

# Reporting In Contentious Times

## Insights for Journalists to Avoid Fanning the Flames

### A Memo by Over Zero in collaboration with Dr. Anna Szilágyi

As journalists in the U.S. report throughout the 2020 election cycle, they do so in an environment rife with misinformation, politicization of election processes, political polarization, and violence that has included the use of federal forces against civilians. In this type of environment, **reporting matters. What and how the media reports will play a critical role in how people understand unfolding events and, potentially, in shaping the trajectory of those events.**

**In this environment, the media can follow several key pointers to ensure that it provides the public with clear and accurate information, rather than inadvertently fueling conflict, providing a platform for violence, or becoming a means to further unfounded rumors or misinformation.** With this in mind, this memo provides a brief overview of key considerations and pointers for responsible and conflict-sensitive election-related reporting.

The media can avoid inadvertently contributing to harm through:

- 1. Providing clear and accurate information in real-time** so that people can navigate through the election process - from voting to counting and results announcement all the way through to inauguration.
- 2. Reporting responsibly amidst inflammatory rhetoric** that can serve, often via the media, to reinforce and inflame division and tensions and to normalize violence.
- 3. Carefully framing escalating tensions and incidents of violence** to avoid inadvertently signaling that violence is more widespread or expected than it is, fueling unequal perceptions of groups, or providing a platform for violent actors.

### → **REMEMBER: Headlines and images matter!**

Throughout all reporting, headlines and images often leave the strongest impression on the reader; people have short attention spans and there is and will be a lot of noise. Headlines or photos that call attention to negative dynamics without context, depict violence or intimidation as widespread, or repeat misinformation are especially likely to fuel risks for election violence. Note that misleading visual material attached to a story may influence how people interpret and remember that story. The below considerations and pointers are thus especially important for selecting headlines and visuals.

## 1. Provide clear and accurate information in real-time so that people can navigate the election process - from voting to counting and results announcements all the way through to inauguration.

**Remember** the standards governing free and fair U.S. elections. When reporting on the overall legitimacy of election processes, ask yourself:

- Were all eligible voters able to vote without hindrance, interference, or intimidation?
- Does the vote reflect the will of the people, by a process in which all votes were counted?
- Were votes counted transparently, and non-partisan rules and laws are followed, and any disputes resolved without bias towards any particular candidate? [USAID REF]



**AVOID** reporting that fuels a sense of uncertainty and confusion – e.g., covering changes in voting processes without providing context for why they’ve changed or speculating on what might happen.



**INSTEAD** report in ways that provide clarity and help people understand the processes and events around them:

- Proactively provide clear and calm information about election processes, especially any new or different processes (whether registration, voting processes, or waiting periods). Remember that people will have different experiences with elections – some may have voted in every election while others may have never voted before. Let people know how the process works in ways that help them feel empowered to vote. Include information about new processes in clear and calm ways.
- Remember that [recounts, audits, and election contests are all normal parts of the elections process](#) that help to ensure that every valid ballot is counted accurately.
- If reporting about any glitches or concerns, provide specific information for how they are being addressed.
- Be prepared to report about the counting and results tallying process. Because these processes will be different than in recent years, you should be ready to proactively explain what to expect and to provide any updates in real-time.
- Because of increased usage of absentee and Vote By Mail methods for voting in a pandemic, this year we may not know the final results for days or longer. Embed the idea of a wait period into stories about the election process (rather than as its own story or speculating on what it

will look like). Use terms like “Election Week” or “Election Season” (to include the early voting period), not just “Election Day/Night.” ([Here](#) is a great resource on managing expectations and one on general [election coverage](#).)

- Focus on the “knowns” or certainties, rather than speculating about what might happen or what might go wrong. If reporting on procedural challenges, focus on how they are being addressed. Use clear and calm language rather than alarmist or sensationalist language.
- Remember to reinforce democratic norms around elections, specifically that the final results are respected. The loser of the election accepts the results, concedes, and engages in a good faith effort to support the election’s winner. Violence is never a justified response to either winning or losing the election.



**AVOID** repeating unfounded claims – including misinformation, rumors, or unfounded claims of fraud, or victory.



**INSTEAD** be prepared and report in ways that elevate facts over misinformation:

- Anticipate the issues rife for misinformation and proactively arm yourself with corrective information. As part of this, monitor (or cooperate with groups that are monitoring) common mis- and disinformation campaigns online and identify sources that you can turn to for information about key parts of the election process, like vote tallying and grievance and dispute resolution. This will allow you to both preemptively release clarifying information on confusing issues and quickly correct misinformation whenever it arises.
- Make sure to rely on precise sources. It is easy to spread misinformation and disinformation by saying that it is “allegedly true” or “true according to some.”
- Be prepared to frame, contextualize, and debunk unfounded claims, including of vote hacking or foreign interference, rather than simply repeating them. For example, providing the accurate information or describing something as a false and unfounded claim prior to making reference to the claim itself. Such claims should never be included in headlines or news scrolls. Note that amidst mis- and disinformation, it becomes even more important to carefully verify and fact-check new information before reporting it.
  - **For example:** instead of reporting that “X politician is claiming he has won the election,” when votes haven’t been counted, be ready to frame these claims within the context of the process and lead with the fact that election results aren’t yet known and the number or percentage of ballots yet to be counted.
- Do not adopt an expression simply because it is widely used by the media and other powerful speakers and be extremely careful when you are reporting on such slogans, catchphrases, or terms. Remember that doing so can increase their reach and normalize them. Be particularly careful to assess if a particular phrase can fuel division, discord, hatred, or violence.

**NOTE!** Throughout this, it's critical to follow additional best practices for correcting misinformation. This includes being sure never to repeat misinformation, and, if you must repeat it, to first warn readers that it's false. It also includes providing accurate information rather than using negative framing (saying "Y is true" rather than "X is Not true"). (see handout X).

**2. Provide humanizing reporting and avoid inflammatory rhetoric** that may reinforce existing divisions and tensions. Inflammatory rhetoric can be an early indicator for violence – it ratchets up the stakes and portrays violence as justified and necessary. These narratives can also justify rejection of democratic norms, conventions, and institutional guardrails.



**AVOID** repeating inflammatory rhetoric, especially without context and additional information about condemnation of such rhetoric. This is even if the rhetoric comes from official sources. This type of rhetoric should never appear in a headline. To start with, you can familiarize yourself with the types of rhetoric that are particularly inflammatory and harmful. This includes language comparing people to animals or describing them as less-than human ("dehumanizing" language), such as **pests, deadly animals, reptiles, parasites, disease, filth, zombies, or demons**. Such dehumanizing labels urge people to think of and act towards others inhumanely or with less care or concern than they typically would other human beings. Further, words that refer to people and events in terms of **war ("ambush," "battle," "crusade"), natural disaster ("they will flood the streets," "violence exploded or erupted"), and crime ("steal the election")** can subtly trigger fear, hostility and anger in the public. This is especially problematic in headlines, even with quotation marks.



**INSTEAD** report in ways that showcase and elevate humanity, and build policies that enable you to avoid being used:

- Have policies in place for how to report on inflammatory rhetoric, especially when it comes from politicians. Policies might be sure never to have such rhetoric (including a direct quote) in a headline. If a quote must be repeated, an editorial policy can mandate that the reporting first feature accurate information that debunks the false claim. You can also consider providing quotes from different leaders or statistics showing rejection of this language and providing alternative narratives.
- If a candidate's or party's rhetoric is targeting a group with dehumanizing terms, reporting can seek to showcase that group's humanity, particularly both their warmth (caring for others,

empathy) and their competence (responsibility, complex emotions like concern, hope, etc.) – dehumanizing language often paints groups as lacking either warmth or competence.



**AVOID** referencing entire groups of people when discussing individual actions or opinions.



**INSTEAD**, be careful in how you refer to groups versus individuals, especially when reporting on violence:

- Be cautious when you use plural nouns that refer to groups of people (e.g., women, men, elderly, voters, protestors, Republicans, Democrats) when describing individuals' opinions, actions, or attitudes as they can imply that what you're saying is true for the whole group ("Democrats support XYZ," "women believe XYZ" etc.) Relatedly, identifying one person in terms of their group belonging (e.g., "a protestor", "a Democrat," "a Republican") implies that a particular part of their identity is relevant to the story you are telling. This type of identification can be harmful if, for example, you are talking about someone taking a violent or other negative action, as this framing inadvertently implies that something about belonging to that group is related to the negative action. Pronouns "they" or "them" can have a similar effect.
- Consider whether your reporting truly concerns groups or not. Reserve collective references for collectives and institutions. Try to use specific references (e.g., "about 50 protestors" instead of "protestors"), when you talk about particular members of a group.
- Be especially cautious in reporting on acts of violence. Where individuals commit acts of violence, avoid depicting the violence as being perpetrated by entire groups of people. For instance, rather than saying, "protestors turned violent." Instead you might say, "there were X hours of peaceful protest with [NUMBER] people present. At [TIME] at [SPECIFIC LOCATION], [# of people, specific action]. We do not yet have identifying information for these individuals or whether they might be provocateurs," and then include additional information about the broader ongoing context and responses.
- When reporting on violence, be careful about unequal treatment of groups. For example, are more inflammatory, sensationalist words used to talk about or describe violent actions or individuals from one particular group? Are benign or neutral words used to describe extremist groups? [thinking specifically about portraying armed militia groups in more "orderly"/"law and order" terms but protesters writ large with verbs around violence "erupting," etc.]



**AVOID** reporting that falls into frames of zero-sum thinking and looming threat (e.g., a headline reading, "[X] party claims that if they lose, the streets will erupt in violence.").



**INSTEAD** report in ways that broaden the frame:

- Be sure your reporting showcases multiple identities and perspectives on events, beyond solely conflict-related or partisan identities – for example, a parent, a mom, a fan or coach of the local football team, a business leader, a faith leader. This brings in perspectives from groups outside of the main political actors and underscores that violence and its aftermath will have consequences beyond politics.

**3. Carefully frame escalating tensions and incidents of violence** to avoid inadvertently signaling that violence is more widespread or expected than it is. This can fuel the notion that it is normal or acceptable to participate in violence, while increasing the notoriety of people committing violence (and the ideologies behind the violence). It may also intimidate particular groups from showing up to vote – particularly if the violence is depicted as targeting those groups.



**AVOID** depicting any violence that does occur as widespread or the norm. Do not repeat calls to violence or provide a platform to vigilante or extremist groups.



**INSTEAD** be specific and provide context, while ensuring your platform isn't used to create notoriety or fame for violent actors or to intimidate people from civic engagement:

- Report with specificity. Describe the location and scope of the violence, as well as the individuals perpetrating it and those being targeted. Refer to particular districts or towns where incidents are occurring, rather than the full city or state.
- Also, be very specific about how violence is happening. For example, saying “there was violence at protests” is misleading if in fact the violence was mainly perpetrated by police.
- Contextualize the violence and its underlying dynamics. Use specific terms, provide information about root causes of violence, and be clear and compassionate about the short and long-term consequences of violence.
- Ensure your reporting does not become a platform for increasing the notoriety of extremist groups or spreading their messages or guiding ideologies. This means not including the names of these groups or their leaders in headlines, which can provide them with desired notoriety. Familiarize yourself with best practices for avoiding amplification and reporting on white supremacy and far right extremists specifically.

- Note that during voting, violence can be used to intimidate voters. Be particularly careful about reporting violence and intimidation at polling locations, as sharing these stories can amplify intimidation. Instead, talk to local communities facing the violence and intimidation and use their insights to inform coverage. Always be sure to include information about how safety is being restored and, where possible, stories directly from the impacted community leaders that showcase their messages about voting.



**AVOID** using sensationalist language when describing violence (e.g., “violence erupted”), which can fuel anger and fear. Be thoughtful about word choice. For example, by using words with “-est” on their end or “most” in front of them (e.g. “biggest,” “worst,” “ugliest,” “most difficult,” for example), the media can activate strong feelings in the audience. Similarly, words that indicate totality can easily dramatize public sentiments. Such words include “always,” “never,” “everyone,” “nobody,” “everywhere”, “nowhere.” Dramatic vocabulary (e.g., “phenomenal,” “unbelievable”, “unprecedented”) can also activate strong reactions.



**INSTEAD:** Report on any violence with both specificity and even-keeled, non-dramatic language (e.g., “a few protestors became violent in the northwest quarter of [city]”). Talk about what specifically happened, provide context about root causes of violence or broader dynamics (e.g. a history of racism, militia organizing), and be clear and compassionate about immediate and long-term impacts of the violence.



**AVOID** showing only a single perspective on any violence that does occur, particularly when that perspective is justifying the violence. Remember that violence can serve as a tool to intimidate people from participating in the election, exercising their right to protest, or speaking out against a particular issue or event. Ask if your reporting might inadvertently contribute to such intimidation by providing a platform for violence and creating fear.



**INSTEAD** show perspectives beyond violent actors, including impacted communities and community leaders, and make sure you show peaceful responses to violence:

- Reporting should showcase multiple perspectives on the issue, including from the groups being targeted and all those who oppose the violence. Consider how to tell the whole story of that community – not just the violence, but also (non-extremist) community perspectives, experiences, underlying issues, and impacts. **Note** that it’s critical to speak with community leaders to learn about and clearly and specifically report on how the violence has affected the community, how it’s responding, and its needs.
- With consultation and permission, show efforts being taken by, in partnership with, or in support of affected communities to maintain safety and address violence.

## An Additional Note:

**It can be helpful to do some pre-work to consider the sourcing needed to report amidst these risks and potential events – build connections and relationships in advance.**

### For example:

- **Which communities are most likely to be targeted with violence?**
  - Do you have connections to community leaders from communities that have been historically marginalized and targeted (Black, MASA, immigrant communities for example)? Do you have sources within other communities that may be targeted?
- **How can you be sure your reporting reflects the diversity of views within the affected community (any community experiencing violence)?**
  - In addition to community leaders, do you have connections to leaders from different segments of the community and represent their views (e.g., community leaders, faith leaders, business owners, local officials)? This can help provide broader context in the face of violence that indicates a negative norm.
- **What are the types of events or places where violence may occur?**
  - Do you have connections to leader or people with insights about these places or events?
- **What types of expertise will you want to have on speed dial?**
  - For example: Election procedures (including processes for contesting or challenging processes)? Civil and human rights (history, organization, law)? Violence and violence prevention?

**→ Finally, beyond getting familiar with best practices, it can be helpful to set editorial standards and guidelines. This can help make real-time decisions with greater clarity.**

## Annex A: About Election Violence

**What is election-related violence?** Election or electoral violence is defined as “any harm, or threat of harm, to any persons or property involved in the election process, or the election process itself, during the election period” [International Foundation for Electoral Systems]. This can involve **physical violence, threats, and/or intimidation aimed at voters, election officials, or candidates.**

**It’s critical that the media be aware of these risks throughout the full election cycle – including in the leadup to and after election day (when votes are still being counted and/or we’re waiting for a results announcement).**

Below we elaborate on these pointers, particularly highlighting the relevant risks, what to avoid, and best practices for reporting.

- **Before an election: efforts to manipulate who will turn out to vote** via coercive pressure, intimidation, threats of violence, or actual violence (seeking to suppress some voters while making others feel they must vote). During this time, we might begin to see misinformation campaigns spreading incorrect information about registration deadlines, identification requirements, and voting procedures. We might also see violence across party or other lines (e.g., at rallies, targeting campaign offices). Candidates themselves, including those running in lower races, may also be intimidated during the campaign period.
- **During an election (on election day): violence or threats of violence to intimidate people** at, on the way to, or after leaving polling stations. Given procedural changes, confusion, misinformation, and violence around **procedural and voting issues** (e.g., long lines, new polling locations, a delay before announcing the results) and **technical challenges** (e.g., inadequate staffing, malfunctioning technology) may open the potential for contestation.
- **The period between election day and the announcement of results: preemptive declarations of victory or attempts to undermine the integrity** of the election process. We should also pay attention to **tensions and mobilization** of armed actors and networks.
- **After results are announced: violence arising from contestation of results or victory violence**, where the winner expresses domination over the perceived loser (this could be political opponents or other groups). This could also prompt **revenge violence**, creating a violence cycle.

## Annex B: Correcting Misinformation

**Correcting misinformation can be tricky, particularly because the more we hear a piece of information (even if it is being disputed), the more likely we are to believe it. Luckily, research and practice have shown us that there are effective ways to correct misinformation without reinforcing it. We outline best practices in this handout.**

1. Correct misinformation as quickly as possible. The more that people hear or see misinformation, the more they are likely to believe it.
2. Use positive framing. For example, if John has been accused of being a thief, the best correction will re-focus attention on what John is (e.g., “John is an honest person who is always sharing”) rather than what he is not (e.g., “John is NOT a thief.”) Why? Repeating the original accusation can strengthen the very association you are trying to undercut (John and thief).
3. Try not to repeat the misinformation, but if you have to, give a warning before you repeat it (not after!). As misinformation is repeated, it becomes more familiar and believable to people. By warning listeners in advance of repeating the association, you activate their critical thinking skills to prevent the association from unknowingly taking hold.
4. Make sure your correction comes from a source (whether an individual, institution, or news outlet) that people find credible and that represents their interests and values.
5. Prompt people to question sources of mis- and dis-information. Encourage people to consider the motive of the source: why would someone spread false or misleading information (e.g., is it clickbait that would help them earn money)? Research has shown that critical thinking and deliberation can reduce the influence of misinformation.
6. If possible, provide an alternative explanation for the evidence underlying the incorrect claim. Misinformation is more influential when people infer a causal relationship from the evidence and subsequent event (e.g., between the presence of flammable materials and a subsequent fire). A correction that simply disputes that the materials caused the fire will be less effective than one that explains the fire resulted from arson.
7. Keep your corrections simple and easy to understand. If possible, use clear and simple visualizations.
8. Consider the underlying narratives that the mis- or dis-information is tapping into. Why would someone believe the misinformation? What emotions, identities, or experiences are attached? What sense of truth or existing belief is it resonating with? Understanding this can allow you to identify the larger narratives, ideas, and beliefs you will need to tackle.

## References & Additional Resources

**Dr. Anna Szilagyi:** [Propaganda, Misinformation, and the Power of Words: Media and Language Use, A Guide for Journalists](#)

**Brennan Center:** [Dirty Tricks: 9 Falsehoods that Could Undermine the 2020 Election](#)

**John Cook and Stephan Lewandowsky:** [The Debunking Handbook](#)

**Data & Society:** [The Oxygen of Amplification, Better Practices for Reporting on Extremists, Antagonists, and Manipulators Online](#)

**IFES:** [Preserving Electoral Integrity During an Infodemic](#)

**Internews:** [“A Conflict Sensitive Approach to Reporting on Conflict and Violent Extremism”](#)

**Internews:** [“Conflict Sensitive Reporting: A Toolbox for Journalists”](#)

**Internews:** [“Reporting on Atrocities: A Toolbox for Journalists Covering Violent Conflict and Atrocities”](#)

**Journalist’s Resource:** [10 Tips for Covering White Supremacists and Far Right Extremists](#)

**National Task Force on Election Crises:** [Covering the Election Before, During, and After Nov. 3](#)

**Reporters Without Borders:** [“Handbook for Journalists during Elections”](#)

**Search for Common Ground:** [Responsible Media Coverage of Elections: A Training Guide](#)

**UNESCO:** [“Coaching Manual for Media Support during Elections”](#)

**UNESCO:** [“Media + Elections: An Elections Reporting Handbook”](#)