-world violence](#), The Brookings Institution
- [How to Responsibly Cover Controversial Candidates](#), NBCU Academy
- [Reporting hate speech – practical tips for journalists](#), Kate Hairsine, DW Akademie

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