

Dos and Don'ts of Covering a Protest

From Tracie Powell, Program Officer for the Racial Equity in Journalism Fund at Borealis Philanthropy



Do: Be Respectful

Listen to Black people. Listen to the communities. Afflict the comfortable, and comfort the afflicted.

Be respectful, both to police and protesters. If a protester asks that you not photograph them, honor that. Know your role, including the role you play in being viewed as "authority figures" who are part of the power structure in which anger is directed.

Consider news value when airing violent scenes on TV news and news websites. At what point does it become trauma porn?

Build relationships with communities BEFORE conflicts erupt. If you don't have those relationships with communities, then work with those who do. This is the perfect time to collaborate with hyperlocal news organizations, particularly those led by people of color.

Understand how police use news coverage to surveil black communities. Protesters know and understand this, so should we.

Weigh carefully the decision to report live from active scenes of violence. Avoid practices that encourage copy-cats to behave poorly. We, as an industry, need to talk about our sometimes conflicting responsibilities of truth-telling versus minimizing harm.



Don't: Report Half-Facts

Don't report these stories as isolated incidences. Do not just report half of the facts.

Don't take the word of police as Gospel truth. Police can, and do, lie.

Don't participate in the active spread of misinformation and disinformation. Do not share any content from social media without first verifying its authenticity.

Don't assume that there are two sides to a story, setting up false dichotomies suggesting that everyone is either on one side or the other: Protesters vs. Police, etc.

Don't make assumptions about communities and the people in them. Do not engage in perpetuating stereotypes, which is what often happens when we lean on assumptions rather than journalistic standards.

Don't use "racially charged" or "officer-involved shooting." It doesn't mean anything. The word is racist. The term is "police shot" or "police shot and killed." Do not use passive voice.



Do: Be Journalists

Report the whole truth. Context matters. The WHY is this happening is just as important as the WHAT is happening.

Be reporters, fact-check. Vet those who claim to be witnesses, INCLUDING POLICE. Be journalists and ask probing questions to get additional details as a means of getting at the truth.

Review all user-generated content. Is the content newsworthy or simply inflammatory? Find out where the content came from. Who is the original author or source of the information and determine why the information may have been shared in the first place. Determine whether the content is staged or otherwise manipulated.

Wear press credentials in plain view.

Remember that there are multiple angles to a story, not just or or two.

Be mindful of the language we use. Be specific. Is property destruction the same as violence? Is property destruction on par with people losing their lives?



Don't: Enable Bad Behavior

Don't allow police to use you, or your coverage, to do their jobs. It is NOT our responsibility to help police do their job of surveilling or arresting protesters.

Don't give attention to attention-seekers or just focus on the drama.

Don't air the dying breaths of George Floyd on continuous loop. Ten days later, all have seen it or know what happened.

Don't continue to ignore whole communities in your news coverage area.

Don't yell back at protesters, as if you have a right to do whatever you want.

Don't think that wearing press credentials will prevent you from becoming a target of police or protesters. Press credentials no longer carry the weight they once did. Likewise, protesters may see press credentials and view you as the enemy. Just know that press credentials are not a form of protection.



Racial Equity
in Journalism
Fund



Institute for
Nonprofit News

