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NARRATIVE MATTERS: A GUIDE TO COVERING PROTESTS

**Anti-racist protest reporting
& protecting Black reporters.**



A GUIDE TO ANTI-RACIST PROTEST REPORTING & PROTECTING BLACK REPORTERS.

This year marked a new era of mass public protest.

The ways in which news media presented and interpreted those protests for tens of millions of news consumers profoundly influenced their impact on both public attitudes and the political process. As the 2020 elections and other events spark more protests in the coming weeks, months and years, **it is essential that the news media advance accurate representations, characterizations and interpretations of both protest activities and the responses to them.**

The Black Lives Matter protests of the 2010s culminated this year with the largest uprising for any cause in American history: more than 20 million people took to the streets to demand accountability for police violence, justice for Black people killed by police, the transformation of our criminal justice system, and a deep reckoning with racial injustice across every part of society.

This year, we have also seen demonstrations in defense of essential workers. And in recent years, we have seen protests demanding that politicians and corporations tackle climate change, protect and support teachers, protect sacred land for Native Americans, and much more. We have also seen white nationalists gather and rally in greater numbers (and with greater arms) than they have in decades.

Police, judges, politicians and news outlets have not treated these protests and counter-protests in the same way.

Meanwhile, covering protests has become particularly dangerous for people of color working in the news media and an unprecedented number of U.S. journalists have been assaulted, arrested or prevented from doing their jobs.

Accordingly, it has never been more important for news media outlets to report on protests accurately and in an anti-racist way. In the minds of millions of news consumers, protesters represent entire communities and protests represent entire causes. Inaccuracy and racial bias in news coverage, intentionally or not, can reinforce the attacks against those communities and causes.

This guide offers a clear set of tools and recommendations for disrupting racial bias in protest coverage:



Identifying language and imagery that reinforce racial bias and racist narratives.



Offering **best practices** for responsible anti-racist reporting.



Providing tips for news outlets can protect and **support Black reporters covering protests.**



Including **trusted resources** and guides reporters can turn to learn more.



PART I: LANGUAGE GUIDE

During this racial reckoning, many aspects of life are being reexamined. This consideration has to be extended to common words and phrases used in everyday speech and writing that actually have racist origins and are factually incorrect. **There is no room for dog whistles and misrepresentations in the time of attacks on and rising distrust in the media.**

The way we talk about protests impacts the protests themselves. **Language matters, and the connotations that words carry play into real-world policy and decisions in times of emergency.** This report lays out usable definitions of words, phrases and concepts that are central to reporting on protests, white nationalism, and racial justice, and provides some guidelines from recent articles linked below for framing the narrative in a way that is more humanizing to all those involved.



Tip: Use the right word to describe what you're seeing.

Do not call protesters rioters or looters unless what they are doing meets the literal definition of rioting or looting. These are not interchangeable terms. **The words “protest” “uprising” “resistance” all connote standing up against something, even causing a disturbance, without hurting people.** Uprising, for example, was the preferred term for the unrest and protest which occurred in Baltimore after the death of Freddie Gray in 2015.



Definitions:



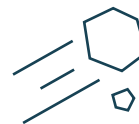
Riot

A violent public disorder characterized by a group violently lashing out against authority, property or people; a disturbance of public peace by 3 or more people assembled and acting with a common intent. Riots typically involve destruction of property.



Protest

A public expression or declaration of dissent or disapproval, often in opposition to something a person has less power to prevent or avoid.



Looting

To carry off something as loot; to plunder or pillage; to steal goods during a war or riot.



Violence

The use of physical force so as to injure, abuse, damage, or destroy.



Tip: Be clear and specific about what happened.

Using passive voice and segmented language often misconstrues the facts, obscuring police responsibility and blaming Black people who've been harmed. It's better to use active voice to share facts about who did what to whom.

PASSIVE LANGUAGE VS. ACTIVE VOICE

“This person died” vs “police killed this person” and “Officer-involved shooting” vs

“police killing”: “Officer-involved” describes an act of violence without assigning action or blame. This type of language is rarely used when a police officer is the victim of the shooting but frequently used when police have shot someone. For example, with Alva Braziel in Houston, a news organization reported “Police discharged their weapons and Braziel, who did not fire any shots, died at the scene.” **This avoids saying that the police shot and killed Alva.**

“Less lethal” vs “non-lethal”: presenting extremely harmful practices as non-lethal frames the police as harmless. While less-lethal forces are not intended to kill, they can cause severe injury and even death.



Tip: Know the political terms and players.

Research the ideology and actions of groups when reporting on them rather than just going by what their members may tell you. Many organizations that have racist or violent ideologies and histories do not see themselves as racist.

Resource:

If this is new terrain for you, **Journalist's Resource** published 10 tips for covering white supremacy and far-right extremists. **The Southern Poverty Law Center** has a well-researched website, with data through 2019, that lists the 940 documented hate groups in the US filtered by state or ideology. Their **HateWatch blog** includes weekly reporting on groups that have been involved in key events over 2020.



Definitions:

White nationalist

Promotes nationalism rooted in a white racial identity; espouses white supremacist or white separatist ideologies. White nationalists are often motivated by changing demographics and a desire to restore white hegemony.

White supremacist

Believes white people are superior and thus should have wealth, social status, power, and privileges to dominate other races. Rooted in the now-discredited doctrine of scientific racism that relied on pseudoscience, and was a key justification for colonialism. Includes the Ku Klux Klan, neo-Confederate, and neo-Nazis.

Terrorist

One engaged in violent actions of terror, often as a means of coercion. A person who uses unlawful violence and intimidation against civilians in the pursuit of political aims. Someone who terrorizes or threatens others.

Hate group

Advances hatred, hostility, or violence against people for their race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation and gender identity. Has beliefs or practices that attack and malign a group of people based on immutable characteristics and often their minority status.

Extremism

Simply put, involves taking an extreme position, a political or religious ideology considered far outside the mainstream attitudes of society. Often embraces achieving their aims through violence. Extremists in the U.S. include white nationalists, anti-Semites, anti-LGBTQ zealots, Black separatists, and racist skinheads.

Far right or Right wing

The group of people whose political views are the most conservative; they are right of the standard political right on the left-right political spectrum, particularly in terms of nationalism, nativist ideologies and authoritarian tendencies.

Far left

The group of people whose political views are the most liberal and to the left of the standard political left on the left-right political spectrum. Some scholars define the far left as those embracing socialism while others limit it to those embracing communism.

Antifa

Comes from the term anti-fascist. A community-based movement organizing against racial and economic injustice that encompasses a large spectrum of people on the political left.

QAnon

A far-right conspiracy theory alleging that a cabal of Satan-worshiping pedophiles is running a global child sex-trafficking ring and plotting against US President Donald Trump.

Black Lives Matter

A movement founded in 2013 in response to the lack of justice for Trayvon Martin. Their mission is to eradicate white supremacy and build local power to intervene in violence inflicted on Black communities by the state and vigilantes, creating space for Black imagination, innovation, and joy.

Definitions continued, next page. >

Movement for Black Lives

A coalition of more than 50 groups representing the interests of Black communities across the US. A space to debate and discuss the current political conditions and co-create a shared movement wide strategy. Members include the Black Lives Matter Network, National Conference of Black Lawyers, and Ella Baker Center for Human Rights.

“Defund the Police”


A phrase that’s become increasingly popular since the murder of George Floyd. Defunding the police means different things to different people. It can range from a call to reduce police budgets, demilitarize the police, and amp up community responses to addiction and mental illness to mandates to lessen police presence in communities of color. Some activists want to abolish police altogether, while others use “defund the police” as shorthand for bringing police budgets in line with other services and ways to invest in communities and their safety. It’s important to clarify what someone means when using this phrase and remember there are a number of other specific measures activists are calling for to end police violence.





Tip: Don’t use phrases that implicitly justify violence against people of color or downplay serious violence.


Don’t use “race-motivated” instead of “hate crime.” Another good example is the phrase “Black-on-Black crime.” It undercuts the idea that we should care about Black people because they don’t care about each other. In reality, Black-on-Black crime is a myth. It’s no more of a thing than white-on-white or Asian-on-Asian crime. US neighborhoods are deeply segregated and people tend to commit crimes in their own communities, inflicting harm on the people around them. It’s about proximity not skin color.

Tip: Look out for language that blames Black people for their own problems. In media coverage of protests, this often plays out by:

 Portraying people of color as dangerous **regardless of whether they’re involved in violence** but portraying protesters who are white, even when armed, as harmless;

 **Describing protesters as lawless** or without clear goals to undermine their aims;

 **Pressuring people** in man-on-the-street interviews to condemn protesters;

 **Harping on violent actions like** burning a store or taking over a building while ignoring the connection to the much larger violence being protested, i.e. a series of murders with no justice or stealing an election by keeping people from voting.

Tip: Use people-first language.

That reminds us we are talking about human beings. Avoid criminal justice language unless you are specifically referring to a court case or someone who has been charged with a crime.

PERSON	SUSPECT
UNDOCUMENTED PERSON	ILLEGAL IMMIGRANT
TEENAGER	JUVENILE
PERSON IN JAIL/PRISON	CRIMINAL
INCARCERATED PERSON	INMATE



Tip: Avoid language that deflects attention from the systems, structures, and leaders inflicting harm.

Injustice is manufactured—not accidental or tragic—and it’s important we talk about it that way. In Kenosha, WI, there were many signs of violence brewing, before and after Jacob Blake was shot that local police ignored. Through the pandemic, we’ve repeatedly seen language that refers to Black people as “vulnerable,” “at risk,” or in need of “charity.” This language, while well-meaning, portrays those being harmed as powerless, and shifts blame from the real actors—in this case corporations who refuse to give workers paid sick time or health insurance, leaders who turn a blind eye to racist violence. In truth, those resisting injustice tend to be strong. **During protests, if we see outbreaks of violence, we need to keep focus on those in power—police chiefs, groups endorsing violence, local and national leaders—and the decisions they’ve made that either keep people safe or put them in harm’s way.**



Tip: Finally, images are just as powerful as words.

A lot of protest coverage over-represents destruction of property or plays it on a loop, giving a distorted picture of what is happening. It’s important not to overemphasize the harm to property while downplaying the harm to people by ignoring what gave rise to the protests or police crackdowns on people who are following the rules and laws for peaceful protests.




SILENCE
IS
VIOLENCE

PART II: THE REPORTING PROCESS

With the fast, unpredictable nature of how protests can evolve, **it's easy for some of the basic rules of journalism to go out the window.** It's crucial, for example, to be thorough and smart about the sources you use though this can be difficult when you're conducting interviews on the street and haven't gotten to research the people you're talking to beforehand. Here are some tips to help. Many are rooted in [The Society of Professional Journalists' Ethics Code](#) around seeking and reporting truth.

The heart of the story is the reason people are protesting. It's irresponsible to ask people what they think of the protests, or any destruction that's come from it, without asking what they think about the reason for the protest itself. Telling the full story means [prioritizing the root causes of unrest](#), whether the murder of Breonna Taylor or the president's refusal to condemn white supremacy or thousands of ballots that have gone missing. People in authority almost always have a vested interest in restoring the status quo; it is all too easy to dismiss protesters by inflaming fears they're making things less safe for all of us. It's important for journalists and editors to check their privilege. While fear of unrest is normal, it's often worth remembering that people on the front lines are there because they feel attacked, and that their rights and well-being are threatened by what has happened.

Make sure you talk to a diversity of sources, not just the first people you meet on the street, and prioritize those with the most inside experience on what you're covering. **You want to talk to people who have personal experience beyond this protest** and have been involved in a situation, group, or issue—whether Black Lives Matter or QAnon, stopping police violence or voter suppression—over time.



“It’s irresponsible to ask people what they think of the protests, or any destruction that’s come from it, without also asking and prioritizing what they think about the reason for the protest itself.”

It is your job to interrogate and fact-check everything, including quotes. You can't assume someone is telling the truth just because they are a cop or government worker. Don't print stats or facts without verifying them. Relying on the phrase "police said" is equally misleading. Especially in this age of misinformation, you will be told many things that are factually incorrect in interviews by people who may well believe they're telling the truth.

Use your reporting skills to analyze what is happening. You can't just talk to someone on the right and the left and assume that covers it. Ask yourself, how are protesters behaving? How are police responding? If protesters are armed, ask them why are they carrying guns and what message they are trying to send? If someone gives a sensationalist quote, is that representative of the hundreds or thousands or tens of thousands of people at the event?

Be curious about people. Some of the best and most award-winning reporting we've seen on the Far Right and movements for change started with journalists approaching people they might see as extreme with an open curiosity.

What brought them here? What motivates them? What is it they want, personally and to see in the world? Where do they get their information or ideas? Remain on guard about assumptions you might make about someone's beliefs because of how they look. Lead with a desire to learn rather than a belief you know more than they do.

Report on what's representative. Journalists, for obvious reasons, gravitate towards what is novel and eye-catching, whether the Mexican woman at a Trump rally or the car burning in what may be an otherwise entirely peaceful protest of thousands. Your primary job is to give an accurate picture of what's happening for people who aren't there. Context and framing are everything. The only full-time Black journalist at the Kenosha News resigned in protest after a headline mischaracterized a protest calling for unity for Jacob Blake with "If you kill one of us, it's time for us to kill one of yours." Meanwhile [this tweet](#), which humorously compared a protest for George Floyd to the aftermath of a Kenny Chesney concert, shows how easy it is to see what we're expecting to see.



Do not shy away from exposing:

Calls for a return to order, without acknowledging that some people's lives—oftentimes Black people's lives—were endangered under what's considered normal.

Police use of force and the trend towards increased militarization. How police are upholding or failing to abide by guidelines and human rights recommendations with protesters.

The history of the groups that are protesting, including racial and gender makeup and where they get their funding.

Remember that large peaceful protests may fail to seem newsworthy after a few weeks but reveal something deep about what people in this country want and are willing to fight for.

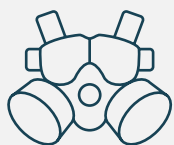
PART III: KEEPING REPORTERS SAFE

While protests can become dangerous, there are ways to minimize risk for yourself or your team as laid out in [Poynter's Guidelines to Safely Cover Protests](#) and the [Committee to Protect Journalists' Safety Advisory](#). **Here are the main takeaway: from these resources:**



Work in teams.

Have a plan that involves regular check-ins with your editor, and make sure backup and legal help is just a phone call away. The team should accommodate the person with the least experience or tolerance for risk. For example, if one person says they don't feel comfortable going into a closed door Proud Boys' rally, then no one goes.



Act to keep yourself safe.

Wear gear—an N95 mask and ballistic goggles—to protect yourself from COVID, tear gas, and pepper spray. Be prepared for violence from police or protesters. You cannot expect police to act rationally in crowd control situations. Things can shift quickly when it comes to arrests. Protesters at both far left and far right rallies have been spraying mace or lighting things on fire.



Report from the periphery.

Always have two exit routes in mind. We saw during the protests for George Floyd that announcing press credentials does not always protect you from police violence. In the current climate, being a journalist can make you a target to some protesters so keep your press badge visible but avoid clothes or uniforms with logos that set you apart. If you lose your phone or get separated from your team, leave the scene and find a way to make contact.



Trust your instincts.

If you feel afraid walking up to people, because of how they are acting or because they are armed, walk away. Keep a healthy distance from anyone without a mask on.



Make a plan.

Make a plan in case you are arrested or police try to bar you from accessing protests. Write the [National Lawyers' Guild](#) number and your editor's phone number on your arm in sharpie or on the back of your press badge. Know that your phone, cameras, and computer may be taken away. Be aware of your rights, but if your rights are being violated by police, it's better to comply in the moment. The environment right now is more repressive and unpredictable than we've seen in decades. Police have driven through barricades and even into crowds. Again, protect yourself.

ADVICE FOR EDITORS & PRODUCERS



Support Black or Brown journalists on the front line.

Anytime you are sending Black or Brown journalists into heavily-policed areas, they are in added danger. This will hold true for people of color, people of Muslim or Jewish descent, and LGBTQ people going to some Far Right rallies too. We are not saying don't send journalists of color. We are saying go the extra mile to protect them. It's important to discuss the risks (check out this editor's checklist), make sure your staff wants to go on this assignment, have a safety plan in place. And make sure reporters of color are not just prioritized for these high-risk race-related stories, but given a shot at other top-notch stories once the riots subside. **These are tough calls, and it's a balancing act of making sure you're not withholding opportunities or pressuring people to put the job above their personal safety, and of course sending in the best reporters for the job.**



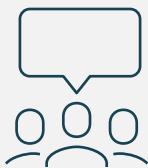
Keep your team safe.

Make sure you provide your entire team with N95 masks, hand sanitizer, goggles, water, snacks, extra phones or batteries in high-security areas or dead zones, and an emergency and legal support number to be written on their arm or taped to their press badge. Have them disinfect mics after reporting and consider paying an abridged day rate for those that should quarantine between assignments. For digital security, make sure everyone is using **encrypted apps like Signal to communicate.**



When your team is reporting on the street keeping them safe is your #1 priority.

Make sure you carve out the time and headspace to manage something high-risk. Consider whether you should send security with your team. Make an emergency plan so they have clear check-in times, a meeting spot and exit plan if they have to flee, legal counsel and staff on standby for support. Help them avoid sticky situations by monitoring violence, arrests, and changes in protest routes on twitter and sharing that information. Make sure they have places to sleep and eat arranged for them. In Ferguson, so many restaurants were burned that many reporters didn't eat a real meal for 3 days.



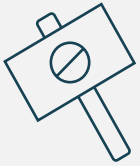
Do not send people out alone.

This is especially important on a photo or video assignment; if someone is looking through a camera, they need someone else to be their eyes 'n ears. If someone is ever out reporting on their own, make sure they're checking in every hour and you know their location through GPS shares or trackers. To save battery, they can drop a pin every hour rather than turn a tracker on. **Have an agreed upon amount of time you will wait if you don't hear from them before starting to look.**



Freelancers are especially vulnerable.

It's worth hiring an extra person, even if they are only there to help carry cameras, water, food, and make sure the first person is not operating solo. It's also fine to have freelancers reporting for different outlets team up for safety. Have your teams tested for COVID after high-risk assignments. Know whether your company's insurance plan covers freelancers who may not have health insurance.



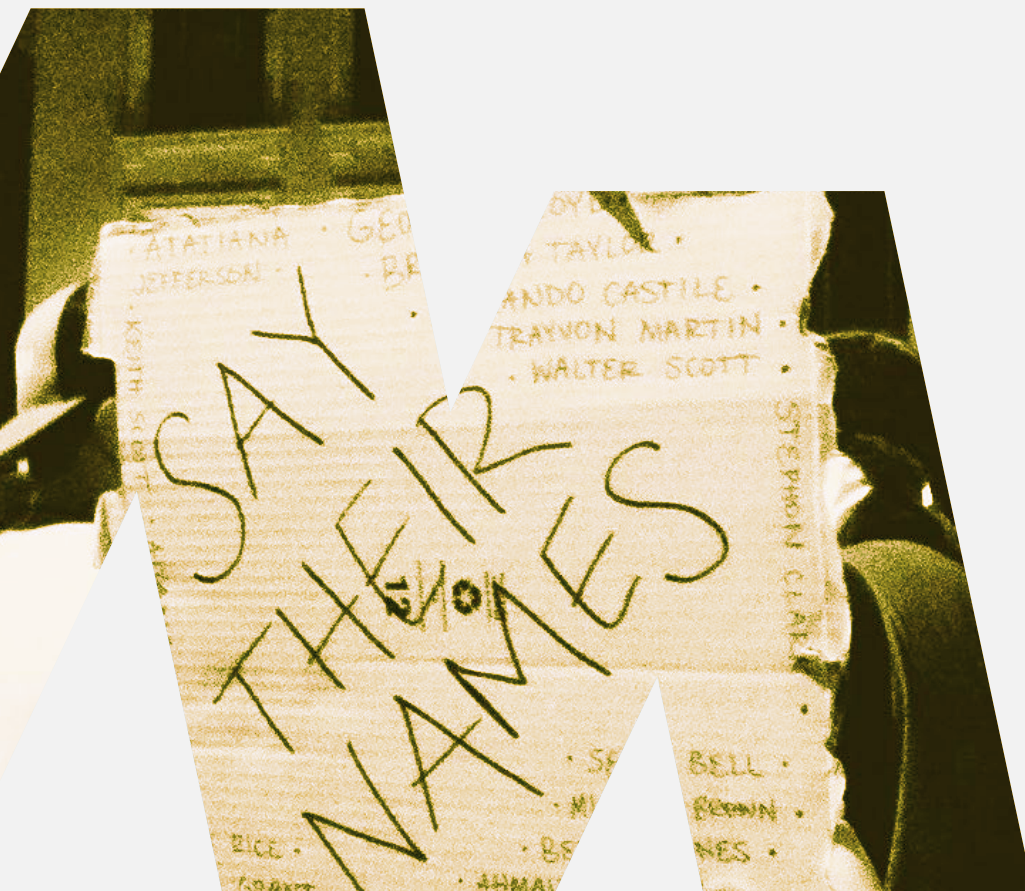
Be aware of the work your organization needs to do internally to combat racism.

This summer a number of journalists of color came forward expressing a **double standard** of being called upon to report on anything related to race, but taken off stories or criticized for not being objective when their reporting pointed to racist double standards.



Explore ways to support staff who witness traumatic situations or bear the brunt of violence.


Consider giving reporters and video editors time off to recover. **Some outlets now have a support person in the newsroom** who is not their boss they can speak to about problems they're experiencing so they don't have to worry about being seen as unfit or taken off assignments if they speak up.



PART IV: TEN RESOURCES TO KEEP NEARBY

1. [Society of Professional Journalists' Guide to Covering Protests](#)
2. [Committee to Protect Journalists' 2020 Elections Safety Kit](#)
3. [National Association of Black Journalists' Tips for Coping, Safety, and #ReportingWhileBlack](#)
4. [Poynter's Guide on How to Safely Cover Protests](#)
5. [Free Press Panel Discussion on Reporting on Civil Unrest this Election Season](#)
6. [Society of Professional Journalists' Code of Ethics](#)
7. [Native American Journalists' Association: Media Guide & Terminology](#)
8. [Journals for Black Lives Reporting Guide](#)
9. [Color Of Change's Guide to Narrative & Memo to Reporters Covering Ferguson](#)
10. [Fair.org's 7 Ways Journalists Use Police Jargon to Obscure the Truth](#)





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