

Aug. 15, 2024

A Call to Action to Media Executives Re: the News Sector's Responsibility in Covering Contentious & Extreme Times

We, more than three-dozen civil-society, consumer-rights and journalistic organizations, write with an urgent call for news outlets to accurately and unapologetically report on U.S. elections, the state of our democracy and civil rights. Following the assassination attempt on former President Trump, some pundits and politicians have suggested that the [media refrain](#) from covering [mounting authoritarianism](#) in this country. We urge news outlets to wholeheartedly reject such a dereliction of journalistic duty, and to rigorously report threats to our democracy.

Media coverage shapes both public discourse and people's understanding of events of the day. This is particularly critical during contentious and extreme times such as these. Media coverage can invite public engagement and robust participation in the democratic process. It can also [be manipulated](#) to promote falsehoods for political gain, to silence dissent and stoke racism.

Under news standards developed in the last century to counter manipulation and low-quality reporting, the media have broadly made an effort to adhere to hallmarks of good reporting through fact-checking, transparency, and other practices best codified by the Society of Professional Journalists' [Code of Ethics](#).

However, these measures aren't enough to meet the political landscape we face today. We have witnessed the resurgence of white-supremacist values on social media and in real-life events like the tragedy in Charlottesville in 2017. We have seen the rise of political figures who fan the flames of bigotry and reject the rule of law. And in the run-up to Jan. 6, 2021, the [right-wing media spread disinformation that played a role in disrupting](#) the peaceful transition of power.

In these moments, media coverage has routinely failed to adequately expose these dangers for audiences. Too often, [extremist values and coverage](#) have made their way into mainstream-media reporting, shifting what is considered "normal" or "acceptable" in public discourse — with [devastating impacts](#) on people of color, women, immigrants, the LGBTQIA+ community and other vulnerable populations. Media companies should not make false equivalencies between those who are trying to protect democracy and those who are seeking to overthrow it.

Democratic backsliding is rising around the world and the media must take the related threats seriously and place protection of democracy over their own bottom lines. We urge media executives to pledge that their news companies will adopt the following best practices in

covering contentious times — and to safeguard information integrity during moments of crisis, violence and threats to U.S. democracy:

- 1) Identify and name authoritarian and autocratic rhetoric. The rhetoric of authoritarian leaders and the expression of autocratic values delegitimize the democratic process. This rhetoric dehumanizes minority groups, flouts the rule of law and supports violence or retribution against critics and even the media itself. Reporting on the extreme values, speech and behaviors of political figures, candidates, political parties and other influencers must be done directly and without equivocation or the pretext of “balanced” coverage. Your companies must courageously and explicitly refuse to normalize authoritarian practices and language from candidates, political parties and other figureheads by framing such practices and language for audiences as extreme.
- 2) Cross-check, fact-check, double-check. Misinformation and false claims can spread rapidly during heightened crisis periods, undermining trust in the democratic process. Newsrooms must verify information from reliable sources before publishing and promptly correct any inaccuracies. The more times a lie is repeated, even in casual references, the harder it is to later debunk that lie for readers. Clearly call a lie a lie when it is uttered, particularly by political figures, candidates, parties, platforms, and influential individuals. Remind audiences that misinformation is ripe when crises unfold.
- 3) Take seriously and report rigorously on threats to the rule of law and institutions. If a political candidate, party or other influential platform applauds illegal activity and rejects the rule of law, reporters and other media professionals must take these threats seriously as they are overt attacks on a functional democracy. So too must reporting explain why the undermining of the rule of law and attacks on civic institutions, including attacks on journalists and news reporting efforts more broadly, lay the groundwork for normalizing these anti-democratic values.
- 4) Think of the impact on audiences when packaging stories. Headlines matter. So do the sources cited. So does imagery. Editors and journalists must practice caution and care in how they select these elements of news reporting. Often, readers may not even read beyond the headline or opening paragraph. Lies repeated in TV and radio coverage minus careful framing can mislead viewers and listeners to assume the wrong facts. Use descriptors when real dangers present themselves to the public and democracy.
- 5) Always give more context for audiences. Assume audiences know only some history or background on a given subject. American democracy is built on a foundation of checks and balances against authoritarianism. Err on the side of including more of this sort of

historical context and explain “how we got here.” More background will help inform audiences and mitigate assumptions where reporting has left gaps in history, politics or details.

- 6) Provide civic information. Don’t stray from your obligation to provide your audiences with the civic information they need to participate more fully in their communities and country. Bad actors have spread misinformation to prevent or dissuade certain classes of people from exercising their right to vote in elections. Only 28 percent of Americans [feel](#) “very informed” about local elections. A majority of Americans [think](#) democracy is in crisis and feel politically alienated in some fashion. News outlets like yours have a responsibility to set the record straight, provide accurate information about the process and encourage everyone to participate in democracy.

It’s only August. We have months of news coverage and unanticipated events that will unfold before the U.S. elections in November. Now is the time to refuse to cover politics with soundbites that place profit over people’s understanding of the stakes. Media must be a watchdog for the people right now. Media must hold itself to the highest pro-democracy standards.

Sincerely,

Abortion Care Network
Access Humboldt
Alternate ROOTS
Association of Foreign Press Correspondents, USA
CAIR Washington
California LGBT Arts Alliance
Center on Race & Digital Justice
Check My Ads
CreaTV San Jose
Disinfo Defense League
EducateUS
Families for Freedom
Free Press
Friends of the Earth Action
GLAAD
Global Project Against Hate and Extremism

Hearken
Media and Democracy Project
Media Innovation Collaboratory | Trollbusters
MediaJustice
Media Matters for America
National Hispanic Media Coalition
National Queer Asian Pacific Islander Alliance
PEN America
Philadelphia Association of Black Journalists
The Pivot Fund
Rinascimento Green
Sikh American Legal Defense and Education Fund
The Sparrow Project
Surveillance Technology Oversight Project
Tully Center for Free Speech
United We Dream
Women's Media Center

Individual Signatories:

Joe Amditis, journalist
Andrea Figueroa, activist
Jeff Jarvis, journalism professor, CUNY
Brian Karem, White House columnist, Salon
Elad Nehorai, writer, Justice Marketing
Damaso Reyes, executive & investigative editor, *New York Amsterdam News*