

Critical Conversations: Planning for covering (and even defining) political violence

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By Ben Kesling

Political violence can pop up unexpectedly but in many cases it's a fire ignited by smoldering embers that journalists and editors have time to recognize, identify and be prepared for. But like any fire, when it breaks out it can appear spontaneous, spreading rapidly and in surprising ways. That's why it's important for news organizations to responsibly identify personnel and procedures to be called on, not when there's a conflagration but when there's the first hints of smoke. Preparedness for this kind of coverage can't be understated. Responding to breaking news of political violence involves the highest stakes: reporters' safety, organizational reputation and the risk of adding to potential chaos.

Who's in this conversation?

Top editors need to plan for the possibility of covering political violence, but disparate parts of the news organization have to get involved and, likewise, be prepared. Standards and copy editors need to have terminology worked out ahead of time. Social media teams need to understand the maelstrom they are wading into with every post.

Risk-management teams need to know protocols so they're not left wondering if their staff is safe. And reporters and photographers must have the training and temperament to understand what needs to happen when a mundane news event suddenly becomes extraordinary.

The agenda

1.) How does our news organization define political violence?

When violence happens, editors need to have a general understanding of whether the organization will label it as political violence. Editors also need to know when the organization deems it prudent to decide they aren't ready to put a label on violence. If that's the case, they can make it clear in the story that they aren't ready to call it political violence, and that the decision is an active one of editorial restraint rather than a passive abdication of responsibility to fairly present the

facts. Once a designation is made, it's out there and hard to retract. This sort of violence often falls in a gray zone, or has a split interpretation depending on someone's political alignment.

Consider these actions:

- ☐ Decide what needs to happen on the ground in a news event before the organization is ready to label something as political violence. Is a single, disturbed apolitical person who takes violent action at a political event engaging in political violence? What if it's a group looking to cause unrest by attacking a politician's motorcade? Is political violence defined by the actions or intent of the group doing the violence — or by the target of the violence? Bringing together people from different departments can help open up the discussion and yield unexpected but welcome viewpoints. This discussion can lead to a base of understanding in the organization. Guidelines will also help reporters on the ground know to look for when thresholds have been met, and updates need to be filed.
- ☐ Ask the style or standards desk to come up with definitions as part of the in-house style guide, and to act as a sounding board when copy is being edited quickly. Look at generally-accepted style guides and other news organizations' terminology — does your outlet agree or disagree with their usages? How have extremist groups been labeled in the past by the news organization? Should that change? These are questions the style-guide experts should always be pressing to answer and refresh.
- ☐ Come up with standard terms for political violence, whether it's emanating from the left or right side of the political spectrum. Clinical-sounding terminology doesn't make for good copy, but it can make for fair copy. And in tense situations, a newsroom's reputation can benefit from that.

2.) Are our reporters and photographers ready to deal with violence?

Even a seemingly mundane news event can turn chaotic in a moment. Take, for instance, the assassination attempt on former President Donald Trump, when a standard political rally in Pennsylvania became the biggest news in the world. Especially during election season, younger reporters are tasked with covering such events. They need to be prepared for whatever might happen.

Consider these actions:

- ☐ Have reporters and editors take Hostile Environment and Emergency First Aid Training (HEFAT). While the odds of a reporter ever needing to use that

training is low, it's important to offer it to as many people as possible who will be doing field reporting. It gives a baseline mindset of how to keep calm in emergencies and allows reporters to take care of themselves in bad situations. The training not only helps journalists better deal with violence, it makes reporters and photographers better able to cope with other emergencies they might encounter while reporting (providing someone with CPR, for example). If budgets are a concern, there are grants available and some HEFAT courses offer pro bono courses to small news organizations and freelancers.

- ☐ Experience on the ground counts for a lot, and editors need to think about that when drawing up assignments. Political violence at an event shouldn't be a full-on surprise. On January 6, 2021, groups talked for days online about converging on Washington and the crowd that stormed the Capitol took time to get worked up before marching there. There's time for editors to listen to beat reporters who have a sense that violence might be brewing, and time for them to assign experienced reporters, photographers and producers to cover such events. There's also time as things unfold to pull people back, reinforce them, or swap them out for others.
- ☐ Editors need to make sure reporters, photographers and producers on the ground know what their organization's expectations are in the event of violence. Not every organization will expect their staff to document closely such violence. Some organizations forbid it. In short, should they run towards the violence or away from it? Before sending people out into the field, editors and risk managers need to make sure the expectations of the organization are clear. Likewise, the risk-management team should have a plan in place to keep accountability for reporters in the field. Templates for such plans need to be developed before an event occurs.

3.) Do we have subject-matter experts on staff?

When political violence happens — or most any kind of violence for that matter — there will likely be symbols, logos, weapons and slogans used during the event that need to be parsed and researched. Sure, news outlets have sources they can call on to identify key terms or items, but it's important that editors identify people inside the organization who are best-placed to do such things organically. Even small newsrooms unable to hire an expert in every field can identify staff whose beats or personal interests make them likely people to call on. A reporter or editor on staff knows the organization's style and priorities and can be trusted on deadline in a way sources can't.

Consider these actions:

- ☐ Prioritize hiring and retaining subject-matter experts and know how to leverage their experience during breaking news events. This goes beyond having beat reporters on staff. When violence happens, staff across the newsroom should know who to call when they need to quickly identify a certain kind of gun or logo. Expertise takes many forms and in smaller newsrooms editors can recognize and cultivate the unique knowledge and experience of their staff.
- ☐ Leverage expertise in the news organization to prepare for extreme events. Have a staff luncheon or online training module led by reporters who have covered political violence in the past and those who have tips to pass on to younger or less-experienced staff. A newsroom is full of people who have experience and expertise — use them.
- ☐ In smaller news outlets where expertise in a field like covering violence might not be readily available, editors need to be able to get staff up to speed quickly when news breaks. Make sure there's a ready source list available who can give accurate and reliable observations. A pre-existing list with vetted names is important, but it's also important to know who not to call when this kind of news breaks. In a crunch, people with dubious credentials scramble to talk to the media.
- ☐ Editors should create a sense of freedom in an organization for desks and reporters to talk to each other, especially when news is breaking. A flat hierarchy in such situations can allow experts from across the organization to speak with each other directly. Such an environment takes time to cultivate and requires the support of editors across the organization.

4.) How can we prepare for post-violence coverage and its impact on the community?

Political violence doesn't arise in a vacuum, and it doesn't subside immediately. There are always repercussions to the violence, which also must be covered. Local news outlets and empathetic journalists from national media are the ones who can tamp down hyperbole and stereotyping in the aftermath of such events.

It's an unfortunate reality, but when violence happens in a small community (or a little-known neighborhood in a big city) it might be one of the few occasions that place becomes well-known around the country or even the world. That attention and the attendant news coverage can fray community bonds in ways that the violence itself doesn't. A news organization from that community can serve as an anchor and trusted partner to the people of that community during the media melee that follows a violent event.

Consider these actions:

- ☐ Make sure you have a plan to be present in the community after such events by, for example, staffing every press conference, news update or community gathering rather than monitoring it remotely. The community notices such things, and it matters.
- ☐ In the wake of violence, reporters can be criticized for not leaving victims and members of their families alone and for not respecting their privacy. Newsrooms need to know proper boundaries and ethical practices. But ethical and honest reporters should be reminded that in the wake of violence, those affected often want to bear witness to what happened, and family members want to make sure their loved ones weren't hurt or killed for no reason. There's a public perception that people want to be left alone in the wake of tragedy, when the opposite is often the case — they are often willing, and even grateful, to speak with an ethical and empathetic reporter who will take the time to listen to them. Cultivate a news outlet where reporters, photographers and producers always remember the human reality of the news and respect that reality.

5.) Are we set up to manage post-violence impact on the news staff?

In the wake of violence, news outlets can't forget the people who have been unintentionally affected by it, including their own staff. Editors need to take the time to make sure they pay attention to their own reporters.

Consider these actions:

- ☐ Be prepared to check in with staff who have covered violence. Consider implementing an objective system for making sure people are healthy after covering a traumatic event. That might be a mandatory lunch with an editor in charge of coverage or mandates that those editors physically check in with staff to make sure they can handle the emotional fallout from covering violence. One person's exciting day at the office might give another person nightmares.
- ☐ Circle back with staff who were on the ground at violent events to see what future coverage is possible. In the wake of such events, editors can plan the next stories without fully engaging with people who were there and who know intimately what happened on the ground. There's also an important part of recovering from trauma called 'meaning making.' If a person who has experienced trauma and violence knows that their experience can be used for positive purposes, it can mitigate the effects of that trauma. Reporters,

photographers and producers need to be given the chance to do that. It's the humane thing to do and it can yield excellent stories.

- ☐ Reassess coverage of political violence, or of any fast-moving violent event, after the dust settles. The news cycle doesn't allow for much retrospection before the next big thing comes along and replaces even large and violent events. Top editors can make the space to meet with others in the newsroom to work through the coverage, what was done well and whether parts of it could have been done better. Political violence can shake people to their core, especially in divisive times. Newsroom staff can want to know that their concerns are being heard and that editors are interested in their expertise and opinions.