

Headlines, Images, and Social Media

Headlines and images have an outsized impact on how readers interpret events. Many readers will encounter coverage of contentious issues or violent events principally (or even exclusively) via its framing through headlines, images, and/or social media content. Readers may never carefully engage with the content of a piece that provides crucial context or detail. Conflict-sensitive approaches to this framing are thus particularly important.

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.

Headlines

- Avoid assigning collective responsibility by referencing a general group (e.g., “Republicans,” “Democrats,” or “protesters”) and instead accurately attribute actions to the responsible individuals. Be mindful of the risks of directly naming extremist groups or their leaders who may be seeking to use the media as a platform.
- Be mindful of repeating misinformation or false claims, even to negate them. This can often amplify the misinformation. Provide accurate information instead.
- Avoid directly amplifying incendiary quotes or phrases. If necessary, describe the phrase in a way that gives context (e.g., “racial epithet” or “fascist slogan”).

- Be specific in signaling the scope of an event or issue; avoid vague or sensationalizing language that may make an event seem larger or more threatening than it was.
- Refrain from using language that activates fear or anxiety, such as natural disaster metaphors (e.g., explosion, wave) or dehumanizing descriptors (e.g., wild animals, savages).
- If violence or threats have occurred, repeat condemnations of violence and elevate non-violent responses.

Images

- Accurately reflect the scope and size of an event, ensuring that images correctly depict details such as the size of a crowd or damage from a violent event.
- Avoid depicting extremist or violent slogans or insignia, so as not to normalize or provide a platform for extremist groups and their messages. Consider blurring offensive material.
- Elevate images of responses or solutions to violence to communicate the full context of a story and reduce fear and anxiety.
- Use extra care when depicting vulnerable or targeted individuals to avoid inadvertently elevating their personal risk.

Social Media

- Apply the same guidance for headlines and images to social media content.
- Never amplify or link to extremist sites or content to avoid directing traffic or attention to extremist groups seeking to use media coverage as a platform.
- Provide clear, accurate details from the story to supplement headlines, including information about responses to violent events.
- Provide audiences with links to additional context that can help them better understand the history or impact of the issue or actions covered in the story, as well as opportunities to get involved in nonviolent responses.

Do's and don'ts for headlines, images, and social media

IN COVERING TRENDS RELATED TO THREATS OF VIOLENCE

✗ **Don't use language that activates fear or anxiety**, such as natural disaster metaphors.

✓ **Do be specific in signaling** the scope of an event or issue.

✗ **Don't use vague or sensationalizing language** that makes an event seem larger than it was.

✓ **Do repeat condemnations** of violence and elevate responses.

EXAMPLE _____
"Officials Fear for their Safety Amidst an Avalanche of Violent Threats"

EXAMPLE _____
In face of threats, election workers vow: 'You are not disrupting the democratic process.' Stateline

IN COVERING PROTESTS THAT RESULT IN VIOLENCE

✗ **Don't use language that activates fear or anxiety**, such as natural disaster metaphors.

✓ **Do be specific in signaling** the scope of an event or issue.

✗ **Don't use vague or sensationalizing language** that makes an event seem larger than it was.

✓ **Do repeat condemnations** of violence and elevate responses.

✗ **Don't directly name** extremist groups or leaders who may be seeking to use the media as a platform

EXAMPLE _____
Portland's Mostly-Peaceful May Day Gatherings Give Way to Vandalism, Conflict, and Arrests, OPB

✗ **Don't repeat incendiary** quotes or phrases.

EXAMPLE _____
Mayor Wheeler Condemns Violent May Day Protest, ABC News

EXAMPLE _____
"As John Doe led chants of 'Burn it down,' downtown rally erupted into violent chaos across the city."

IN COVERING VIOLENT EVENTS DRIVEN BY CONSPIRACY THEORIES OR DISINFORMATION

✗ **Don't use language** that activates fear or anxiety.

✓ **Do repeat condemnations of violence** and elevate responses.

✗ **Don't assign** collective responsibility by referencing a general group.

✓ **Do accurately attribute** actions to responsible individuals.

✗ **Don't repeat** misinformation or false claims.

EXAMPLE _____

"Gunman terrorizes local business, seeking to rescue trafficked children based on conspiracy theory believed by supporters of Candidate Jane Doe."

EXAMPLE _____

After gun scare, community rallies behind DC pizzeria, wtop news

EXAMPLE _____

In home town of alleged 'Pizzagate' gunman, shock and disappointment, The Washington Post

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- The Authoritarian Playbook: How reporters can contextualize and cover authoritarian threats as distinct from politics-as-usual, Protect Democracy
- Why Images are so powerful — and what matters when choosing them?, Margarida Alpuim and Katja Ehrenberg, Bonn Institute
- Facts Forward: A Journalist's Guide to Combatting Disinformation, PEN America
- How to Cover Electoral Conflict, Amanda Ripley and Rachel Kleinfeld

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