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# HATE IN THE HEADLINES: JOURNALISM & THE CHALLENGE OF EXTREMISM



# TABLE OF --- CONTENTS

## HATE IN THE HEADLINES: JOURNALISM & THE CHALLENGE OF EXTREMISM

INTRODUCTION	3
THE RADICALIZATION OF THE AMERICAN RIGHT	8
The Role of the Conservative Media in Radicalizing the Right	9
“The Right and the Rest”	10
Right-Wing Media Links Extremists to Conservative Audiences	12
CHALLENGES IN REPORTING ON RISING EXTREMISM	15
The “Blurring Line” Between Right-Wing Extremism and Mainstream Politics	16
Reporting on Racial Resentment and “White America”	18
Retooling the Newsroom and Adapting to New Realities	19
The Disinformation Challenge	20
Forest for the Trees: Focusing on Episodes and Individuals	22
Buying into the Myth of the “Lone Wolf”	23
Case Study: The Nazi Sympathizer Next Door	26
Moving Beyond Amplification and Manipulation	29
Mediating Direct Quotes	30
Extremist as Clickbait	30

<b>False Equivalency and the Balance Imperative</b>	31
Overcompensating for “Liberal Bias”	34
<b>Case Study: Equivalency Gone Awry</b>	37
NEWSROOM DIVERSITY AND ITS ROLE IN IDENTIFYING EXTREMISM	42
THREATS TO EXTREMISM REPORTERS	47
<b>Case Study: Local Outlets on the Frontlines</b>	49
<i>Mainer</i> Pulled from Circulation	49
Pressures Against Independent Media in West Virginia	51
THE RISE OF DEMOCRACY REPORTING	53
CONCLUSION	57
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	60
APPENDIX: RESOURCES	61

## INTRODUCTION

In August 2017, millions of Americans were shocked and horrified to see footage of thousands of white supremacists marching openly on the streets of Charlottesville, Virginia. After the rally—in which counterprotester Heather Heyer was murdered by a white supremacist<sup>1</sup>—U.S. publications kicked off a national conversation about the need to cover right-wing domestic extremism in a more concerted way. “The beat should be a priority for newsrooms located in ostensibly progressive areas like cities, as well as rural areas,” a journalist wrote in the *Columbia Journalism Review*. “White nationalists and the influence of white supremacy are everywhere,” and newsrooms should cover events like the Unite the Right rally not as an “aberration” but as “a symptom of an ideology knitted into the fabric of America.”<sup>2</sup>

The collective alarm felt by American journalists and the public echoed the shock of the previous November when Donald Trump won the presidential election, running on a platform that explicitly invoked white supremacist ideology and narratives. Both the Charlottesville rally and the election results jolted the press, galvanizing waves of articles on extremists and extremism. Reporters gravitated to the beat, and newsrooms began focusing resources toward investigations. Coverage of far-right extremism, especially white supremacist extremism, rose dramatically at national media outlets between 2016 and 2018. What was once a specialized and somewhat obscure beat became more commonplace.

But the explosion of interest brought its own problems. As newsrooms rushed to cover right-wing extremists, they found that their audience betrayed a morbid fascination with them and that news coverage threatened to glamorize them. Some newsrooms, including the most prestigious ones, ran profiles of white supremacists that unintentionally made them seem relatable, while some digital outlets thirsting for content published clickbait stories about them. All of this generated outsize engagement from readers without inoculating them from the lure of extremist vitriol and propaganda.<sup>3</sup>

Many journalists entering the beat had little awareness of the long history of white supremacist extremism or its relationship with the internet.<sup>4</sup> White supremacist and other extremist groups were early adopters of online political organizing and by 2016—when then-candidate Donald Trump gave them the news hook they had been waiting for—had developed a culture of memes, satire, and trolling designed to manipulate journalists.<sup>5</sup> This manipulation, combined with a wave of reporters incentivized to feed an insatiable appetite for digital content and Trump’s own increasingly explicit embrace of them, allowed extremists to ascend

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<sup>1</sup>Ohio Man Sentenced to Life in Prison for Federal Hate Crimes Related to August 2017 Car Attack at Rally in Charlottesville, Virginia. 28 June 2019, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/ohio-man-sentenced-life-prison-federal-hate-crimes-related-august-2017-car-attack-rally>.

<sup>2</sup>Christiana Mbakwe, “White-supremacy threat demands its own beat reporters,” *Columbia Journalism Review*, August 17, 2017, [cjr.org/criticism/white-supremacy-beat.php](http://cjr.org/criticism/white-supremacy-beat.php)

<sup>3</sup>Interview with a technology reporter on background. Name withheld at their request. PEN America interview with Kelly Weill, reporter, the Daily Beast, November 8, 2021; PEN America interview with Michael Edison Hayden, senior investigative reporter, Southern Poverty Law Center, October 8, 2021; Interview with David Neiwert of the Daily Kos. Secondary sources: Whitney Phillips, “The Oxygen of Amplification,” *Data & Society*, 2018, <https://datasociety.net/library/oxygen-of-amplification/>; Avi Asher-Schapiro, “Journalists covering US white supremacists must weigh risks to selves and families,” *Committee to Protect Journalists*, March 15, 2018, <https://cpj.org/2018/03/journalists-covering-us-white-supremacists-must-we/>

<sup>4</sup>Whitney Phillips, “The Oxygen of Amplification,” *Data & Society*, 2018, <https://datasociety.net/library/oxygen-of-amplification/>.

<sup>5</sup>In journalism, the “news hook” is that critical piece of newsworthy information that captures the attention and interest of both the news media and their audiences. Yopp, McAdams, & Thornburg, *Reaching Audiences: A Guide to Media Writing*, Pearson Allyn and Bacon, 2010.

to the national stage. According to disinformation scholar Whitney Phillips, the news media was effectively “hijacked from 2016 to 2018 to amplify the messages of hate groups.”<sup>6</sup>

Domestic right-wing extremism has evolved from a fringe movement into an antidemocratic force with open support from some elected officials as well as influential conservative media figures, most notably Tucker Carlson, whose Fox News show has a nightly audience of three million-plus viewers.<sup>7</sup> According to an AP-NORC poll released this spring, one in three American adults believe in the “Great Replacement” theory, which holds that a “group of people is trying to replace native-born Americans with immigrants for electoral gains.”<sup>8</sup> A significant number align with the white power movement in their willingness to voice racial resentment toward communities of color, especially immigrants, and toward religious minorities, including Jews and Muslims, and to adopt their radical anti-government stance, and their embrace of authoritarian governance, and the promotion of disinformation to proselytize these views.<sup>9</sup>

Trump and Trumpism have also goaded establishment Republican figures to break with the longstanding norms of the existing democratic system and embrace far-right extremist tactics like disinformation and antidemocratic obstruction, including tolerating and in some cases possibly enabling political violence, to achieve their political goals.<sup>10</sup> Hours after the Capitol insurrection of January 6, 2021, 147 Republican U.S. representatives and senators voted to overturn the 2020 election results, and many elected officials and candidates still voice support for the “Big Lie” that Trump actually won.<sup>11</sup> Less than two years later, a major portion of Republican candidates for office during the 2022 midterms denied the legitimacy of President Biden’s victory—a shocking embrace of dangerous disinformation within one of America’s two main political parties.<sup>12</sup> These anti-democratic impulses and tactics are ones that autocrats and authoritarians around the world happily employ.

Today, as far-right extremists have spread their ideology beyond organized hate groups and filled seats in local, state, and federal elected offices, they play an ever-more-prominent role in U.S. politics. The storming of the United States Capitol was the clearest, but far from the only, sign of the existential threat that anti-democratic extremists pose to our democracy. As efforts to subvert elections continue throughout local and national politics, journalists must reckon with when and how to identify and expose this unprecedented danger.

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<sup>6</sup> Data & Society. “The Oxygen of Amplification.” By Whitney Phillips. 2018. <https://datasociety.net/library/oxygen-of-amplification/>.

<sup>7</sup> Nicholas Confessore, “What to know about Tucker Carlson’s Rise,” *The New York Times*, April 30,

2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/30/business/media/tucker-carlson-fox-news-takeaways.html>; Amna Nawaz et al, “Tucker Carlson’s influence and his increasingly extreme views,” PBS NewsHour, May 2, 2022, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/tucker-carlsons-influence-and-his-increasingly-extreme-views>

<sup>8</sup> Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, “Immigration Attitudes and Conspiratorial Thinkers: A Study Issued on the 10th Anniversary of the Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, May 9, 2022, <https://apnorc.org/projects/immigration-attitudes-and-conspiratorial-thinkers/>

<sup>9</sup> Chris Hayes, “The Republican Party is Radicalizing Against Democracy,” *The Atlantic*, February 8, 2021,

<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/02/republican-party-radicalizing-against-democracy/617959/>

<sup>10</sup> Carlos Maza, “How Trump makes extreme things look normal,” Vox, December 21, 2017, <https://www.vox.com/2017/12/21/16806676/striethrough-how-trump-overtone-window-extreme-normal>; Sarah Manavis, “How the alt-right shifted the Overton Window,” *New Statesman*, June 10,

2020, <https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/books/2020/06/alt-right-politics-2016-andrew-marantz-antisocial-review>; Heather Timmons, “Stochastic terror and the cycle of hate that pushes unstable Americans to violence,” Quartz, October 26, 2018, <https://qz.com/1436267/trump-stochastic-terror-and-the-hate-that-ends-in-violence/>; Jon Allsop, “Both sides,” *Columbia Journalism Review*, December 16, 2019, [https://www.cjr.org/the\\_media\\_today/both-sides-impeachment-trump.php](https://www.cjr.org/the_media_today/both-sides-impeachment-trump.php)

<sup>11</sup> Karen Yourish, Larry Buchanan, and Denise Lu, “The 147 Republicans who voted to overturn election results,” *The New York Times*, Jan. 7, 2021,

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/01/07/us/elections/electoral-college-biden-objectors.html>

<sup>12</sup> “60 Percent Of Americans Will Have An Election Denier On The Ballot This Fall,” *FiveThirtyEight*, Updated Oct. 28,

2022, <https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/republicans-trump-election-fraud/>; Adrain Blanco and Amy Gardner, “Where Republican Election Deniers are on the Ballot Near You,” *The Washington Post*, October 6, 2022, <https://washingtonpost.com/elections/interactive/2022/election-deniers-running-for-office-elections-2022/?tid=hp-top-table-main-t-3>

This report builds on the work of journalists and experts in journalism, media, and extremism to examine how the news media has grappled with the challenges of reporting on rising far-right extremism in the United States. It examines the steps taken to identify and report on this movement from 2016 until today and considers how the journalism industry should respond as the line between extremist and mainstream politics continues to blur.

As this report will explore, many ideas and tactics that originated in white supremacist subcultures and are antithetical to democracy have migrated from the fringe to the mainstream. Regardless of their increasing palatability to portions of the American public and among some candidates for office and elected officials, such stances remain extreme. Both antidemocratic and illiberal (in the sense of degrading Americans' civil liberties), they are incompatible with the guarantees of civil rights and popular participation that underpin the American system of government. Far-right extremists have worked methodically to seed these ideas in broader society, casting them as normal to obscure the line between mainstream conservative politics and their own hate-based ideologies and shifting the so-called Overton window<sup>13</sup> of acceptable discourse to include formerly fringe positions on immigration, women's rights, and other issues.<sup>14</sup>

In this report, PEN America uses the term "right-wing extremism" to describe the radical, anti-democratic ideologies that in recent years have been exerting steadily greater influence on mainstream U.S. politics.<sup>15</sup> Right-wing extremism is often explicit in its aim to degrade or dismiss the rights of people of color—with white supremacy and white nationalism playing a major animating role. Further, while we use "right-wing extremism" to encompass actors and events that are not explicitly about race—such as the January 6 insurrection—we recognize that almost invariably, such movements are ultimately tied to racial, religious, and ethnic antagonism. An analysis by the Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS) shows that during the Trump era, far-right violent plots and attacks have disproportionately affected racial, religious, and ethnic minorities.<sup>16</sup>

Racial animosity can play a role in fostering anti-democratic inclinations, as well. A significant 2020 analysis of Republican voters found a clear statistical relationship between higher scores on an ethnic-antagonism scale and a voter's willingness to support antidemocratic statements

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<sup>13</sup> Political science and policy theorists term the range of ideas and policy proposals deemed "acceptable" in mainstream public discourse the "Overton window." Ideological movement of the Overton Window to include new policies or party priorities is a standard hallmark of American politics. For example, in 2011 Luke Fuszard of Business Insider attributed the visibility of social security privatization and Medicare reform introduced by Tea Party political candidates as the result of a long-term Republican Party strategy to shift the Overton Window to the right on issues of healthcare and social services. Politico, HuffPost, and *The New York Times* identified the introduction and campaign success of Bernie Sanders's progressive economic policies in the 2016 election as evidence of a shift of the Overton Window on the left. See Maggie Astor, "How the Politically Unthinkable Can Become Mainstream," *The New York Times*, Feb. 26, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/26/us/politics/overton-window-democrats.html>; Derek Robertson, "How an obscure conservative theory became the Trump era's go-to nerd phrase," Politico, February 25, 2018, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2018/02/25/overton-window-explained-definition-meaning-217010>; Chris Weigant, "Bernie moves the Overton Window on single-payer," Huffpost, September 13, 2017, [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/bernie-moves-the-overton-window-on-single-payer\\_b\\_59b9d3dfe4b06b71800c36a3](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/bernie-moves-the-overton-window-on-single-payer_b_59b9d3dfe4b06b71800c36a3)

<sup>14</sup> E.g. Aaron Sankin and Will Carless, "The Hate Report: Article 'normalizes' a neo-Nazi, internet flips out," Reveal News, December 1, 2017, <https://revealnews.org/blog/the-hate-report-article-normalizes-a-neo-nazi-internet-flips-out/>

<sup>15</sup> The historian Kathleen Belew defines the white power movement as the broad social movement that brought together Klan, neo-Nazis, skinhead, militia, radical tax resistor and other militant right-wing activists in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. See "Are We Witnessing the Mainstreaming of White Power in America?" Ezra Klein Show, *The New York Times*, November 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/16/opinion/ezra-klein-podcast-kathleen-belew.html>

<sup>16</sup> More about the CSIS methodology: Data compiled by the CSIS Transnational Threats Project from the START Global Terrorism Database (1994-2020), Janes Terrorism and Insurgency Events (2009-2020), RAND Database of Worldwide Terrorism Incidents (1994-2009), and the Anti-Defamation League's (ADL) Hate, Extremism, Anti-Semitism, and Terrorism (HEAT) Map. Also compiled events as recorded in ADL publications and Federal Bureau of Investigation annual reports and news release (1994-2020). Cross-referenced events against local and national news sources, including the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *Los Angeles Times*. Read full methodology here: [https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/200616\\_Jones\\_Methodology\\_v3\\_0.pdf](https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/200616_Jones_Methodology_v3_0.pdf).

like “the traditional American way of life is disappearing so fast we may have to use force to save it” and “strong leaders sometimes have to bend the rules in order to get things done.”<sup>17</sup>

Alarming, right-wing extremists are currently enjoying broader acceptance in the political mainstream than at any other time in the post-civil rights era.<sup>18</sup> Heidi Beirich, a co-founder of the Global Project Against Hate and Extremism who has tracked extremists since the 1990s, told *USA Today*: “I don’t think we’ve ever had so many candidates, in so many parts of the country, who are openly conspiracists or connected to white nationalists or various forms of extremism.... It just shows how much fringe ideas have been mainstreamed over the course of the last five or six years.”<sup>19</sup>

The current rise of right-wing extremism is also inextricably linked to the rise of disinformation and fraudulent news. Long-standing tools of far-right extremists, these deceptive tactics are now deployed by some right-wing politicians and operatives as well as the larger, Trump-affiliated, Make America Great Again (MAGA) movement to influence the U.S. political system.

In 2017 and 2019, PEN America published reports examining the corrosive implications of disinformation and recommended steps to combat it while protecting free expression rights. Our 2019 report stated that “fraudulent news remains a salient threat to our politics” and warned, “Political parties, campaigns, regulators and technology companies are on notice that the integrity of the 2020 US election will depend upon their ability to mount more effective defenses than exist today.”<sup>20</sup> Publishing that report before the 2020 election, we did not anticipate that the false belief that President Biden and the Democratic Party “stole” the 2020 presidential election—the so-called “Big Lie”—would become a sustained, animating force on the right, or that 2020’s election-denial efforts could serve as a practice run for more consequential operations in the future.<sup>21</sup>

As far-right views increasingly infuse the modern Republican Party, an increasing number of journalists will face the challenge of reporting on far-right political candidates or elected officials. These include challenges such as how and when to report on those individuals’ fraudulent or inflammatory statements, how to cover violence or threats of violence at the polls, and how to recognize extremism and disinformation as they infiltrate a variety of policy issues. Responding to these challenges will require conceptual shifts in how outlets approach covering politics. As *Washington Post* media columnist Margaret Sullivan put it in August 2022, in her final column for the paper, “One thing is certain. News outlets can’t continue to do speech, rally and debate coverage—the heart of campaign reporting—in the same old way.

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<sup>17</sup> Larry M. Bartels, “Ethnic antagonism erodes Republicans’ commitment to democracy,” *PNAS*, August 31, 2020, <https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.2007747117>; Zack Beauchamp, “The Republican revolt against democracy, explained in 13 charts,” *Vox*, March 1, 2021, <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/22274429/republicans-anti-democracy-13-charts>.

<sup>18</sup> “Are We Witnessing the Mainstreaming of White Power in America?” Ezra Klein Show, *The New York Times*, November 16, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/16/opinion/ezra-klein-podcast-kathleen-belew.html>. University of Chicago Staff Page: <https://history.uchicago.edu/directory/kathleen-belew>.

<sup>19</sup> Will Carless, “Fringe ideas are going mainstream in US politics. That’s a danger to democracy, extremism experts say,” *USA Today*, January 26, 2022, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2022/01/26/democracy-politics-extremism-white-supremacy/9213808002/>.

<sup>20</sup> PEN America, “Truth on the Ballot: Fraudulent News, the Midterm Elections, and Prospects for 2020,” March 2019, <https://pen.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Truth-on-the-Ballot-report.pdf>.

<sup>21</sup> Karen Yourish, Larry Buchanan and Denise Lu, “The 147 Republicans Who Voted to Overturn Election Results,” *The New York Times*, January 7, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/01/07/us/elections/electoral-college-biden-objectors.html>

They will need to lean less on knee-jerk live coverage and more on reporting that relentlessly provides meaningful context.”<sup>22</sup>

Based on PEN America’s interviews with 75 journalists, academics, and other experts, this report examines the challenges faced by the press in covering these dynamics. It offers an assessment of debates within the industry about how to report on mainstream political radicalization, what lessons can be learned from reporters experienced in covering extremism, and shifts in newsroom approaches to covering extremism, including addressing the “balance imperative” and false equivalence, fraudulent or inflammatory statements made by elected officials and candidates, violence or threats at the polls, and the deluge of disinformation infiltrating a variety of policy issues. It also notes the increasing turn toward adopting a pro-democracy approach when covering voting rights, electoral processes, antidemocratic legislation, and the normalization of political violence. It ends with a set of recommendations for how newsrooms and their supporters can help foster fair and responsible reporting in the public interest.

The press continues to play a crucial role in curbing extremist influence and holding elected officials accountable for embracing or condoning extremism—in other words, in serving as a watchdog for our democracy. PEN America offers this report to uphold this vital work.

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<sup>22</sup> Margaret Sullivan, “My final column: 2024 and the dangers ahead,” *The Washington Post*, August 21, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/media/2022/08/21/margaret-sullivan-last-column-trump-2024-media/>



# THE RADICALIZATION OF THE AMERICAN RIGHT

*“People have trouble seeing the type of extremism that comes wrapped in the American flag.”*  
–Samantha Kutner, anti-extremism researcher<sup>23</sup>

The term “extremism” implies ideas that are outside the mainstream of political discourse. In the past few years, however, extremists have penetrated national, state, and local politics in startling numbers. In January 2022, the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) found that at least 100 candidates running in the 2022 midterm elections have associated with extremists such as Oath Keepers and Proud Boys or promoted extreme views, including conspiracy theories—“and the list,” ADL said, “continues to grow on a near-daily basis.”<sup>24</sup> Nine months later, *The Washington Post* found that 299 Republican candidates—more than half of all GOP candidates for state and local office, in 48 of 50 states—were “election deniers,” propagating the myth that President Biden lost the 2020 election.<sup>25</sup> The news outlet FiveThirtyEight offered broadly comparable figures that same month, calculating that out of 552 total Republican candidates for office in the then-upcoming midterms, at least 201 denied the legitimacy of President Biden’s victory.<sup>26</sup> The Insurrection Index, an online database built by the voting rights group Public Wise, has documented 233 sitting politicians or candidates who participated in or “directly supported” the January 6 Capitol insurrection.<sup>27</sup>

News coverage over the past five years has familiarized audiences with groups like the Proud Boys, Boogaloo Boys, Oath Keepers, and Three Percenters, but such groups represent only part of a complex, active realm that also encompasses conspiracy movements like QAnon, loose networks of white supremacists, and subcultures like “involuntary celibates” (aka “incels,” who are hostile and sometimes violent toward women). Some far-right extremists are motivated primarily by racial or ethnic bigotry, including xenophobia, and others by extreme opposition to the federal government and its policies. While white supremacist extremism presents the greatest threat of violence in the United States, other forms of extremism, fed by disinformation and anti-government beliefs are also fomenting violence and raising threats.<sup>28</sup> Among the most pernicious anti-government movements are opponents of Covid-19 health mandates and proponents of Trump’s claims of election fraud and the Biden Administration’s illegitimacy.<sup>29</sup>

Communities of color, women, immigrants, and members of religious minorities are the primary targets of political violence, harassment, and discriminatory rhetoric perpetrated by right-wing extremists and their enablers. The Center for Strategic & International Studies compiled information from several government and civil society databases and found that

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<sup>23</sup> PEN America interview with Samantha Kutner, *International Center for Counter-Terrorism*, October 15, 2021

<sup>24</sup> Anti-Defamation League. “Extremism on the Ballot.” January 25, 2022, <https://www.adl.org/blog/extremism-on-the-ballot-in-2022>

<sup>25</sup> Adrain Blanco and Amy Gardner, “Where Republican Election Deniers are on the Ballot Near You,” *The Washington Post*, October 6, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/elections/interactive/2022/election-deniers-running-for-office-elections-2022/?itid=hp-top-table-main-t-3>

<sup>26</sup> “60 Percent Of Americans Will Have An Election Denier On The Ballot This Fall,” FiveThirtyEight, Updated Oct. 28, 2022, <https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/republicans-trump-election-fraud/>

<sup>27</sup> Insurrection Index: <https://insurrectionindex.org/>. As of October 19, 2022.

<sup>28</sup> Thomas T Cullen, “The Grave Threats of White Supremacy and Far-Right Extremism,” *The New York Times*, February 22, 2019, <https://www.justice.gov/usao-wdva/pr/opinion-grave-threats-white-supremacy-and-far-right-extremism>

<sup>29</sup> Ben Collins and Brandy Zadrozny, “From the Capitol to the city council: How extremism in the U.S. shifted after January 6,” NBC News, January 4, 2022, <https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/internet/extremism-us-jan-6-capitol-rcna10731>

between 2015 and 2020, 74 percent of violent far-right attacks were against minority communities and locations associated with them, like mosques, synagogues, churches, and even grocery stores located in minority neighborhoods.<sup>30</sup> Between 1994 and 2020, 46 percent of right-wing extremist attacks struck private individuals, property, and religious institutions selected due to their race, ethnicity, or religion. Women’s health clinics and government facilities were also vulnerable targets.<sup>31</sup> Of 443 murders carried out by extremists between 2012 and 2021, the Anti-Defamation League reported that 244 (55 percent) were by self-described white supremacists.<sup>32</sup>

It is important to note that far-left terrorist incidents carried out by groups like anarchists, anti-fascists, and violent environmentalists have also been on the rise in recent years, according to CSIS and the ADL. But the size, organization, quantity, and casualties of terrorism and hate crimes perpetrated by the far right vastly exceed those on the left.<sup>33</sup> Between 2012 and 2021, left-wing violent attacks made up only 4 percent of the 443 extremist-related murders carried out in the United States, according to the ADL.<sup>34</sup> Seventy-five percent of those murders were perpetrated by right-wing extremists.<sup>35</sup>

## The Role of the Conservative Media in Radicalizing the Right

While this report deals primarily with the mainstream media,<sup>36</sup> it would be incomplete without also examining the avowedly partisan conservative media, a separate news ecosystem. Scholars and journalists interviewed for this report express concern about this growing, highly influential media sector—which encompasses digital publications, podcasts, radio, and cable TV, led by the colossus of Fox News—and its role in spreading disinformation, amplifying extremist talking points, pushing a radical agenda, and undermining trust in mainstream media coverage. They warn that the right-wing mediascape will outlast former President Donald Trump and will continue to radicalize conservative audiences and policy.<sup>37</sup>

In 2020, the Pew Research Center found that nearly two-thirds of self-identified Republicans and Republican-leaning independents ranked Fox News as their most trusted source for

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<sup>30</sup> CSIS, “The Tactics and Targets of Domestic Terrorists,” Seth Jones, Catrina Doxsee and Nicholas Harrington, July 30, 2020, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/tactics-and-targets-domestic-terrorists>

<sup>31</sup> More about the CSIS methodology: Data compiled by the CSIS Transnational Threats Project from the START Global Terrorism Database (1994-2020), Janes Terrorism and Insurgency Events (2009-2020), RAND Database of Worldwide Terrorism Incidents (1994-2009), and the Anti-Defamation League’s (ADL) Hate, Extremism, Anti-Semitism, and Terrorism (HEAT) Map. Also compiled events as recorded in ADL publications and Federal Bureau of Investigation annual reports and news release (1994-2020). Cross-referenced events against local and national news sources, including the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *Los Angeles Times*. Read full methodology here: [https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/200616\\_Jones\\_Methodology\\_v3\\_0.pdf](https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/200616_Jones_Methodology_v3_0.pdf).

<sup>32</sup> Anti-Defamation League, “Murder and Extremism in the United States in 2021,” <https://www.adl.org/murder-and-extremism-2021>

<sup>33</sup> CSIS, “The Military, Police and the Rise of Terrorism in the United States.” By Seth G. Jones, Catrina Doxsee, and Grace Hwang, April 12, 2021, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/military-police-and-rise-terrorism-united-states>

<sup>34</sup> Anti-Defamation League. “Murder and Extremism in the United States in 2021.” <https://www.adl.org/murder-and-extremism-2021>

<sup>35</sup> Anti-Defamation League. “Murder and Extremism in the United States in 2021.” <https://www.adl.org/murder-and-extremism-2021>

<sup>36</sup> By “mainstream media,” we use social scientist Yochai Benkler’s definition. Mainstream media, according to Benkler, is characterized by its willingness and capacity to identify, resist and correct falsehoods (source: Yochai Benkler, Robert Faris, and Hal Roberts. *Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics*. Oxford University Press, 2018). Communications scholars and media observers have named the following news organizations to define the “mainstream,” but the list is not necessarily comprehensive: ABC, CBS, NBC, PBS, CNN, *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Reuters*, Bloomberg, the AP, and NPR.

<sup>37</sup> See e.g. Harvard Kennedy School Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy. “They Don’t Give a Damn about Governing: Conservative Media’s Influence on the Republican Party,” Jackie Calmes, July 27, 2015, <https://shorensteincenter.org/conservative-media-influence-on-republican-party-jackie-calmes/>; Brian Stelter, “Experts warn about the radicalizing power of right-wing media.” CNN, December 21, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/12/21/media/right-wing-radicalization-election-results/index.html>; David Roberts, “How conservative media helped the far-right take over the Republican Party,” Vox, July 30, 2015, <https://www.vox.com/2015/7/30/9074761/conservative-media-republican-party>; Yochai Benkler, Robert Faris, and Hal Roberts. *Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics*. Oxford University Press, 2018

political and election coverage.<sup>38</sup> Meanwhile, the election and presidency of Donald Trump elevated the national profile of far-right outlets such as Newsmax, One America News Network, and Breitbart News.<sup>39</sup> These outlets have massive reach, aided by the rise of social media and its algorithms enabling hyper-partisan content to go viral.<sup>40</sup>

The powerful organizing capacity of right-wing media, especially talk radio hosts, also means that those who defy the GOP's "most vocal, most ideological, most extreme elements" are subject to primary challenges and other political consequences at the behest of these right-wing media personalities. There has never been an equivalent on the partisan left, as left-of-center media has remained small in comparison to its right-wing counterparts.<sup>41</sup>



"Conservative media gives them a narrative for when they're consuming news from these other outlets. So if they are reading The New York Times, they are already reading it through a lens that they've been given through that other ecosystem."

A.J. Bauer, *University of Alabama*

## "The Right and Rest"

Since its founding, modern right-wing media has defined itself in opposition to the journalistic norms and practices of mainstream news. The conservative media ecosystem can arguably be traced back to the 1920s, but its size and influence surged in the late 1980s, in part due to the FCC's repeal of the Fairness Doctrine during the Reagan Administration.<sup>42</sup> The Fairness Doctrine was a federal regulatory measure in place from 1927 to 1987, under the Federal Radio Commission and its successor organization the

Federal Communications Commission. Under this doctrine, broadcasters were required to cover controversial issues of public importance, and were further required to ensure such coverage was fair by accurately reporting opposing views, and by affording reasonable opportunity for those who disagreed. One major effect of this doctrine, which was eliminated under the Reagan Administration, was to limit exclusively partisan networks. See Yochai Benkler, Robert Faris, and Hal Roberts. *Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics*. Oxford University Press, 2018, pp. 320-322 Talk radio host Rush Limbaugh, whose show became nationally syndicated in 1988, set the incendiary tone, laying the groundwork for Fox News, which launched in 1996, and for later pundits like Glenn Beck, Sean Hannity, and Tucker Carlson.<sup>43</sup> As right-wing voices reached mass audiences in the 1990s,<sup>44</sup> they created a conservative news identity,<sup>45</sup> defined by criticism of mainstream

<sup>38</sup> John Gramlich, "5 facts about Fox News." Pew Research Center, April 8, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/04/08/five-facts-about-fox-news/>

<sup>39</sup> Benjamin Fearnow, "Fox News Receives Twice as Many Daily Republican Viewers as Newsmax, Poll Finds," *Newsweek*, March 9, 2021, <https://www.newsweek.com/fox-news-receives-twice-many-daily-republican-viewers-newsmax-poll-finds-1574938>; Yochai Benkler, Robert Faris, and Hal Roberts. *Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics*. Oxford University Press, 2018, p. 52

<sup>40</sup> See e.g. Yochai Benkler et al, "Study: Breitbart-led right wing media ecosystem altered broader media agenda," *Columbia Journalism Review*, March 3, 2017, <https://www.cjr.org/analysis/breitbart-media-trump-harvard-study.php>

<sup>41</sup> David Roberts, "How conservative media helped the far-right take over the Republican Party," *Vox*, July 30, 2015, <https://www.vox.com/2015/7/30/9074761/conservative-media-republican-party>. See also Harvard Kennedy School Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy, "They Don't Give a Damn about Governing: Conservative Media's Influence on the Republican Party," Jackie Calmes. July 27, 2015, <https://shorensteincenter.org/conservative-media-influence-on-republican-party-jackie-calmes/>

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>43</sup> Anthony Nadler and A.J. Bauer, *News on the Right: Studying Conservative News Cultures*, Oxford University Press, 2019, p. 3; Yochai Benkler, Robert Faris, and Hal Roberts. *Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics*. Oxford University Press, 2018, p. 317

<sup>44</sup> Fox News combined Limbaugh's model with CNN's 24-hour news format. Yochai Benkler, Robert Faris, and Hal Roberts, *Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics*, Oxford University Press, 2018, p. 322.

<sup>45</sup> Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Joseph Cappella. *Echo Chamber: Rush Limbaugh and the Conservative Media Establishment*. Oxford University Press, 2010, pp.

media, efforts to undermine trust in government, race- and gender-baiting language, pressures to push Republican politicians to embrace extreme positions, and a viewpoint-driven, rather than fact-based, approach to news.<sup>46</sup>

Right-wing pundits and politicians have been particularly effective at casting mainstream media as having a partisan “liberal bias.”<sup>47</sup> In a significant 2018 study of online media, scholars at Harvard Law School’s Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society showed that digital news consists of two ecosystems. The study found that the two ecosystems, while separate, do not fall neatly along right-left partisan lines. Instead, the scholars found a divide between “the right and the rest”:<sup>48</sup> an asymmetrically polarized mediascape with a discrete right-wing ecosystem that operates in a fundamentally different way from the rest of U.S. media.<sup>49</sup>

The distinction between right-wing media and “the rest,” these scholars found, is only partly tied to partisanship or political ideology but more fundamentally to each side’s capacity to identify, resist, and correct falsehoods. The mainstream media ecosystem has a diverse architecture made of many competing, high-profile sites that, whatever their flaws, generally attempt to adhere to facts. It’s a framework that, the scholars say, collectively “imposes higher reputational costs on sites and authors who propagate rumor and provides avenues for relatively rapid fact checking, criticism of false claims, and rapid dissemination of and coalescence around corrected narratives.” By contrast, right-wing media revolves around high levels of trust in single outlets, creating “positive feedback for bias-confirming statements as a central feature of its normal operation.”<sup>50</sup>

In an interview with *Boston Review*, Yochai Benkler of the Berkman Klein Center elaborated on the distinctions:

We have an insular right-wing media ecosystem (Fox News, Breitbart, the *Washington Times*, Daily Caller, and the Gateway Pundit, for example) that has spun out of control and created a propaganda feedback loop, in which what is true or false is entirely beside the point. Its defining characteristic is pushing content that reinforces identity and political in-group membership. To contrast, the left-wing media, which includes outlets such as Daily Kos, Mother Jones, and HuffPost, is ... anchored in traditional mainstream media—the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, CNN, and which stretches all the way to editorially conservative mainstream publications such as the *Wall Street Journal* and *Forbes*. In most cases, the left-wing outlets share the reporting and journalistic traditions of mainstream media, and even where they do not, they are constrained in how far they can stray from the truth by the fact that their

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30, 179.

<sup>46</sup> Yochai Benkler, Robert Faris, and Hal Roberts. *Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics*. Oxford University Press, 2018, pp. 321-322.

<sup>47</sup> Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Joseph Cappella. *Echo Chamber: Rush Limbaugh and the Conservative Media Establishment*. Oxford University Press, 2010, p. 161.

<sup>48</sup> Yochai Benkler, Robert Faris, and Hal Roberts. *Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics*. Oxford University Press, 2018, p. 74.

<sup>49</sup> Robert Faris, Hal Roberts, Bruce Etling et al. “Partisanship, Propaganda, and Disinformation: Online Media and the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election.” Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University, August 2017, 8, 17. This reality also reflects a gutting of the center-right media landscape, determined by researchers to be “the least populated and least influential portion of the media spectrum” (Faris et al 2017, 18). Researchers also emphasized that this asymmetric polarization, while examined more rigorously in recent years, pre-dates the rise of Trump and has deeper historical roots: It likely that Trump benefited from existing asymmetric polarization as much as his candidacy was a cause of it (Faris et al 2017, 37).

<sup>50</sup> Yochai Benkler, Robert Faris, and Hal Roberts. *Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics*. Oxford University Press, 2018, p. 74.

audiences pay significant attention to these media. So the two wings of the media ecosystem are not operating under the same rules.<sup>51</sup>

As journalist David Roberts wrote for Vox in 2015, conservative media is “now a full media ecosystem; there’s no longer any need for conservatives to stray outside it to stay informed, or ‘informed.’”<sup>52</sup> While defamation law may act as a deterrent to airing egregious or damaging disinformation, conservative media pays little social penalty for doing so. (The pending lawsuits filed by Dominion and Smartmatic claiming that Fox News and its mouthpieces caused irreparable harm by promoting false claims that their voting machines intentionally rigged the 2020 election have yet to be decided.)

Right-wing media also provides its audience with alternate interpretations of mainstream media news. Drawing from interviews with Tea Party activists, A.J. Bauer of the University of Alabama told PEN America: “Conservative media gives them a narrative for when they’re consuming news from these other outlets. So if they are reading *The New York Times*, they are already reading it through a lens that they’ve been given through that other ecosystem.”<sup>53</sup>

Animus toward the mainstream media is an aspect of this distorted lens, contributing significantly to the increasing distrust and anger conservative audiences hold for mainstream outlets.<sup>54</sup> After Donald Trump called the news media “the enemy of the people”<sup>55</sup> (a phrase favored by Joseph Stalin, among many others), a Quinnipiac poll found that 51 percent of Republicans agreed with that characterization.<sup>56</sup>

## Right-Wing Media Links Extremists to Conservative Audiences

Mis- and disinformation<sup>57</sup> are not limited to the right.<sup>58</sup> Yet, the risks that disinformation poses when disseminated by the right-wing ecosystem, specifically, are uniquely high. The extensive reach of popular media organizations like Fox News and Breitbart to audiences on the right means that false or misleading information from them can be amplified faster, reach more people, and stay in circulation unchecked for longer than information from mainstream outlets.<sup>59</sup> This structure makes the right-wing ecosystem an attractive propaganda vehicle for

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<sup>51</sup> Deborah Chasman, “Selling Outrage: An Interview with Yochai Benkler,” *Boston Review*, November 12, 2018, <https://bostonreview.net/articles/yochai-benkler-deborah-chasman-selling-outrage/>

<sup>52</sup> David Roberts, “How conservative media helped the far-right take over the Republican Party,” Vox, July 30, 2015, <https://www.vox.com/2015/7/30/9074761/conservative-media-republican-party>

<sup>53</sup> PEN America interview with A.J. Bauer, Assistant Professor at the College of Communication and Information Sciences, University of Alabama, January 6, 2022

<sup>54</sup> See Meredith Conroy, “Why being ‘anti-media’ is now part of the GOP identity,” *FiveThirtyEight.com*, April 5, 2021, <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/why-being-anti-media-is-now-part-of-the-gop-identity/>; Anthony Nadler and Doron Taussig, “Conservatives’ mistrust of media is rooted in the feeling journalists want to ostracize them,” *NiemanLab*, April 19, 2022, <https://www.niemanlab.org/2022/04/conservatives-mistrust-of-media-is-rooted-in-the-feeling-journalists-want-to-ostracize-them/>

<sup>55</sup> David Remnick, “Trump and the Enemies of the People,” *The New Yorker*, August 1, 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/trump-and-the-enemies-of-the-people>

<sup>56</sup> Eli Watkins, “Poll: Majority of GOP agrees news media is ‘enemy of the people,’” *CNN*, August 15, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/08/14/politics/quinnipiac-media-gop/index.html>

<sup>57</sup> PEN America defines “misinformation” as inaccurate or false information that is not necessarily created or disseminated with the intent to deceive, while “disinformation” as false content created or distributed with the intent to deceive. For more, see PEN America’s reports *Hard News: Journalists and the Threat of Disinformation* (April 2022); *Truth on the Ballot: Fraudulent News, the Midterm Elections, and Prospects for 2020* (March 2019); and *Faking News: Fraudulent News and the Fight for Truth* (October 2017)

<sup>58</sup> Toby Hopp, Patrick Ferrucci, and Chris J. Vargo, “Why Do People Share Ideologically Extreme, False, and Misleading Content on Social Media? A Self-Report and Trace Data-Based Analysis of Countermedia Content Dissemination on Facebook and Twitter,” *Human Communication Research*, 2020, 364. <https://academic.oup.com/hcr/article/46/4/357/5840447?guestAccessKey=e1548abf-a0ae-469a-98f5-a9a04b0b769e>

<sup>59</sup> David French, a former senior writer at *The National Review*, has said he thinks the publication “has a responsibility to criticize and debunk popular right-wing conspiracies if they gain a certain degree of currency” or “significant visibility.” Many other conservative journalists interviewed said that their publications should

extremists looking to promote dangerous falsehoods or conspiracy theories about elections, democracy, and minority communities.

Since 2020, right-wing media has emerged as a major vector for Covid-related disinformation.<sup>60</sup> The amplification of election-related disinformation, including conspiracy theories about mail-in-voter fraud, has been even more inflammatory, encouraging antidemocratic tactics such as the harassment and intimidation of poll workers<sup>61</sup> and the political violence of January 6.<sup>62</sup>

Fox News favorite Tucker Carlson elevated fictitious narratives and legitimized political violence with his Fox News documentary *Patriot Purge*, which claimed that January 6 was a “false flag” operation carried out by the federal government to provide cover for targeting and arresting conservatives.<sup>63</sup>

In recent years, says Anthony Nadler, a conservative-news expert at Ursinus College, explicitly white supremacist publications have found new levels of success by being able to “infiltrate” the conservative media sphere—and national politics—through far-right outlets like Breitbart News.<sup>64</sup> In 2019, researchers found a smoking gun when a leak of more than 900 emails revealed that in 2015 and 2016, Trump senior policy adviser Stephen Miller directly fed conspiracy theories and content from white nationalist sites to editors at Breitbart News.<sup>65</sup>

A research team led by Benkler of the Berkman Klein Center found that the term “globalist,” widely recognized as an anti-Semitic dog whistle<sup>66</sup> and until 2015 used primarily by white supremacist publication *VDARE*, was adopted and amplified by Breitbart and Steve Bannon, Trump’s campaign chief and senior White House strategist. By 2017, the term was in general use outside the right-wing ecosystem. In their 2018 book *Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics*, coauthors Benkler, Robert Faris, and

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avoid directly publishing or sourcing disinformation but said they generally ignore and avoid fact-checking conspiracy content in the right-wing ecosystem. Multiple said conservative sites should instead focus on addressing challenges in mainstream media. Anthony Nadler, A.J. Bauer, and Magda Konieczna, “Conservative Newswork: a Report on the Values and Practices of Online Journalists on the Right,” *Columbia Journalism Review*, March 31, 2020, [https://www.cjr.org/tow\\_center\\_reports/conservative-newswork-report-on-the-values-and-practices-of-online-journalists-on-the-right.php](https://www.cjr.org/tow_center_reports/conservative-newswork-report-on-the-values-and-practices-of-online-journalists-on-the-right.php)

<sup>60</sup> Linda So and Jason Szep, “Reuters unmasks Trump supporters who terrified U.S. election officials,” *Reuters*, November 9, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/usa-election-threats/>

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, “Trump’s Facebook Ban Won’t Stop Conservative Disinformation,” May 6, 2021, Steven Feldstein, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/05/06/trump-s-facebook-ban-won-t-stop-conservative-disinformation-pub-84489>  
Just Security, “#StopTheSteal: Timeline of Social Media and Extremist Activities Leading to 1/6 Insurrection,” Atlantic Council’s DFRLab, February 10, 2021, <https://www.justsecurity.org/74622/stopthesteal-timeline-of-social-media-and-extremist-activities-leading-to-1-6-insurrection/>  
Bill Keveney and Maria Puente, “How conservative media stoked baseless election-fraud claims that motivated DC rioters,” *USA Today*, January 11, 2021, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/entertainment/tv/2021/01/11/dc-riots-how-newsmax-oan-conservative-outlets-fueled-mob/6589298002/>  
Jim Rutenberg et al, “77 Days: Trump’s Campaign to Subvert the Election,” *The New York Times*, January 31, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/31/us/trump-election-lie.html>

<sup>63</sup> Ben Smith, “Two Fox News Contributors Quit in Protest of Tucker Carlson’s January 6 Special,” *The New York Times*, November 21, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/21/business/jonah-goldberg-steve-hayes-quit-fox-tucker-carlson.html>

<sup>64</sup> Nevertheless, Nadler told PEN America, the majority of conservative media journalists and consumers he has profiled in his research, resist this association with white supremacist messaging, and remain committed to separating extremist sources from right-wing media. PEN America interview with Anthony Nadler, Associate Professor of Media and Communication Studies, Ursinus College, December 13, 2021

<sup>65</sup> Michael Edson Hayden, “Stephen Miller’s Affinity for White Nationalism Revealed in Leaked Emails,” Southern Poverty Law Center, November 12, 2019, <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2019/11/12/stephen-millers-affinity-white-nationalism-revealed-leaked-emails#conspiracy>

<sup>66</sup> See e.g. Eli Rosen, “Trump called Gary Cohen a ‘Globalist’. Here’s why some people find that offensive,” *The Washington Post*, March 9, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2018/03/09/trump-called-gary-cohn-a-globalist-heres-why-some-people-find-that-offensive/>; American Jewish Committee, “Translate Hate: Globalist,” <https://www.ajc.org/translatehate/globalist>; Rachel Barenblat, “Why ranting about globalism is anti-semitic,” *The Forward*, October 24, 2018, <https://forward.com/community/412627/globalism-anti-semitism/>

Hal Roberts describe the 2017 appearance of “globalist” in *The New York Times* as the end stage of the word’s path from white supremacist website to mainstream.<sup>67</sup>

While the right-wing mediascape is insular, Benkler says that the mainstream media could potentially reach a meaningful segment of less hardline conservatives. In 2018 he told the *Boston Review*: “There is this chunk of between 15 and 25 percent of the population with political views that are more fluid,” who consume diverse media diets, from right-wing networks like Fox News to more mainstream sources.<sup>68</sup> This audience may overlap with a broader group of media consumers that PEN America CEO Suzanne Nossel has termed the “informationally adrift”—those overwhelmed by and skeptical of the news media who seek trusted and verified content.<sup>69</sup> In reaching this segment of the American public, mainstream media can meaningfully dispute and disempower disinformation and extremism in the right-wing media ecosystem.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Yochai Benkler, Robert Faris, and Hal Roberts. *Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics*. Oxford University Press, 2018, pp. 128-131.

<sup>68</sup> Deborah Chasman, “Selling Outrage: An Interview with Yochai Benkler,” *Boston Review*, November 12, 2018, <https://bostonreview.net/articles/yochai-benkler-deborah-chasman-selling-outrage/>

<sup>69</sup> Suzanne Nossel, “How to Save People From Drowning in a Sea of Misinformation,” *Slate*, December 15, 2021, <https://slate.com/technology/2021/12/information-consumers-misinformation-adrift-media-literacy.html>

<sup>70</sup> Yochai Benkler and Deborah Chasman, “Selling Outrage,” *Boston Review*, November 12, 2018, <https://bostonreview.net/articles/yochai-benkler-deborah-chasman-selling-outrage/>

## CHALLENGES IN REPORTING ON RISING EXTREMISM

*“We are not the fringe. We are the base of the party.” —Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene<sup>71</sup>*

All journalists PEN America interviewed who had substantial experience reporting on national politics, fourteen in total, say that covering the Trump campaign and presidency presented unprecedented challenges—from personal attacks made by Trump, his staff, and his supporters, to navigating how to debunk lies and conspiracy theories espoused by Trump and his administration, to the growing explicitness of racial animus in politics. PEN America also interviewed 22 reporters with experience covering right-wing extremism on beats like law enforcement, national security, race, and technology.

All but five of the reporters interviewed for this report began reporting on far-right extremism only after 2016. The consensus among all those interviewed is that covering domestic extremism has evolved since 2016, with many media outlets sharpening their focus on the growing radicalization of the Republican Party and the rising influence of right-wing extremist groups in state and local politics. Journalists with several years of experience covering domestic terrorism and extremism say that, while the industry has begun establishing or revising best practices, determining how to cover the intersection of politics and extremism remains an active debate and an ongoing challenge. Several interviewees say that extremism in local politics is a particular concern, while others emphasize the troubling rise of new extremist groups.<sup>72</sup> As journalists report on extremism at school board meetings, on city councils, and at polling places, they continue to face the question of who and what qualifies as “extremist” in an increasingly polarized national polity.

In this report section, PEN America examines how reporting on extremism has evolved in the past six years—from the 2016 election season, to the Trump administration, to today. We also examine contemporary insights from journalists on how to responsibly cover extremism in politics today.

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<sup>71</sup> @patriottakes, <https://twitter.com/patriottakes/status/1466104574473912321?s=20> (Clip of Marjorie Taylor Greene appearing on white nationalist Steve Bannon’s podcast “War Room”)

<sup>72</sup> PEN America interview with Odette Yousef, National Security Reporter on Extremism, NPR, December 6, 2021; PEN America interview with Michael Edison Hayden, senior investigative reporter, Southern Poverty Law Center, October 8, 2021; PEN America interview with Kelly Weill, reporter, The Daily Beast, November 8, 2021; PEN America interview with Jared Holt, fellow, Digital Forensic Lab, Atlantic Council, October 20, 2021. See also [Collins and Zadrozny](#) for NBC News, and Jared Holt’s latest report for the Atlantic Council, “After the Insurrection: How Domestic Extremists Adapted and Evolved After the January 6 US Capitol Attack.” January 2022.





The CNN newsroom in Atlanta. Credit: Charles Atkeison



“We’ve struggled with how to talk about this massive group of people who are now unaffiliated but radicalized”

*AC Thompson, ProPublica*

## The “Blurring Line” Between Right-Wing Extremism and Mainstream Politics

Many interviewees observe that extremism and politics have been gradually merging into the same beat. Odette Yousef, the national security reporter on

extremism at NPR, says that this “blurring line” calls for “much more education for political reporters on extremism,” especially at the local level. “I find myself in situations where I’m trying to report on something that I think is really a politics story, but it’s also definitely an extremism story,” Yousef says. As “Trump has mainstreamed what used to be extremist positions on things like immigration and made it mainstream within the Republican Party ... I think there’s a general struggle for journalists to figure out what’s going on in our politics and how to report on it.”<sup>73</sup>

<sup>73</sup> PEN America interview with Odette Yousef, National Security Reporter on Extremism, NPR, December 6, 2021

A.C. Thompson of ProPublica and *Frontline* finds himself grappling with how to describe radicalized individuals who are not affiliated with organized groups but are loyal to Trump. “After Unite the Right in 2017,” he says, “my colleagues and I were saying that the most dangerous extremist in the land was the president, and that he was most likely to catalyze hate violence. We were focusing on this broader group of people who were very enamored by the president and who were adopting more and more extremist, militant views, but we’ve struggled with how to talk about this massive group of people who are now unaffiliated but radicalized.”<sup>74</sup>

Covering domestic extremism for the Daily Beast, technology reporter Kelly Weill has wrestled with how to portray groups that are increasingly savvy about how they present themselves. She says that when writing, for example, about attempts by American Patriots USA (APUSA) to make inroads with Republican lawmakers in Georgia, including by supporting GOP candidates for state legislature, she observed that the group brands itself as a pro-gun, conservative constitutionalist group and strives to obscure its ties to the white supremacist movement. But its leader, Chester Doles, is a former leader of the Ku Klux Klan and the neo-Nazi National Alliance, and in 2020 the Southern Poverty Law Center designated APUSA as a hate group.<sup>75</sup> Further complicating her challenge, Weill points out that APUSA had deliberately styled itself after the 1990s Patriot movement, a diffuse right-wing, populist faction made up of armed militias, sovereign citizens, and tax protesters. This movement has a long history of extremism and has carried out domestic terror attacks but remains formally separate from white supremacist groups.<sup>76</sup>

Extremists have become so used to trying to deceive the press, explained *Mother Jones* reporter Ali Breland in a January 2022 interview, that they even have a term for it. “It’s called ‘hiding your power level,’ and it’s a common trope among far-right groups to try and whitewash or sanitize their perspectives so they’re not seen as bad.”<sup>77</sup>

Weill notes that white supremacists post-Charlottesville understand that anti-government stances are more palatable to mainstream conservatives than overt racism, and have sought to rebrand accordingly. “There’s so much subterfuge in how these groups brand themselves,” she says, adding that “it’s tough to label these groups when they are always shifting their presentation and their self-descriptions. I have used the term ‘far right’ a lot, maybe even as a crutch, because it seems to be pretty encompassing of a lot of people’s rhetoric. As these views metastasize out from organized groups to an increasingly radicalized Republican Party, the term ‘far right’ just describes a lot of people these days. I aim for specifics where I can. But there’s no uniform labeling, and it’s something that I personally deal with from story to story.”<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> PEN America interview with A.C. Thompson, reporter, ProPublica, December 8, 2021

<sup>75</sup> Kelly Weill, “American Patriots USA’s Anti-Racist Rebrand is Going horribly Wrong,” Daily Beast, May 22, 2020, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/american-patriots-usas-anti-racist-rebrand-is-going-horribly-wrong>

<sup>76</sup> E.g. Key Events and Crimes of the Patriot Movement, Southern Poverty Law Center, April 16, 2015, <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2015/04/15/key-events-and-crimes-patriot-movement>

<sup>77</sup> Gretchen A. Peck, “At the Front Lines, on the Homefront,” Editor and Publisher, January 6, 2022, <https://www.editorandpublisher.com/stories/at-the-front-lines-on-the-homefront.212640>

<sup>78</sup> PEN America interview with Kelly Weill, reporter, The Daily Beast, November 8, 2021

## Reporting on Racial Resentment and “White America”

Journalists are also confronting new challenges in reporting on the increasingly overt role of racial resentment in U.S. politics. A.C. Thompson, for instance, notes that some voters express high levels of racial resentment in surveys but don't necessarily condone, much less engage in, political violence.<sup>79</sup> Astead Herndon, national political correspondent for *The New York Times*, says that journalists have to evolve with the changing political and racial landscape. “We cannot assume violence will not happen,” he says, “or that election results will be believed.”<sup>80</sup>

Journalists like Perry Bacon Jr. (formerly of FiveThirtyEight), Sean Illing (Vox), and Farai Chideya (Our Body Politic) have written about the need to report on whiteness, especially its role in politics, since 2016.<sup>81</sup> As Bacon wrote in 2021: “Like a lot of political reporters pre-Trump, I largely covered racial issues through the prism of people of color—writing stories about the Black vote in state X, or the Latino vote in state Y. I didn't really think as much about white people as having a racial identity and how that might shape their political views.”<sup>82</sup> Farai Chideya argues that a key reason white nationalism has been largely absent from the public eye is “the inability of media and of many individuals to ascribe racial/group characteristics to whiteness in the way blackness is grouped and tracked, or, in the context of terrorism, Muslim beliefs.”<sup>83</sup>

Tia Mitchell, Washington correspondent for the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, tells PEN America that political reporters need greater awareness of white identity politics and white voters—not as the default perspective but as its own brand of identity politics, ripe for interrogation. “I think the way white people view their identity in politics has changed,” Mitchell says, “but we're still struggling with how to make it all make sense, and how to cover white identity politics with the same vigor and curiosity that we cover other types of identity politics.”<sup>84</sup>

Mitchell says that journalists have been reluctant to delve into white identity politics because most journalists are themselves white,<sup>85</sup> and “white people have a hard time speaking frankly about race and racism.” Moreover, she says, “white supremacy and racism play into white identity politics. That makes it harder to write and report about whiteness. These are conversations that require a truth-telling that America isn't really used to.”<sup>86</sup>

Another reason for the reluctance to focus on whiteness is that traditionally, many of those most fixated on white identity, and most likely to celebrate it, have been white supremacists

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<sup>79</sup> PEN America interview with A.C. Thompson, reporter, ProPublica, December 8, 2021

<sup>80</sup> PEN America interview with Astead Herndon, national political correspondent, *The New York Times*, November 12, 2021

<sup>81</sup> Farai Chideya, “The Call-to-Whiteness: The Rise of the New White Nationalism and Inadequate Establishment Whiteness,” January 9, 2021. <https://farai.medium.com/the-call-to-whiteness-9a27b5a0b347>; Sean Illing, “White identity politics is about more than racism,” Vox, April 27, 2019, <https://www.vox.com/2019/4/26/18306125/white-identity-politics-trump-racism-ashley-jardina>

<sup>82</sup> Perry Bacon Jr., “What the Trump Era Taught Me About Covering Politics,” FiveThirtyEight, February 22, 2021. <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/nine-lessons-i-learned-about-political-reporting-while-covering-trump/>

<sup>83</sup> Farai Chideya, “The-Call-to-Whiteness,” Farai.com, <https://farai.com/the-call-to-whiteness/>

<sup>84</sup> PEN America interview with Tia Mitchell, Washington correspondent, *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, November 2, 2021

<sup>85</sup> See e.g. Elizabeth Grieco, “Newsroom employees are less diverse than U.S. workers overall,” Pew Research Center, November 2, 2018,

<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/11/02/newsroom-employees-are-less-diverse-than-u-s-workers-overall/>

<sup>86</sup> PEN America interview with Tia Mitchell, Washington correspondent, *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, November 2, 2021

and neo-Nazis. Discussions of white identity are further complicated by the heterogeneity of the segment of the U.S. population that may be considered white. Those classified as white may include Hispanics, Jews, Muslims, Arab Americans, multiracial individuals, and members of other religious, ethnic, and racial groups—who may not identify as white and may themselves be targeted by extremists. As with all such groupings, white people encompass a wide range of socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds, making it impossible to discuss white identity as a single, unified characteristic.

Notwithstanding those complexities, Andale Gross, the race and ethnicity editor at the Associated Press, says that he and his team are developing a reporting beat around “white America.” “As much as certain parts of our society want to pretend they’re on the sidelines,” he says, “no one is on the sidelines when it comes to race in America. You have a stake whether you know it or not... One of my reporters has been saying this for a while—that we’re just letting white folks off the hook and at the same time not being fair to them and letting them be part of the conversation.”<sup>87</sup>



“Health reporters, voting reporters, social services reporters, business reporters—every one of them needs to see extremism as part of their beat.”  
*Jessica Huseman, Votebeat*

## Retooling the Newsroom and Adapting to New Realities

Since Trump was elected in 2016, some newsrooms have been able to add positions for national correspondents focusing on domestic extremism.<sup>88</sup> The 2020 presidential election, Trump’s subsequent refusal to concede, the January 6 Capitol insurrection, and Trump supporters’ ongoing efforts to

undermine the country’s electoral system have prompted additional new beats, among them democracy, government, and voting and elections.<sup>89</sup>

But many newsrooms can’t afford to hire dedicated extremism reporters, and even those that can will fall short if reporters on other beats remain ignorant of how to treat these issues. Numerous reporters on existing beats like technology, national security, and law enforcement now cover the proliferation of hate groups and anti-government militias as well as Trump’s cozy relationship with them.<sup>90</sup> Bill Morlin of *The Spokesman-Review* and David Neiwert of *Daily Kos*, both longtime reporters on domestic extremism,<sup>91</sup> emphasized in interviews that covering extremism is not just the responsibility of an extremism reporter or a politics reporter but is a newsroom-wide imperative. Especially for resource-strapped smaller

<sup>87</sup> PEN America interview with Andale Gross, race and ethnicity editor, Associated Press, November 30, 2021

<sup>88</sup> Examples: Hannah Allam is the Washington Post’s national security reporter focusing on extremism and domestic terrorism. Odette Yousef is NPR’s national security correspondent focusing on extremism.

<sup>89</sup> Perry Bacon Jr, “The rise of a pro-democracy media,” *Washington Post*, January 7, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/01/07/pro-democracy-media-gop-threats/>.

<sup>90</sup> Whitney Phillips, “The Oxygen of Amplification,” *Data & Society*, 2018, [datasociety.net/library/oxygen-of-amplification/](https://datasociety.net/library/oxygen-of-amplification/). Jean Guerrero, Hatemonger, Harper Collins, August 2020.

<sup>91</sup> Neiwert has written more than eight books on domestic right-wing extremism, the most recent being *Red Pill, Blue Pill: How to Counteract the Conspiracy Theories That Are Killing Us*, published in 2020, and *Alt-America: The Rise of the Radical Right in the Age of Trump*, published in 2017. Morlin spent more than three decades specializing in reporting on the far-right in the Pacific Northwest. Bill Morlin passed away at 75 years old on November 20, 2021. The PEN America research team interviewed him on October 19, 2021. We are grateful for the opportunity to have spoken with him about his decades of reporting on the far right. See Kip Hill, “Local, national journalists remember Bill Morlin as a source of inspiration, motivation,” *The Spokesman-Review*, November 22, 2021, <https://www.spokesman.com/stories/2021/nov/22/local-national-journalists-remember-bill-morlin-as/>

newsrooms, they said, all editors and reporters interested in extremism—regardless of beat—should educate themselves and develop expertise on this subject. For larger, well-resourced newsrooms, extremism as a dedicated beat could be desirable, while reporters covering education, health care, politics, law enforcement, and the courts could also benefit from training on extremist groups, their talking points, their history, the wider context, and best practices for responsible reporting.

Jessica Huseman, editorial director of Votebeat, a nonprofit newsroom started by Chalkbeat, echoes calls for a newsroom-wide approach. “Health reporters, voting reporters, social services reporters, business reporters—every one of them needs to see extremism as part of their beat,” she says. “I think the solution is to prepare your entire newsroom for doing factually accurate coverage that full-throatedly recognizes what the problem is within each beat.”<sup>92</sup>

Aaron Sharockman, the executive editor of the nonprofit fact-checking organization Politifact, told PEN America that the 2022 midterm election season has caused journalists to think more about the possibility of political violence related to the election cycle, but that training and workshops on extremism would be valuable in raising awareness about how to cover extremism more generally. “There are clearly small subsets of journalists who are thinking about extremism in a very specific way and thinking about how to cover it—hoping to have an impact. I think there is a whole other group who go to school board meetings, city council meetings, elections and who *encounter* extremism in one way, shape, or form.” Ultimately, Sharockman stressed, “We want to train journalists to report on extremism wherever it might pop up—school board meetings, community rallies, polling places.”<sup>93</sup>

While all the reporters interviewed by PEN America welcomed the boost in coverage of domestic extremism, calling it “overdue” and “critical,” they were also generally disapproving of certain aspects of that coverage.

### The Disinformation Challenge

The 22 interviewees with the most experience covering domestic extremism cited two reporting challenges as especially critical at the moment: avoiding being manipulated by extremists into uncritically giving them a platform; and identifying and halting the flow of disinformation promoted by extremists. These reporters say that although they have learned through experience how to dodge those pitfalls, consistently avoiding them remains a daily effort.

In PEN America’s 2022 report *Hard News: Journalists and the Threat of Disinformation*, based on a survey of more than 1,000 journalists and editors on how disinformation is disrupting the practice of journalism, 97 percent of respondents said disinformation was a serious or very serious problem for journalism, and 11 percent admitted unwittingly reporting disinformation themselves. But only 30 percent of respondents said their newsrooms had generally effective

<sup>92</sup> PEN America interview with Jessica Huseman, editorial director, Votebeat, March 18, 2022

<sup>93</sup> PEN America interview with Aaron Sharockman, executive director, Politifact, March 21, 2022

processes in place to cope with disinformation, and the report as a whole highlighted the particular challenges created by the crisis in local news coverage; the closure of many local news outlets leaves information vacuums behind that disinformation can fill, and those that remain lack the resources to counter it.<sup>94</sup>

Moreover, even responsible reporting on extremists can amplify their causes. Confounding the justifiably sacred adage that sunlight is the best disinfectant, critical and careful coverage can sometimes serve to bring viral attention to the most harmful actors and their tactics, driving recruitment, inspiring copycats, and spurring radicalization.

These findings align with those of Whitney Phillips, author of the significant 2018 report “The Oxygen of Amplification: Better Practices for Reporting on Extremists, Antagonists, and Manipulators,” published by the research institute Data & Society. While the journalists interviewed by Phillips considered their coverage necessary and important to prevent the problem of extremism from festering and growing without accountability, they expressed deep misgivings about unwittingly elevating what was then commonly called the “alt-right.” “The nonstop coverage devoted to ‘alt-right’ antagonists operating under the banner of trolling illustrates the fundamental ambivalence of amplification,” Phillips wrote. “However critically it might have been framed, however necessary it may have been to expose, coverage of these extremists and manipulators gifted bad actors a level of visibility and legitimacy that even they could scarcely believe, as nationalist and supremacist ideology metastasized from culturally peripheral to culturally principal in just a few short months.”<sup>95</sup>

While all the reporters interviewed by PEN America welcomed the boost in coverage of domestic extremism, calling it “overdue” and “critical,” they were also generally disapproving of certain aspects of that coverage. Many pointed to harmful outcomes like clickbait coverage designed to maximize reach and engagement, glossy profiles of white supremacists,<sup>96</sup> and the uncritical repetition of extremist talking points. Because of media and political polarization, even coverage of extremists that is intended to be hard-hitting or negative can be received by sympathizers as evidence of the virtue or legitimacy of the organization or individual being portrayed, and more reason to distrust the media outlet offering the coverage.

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<sup>94</sup> PEN America, *Hard News: Journalists and the Threat of Disinformation*, April 14, 2022, <https://pen.org/report/hard-news-journalists-and-the-threat-of-disinformation/>

<sup>95</sup> Whitney Phillips “The Oxygen of Amplification,” Data and Society, May 22, 2018, <https://datasociety.net/library/oxygen-of-amplification/>; Jean Guerrero, *Hatemonger*, Harper Collins, 2020

<sup>96</sup> Mack Lamoureux, “How a Game of Thrones Blogger Made His Way Into the White House,” *Vice*, May 17, 2017, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/nz85kg/how-this-game-of-thrones-blogger-made-his-way-into-the-white-house>



“It’s problematic when you don’t have people covering terrorism in an ongoing way . . . Versions of what happened tend to come out early and crystallize the public’s understanding of what happened—and then turn out not to be true.”

*Sebastian Rotella, ProPublica*

## Forest for the Trees: Focusing on Episodes and Individuals

Media critics and scholars have long criticized news coverage that fails to contextualize violent events, from hate crimes to incidents of domestic terrorism,<sup>97</sup> leading to fragmented or episodic coverage. When reporting on incidents of domestic terrorism, context means connecting extremists to the movements or ideologies that impel their violent speech or action, noting recurring patterns, and giving a sense of the scope of such terrorism. Academic studies show that journalists tend to cover the most

fatal attacks—such as the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing—but largely ignore what drove them until the next attack with significant fatalities.<sup>98</sup> This pattern has resulted in news coverage of white supremacy in the United States in connection to violent events, but then very little coverage of the broader phenomenon of white supremacy itself. It also leaves the impression of a patchwork of attacks that are isolated rather than linked by a movement or ideology. Media scholars found that coverage of the white supremacist murder of nine Black parishioners in South Carolina in 2015 and the white supremacist rally in Charlottesville in 2017, each of which drew levels of coverage approaching that of the Oklahoma City bombing, reinforced previous findings that reporting on extremism tends to be episodic and in response to violent incidents.<sup>99</sup>

Beyond explosive events, Michael Edison Hayden, an investigative reporter and spokesperson for the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), criticizes what he calls a “hyperfocus on individuals and individual hate groups” like Richard Spencer or the Proud Boys<sup>100</sup>—spotlighting the most flamboyant personalities while masking the decentralized yet widespread nature of the threat.

An academic study of media coverage and domestic terrorism from 1990 to 2020 shows that in-depth coverage of domestic extremism was relatively sparse, with the glaring exception of the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, which shined the most intense public spotlight on right-wing domestic terrorism since the civil rights era.<sup>101</sup> In this cataclysmic case, some coverage ranged beyond the violent event, and reports exploring white nationalism, white separatism, and white supremacy increased significantly. *The New York Times* dug especially deep, publishing

<sup>97</sup> As with most things, there are notable exceptions. Comprehensive analysis of extremism coverage prior to 2016 is outside of the scope of this report. However, manual scans of relevant press coverage using the database Lexis Nexis suggest that some media outlets did shine a light on white supremacist movements and leaders even when they were not already in the public eye. In fact, some local papers, ABC News and the *Christian Science Monitor* did sporadic reporting on these movements as early as 1980. As an example see Robert M. Press, “They play war games in U.S. countryside,” *Christian Science Monitor*, March 23, 1981, Accessed through Lexis Nexis Dec. 14, 2021. The *Christian Science Monitor* editorial board even published an editorial praising federal law enforcement crackdown on right-wing terrorist groups in the United States in 1985. It draws a clear line between the Ku Klux Klan and Nazi-oriented groups of the 1930s to the neo-Nazi movement of the early 1980s and calls for law enforcement to continue tracking them down. “These groups—largely male, white supremacist and anti-black and anti-Jewish in orientation—constitute a threat to public order... they have no place in American society. The FBI and other law enforcement agencies are to be commended for bringing such groups to justice.”

<sup>98</sup> Zulli et al. “Media Coverage of the unfolding crisis of domestic terrorism in the United States, 1990-2020,” *Public Relations Inquiry*, Volume 10, Issue 3, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/2046147X21996015>

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>100</sup> PEN America interview with Michael Edison Hayden, senior investigative reporter, Southern Poverty Law Center, October 8, 2021

<sup>101</sup> Zulli et al. “Media Coverage of the unfolding crisis of domestic terrorism in the United States, 1990-2020,” *Public Relations Inquiry*, Volume 10, Issue 3, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/2046147X21996015>

dozens of articles about terrorist Timothy McVeigh, his trial, and his white supremacist activities.<sup>102</sup> But then in 1997, coverage of these subjects dropped back off and resumed its typical, more sporadic pattern.

News outlets are not about to stop reporting on significant breaking events—nor should they. But PEN America’s interviewees stressed the importance of also covering the spread of mass radicalization during quiet moments, when the fog of war has cleared and there’s more time to check for accuracy and offer thoughtful analysis and context. “It’s problematic when you don’t have people covering terrorism in an ongoing way,” says Sebastian Rotella, a senior reporter for ProPublica who has reported on terrorism for more than two decades. “When there’s an attack, there’s a frenzy and a lot of information flying around. It’s by nature a sensitive issue to cover. It’s by nature secretive. Versions of what happened tend to come out early and crystallize the public’s understanding of what happened—and then turn out not to be true.”<sup>103</sup>

Trump’s presidential election in 2016, the Unite the Right rally in 2017, and the January 6 attack on the Capitol in 2021 all prompted greater newsroom attention to extremism. Rotella compares this collective response to reporting on international terrorism following the 9/11 attacks. “After 9/11,” he says, “a lot of people in journalism, as in law enforcement and intelligence agencies, dove into the issue and tried to learn about it on the fly. So in the beginning, people were making mistakes, and that’s what happens when you learn on the fly. I think as time has gone on, there have been more people who have developed expertise and there has been better coverage. I see this happening with right-wing extremism as well.”<sup>104</sup>

The top-line lesson: Be wary of focusing too much on individuals, especially if they obscure the larger story.

### Buying into the Myth of the “Lone Wolf”

The media’s focus on individuals, rather than the extremist ideologies that drive them, is something some extremists have come to count on. Far-right extremism has a long history of so-called “lone

wolves,” and both law enforcement and the news media covering such cases have an equally long history of overlooking the connections of these supposed lone wolves to larger white power movements, according to historian Kathleen Belew.<sup>105</sup> Another scholar, K.A. Powell, wrote in a 2011 study that news coverage left readers with the incorrect impression that “domestic terrorists are less of a threat than international terrorists because they are isolated, troubled individuals working alone, and not part of a ‘war on America.’”<sup>106</sup> The frequency of mass shootings in the United States, perpetrated by individuals with diverse motives, muddies the picture and exacerbates this “lone wolf” misconception when a far-right anti-government extremist or white supremacist actor does inflict mass casualties.

<sup>102</sup> Review of 30 articles published by Jo Thomas between 1995 and 1998 pertaining to the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995 and Timothy McVeigh’s trial. Articles accessed through Lexis Nexis. For analysis of how McVeigh’s white supremacist motivations fell out of the national narrative, see e.g. Kathleen Belew, *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America*, Harvard University Press, 2018, <https://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674286078>

<sup>103</sup> PEN America interview with Sebastian Rotella, senior reporter, ProPublica, December 28, 2021

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>105</sup> Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation, “The White Power Movement at War on Democracy,” Kathleen Belew, January 2021; Kathleen Belew, *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America*, Harvard University Press, 2018, <https://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674286078>

<sup>106</sup> Powell, K. A. 2011. “Framing Islam: An Analysis of U.S. Media Coverage of Terrorism since 9/11.” *Communication Studies* 62 (1): pp. 90–112.; cited in Zdejar & Davies. “Let’s not put a label on it: right-wing terrorism in the news,” *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 14:3, June 22, 2021



Part of the challenge is that news coverage of right-wing violence is heavily influenced by the language that local, state, or federal government officials use to describe a particular attack—with government officials potentially being unfamiliar with, or unwilling to label a specific crime, domestic extremism.<sup>107</sup> After a mass shooting or other violent incident, quoting official statements is a necessary part of reporting, and journalists depend on such statements. A PEN America interviewee who has reported on the federal surveillance of Muslim communities, who asked to remain anonymous, says that it's especially crucial for journalists to go beyond official statements when reporting on minority communities that are disproportionately targeted by surveillance or aggressive policing. Other interviewees echo this advice, noting that in the wake of extremist activity, reporters should rigorously examine official statements and follow up with questions about the language used and the steps law enforcement is taking to address organized forces that may have fostered the violence.

In the case of the domestic terrorist attack in Buffalo, New York, on May 15, 2022, during which a self-described white supremacist targeted, shot, and murdered 10 Black Americans in a supermarket, mainstream media, including *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, the Associated Press, CNN, and others, largely got it right, immediately and accurately characterizing the mass shooting as an act of racially motivated violence and white supremacist extremism.<sup>108</sup> This clarity was admittedly supported by the 180-page racist manifesto that the shooter posted online, in which he described himself as a “white supremacist” and cited the conspiratorial “Replacement Theory” as justification for his actions.<sup>109</sup> Notably, there was less media emphasis on the explicitly anti-Semitic ideology and motivation behind the attack, perhaps because the victims were not Jewish.<sup>110</sup>

Some coverage drew additional and necessary connections between the attack and larger trends. In its May 17 “Morning Briefing” newsletter by David Leonhardt, *The New York Times* subtitled its lead story “The Buffalo killings are part of a pattern: Most extremist violence in the U.S. comes from the political right.”<sup>111</sup> Leonhardt placed the Buffalo killings squarely into a larger context, noting that from 2012 to 2021, 75 percent of the 443 politically motivated killings were perpetrated by right-wing extremists.<sup>112</sup> He also drew a through line from this particular incident to the mainstreaming of extremism in U.S. politics in general, declaring: “The pattern extends to violence less severe than murder, like the January 6 attack on Congress. It also extends to the language from some Republican politicians—including Donald Trump—and conservative media figures that treat violence as a legitimate form of

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<sup>107</sup> See e.g. “Rashawn Ray, Why is it so hard for America to designate domestic terrorism and hate crimes?” Brookings Institute, March 18, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/how-we-rise/2021/03/18/why-is-it-so-hard-for-america-to-designate-domestic-terrorism-and-hate-crimes/>

<sup>108</sup> Carolyn Thompson, John Wawrow, Michael Balsamo and Dave Collins, “10 dead in Buffalo supermarket attack police call hate crime,” Associated Press, May 15, 2022, [<sup>109</sup> Stephen Watson, Lou Michel, “Racist diatribe details hateful views, methodical planning of accused gunman,” Buffalo News, May 15, 2022, \[https://buffalonews.com/news/local/racist-manifesto-details-hateful-views-methodical-planning-of-accused-gunman/article\\\_b8d90e34-d477-11ec-8319-d730ba162ec9.html\]\(https://buffalonews.com/news/local/racist-manifesto-details-hateful-views-methodical-planning-of-accused-gunman/article\_b8d90e34-d477-11ec-8319-d730ba162ec9.html\)](https://apnews.com/article/buffalo-supermarket-shooting-442c6d97a073f39f99d006dbba40f64b; Joanna Slater, Monika Mathur and Razzan Nakhlawi, “What we know about the victims of the Buffalo grocery store shooting,” Washington Post, May 16, 2022. https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2022/05/15/buffalo-shooting-victims/; Shimon Prokupecz, Christina Maxouris, Dakin Andone, Samantha Beech and Amir Vera, “What we know about Buffalo supermarket shooting suspect Payton Gendron,” CNN, May 18, 2022, https://www.cnn.com/2022/05/15/us/payton-gendron-buffalo-shooting-suspect-what-we-know/index.html</a></p></div><div data-bbox=)

<sup>110</sup> See e.g. Shane Burley, “How Buffalo suspect’s hateful propaganda connects Black Americans and Jews,” NBC News, May 18, 2022, <https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/buffalo-suspects-hateful-propaganda-connects-black-americans-jews-rcna29390>

<sup>111</sup> David Leonhardt, “The Right’s Violence Problem,” *The New York Times*, May 17, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/17/briefing/right-wing-mass-shootings.html>

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*

political expression.”<sup>113</sup>

As extremism increasingly infiltrates mainstream politics, the challenges of responsibly covering those who spew hateful ideology will only grow—and the psychological weight of those challenges will fall uneasily on reporters. Phillips writes that the journalists she interviewed for her 2018 report said they struggled with the knowledge that they might be amplifying or platforming white supremacy or other harmful ideologies but still felt that covering extremists and extremism was both a professional duty to the public and critical to combating hate.<sup>114</sup> Still, Phillips concluded that amplification makes “particular ... actors more influential than they would have been otherwise, ... risks normalizing and desensitizing people to harmful views,” and “risks lending credence to false narratives.”<sup>115</sup>

No journalist PEN America spoke to offered foolproof rules for reporting on extremist individuals, but all agreed on several general guidelines:

- Cover actions, not words; trends more than episodes; and movements more than individuals.
- When you do cover an individual, ascertain and report on any connections to a broader extremist movement.
- Treat what extremists say with extreme caution.
- Above all, never quote an extremist directly without providing full context.

The top-line lesson: Be wary of focusing too much on individuals, especially if they obscure the larger story.

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<sup>113</sup> David Leonhardt, “Morning Briefing,” *The New York Times*, May 17, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/17/briefing/right-wing-mass-shootings.html>.

<sup>114</sup> Whitney Phillips, “The Oxygen of Amplification,” *Data & Society*, 2018, <https://datasociety.net/library/oxygen-of-amplification/>, p. 6

<sup>115</sup> Whitney Phillips, “The Oxygen of Amplification,” *Data & Society*, 2018, <https://datasociety.net/library/oxygen-of-amplification/>, p. 7



Neo-Nazis and other extremists gather at the “Unite the Right” white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, August 2017. Credit: Anthony Crider

## Case Study: The Nazi Sympathizer Next Door

In November 2017, *The New York Times* published a 2,000-plus-word profile of Tony Hovater, a self-proclaimed modern-day Nazi. The article, “A Voice of Hate in America’s Heartland,” by reporter Richard Fausset, read, in part:

He is the Nazi sympathizer next door, polite and low-key at a time the old boundaries of accepted political activity can seem alarmingly in flux. Most Americans would be disgusted and baffled by his casually approving remarks about Hitler, disdain for democracy and belief that the races are better off separate. But his tattoos are innocuous pop-culture references: a slice of cherry pie adorns one arm, a homage to the TV show “Twin Peaks.” He says he prefers to spread the gospel of white nationalism with satire. He is a big “Seinfeld” fan.

The article generated a firestorm of controversy. “What the hell is this, @nytimes?” tweeted Nate Silver, founder of media outlet FiveThirtyEight. “This article does more to normalize neo-Nazism than anything I’ve read in a long time.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> @NateSilver538, November 25, 2017, <https://twitter.com/NateSilver538/status/934489016765992960>; see also Aaron Sankin and Will Carless, “The Hate

Critics skewered the article for humanizing a white supremacist and treating him with a soft glove, while Marc Lacey, then an associate managing editor of the *Times*, wrote in its defense that “the point of the story was not to normalize anything but to describe the degree to which hate and extremism have become far more normal in American life than many of us want to think.”<sup>117</sup>

Critics largely made two arguments. The first was that covering white supremacists and hate groups gave them just the media attention they sought. Karen Attiah of *The Washington Post* tweeted, “Instead of long, glowing profiles of Nazis/White nationalists, why don’t we profile the victims of their ideologies?”<sup>118</sup>

The second strand of critique focused on the *Times*’ approach. As Pete Vernon of *Columbia Journalism Review* wrote: “The piece obviously missed the mark, but the *Times* was right to try. Stories on this topic need to be told.”<sup>119</sup> Ezra Klein, then editor-at-large at Vox (and since 2020 a columnist at the *Times*) noted that Fausset’s profile fell into a “broader genre” of journalism that bends over backward to understand Trump supporters and said that the *Times* “deserved criticism” for publishing a piece that “goes to great lengths to show that the subject ... is just like you and me.” But, he wrote, “the problem with the *Times* story isn’t that it’s about a modern-day Nazi. It’s that it doesn’t offer any insight into modern-day Nazis.”<sup>120</sup>

In a retrospective analysis, Fausset acknowledged that there was “a hole at the heart” of his piece, a failure to explain why Hovater had turned to white supremacist extremism. “What I had were quotidian details, though to be honest, I’m not even sure what these add up to... Sometimes a soul, and its shape, remain obscure to both writer and reader.”<sup>121</sup>

Jared Holt, an Atlantic Council fellow with the organization’s Digital Forensic Research (DFR) Lab, told PEN America that focusing on individuals or single organizations can obscure, rather than illuminate, readers’ understanding of broader movements. “This is still an issue that plagues extremism reporting today,” he says. “Profiles of people like Richard Spencer or Gavin McInnes or the Proud Boys are important, but a hyperfocus on them creates sort of a vacuum in understanding the broader sentiments that we’re spreading as journalists and the narratives that are spreading that are spurring this larger mass radicalization.”<sup>122</sup>

Extremism reporters say that profile writers face two unique challenges: that extremists lie and that they are hungry for attention from journalists. Profiles typically include scene-setting

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Report: Article ‘normalizes’ a neo-Nazi, internet flips out,” Reveal, December 1, 2017, <https://revealnews.org/blog/the-hate-report-article-normalizes-a-neo-nazi-internet-flips-out/>

<sup>117</sup> Marc Lacey, “Readers Accuse Us of Normalizing a Nazi Sympathizer; We Respond,” *The New York Times*, November 26, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/26/reader-center/readers-accuse-us-of-normalizing-a-nazi-sympathizer-we-respond.html>

<sup>118</sup> @KarenAttiah, November 25, 2017, [https://twitter.com/KarenAttiah/status/934576439793504256?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Etfw](https://twitter.com/KarenAttiah/status/934576439793504256?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw)

<sup>119</sup> Pete Vernon, “Reporting on extremism from those who have done it best,” *Columbia Journalism Review*, November 30, 2017, <https://www.cjr.org/analysis/reporting-on-extremism-from-those-who-have-done-it-best.php>

<sup>120</sup> Ezra Klein, “Where the New York Times article on an American Nazi went wrong,” Vox, Nov. 27, 2017, <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2017/11/27/16701780/nyt-nazis-trump>

<sup>121</sup> Richard Fausett, “I Interviewed a White Nationalist and Fascist. What Was I Left With?” *The New York Times*, November 25, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/25/insider/white-nationalist-interview-questions.html>

<sup>122</sup> PEN America interview with Jared Holt, fellow, Digital Forensic Lab, Atlantic Council, October 20, 2021

details about the subject’s home, friends, and family as well as dress, facial expressions, and speaking style. They feature direct quotes and usually allow subjects to speak for themselves. They seek to bring their subjects to life. These norms of profile writing—especially newspaper profiles, which tend to reflect much less depth than, say, longer-form pieces—present opportunities for extremists to manipulate reporters. As media critic Erik Wemple wrote in *The Washington Post*, a key failing of Fausset’s piece was that it approached coverage of a neo-Nazi as a feature profile, complete with details about his upcoming wedding.<sup>123</sup>

This piece is a cautionary tale. PEN America interviewees cite several classic flaws with it: It can be read as framing a self-described neo-Nazi and white supremacist as “just a normal guy” who also holds some racist views; it quotes Hovater liberally without context; and it fails to connect the dots or highlight the contradictions between some of his statements and his actions. Fausset did not seem to account for the possibility that his subject intentionally cultivated his regular-guy image to help recruit supporters to his cause. While observing that Hovater “says he prefers to spread the gospel of white nationalism with satire,” Fausset failed to note that the online alt-right movement in 2016 and 2017 relied heavily on memes and satire to promote its message.



Members of the Proud Boys, the extremist group whose leaders have been indicted on seditious conspiracy charges for their participation in the January 6 insurrection, at a November 2020 protest in Raleigh, North Carolina. Credit: Anthony Crider

<sup>123</sup> Erik Wemple, “New York Times faces backlash over half-baked profile of white nationalist,” *Washington Post*, November 26, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/erik-wemple/wp/2017/11/26/new-york-times-faces-backlash-over-half-baked-profile-of-white-nationalist/>

## Moving Beyond Amplification and Manipulation

In 2020, Sean Illing of Vox wrote that journalists face “a new form of propaganda that wasn’t really possible until the digital age.” Generated by Trump, some Republican politicians and conservative operatives, and the right-wing media ecosystem, this propaganda is designed not to motivate people behind a common objective or vision of the future but to convince them that “the truth is unknowable” and to eradicate trust in established institutions.<sup>124</sup> Illing points to “media fragmentation, the explosion of the internet, political polarization, curated timelines, and echo chambers” as key conditions that enable Steve Bannon’s signature tactic—“Flood the zone with shit”—to work as intended.<sup>125</sup>

The purpose of such propaganda bombardments, scholar Whitney Phillips says, is in part to distract journalists from covering what really matters: the extremists’ sustained assault on democratic institutions.<sup>126</sup> In a 2021 *Wired* article, Phillips describes a supercharged, Bannon-inflected trolling strategy that she calls “smokescreen trolling”: “flooding the zone with (bull)shit and lighting the fuse to every moral panic possible, while obscuring the underlying assaults against pluralistic, multiracial democracy.”<sup>127</sup> She advises journalists to “refuse to play their game,” and instead to “describe the specific actions they and other officials in their state have undertaken to suppress the vote, reinforce white supremacy, and threaten citizens’ freedoms.”<sup>128</sup> Phillips elaborates: “Call attention to *what* strategies and tactics are being used and *why* they’re being used” to “help others understand how they’re being manipulated, where they should be directing their attention instead, and what is at stake.”<sup>129</sup>

PEN America’s interviewees also suggest that the best approach when covering elected officials or candidates may be to avoid reporting on what they say but rather to focus on their actions. Elected officials know they can generate media coverage by saying something extreme or pulling a stunt that’s designed to outrage.<sup>130</sup> Careful journalists should be discerning in what they choose to report, stressing the motives and goals of extremist politicians and operatives seeking to manipulate the mainstream media narrative for their own benefit.<sup>131</sup> Extremism reporters told PEN America the best way to provide such context for readers is not only to talk to and quote subject-matter experts on extremism but also to include voices from impacted communities that are targeted by white supremacist extremists and quote them.

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<sup>124</sup> Sean Illing, “‘Flood the zone with shit’: How misinformation overwhelmed our democracy,” Vox, Feb. 6, 2020, <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2020/1/16/20991816/impeachment-trial-trump-bannon-misinformation>. In the article, Illing credits Soviet-born journalist Peter Pomerantsev for this insight.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>126</sup> Whitney Phillips, “Beware ‘Smokescreen Trolling,’ Trump Followers’ Favorite Tactic,” *Wired*, June 18, 2021, <https://www.wired.com/story/far-right-social-strategy-smokescreen-trolling/>; Max Fisher, “Stephen K. Bannon’s CPAC Comments, Annotated and Explained,” *The New York Times*, February 24, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/24/us/politics/stephen-bannon-cpac-speech.html>

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>128</sup> Whitney Phillips, “Beware ‘Smokescreen Trolling,’ Trump Followers’ Favorite Tactic,” *Wired*, June 18, 2021, <https://www.wired.com/story/far-right-social-strategy-smokescreen-trolling/>

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>130</sup> @SenTedCruz, June 14, 2021, <https://twitter.com/sentedcruz/status/1404564419229724676>

<sup>131</sup> Whitney Phillips and Ryan M. Milner, *You Are Here: A Field Guide for Navigating Polarized Speech, Conspiracy Theories, and Our Polluted Media Landscape*, MIT Press, 2021, <https://mitpress.mit.edu/books/you-are-here>

## Mediating Direct Quotes

Odette Yousef of NPR told PEN America that journalists should interview extremists but avoid publishing direct quotes as much as possible. “Extremists don’t go into these interviews in good faith,” she says. “They’re going into the interview because they are getting something out of it. I think that’s where some journalists have been caught flat-footed. They don’t understand that going into an interview with an extremist is not on the normal terms of engagement. People need to go into those interviews with a high degree of preparation. I need to know what their histories are, especially their criminal history. I read up on everything I can about the person or group I’m interviewing.”<sup>132</sup>

In 2019, Yousef began developing a podcast series—Season 3 of WBEZ Chicago’s “Motive”—tracing the history of white supremacist extremism in Chicago, for which she interviewed several self-described white nationalists, including Klan leader Tom Metzger and neo-Nazi Art Jones. “The decision we made was that we were not going to use any tape of extremists in the podcast where they shared their ideology,” she says. They employed direct quotes only “if it was necessary as evidence for something that we were investigating. So we explained what their extremist ideology was when necessary, but we never allowed them in their own voices to share their ideology. I’ve never been more prepared [than] walking into interviews with white extremists. You have to be able to tell when they are lying.”<sup>133</sup>



“I think demands for content are probably the reason journalists don’t produce the best work on any beat. Sometimes those demands will lead reporters to try and find anything to write about, [like] ‘This is the new meme on the alt-right.’ And that’s the kind of coverage that you start to debate whether it’s helpful or harmful.”  
*Kelly Weill, The Daily Beast*

### Extremism as Clickbait

The sudden interest in extremism prompted by Trump’s election and the Unite the Right rally in 2017 fueled interest in extremism coverage as a route to attract readers and subscribers, to build professional visibility, and potentially to make more money, according to investigative reporter Michael Edison Hayden. There were cases where this was “used by some media companies and journalists in a capitalistic way to generate content and build social media brands,” says Hayden of the SPLC. “I was implicated in that, too. When I was at *Newsweek*, they asked me to cover extremism, and I had click demands I had to meet. In my opinion, that was highly unethical.”<sup>134</sup>

The Committee to Protect Journalists reported in 2018, “Despite the dangers, there is increased pressure from newsroom leaders to cover white nationalism, in part, because readers find stories about extremists tantalizing, reporting can be done quickly online, and the coverage generates a lot of clicks.”<sup>135</sup> Kelly Weill of the Daily Beast adds that the thirst for

<sup>132</sup> PEN America interview with Odette Yousef, National Security Reporter on Extremism, NPR, December 6, 2021

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> PEN America interview with Michael Edison Hayden, senior investigative reporter, Southern Poverty Law Center, October 8, 2021

<sup>135</sup> Avi Asher-Schapiro, “Journalists covering US white supremacists must weigh risks to selves and families,” Committee to Protect Journalists, March 15, 2018, <https://cpj.org/2018/03/journalists-covering-us-white-supremacists-must-we/>

clicks and its potential to compromise quality and news judgment can be particularly dangerous when reporting on extremism. “I think demands for content are probably the reason journalists don’t produce the best work on *any* beat,” she says. “Sometimes those demands will lead reporters to try and find anything to write about, [like] ‘This is the new meme on the alt-right.’ And that’s the kind of coverage that you start to debate whether it’s helpful or harmful.”<sup>136</sup>

Phillips calls this dynamic the “tyranny of analytics.” In “The Oxygen of Amplification,” she writes: “The issue isn’t that the media system is broken; the issue is that the media system is working as it was designed to work... Commoditized content spreads as quickly as possible.” Over the years, as “the media landscape has become more crowded, more competitive, and more ripe for manipulation,” the pressure has intensified, “making an already consequential problem that much more pressing.”<sup>137</sup>

## False Equivalency and the Balance Imperative

*“You need to be equally fair, but fair reporting may not lead you to saying that the two sides are symmetrical—Zack Beauchamp, Vox*<sup>138</sup>

Almost all of the journalists interviewed for this report critiqued the media’s deeply ingrained journalistic practices that can result in the drawing of false equivalencies in political reporting. This dynamic, they say, imposes a misleading sense of neutrality that enables right-wing populist politicians with authoritarian tendencies to manipulate the media into platforming extremist and anti-democratic views, and into amplifying disinformation and propaganda meant to ignite moral outrage over cultural issues. Many interviewees referred to this dynamic as “bothsidesism.”

The “both sides” approach to reporting has roots in the aftermath of World War II.<sup>139</sup> It began as a practical standard to achieve balance and objectivity by accounting for and presenting diverse viewpoints on a subject, particularly across the political spectrum.<sup>140</sup> Yochai Benkler of the Berkman Klein Center told the *Boston Review* that it worked pretty well in an era when political parties, corporations, and other actors “more or less complied with a set of elite norms about how much you could attack basic foundational facts, how much you could fabricate. This meant that the model of journalistic objectivity and balance—being neutral and reporting on both sides—was not systematically biased in favor of one major party or the other. It reflected, more or less, the elite consensus range of views.” But in the Trump era, as Jon Allsop observed in *CJR*, bothsidesism “has become shorthand for a journalistic philosophy” whose rules “make things that aren’t the same seem the same, and allow bad actors to launder disinformation.”

The both-sides framework showed cracks long before Trump entered politics. As Rick

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<sup>136</sup> PEN America interview with Kelly Weill, reporter, *The Daily Beast*, November 8, 2021

<sup>137</sup> Whitney Phillips, “The Oxygen of Amplification,” *Data & Society*, 2018, <https://datasociety.net/library/oxygen-of-amplification/>, p. 30

<sup>138</sup> PEN America interview with Zack Beauchamp, Senior Correspondent, *Vox*, November 16, 2021.

<sup>139</sup> PEN America interview with Jay Rosen, Professor of Journalism, New York University, November 18, 2021

<sup>140</sup> Wallace 2019, 41.



Perlstein, the author of several books on the American right, tweeted in 2019: “In 1972 the Washington Post carefully balanced stories about Watergate with ones about picayune financial irregularities in the McGovern campaign. The algorithm was always bankrupt.”<sup>141</sup> But as the American right has radicalized, the “algorithm” has proved increasingly insidious.

Given that bothsidesism has overlapping meanings and can be difficult to disentangle from larger journalistic practices, including the journalistic imperative to support open and informed discourse, PEN America instead prefers the term “false equivalence,” though others opt for “the balance imperative.”<sup>142</sup> Whatever its label, there are two key ways in which journalists can engage in false equivalence in their reporting: 1. affording radical, right-wing ideas or policy positions legitimacy as simply “one side” of a debate; and 2. portraying Republicans and Democrats as mirror-image parties by drawing a false equivalence between the right and left in everything from the behavior and rhetoric of elected officials to the prevalence of political violence and domestic terrorism (the majority of domestic terrorism attacks have been carried out by the far-right over the past decade).<sup>143</sup>

Zack Beauchamp, a senior correspondent at Vox, points to the so-called “birther” conspiracy, holding that President Obama was not an American citizen, as a prototypical example of the hazards of false equivalency. Based on a partisan stance clearly built on disinformation rather than legitimate evidence or even sincere belief, this ginned-up controversy does not lend itself to reporting on two sides when the facts are so unambiguously clear. But even in less glaring cases, Beauchamp told PEN America, “both sides” may not be equal in their veracity. “Obviously partisan divides between Republicans and Democrats are not as stark as people who deny the reality of where President Obama was born,” he says, “but that doesn’t mean that the parties are on equal footing on all the different issues.”<sup>144</sup>

Another example of false equivalence appeared in Axios in January, 27, 2021, under the headline “The Mischief Makers.” In the outlet’s trademark listicle format, the piece labeled five Republicans and five Democrats as “members who threaten to upend party unity.” It went on to compare Republicans like Marjorie Taylor Greene, Matt Gaetz, and Mo Brooks—who days earlier had attempted to overturn the results of the 2020 presidential election—with Democrats like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Jamaal Bowman, representatives of color who advocate progressive economic policies, thus reducing the fundamentals of our democracy to simply another electoral horse-race issue.<sup>145</sup> As Beauchamp wrote in Vox: “Ocasio-Cortez’s alleged ‘extremism’ is her advocacy of a democratic socialist politics,” while “Greene is a conspiracy theorist who has called for executing Barack Obama, claimed the Parkland school shooting was staged, and suggested a space laser controlled by wealthy Jews caused the 2018 California wildfires. One advocates for left-wing policy ideas in good faith; the other spreads absurd, offensive, and even dangerous lies.”<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> @rickperlstein, Twitter, Dec. 17, 2019, <https://twitter.com/rickperlstein/status/1207012760095207428?s=20&t=RC4VNoXm8MOslmFm-xfrQ>

<sup>142</sup> PEN America interview with A.J. Bauer, Assistant Professor at the College of Communication and Information Sciences, University of Alabama, January 6, 2022

<sup>143</sup> Anti-Defamation League. “Murder and Extremism in the United States in 2021.” <https://www.adl.org/murder-and-extremism-2021>

<sup>144</sup> PEN America interview with Zack Beauchamp, Senior Correspondent, Vox, November 16, 2021

<sup>145</sup> Alayna Treene, Kadia Goba, “The Mischief Makers,” Axios, Jan. 28, 2021, <https://www.axios.com/2021/01/28/marjorie-taylor-greene-aoc-troublemakers>

<sup>146</sup> Zack Beauchamp, “Why comparing Marjorie Taylor Greene to AOC is ridiculous,” Vox, Feb. 3, 2021 <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/22264412/marjorie-taylor-greene-aoc-extremism-false-equivalence>

While hard-news reporting has a greater responsibility to avoid these false equivalences, opinion pieces can fall into the same trap. In January 2022, the political outlet *The Hill* published an opinion piece by consultants Douglas Schoen and Carly Cooperman citing the results of a recent survey of likely 2022 midterm voters. The consultants wrote: “Political extremism is the enemy of bipartisan cooperation, and both Democrats and Republicans are guilty of allowing the extreme fringe members of their party to infiltrate the mainstream. The political right has embraced conspiracy theories about the Deep State and voter fraud, while the left has entertained socialism and the Defund the Police movement. As a result, a plurality of voters said they were equally concerned about political extremism from the far-left and far-right.”<sup>147</sup>

PEN America interviewees say that this type of analysis provides a misleading view that extremism flourishes equally, and results in equally harmful impacts, on both sides of the political aisle. Jackie Calmes, a Washington-based opinion columnist for the *Los Angeles Times*, calls Schoen and Cooperman’s column “one of the worst examples of bothsiderism I’ve ever seen.”<sup>148</sup> Public perceptions that equate the dangers of right- and left-wing extremism, as reflected in Schoen and Cooperman’s survey, may outpace the reality if members of the media use their editorial agency to propagate rather than interrogate this narrative.

Beauchamp says that fairness and transparency in sourcing are crucial for covering global politics and ideology, his current beat at Vox. A reporter’s final conclusions, however, should value truth and facts over the image of partisan balance. “You need to be equally fair,” he says, “but fair reporting may not lead you to saying that the two sides are symmetrical.”<sup>149</sup> “In the highly asymmetric system we have today—when one side systematically produces propaganda and has no internal checks, and the other side is much more constrained by fact-checking because its readers pay attention to a broader range of media—the flows of falsehood are so unequal that, if you try to maintain neutrality, you are essentially complicit in creating a false impression that there are two legitimate sides to the story.”

Affirming the truth of a conflict takes longer than merely transcribing the views of each side, but even on deadline, it’s necessary. John Daniszewski, vice president and editor at large for the Associated Press, says it’s imperative that reporters and their editors scrutinize sources and “really dig down deep into the information and then, in the end, say which side has the facts on its side.”<sup>150</sup>

Nikole Hannah-Jones, the investigative journalist and creator of the Pulitzer Prize-winning 1619 Project, has been a consistent critic of the idea that journalists can be truly ‘objective’. “When I choose to write about school segregation as opposed to writing about something else in education, that’s a subjective choice,” she noted in a 2021 interview. “And I just think we should be more honest about the limits of this notion of objectivity – that it has never existed and that all of us are pursuing our work through the framework of our own lived existence.” In

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<sup>147</sup> Douglas Schoen and Carly Cooperman, “Rampant distrust in American democracy persists in 2022,” *The Hill*, January 2, 2022, <https://thehill.com/opinion/campaign/587896-rampant-distrust-in-american-democracy-persists-in-2022/>

<sup>148</sup> PEN America interview with Jackie Calmes, columnist, *The Los Angeles Times*, March 21, 2022

<sup>149</sup> PEN America interview with Zack Beauchamp, Senior Correspondent, Vox, November 16, 2021. See also Yochai Benkler, Deborah Chasman, “Selling Outrage,” *Boston Review*, November 12, 2018, <https://bostonreview.net/articles/yochai-benkler-deborah-chasman-selling-outrage/>

<sup>150</sup> PEN America interview with John Daniszewski, Vice President and Editor at Large for the Associated Press, November 10, 2021

fact, Hannah-Jones argued, the entire idea of ‘accountability reporting’ puts the lie to the idea of objectivity, saying, “When you write about Watergate, you’re not being ‘objective’—you don’t think the government should be corrupt.”<sup>151</sup>

Since the 2016 election and the Charlottesville rally, reporters have generally become more adept at flagging lies and resisting manipulation. Explaining the widening gap between left and right has “required developing a new set of skills,” Lisa Lerer, a national political correspondent at *The New York Times*, wrote last year in Nieman Reports. “So, we educated ourselves on fantastical conspiracy theories. We learned to call out presidential lies, even in our news chyrons. We dropped ‘bothsideism’ to call out attacks on our democracy, like fighting the results of a legitimate election. And we wrote about race in new ways, tracking the impact of views long constrained to the fringes of our political debate on our national conversation.”<sup>152</sup> *Washington Post* columnist Perry Bacon Jr. writes that an “emboldened media has not only extensively covered the new radicalism of the GOP—its questioning of election results, targeting of election officials and push to ban discussions of race relations in schools—but increasingly described long-standing Republican tactics such as aggressive gerrymandering and support for voting restrictions as the dangers to democracy that they are.”<sup>153</sup> Still, he argues, editors remain “gun-shy,” and newsroom leaders still sanction coverage that obscures or plays down the antidemocratic nature of many contemporary Republican proposals out of fear of being seen as politically biased.<sup>154</sup>

In “The Oxygen of Amplification,” Whitney Phillips shares one editor’s succinct justification for adhering to the balance imperative: “If we include the other side, no one can accuse us of being biased.”

### Overcompensating for “Liberal Bias”

Despite limited empirical evidence that the mainstream news media exhibits a liberal bias, PEN America’s interviewees say that many mainstream outlets take significant steps to minimize accusations of such bias and in some cases cater to conservative voices in order to project an image of neutrality. According to media historians, efforts to depict both parties as having equal claim to the truth represent the

media’s collective response to a decades-long campaign waged by right-wing media and politicians to discredit the mainstream media.

Nicole Hemmer, a historian specializing in conservative media, attributes the rise of this tendency to conservative media’s and politicians’ attacks on the press’s supposed liberal bias dating back to at least the 1960s, including by the Nixon Administration.<sup>155</sup> Over decades, this critique became ubiquitous, and the mainstream media internalized it, moderating their behavior to prove its critics wrong. As Hemmer observes, they began creating “liberal versus

<sup>151</sup>Nikole Hannah-Jones on the Power of the 1619 Project, Deep Background with Noah Feldman, July 28, 2021

<sup>152</sup>Lisa Lerer, “For Political Reporters, There Will Be No Return to Normal,” NiemanReports, April 26, 2021

<sup>153</sup>Perry Bacon Jr., “Opinion: The rise of pro-democracy media,” *Washington Post*, January 7, 2022. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/01/07/pro-democracy-media-gop-threats/>

<sup>154</sup>Ibid.

<sup>155</sup>Nicole Hemmer, “Five Myths About Cable News,” *Washington Post*, November 9, 2018, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/five-myths/five-myths-about-cable-news/2018/11/09/59e0b088-e3aa-11e8-ab2c-b31dcd53ca6b\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/five-myths/five-myths-about-cable-news/2018/11/09/59e0b088-e3aa-11e8-ab2c-b31dcd53ca6b_story.html); Nicole Hemmer, “The Conservative War on Liberal Media Has a Long History,” *The Atlantic*, January 17, 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2014/01/the-conservative-war-on-liberal-media-has-a-long-history/283149/>

conservative” debate shows like CBS Radio’s 1971 *Spectrum*.<sup>156</sup>

In 1982, the debate-show format hit cable news with CNN’s *Crossfire*, immortalized in 2004 when comedian Jon Stewart accused hosts Tucker Carlson and Paul Begala of “hurting America” with their “partisan hackery.”<sup>157</sup> Hemmer, NYU’s Jay Rosen, the late Todd Gitlin, and other media analysts have stated that the right’s accusations of liberal bias have often been motivated more by a desire to discredit mainstream media than a good-faith effort to expose a real imbalance in news coverage.<sup>158</sup> An analysis of 99 academic studies examining U.S. presidential election coverage between 1948 and 2008 conducted by Dave D’Alessio, associate professor of communications at the University of Connecticut, shows no measurable partisan bias in the vast majority of mainstream media presidential election coverage, with the exception of coverage by Fox News and MSNBC.<sup>159</sup>

CNN hosts Jake Tapper and Don Lemon, and former host Brian Stelter, have expressed frustration on air about the challenge of finding pro-Trump and other conservative analysts to appear as guests and represent the “other side” without spreading disinformation.<sup>160</sup> Wajahat Ali, currently a columnist with the *Daily Beast*, and former contributor to the *New York Times* and *CNN*, told PEN America that right-wing campaigns “complaining about liberal bias against Trump voters” have become a powerful tool to push mainstream networks to tread lightly in criticizing Republican politicians, operatives, and voters.<sup>161</sup>

In “The Oxygen of Amplification,” Phillips shares one editor’s succinct justification for adhering to the balance imperative: “If we include the other side, no one can accuse us of being biased.”<sup>162</sup> Strangely, this has produced a situation where the ‘biased’ journalists have perhaps been the greatest truth-tellers on extremism: As *Washington Post* columnist Perry Bacon Jr. argues, “Much of the journalism over the past decade that has most accurately captured the radical turn of the Republican Party has been done by opinion writers and those at left-wing publications who are not bound by mainstream journalism conventions.”<sup>163</sup>

Phillips observes that in an environment where right-wing extremists are looking for opportunities to inject disinformation into the mainstream, the practice of reflexive enforced neutrality leads to situations where positions that are “false, manipulative, dehumanizing, and in many cases not worth reporting at all, are given equal platform to positions that are

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<sup>156</sup> Nicole Hemmer, “The Conservative War on Liberal Media Has a Long History,” *The Atlantic*, January 17, 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2014/01/the-conservative-war-on-liberal-media-has-a-long-history/283149/>

<sup>157</sup> Youtube. “Jon Stewart on Crossfire.” Jan 16, 2006. Available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aFQFB5YpDZE>

<sup>158</sup> Jay Rosen and Todd Gitlin, professors of journalism Columbia Journalism School and New York University, respectively, told PEN America, that the narrative of “liberal media bias” purposefully sows doubt in mainstream media in order to enable the elevation of extremist right-wing positions as political equivalents in mainstream reporting. A.J. Bauer, a conservative media news expert at the University of Alabama, said that the “balance imperative” in mainstream political reporting, in combination with concerns about liberal media bias may have led to hesitancy to identify far-right extremism in politics—as well as the role of white identity in U.S. politics.

<sup>159</sup> D’Alessio, Dave, “Media Bias in Presidential Election Coverage, 1948-2008: Evaluation via Formal Measurement.” *International Social Science Review*. Vol. 88, Issue 1-2. [https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A368471435/AONE?u=mlin\\_oweb&sid=googleScholar&xid=be4da788](https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A368471435/AONE?u=mlin_oweb&sid=googleScholar&xid=be4da788); Reporting Elections—Swansea University; Hassell, Hans J.G., Holden, John B., Miles, Matthew R. “There is no liberal media bias in which news stories political journalists choose to cover,” *Science Advances*, 1 Apr 2020, Vol 6, Issue 14, <https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/sciadv.aay9344>.

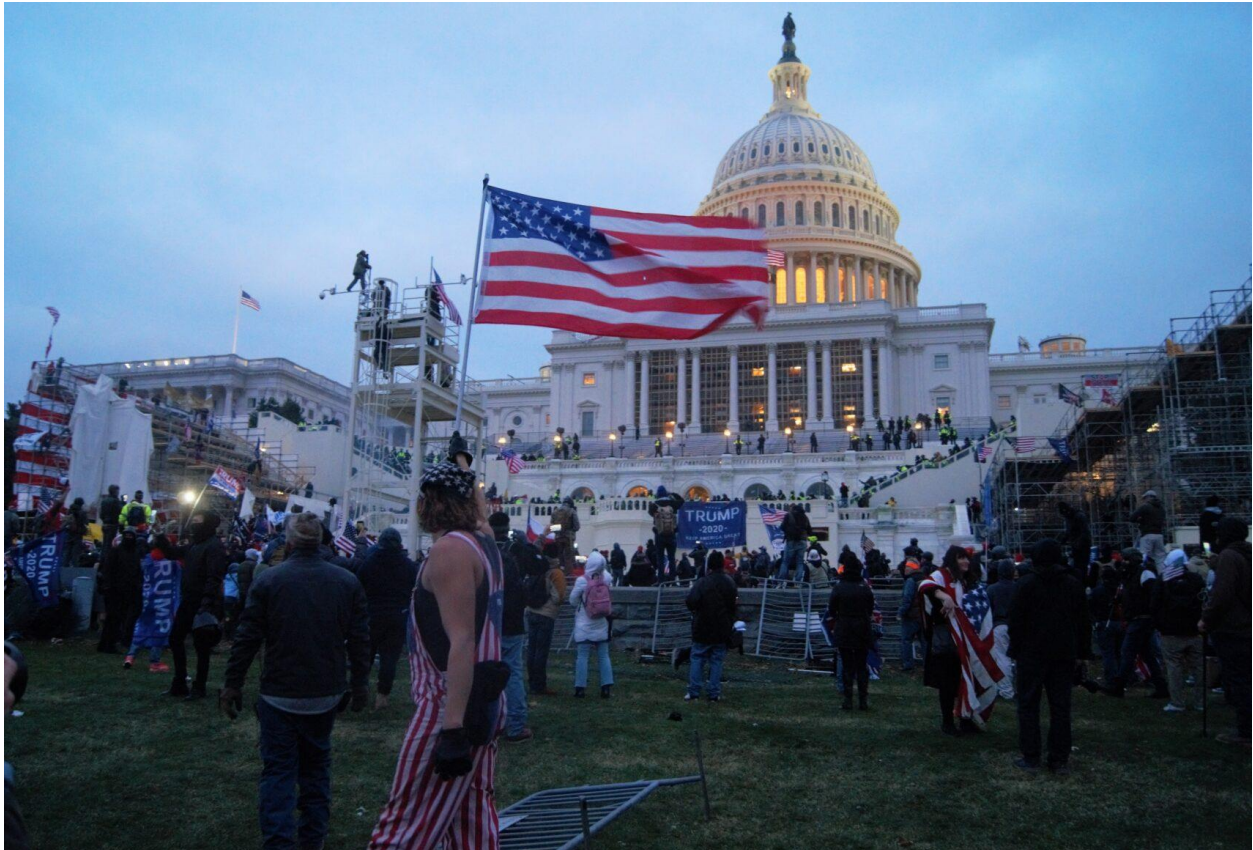
<sup>160</sup> See e.g. “Controversy over CNN’s hiring of Corey Lewandowski,” CNN, June 26, 2016, <https://www.cnn.com/videos/tv/2016/06/26/lewandowski-joins-cnn.cnn>

<sup>161</sup> PEN America interview with Wajahat Ali on October 27, 2021. See also Wajahat Ali, “What Does It Take to Get a White Man Fired From CNN?” *Daily Beast*, May 3, 2021, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/what-does-it-take-to-get-a-white-man-fired-from-cnn>

<sup>162</sup> Whitney Phillips, “The Oxygen of Amplification,” *Data & Society*, 2018, <https://datasociety.net/library/oxygen-of-amplification/>.

<sup>163</sup> Perry Bacon Jr., “America should spend billions to revive local news,” *The Washington Post*, October 17, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/10/17/local-news-crisis-plan-fix-perry-bacon/>

factually true, relevant to the public interest, and unquestionably newsworthy.”<sup>164</sup>



The “Stop the Steal” rally at the US Capitol, January 6, 2021. Soon after this picture was taken, participants would storm the Capitol in an effort to disrupt the certification of the 2020 election. Credit: Tyler Merbler

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<sup>164</sup> Whitney Phillips, “The Oxygen of Amplification,” Data & Society, 2018, <https://datasociety.net/library/oxygen-of-amplification/>.



“He had said some really inflammatory things to me on camera—like that he wanted to die in a gunfight.”

*Jean Guerrero, journalist*



“I think that kind of gentle, human-interest feature is something I don’t think is appropriate anymore... especially now that we’ve seen how extremists can manipulate media and can manipulate these kinds of sympathetic profiles, and how that’s a backdoor to normalizing these very extremist political positions.”

*Leonardo Castañeda, journalist*

## Case Study: Equivalency Gone Awry

In 2017, journalists Jean Guerrero and Leonardo Castañeda were in the process of a months-long investigation into existing border infrastructure in the southwestern United States. Guerrero was an immigration reporter for the NPR affiliate, KPBS, while Castañeda was a data reporter for San Diego media outlet *inewssource*. Their joint reporting was the result of a collaboration between two outlets. The resulting investigative series, “America’s Wall,” featured both in-depth document and data analysis of public records about the walls and fencing along the U.S.-Mexico border, and profiles of people whose lives revolve around border barriers and fencing.

The series went on to win two Emmys. And yet, both Guerrero and Castañeda shared with PEN America that they have misgivings. The main report featured a series of profiles, including: a Customs and Border Patrol officer, Joshua Wilson; border muralist Enrique Chiue; and Ely Ortiz, founder of *Aguilas Del Desierto*,

a humanitarian group that searches for missing migrants and asylum seekers in the desert along the U.S.-Mexico border. Guerrero and Castañeda’s misgivings center around one profile in particular: Bob Maupin, an anti-immigration property owner from San Diego and a self-described border “vigilante.”

Guerrero tells PEN America that she originally chose Maupin to be one of her profiles because “I’d been repeatedly told and trained to depict ‘both sides’ of the immigration debate, and that failing to do so was activism, not journalism.”<sup>165</sup> Guerrero said that both the reporting team and the editors involved in the project wanted the series to include perspectives from all communities along the border and viewed anti-immigration property owners as an important perspective to include. She said that editors at KPBS and *inewssource* were concerned about ensuring that Maupin read as a sympathetic figure in the profile.

But Guerrero quickly became unnerved by Maupin’s comments while interviewing and filming him for “America’s Wall.” “He had said some really inflammatory things to me on camera—like that he wanted to die in a gunfight,” Guerrero says.<sup>166</sup>

“There were some comments that I included in the video package that showed he was an

<sup>165</sup> Written comments from journalist Jean Guerrero, October 2022

<sup>166</sup> PEN America interview with journalist Jean Guerrero, November 24, 2021

extremist, that he was a dangerous person. But my supervisor at the time told me to take them out because she wanted him to be someone readers could empathize with. I was upset about that, and I pushed back. But this was part of a larger project, and I was trying to pick my battles.”<sup>167</sup>

One comment betraying Maupin’s extremism did make it into the published video, as the closing line: “It is my duty to protect my country from people invading it. I’m going to die, and I don’t care how. Except I’m not going to die a slobbering old man in a rest home pushing a walker. I’m going out in a firefight.”<sup>168</sup>

In retrospect, Guerrero said she thought the profile of a white, armed border vigilante did not adequately delve into the dangers he represented. The profile, similar to Fausset’s article on Hovater, includes details like his passion for restoring World War II vehicles and his memories of his late wife, rather than hard questioning about the potential harms, not to mention potentially illegal nature, of his vigilantism on any migrants caught crossing his property.<sup>169</sup> Guerrero, who has continued to reflect on the experience, concluded recently that “I don’t think having empathy for people who have been radicalized is wrong. What is wrong is to approach these dangerous individuals without also challenging them on the very real and extreme dangers they pose to vulnerable communities.”<sup>170</sup>

Castañeda, reflecting on the profile during an interview, agrees. “I think that kind of gentle, human-interest feature is something I don’t think is appropriate anymore ... especially now that we’ve seen how extremists can manipulate media and can manipulate these kinds of sympathetic profiles, and how that’s a backdoor to normalizing these very extremist political positions.”<sup>171</sup>

Castañeda, although not directly involved in the conversations with editors, said he thought even the reporting team didn’t necessarily see the Maupin profile as an issue at the time but rather saw Maupin’s profile as part of the border community’s story. “I don’t think I saw it as an external editorial pressure to have [Maupin’s profile] so much as that’s how I thought about doing good journalism.”<sup>172</sup>

In looking back on the profile, Castañeda said he thought the reporting team would approach Maupin very differently today. “Today, with what we know now, I’d be very worried sending someone alone, or even two people, to walk around with someone armed with an AR-15 and [who] walks around in the desert. Now, there would be a lot more conversations about what that would look like, and the safety measures. Then, I think we saw [people like Maupin] as aggrieved landowners with too much time on their hands, not the kind of political or racial extremists the way we do now ... I think the years under Trump have shown us that people like Maupin have a capacity for violence that I think we didn’t take seriously at the time.”<sup>173</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> PEN America interview with journalist Jean Guerrero, November 24, 2021

<sup>168</sup> Jean Guerrero, “Vigilante” Bob Maupin patrols his property in Boulevard, on the U.S.-Mexico border,” KPBS, November 13, 2017, <https://border.inewsource.org/vigilante>

<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

<sup>170</sup> Written comments from journalist Jean Guerrero, October 2022

<sup>171</sup> PEN America interview with journalist Leonardo Castañeda, February 4, 2022

<sup>172</sup> Ibid.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid.

Guerrero and Castañeda’s experience developing “America’s Wall” demonstrates how feature profiling, lack of context, and direct quotes can normalize and platform extremism. Armed border vigilantes have a history of ties to the white supremacist movement, and while Maupin did not appear to have an affiliation with border militias like the Minuteman Project (started by Jim Gilchrist and Chris Simcox in Arizona), and Ranch Rescue, or with white supremacist or nationalist groups, his profile still lacks critical context on the influence that anti-immigration vigilante groups have had on right-wing armed groups more broadly. A shot of a flag flapping in the wind—bearing an illustration of a rifle and the words “Will Not Comply”—fills the screen for several seconds, but left unexplained is the fact that this slogan is a rallying cry for white supremacist and other far-right movements decrying government authority on everything from vaccine mandates to “globalism,” state gun laws, and “tyrannical” immigration laws.<sup>174</sup> Most glaringly, the profile fails to make clear that private citizens acting to prevent illegal border crossings, including detaining individuals at the border, is illegal under U.S. laws.<sup>175</sup>

Guerrero also told PEN America that she felt some of her editors had exercised a “double standard” in their decision to include Maupin in the “America’s Wall” series and exclude another profile, that of deported pastor Walter Bohorquez and his wife, Bridget, based on police allegations that he was in the street and prison gang the Latin Kings. “One of my editors thought Bohorquez wasn’t a sympathetic individual at all, because he was allegedly a Latin King, something the pastor denied to me,” she says. “But on the other hand, we have this white extremist talking about his really horrific views, but we wanted to paint him as a nice guy. And then when it came to this pastor, who is Mexican, even though he denied being associated with the Latin Kings and was otherwise a caring father and a pastor, editors with *inewssource* just wanted it removed. They thought it would be offensive to our audiences.”<sup>176</sup> Guerrero added that a KPBS editor also approached her about removing the Bohorquez profile from their version of the story series after learning that *inewssource* editors had done so, but that she was able to convince the editor to keep it.<sup>177</sup>

Guerrero told PEN America that a second editor had also suggested the Center for Immigration Studies (CIS) as a conservative policy expert source to balance the inclusion of immigrant and immigration attorney perspectives. In the final published feature, Guerrero referred to the organization as “a nonprofit think tank that advocates for tougher restrictions on illegal immigration.” It was not until Guerrero began research for her biography of Trump’s senior adviser Stephen Miller, a book called *Hatemonger*, that she learned CIS is one of several anti-immigration groups founded by John Tanton, a white nationalist who believed in the necessity of a “European-American majority” to preserve American culture,<sup>178</sup> or that the organization was categorized as a hate group by the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC),

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<sup>174</sup> See e.g. “Alex Jones’ Grift Continues Via GiveSendGo,” Anti-Defamation League, August 15, 2022, <https://www.adl.org/resources/blog/alex-jones-grift-continues-givesendgo>; “Anatomy of a Standoff: The Occupiers of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge Headquarters,” Anti-Defamation League, <https://www.adl.org/sites/default/files/Anatomy-of-a-Standoff-MalheurOccupiers.pdf>; Will Ragland, “A List of MAGA Republicans who took the ‘Great Replacement Theory’ Mainstream,” American Progress Action, May 18, 2022, <https://www.americanprogressaction.org/article/a-list-of-maga-republicans-who-took-the-great-replacement-theory-mainstream/>

<sup>175</sup> Vanda Felbab-Brown and Elisa Norio, “What border vigilantes taught US right-wing armed groups,” Brookings Institution, March 12, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/what-border-vigilantes-taught-us-right-wing-armed-groups/>.

<sup>176</sup> PEN America interview with journalist Jean Guerrero, November 24, 2021

<sup>177</sup> Written comments from journalist Jean Guerrero, October 2022

<sup>178</sup> Southern Poverty Law Center. Extremist profile page: “John Tanton.” Available online: <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/individual/john-tanton>.



based on its continued circulation of white nationalist and anti-Semitic writers in its weekly newsletter in 2016, and employment of a policy analyst known for embracing “racist pseudoscience.”<sup>179</sup> (In 2017, PolitiFact determined that the SPLC designation was based on some of CIS’s past associations rather than its current work, though SPLC stands by its designation.<sup>180</sup>)

When asked whether he recalled any conversation about CIS as a source at the time, Castañeda replied, “No, which I think is pretty damning.... At the time we didn’t think of CIS as a far-right anti-immigrant organization. There was this understanding that they come from a very conservative angle, but that they have good people doing solid analysis and reports. I do think there was a sense of – ‘we should have the conservative immigration analysis as well because that’s how you do good journalism. And that is how you do a big story like this, you have to have both sides,’ which looking back now, feels a little naïve.”<sup>181</sup>

PEN America reached out to *inewssource* and KPBS for comment.

*Inewssource* responded with this statement from managing editor Mark Rochester: “The *inewssource* editor who oversaw this project has since retired, but we categorically deny there was pressure to present a positive character profile as described in the article. Then, as today, *inewssource* produces its investigations in collaborative fashion with reporters, carefully vetting and fact checking for accuracy all our investigations – we stand by that reporting and editing.”<sup>182</sup>

KPBS responded with this statement from News Director Terence Shepherd: “If we had this project in front of us today, we would include additional context in the profile of Mr. Maupin. Certainly, in hindsight, after lessons learned over the past five years, we would have asked more questions during the editing process.”<sup>183</sup>

Guerrero told PEN America she still sees the CIS and other Tanton groups, like the Federation for American Immigration Reform, regularly cited in national immigration reporting without proper scrutiny. This blind spot, she says, results from a lack of awareness about their origins, and how to navigate their strategic branding as “reputable” economics-focused organizations. While the CIS in particular disputes the SPLC’s designation, Guerrero told PEN America the group’s history in the “nativist white supremacist movement” should be called out and exclude it from being included in reporting as a legitimate source.<sup>184</sup>

The journalistic urge to paint one’s subject as empathetic is an understandable one. Yet as this case study illustrates, the urge to portray extremists as “relatable” threatens to amplify and

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<sup>179</sup> Southern Poverty Law Center. Extremist group profile page: “Center for Immigration Studies.” Available online: <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/center-immigration-studies>; Stephen Pigott and Alex Amend, “More Than An occasional Crank: 2,012 Times the Center for Immigration Studies Circulated White Nationalist Content,” Southern Poverty Law Center, May 23, 2017, <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2017/05/23/more-occasional-crank-2012-times-center-immigration-studies-circulated-white-nationalist>

<sup>180</sup> Amy Sherman, “Is the Center for Immigration Studies a hate group, as the Southern Poverty Law Center says?” PolitiFact, March 22, 2017, [politifact.com/article/2017/mar/22/center-immigration-studies-hate-group-southern-pov/](https://www.politifact.com/article/2017/mar/22/center-immigration-studies-hate-group-southern-pov/).

<sup>181</sup> PEN America interview with journalist Leonardo Castañeda, February 4, 2022

<sup>182</sup> Written response via Mark Rochester, Managing Editor, *inewssource*, November 2022.

<sup>183</sup> Written response via Heather Milne Barger, Director of Communications, KPBS, November 2022. In their response, KPBS noted that Shepherd joined KPBS in August 2022 and was not on staff at the time that the story was published.

<sup>184</sup> PEN America interview with journalist Jean Guerrero, November 24, 2021

normalize their message. Further, the instinct to treat extremism as simply one of many perspectives sends the implicit message that such a perspective is validly included within mainstream discourse—an objective that extremist groups are actively seeking.



A border protection officer watches from a hill above barbed-wire border fencing on the wall between the US and Mexico border; San Diego, California. Credit: Tony Webster

## NEWSROOM DIVERSITY AND ITS ROLE IN IDENTIFYING EXTREMISM

Dana Coester tells PEN America that Appalachian communities had experienced the impacts of violent extremism long before the mainstream media began reporting on Trump and his supporters. "What we're seeing now," she says, "it's something that's very much a long time coming."



"When you write a story that says 'Oh, look at this Nazi who did something dumb again,' it's an easy story to write. I've written that story, definitely." But reporters can resist such an approach, and dig more deeply into the consequences of extremism, simply "by talking to the people that are impacted by that person's ideology."  
*Kelly Weill, Daily Beast*

In 1967, in response to a rash of riots in urban neighborhoods around the country, President Lyndon Johnson convened the Kerner Commission to reveal the root causes of the violence and find a way toward peace. The next year, the commission released a report that implicated journalism as one of the problems. The profession, it stated, was "shockingly backward in seeking out, hiring, training, and promoting" Black journalists. The lack of newsroom diversity, it found, not only failed to adequately represent certain demographics but directly diminished the quality of coverage in publications across the country. "Failures of the media" were particularly pronounced in coverage of issues related to race, including white vigilante violence against communities of color.<sup>185</sup> The report's section on media representation decisively concluded, "If the media are to report with understanding, wisdom and sympathy on the problems of the cities and the problems of the black man ... they must employ, promote and listen to [Black] journalists."<sup>186</sup>

There have been periodic waves of introspection and action in the years since, but the election and presidency of Donald Trump and the murder of George Floyd have reanimated industry discussions of the links between the lack of newsroom diversity and deficiencies in coverage of race, politics, and threats to democracy.<sup>187</sup> The extremism, race, and politics

reporters whom PEN America interviewed consistently affirmed that newsroom diversity and race reporting initiatives are crucial to continuing to identify, report on, and adequately convey the growing threat of extremism in politics to communities of color, women, religious minorities and immigrants, as well as to democracy at large.

Data on the latest rounds of newsroom diversity hiring is still scant. As of October 2021, some national and regional outlets—including *The New York Times*, NPR, BuzzFeed, *The Philadelphia*

<sup>185</sup> "Report of The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders," (1968), at 207. Available online: [https://belonging.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/kerner\\_commission\\_full\\_report.pdf?file=1&force=1](https://belonging.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/kerner_commission_full_report.pdf?file=1&force=1)

<sup>186</sup> "Report of The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders," (1968), at 212. Available online: [https://belonging.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/kerner\\_commission\\_full\\_report.pdf?file=1&force=1](https://belonging.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/kerner_commission_full_report.pdf?file=1&force=1)

<sup>187</sup> Hanaa' Tameez, "American journalism's 'Racial Reckoning' still has lots of reckoning to do," Nieman Lab, March 8,

2022, <https://www.niemanlab.org/2022/03/american-journalisms-racial-reckoning-still-has-lots-of-reckoning-to-do/>; Issac J. Bailey, "Want better coverage of threats to democracy? Diversify newsrooms," Nieman Reports, May 6, 2022. <https://niemanreports.org/articles/newsroom-diversity-democracy/>

*Inquirer*, and *The Arizona Republic*—have begun conducting and publishing independent diversity audits.<sup>188</sup> But fewer than 250—just 4 percent—of an estimated 5,900 newsrooms across the United States have provided data for inclusion in the most recent annual American Society of News Editors News Leaders Association survey.<sup>189</sup> Another survey, the Leavers Project, questioned 101 former journalists of color about why they left the industry and highlighted long-standing problems with reporter retention, particularly among Black women, highlighting the urgent need for more discussion in the field on the fraught issue of retention.<sup>190</sup>

PEN America’s interviewees resoundingly told us that fair, informed, multidimensional, and nuanced reporting on targeted communities is integral to effective reporting on political extremism. Newsroom diversity—in hiring, sourcing, and the allocation of resources—is a prerequisite for such reporting. Consistent with the Kerner Commission’s findings, multiple extremism reporters say that investigating the impact of extremism on historically marginalized communities has improved their ability to identify and communicate the impact of extremism more broadly.

Six of the reporters and editors we interviewed identify as Black. When asked about coverage of rising extremism during the Trump campaign and presidency, they say that their colleagues at times thought they were exaggerating the threat that Trump posed to communities of color and the degree to which white racial resentment drove his voters. April Ryan, now the White House correspondent for *TheGrio*, notes that as a Black journalist, her reporting is too often mislabeled as partisan or “activism.” “When I was asking Donald Trump questions,” she says, “I was considered a bleeding-heart Democrat ... When a white journalist asks tough questions, they’re considered a good journalist.”<sup>191</sup>

Amber D. Dodd, formerly of *The Spokesman-Review*, where she was the inaugural race-equity reporter, says that she tries to position any coverage of extremism within the context of her greater goal of elevating underrepresented racial and ethnic minority groups in and around Spokane, Washington. She tells PEN America that in practice, this means “choosing story angles that focus on the agency of people of color and targeted communities.”<sup>192</sup> Dodd followed this approach when writing a September 2021 article in response to a neo-Nazi attack on a local synagogue. The piece, titled “As Hate Crimes Rise Nationally, So Do Spokane’s Community Efforts to Identify and Eradicate Them,” focuses on the work of local Jewish leaders as well as organizations like the NAACP and Asian Pacific Islander Coalition.<sup>193</sup>

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<sup>188</sup> See “The Arizona Republic releases 2021 newsroom diversity figures,” *The Arizona Republic*, Sept. 1, 2021, <https://www.azcentral.com/story/news/arizona-republic/2021/09/01/arizona-republic-newsroom-diversity-2021-census-figures-released/5672309001/>; “*Inquirer* has overwhelmingly white newsroom and its coverage underrepresents people of color, report says,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Feb. 12, 2021, <https://www.inquirer.com/news/philadelphia-inquirer-audit-temple-race-inclusion-newsroom-20210212.html>; Jonah Peretti, “2019 Update on Diversity at BuzzFeed,” BuzzFeed, March 4, 2019, <https://www.buzzfeed.com/jonah/2019-update-on-diversity-at-buzzfeed>; Elizabeth Jensen, “NPR’s Staff Diversity Numbers, 2019,” NPR, November 19, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/sections/publiceditor/2019/11/19/779261818/nprs-staff-diversity-numbers-2019>; “2019 Diversity and Inclusion Report,” *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytc.com/company/diversity-and-inclusion/2019-diversity-and-inclusion-report/>

<sup>189</sup> David Bauder, “Efforts to track diversity in journalism are lagging,” Associated Press, October 14, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/business-race-and-ethnicity-journalism-arts-and-entertainment-885ce3486382d7c3080519c50407aa18>

<sup>190</sup> Carla Murphy, “Introducing ‘Leavers’: results from a survey of 101 former journalists of color,” OpenNews, August 26, 2020, <https://source.opennews.org/articles/introducing-leavers-results-survey/>

<sup>191</sup> PEN America interview with April Ryan, White House Correspondent, *TheGrio*, December 8, 2021

<sup>192</sup> PEN America interview with Amber D. Dodd, former Race-Equity Reporter, *Spokesman-Review*, November 16, 2021

<sup>193</sup> Amber D. Dodd, “As hate crimes rise nationally, so do Spokane’s community efforts to identify and eradicate them,” *The Spokesman-Review*, September 25, 2021, <https://www.spokesman.com/stories/2021/sep/24/as-hate-crimes-rise-nationally-so-do-spokanes-comm/>

Dana Coester began 100 Days in Appalachia, a nonprofit newsroom in West Virginia, to spotlight that region's historically marginalized communities. What began as a series of profiles of racial and religious minorities in the region led to coverage of what she calls the "first really visible white supremacist rally in Pikeville," Kentucky.<sup>194</sup> She tells PEN America that Appalachian communities had experienced the impacts of violent extremism long before the mainstream media began reporting on Trump and his supporters. "What we're seeing now," she says, "it's something that's very much a long time coming. I think it just became more visible, perhaps, during the Trump Administration." It was while reporting on local marginalized groups that her team first identified the extremism at the Pikeville rally and saw the need to introduce an extremism reporting beat.<sup>195</sup>

Kelly Weill of the Daily Beast cites "Gamergate" as a red flag that alerted her to the danger of far-right groups in the digital age.<sup>196</sup> Gamergate was the name that members of the alt-right gave their online harassment campaign targeting female gamers in 2014 and '15. "I think Gamergate was for a lot of people sort of a wake-up call," Weill says, "as to the potential for these groups to work as a political movement or a cudgel against the left and against marginalized communities."<sup>197</sup>

But Gamergate was also instructive. Witnessing its misogynistic harassment taught Weill that heeding the perspectives of people targeted by extremists is a crucial way to avoid publishing superficial clickbait stories that focus on extremists' personalities while ignoring or glossing over the real threats they pose. "When you write a story that says 'Oh, look at this Nazi who did something dumb again,'" Weill says, "it's an easy story to write. I've written that story, definitely." But reporters can resist such an approach, and dig more deeply into the consequences of extremism, simply "by talking to the people that are impacted by that person's ideology."<sup>198</sup>

Efforts to address newsroom diversity have stepped up significantly in the past five years. During the 2020 racial-justice protests, demands from journalists and communities of color prompted major mainstream news networks such as NBC News and *USA Today* to commit to hiring and staffing more representative newsrooms. Kristen Go, executive editor of news and initiatives at *USA Today*, says that the formation of a new race-and-identity team, in direct response to the 2020 protests, led to the creation of 20 newsroom positions, both new hires and reassignments, and a variety of new beats, including housing, history and racism, and economics.<sup>199</sup> Gannett also publishes diversity statistics, a rarity for newsrooms, and has pledged to increase the diversity of its executive team by 30 percent by 2025.<sup>200</sup> Seasoned journalists of color like Sam Fulwood of American University express skepticism of such pledges, noting that since the Kerner Commission, newsrooms have repeatedly promised to

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<sup>194</sup> PEN America interview with Dana Coester, founder, 100 Days in Appalachia, October 14, 2021. See "100 Days, 100 Voices," 100 Days in Appalachia, <https://www.100daysinappalachia.com/100-days-100-voices/>

<sup>195</sup> PEN America interview with Dana Coester, founder, 100 Days in Appalachia, October 14, 2021.

<sup>196</sup> Aja Romano, "What we still haven't learned from Gamergate," January 7, 2021, Vox, <https://www.vox.com/culture/2020/1/20/20808875/gamergate-lessons-cultural-impact-changes-harassment-laws>

<sup>197</sup> PEN America interview with Kelly Weill, reporter, The Daily Beast, November 8, 2021

<sup>198</sup> Ibid.

<sup>199</sup> PEN America interview with Kristen Go, executive editor for news and initiatives, USA Today, November 19, 2021

<sup>200</sup> Nathan Bomey, "USA Today owner Gannett commits to make workforce as diverse as America, add new beats on race and social justice," USA Today, August 20, 2020. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/money/2020/08/20/gannett-usa-today-diversity-commitment-journalism/5604473002/>

diversify and consistently failed to deliver.<sup>201</sup>

Multiple journalists report that greater funding for race and ethnicity coverage has helped their newsrooms identify best practices for covering extremism. Odette Yousef of NPR developed expertise in reporting on local extremism through her work on WBEZ Chicago Public Radio's race, class, and communities (RCC) desk. Established in 2018, the RCC desk highlights what Yousef describes as the "disparate impact of citywide policies" and provides institutional resources, reporters, and a designated editor to local reporting on race and class. Yousef says that her initial reporting on right-wing extremism came directly out of her work on that desk. "I had covered a story ... about how a public-school teacher in Chicago had developed a tool kit to help other educators and parents recognize when young students were starting to spout white nationalist rhetoric," she says, "and what they should do to recognize it, confront it, and work with those young people." The existence of the RCC desk and its resources inspired Yousef to pitch an extended investigation of Chicago's neo-Nazi skinhead movement of the 1980s and 1990s to WBEZ's "Motive" podcast and informed her future, sustained reporting on extremism.<sup>202</sup>

At the Louisville *Courier-Journal*, says News Director Mike Trautmann, creating new community engagement positions and allotting more resources to race reporting directly contributed to the paper's Pulitzer-finalist coverage of the Breonna Taylor killing, and subsequent protests and extremist counterprotests.<sup>203</sup> Trautmann credited a colleague—Veda Morgan, the *Journal's* current senior director for engagement, diversity, and opinion, who served as the inaugural director of community impact from 2018 to 2020—for much of this progress, telling PEN America that Morgan's appointment and guidance greatly informed the paper's approach to covering violence against communities of color. Specific steps that Morgan initiated include reallocating reporters to race and criminal justice beats and rebuilding the paper's relationships with impacted groups.<sup>204</sup>

Reporters of color, immigrants, and members of religious, gender, or sexual minorities are frequently well positioned to cover extremists. Reporters with these identities may possess a firsthand understanding of the harms wrought by extremists, have better access to populations most impacted by extremism, and be better positioned to build trust with interviewees. Sensitized to slights and erasure, reporters with marginalized identities may also be more likely to seek out diverse voices for their stories—a key not only to better representation but also to better reporting overall.

While the proliferation of new beats covering race and identity can lead to more and better coverage, it does not stand alone as a solution.<sup>205</sup> Go says that reporters on *USA Today's* race-and-identity team have expressed concerns that their reporting and perspectives could be siloed, cut off from the rest of the political coverage. She adds that race reporting needs to be presented holistically, as a central component of political-extremism coverage, not as a

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<sup>201</sup> PEN America interview with Sam Fulwood, Dean of the School of Communication, American University, December 3, 2021

<sup>202</sup> PEN America interview with Odette Yousef, National Security Reporter on Extremism, NPR, December 6, 2021. Motive, from WBEZ Chicago, can be found at <https://www.wbez.org/shows/motive/8c9f445c-4f62-46d6-a7f6-dc70a835e99b>

<sup>203</sup> PEN America interview with Mike Trautmann, News Director, *Louisville Courier Journal*

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>205</sup> PEN America interview with Kristen Go, Executive Editor for News and Initiatives, *USA Today*, Nov 19, 2021

sidebar to it.<sup>206</sup>

In November 2021, Vox addressed the silo issue by taking the counterintuitive and controversial step of eliminating its Identities vertical, which housed coverage of race, gender, and criminal justice. Rather than segregating this coverage, so to speak, the publication opted to present intersectional coverage across all sections. Zack Beauchamp says this change formalizes an approach he has taken in his reporting since he began at Vox in 2018. “It is just empirically true that racial hostility has been a major driving force in American politics,” he says, “arguably *the* most important structuring force, period. And so, if you’re analyzing what’s happening in the U.S., you need to figure out how to treat racism as an empirically powerful force and integrate it into any theory you have about structural changes to American politics.”<sup>207</sup> While Beauchamp and several other interviewees acknowledge that both the separate and intersectional models could work, depending on the newsroom, they also note the reality that designating explicitly race-focused reporting teams often leads to greater financial, staffing, and infrastructure support for such beats.

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<sup>206</sup> Email to PEN America, Andale Gross, February 15, 2022.

<sup>207</sup> PEN America interview with Zack Beauchamp, Senior Correspondent, Vox, November 16, 2021

Multiple journalists report that greater funding for race and ethnicity coverage has helped their newsrooms identify best practices for covering extremism.

## THREATS TO EXTREMISM REPORTERS

Journalists around the world find themselves and their reporting under attack as never before. Targeted by repressive governments, extremist groups, and unaffiliated but like-minded individuals, reporters face a rising torrent of distrust, animosity, and violence, often emboldened by the anti-press rhetoric of political leaders. In the United States in 2020, over one hundred journalists were arrested or criminally charged in relation to their reporting, and 300 more were assaulted, many during that summer's Black Lives Matter protests.<sup>208</sup> As insurrectionists stormed the Capitol on January 6, journalists describe being chased and threatened by the mob, which chanted slogans like "CNN sucks!" and scrawled "murder the media" on a Capitol door.<sup>209</sup>



"Reporters of color get hit particularly hard. Particularly if you're a reporter of color and you're covering race or politics, some of these issues that are really divisive really tug at people's emotions one way or another."

*Andale Gross, Associated Press*

Many extremism reporters interviewed by PEN America say they endure constant harassment and security threats on the job. Those who focus specifically on far-right hate groups face risks from self-described neo-Nazis, white supremacists, incels, and other violent forces within the organized hate movement. As extremism, disinformation, and antidemocratic violence creep into the political mainstream, so do the dangers endemic to reporting on these topics.<sup>210</sup> Harassment from conservative activists and self-described extremists in everyday circumstances like school board meetings, local government meetings, rallies, and protests is now an occupational hazard for journalists across the newsroom.

In October 2021, Brian Stelter, until recently the host of CNN's *Reliable Sources*, said on air that he and his family were threatened for more than a year by a serial harasser who believed Trump's propaganda that the 2020 presidential election was illegitimate. "You tell the truth, you get threats," Stelter said. He concluded, "Threats and harassment hinder a free press."<sup>211</sup>

As early as 2016, after multiple instances of anti-press violence at Trump campaign rallies, NPR began offering hostile-environment training to reporters covering political beats.<sup>212</sup> Dorothy Tucker, a CBS correspondent in Chicago and president of the National Association of Black

<sup>208</sup> Katherine Jacobs, "In 2020, journalists faced unprecedented attacks," Committee to Protect Journalists, December 14, 2020, <https://cpj.org/2020/12/in-2020-u-s-journalists-faced-unprecedented-attacks/>.

<sup>209</sup> Tiffany Hsu and Katie Robertson, "Covering Pro-Trump Mobs, the News Media Became a Target," *The New York Times*, January 6, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/06/business/media/media-murder-capitol-building.html>.

<sup>210</sup> For further PEN America analysis on disinformation and the threats and harassment journalists may face when debunking it, including recommendations for reporters on how to better protect themselves, see PEN America's report *Hard News: Journalists and the Threat of Disinformation* and our *Online Harassment Field Manual*.

<sup>211</sup> Ramishah Maruf, "More reporting: how journalists should cover threats to democracy," CNN, October 18, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/10/17/media/reliable-sources-covering-democracy/index.html>.

<sup>212</sup> Josh Hafner, "Report: NPR journalists get 'Trump training' to deal with hostile events," *USA Today*, March 23, 2016.

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/npr-starts-trump-training-to-deal-with-threats/2016/03/23/eb13049c-f05b-11e5-85a6-2132cf446do\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/npr-starts-trump-training-to-deal-with-threats/2016/03/23/eb13049c-f05b-11e5-85a6-2132cf446do_story.html)



Journalists (NABJ), told PEN America that in response to growing harassment, her network has implemented physical security training for all its broadcast journalists. Tucker says that broadcast journalists are particularly visible targets since they arrive at a protest or rally in a marked van and carry equipment like large cameras and microphones that identify them as reporters.<sup>213</sup>

These safety risks are often heightened for journalists who are non-white, women, LGBTQI+, and/or members of religious or ethnic minority groups. Sue Robinson, coauthor of *News After Trump: Journalism's Crisis of Relevance in a Changed Media Culture*, argues that “special attention is owed to [Trump’s] targeting of journalists of color because they connect back to the white nationalist elements of his populist rhetoric.”<sup>214</sup> April Ryan told PEN America that she was often singled out and insulted by Trump and other officials, and as a result has become a visible target of harassment.<sup>215</sup>

Beyond direct threats, several journalists, including Jared Holt of Digital Forensic Lab, AC Thompson of ProPublica, Gisela Pérez de Acha of UC Berkeley’s Investigative Reporting Program, Mila Sanina of PublicSource, Andale Gross of the Associated Press, and Amber D. Dodd of the *Spokesman Review*, spoke to the psychological trauma of reporting on violence, especially when reporting in racially hostile environments.

“Reporters of color get hit particularly hard,” says Gross. “Particularly if you’re a reporter of color and you’re covering race or politics, some of these issues that are really divisive really tug at people’s emotions one way or another. I think particularly if you’re a woman of color, you doubly get it, because that’s when I feel like people take shots at you over you being a woman as well.”<sup>216</sup> Mila Sanina, an assistant teaching professor at Penn State, observes that while “there is such a huge load and expectation on reporters who come from marginalized communities to cover those stories,” she doesn’t see a commensurate effort to protect them from the trauma that such work can bring.<sup>217</sup>

Local-news reporters face unique risks as well. They are often just as vulnerable to extremist attacks as national reporters yet have access to fewer resources and support—a deterrent to outlets’ covering the issue at all. Sanina, formerly the executive director of Pittsburgh-based PublicSource, believes that journalists have an obligation to report on right-wing elements in their regions, yet she wonders, “What is our responsibility for building a newsroom where they feel safe to share that within a professional setting?”<sup>218</sup> Andy Downing, who until recently was editor in chief of the now-shuttered Columbus Alive, laments that small, local publications often lack the resources to carry out sustained investigative reporting and provide institutional protection to journalists in dangerous or racially hostile environments. While larger outlets have the means to take safety measures like scrubbing reporters’ private online data, Downing says, “I don’t think those resources are really there at a local level . . . so you do

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<sup>213</sup> PEN America interview with Dorothy Tucker, Correspondent, CBS, December 20, 2021

<sup>214</sup> Matt Carson et al, *The Trump Presidency: Four Years of Battling and Belittling the Press*, Oxford Academic Press, 2021

<sup>215</sup> PEN America interview with April Ryan, White House Correspondent, TheGrio, December 8, 2021

<sup>216</sup> PEN America interview with Andale Gross, race and ethnicity editor, Associated Press, November 30, 2021

<sup>217</sup> PEN America interview with Mila Sanina, Editor in Chief, PublicSource, November 10, 2021

<sup>218</sup> Ibid.

the best you can, but you're not going to be able to do what a professional resource can do."<sup>219</sup>

The connection between local-resource scarcity and lack of coverage is particularly concerning given the crucial role of local reporters in exposing the extremist next door.<sup>220</sup> When local outlets do commit to reporting on extremism, the backlash can be strong and systematic enough, and the resulting risk high enough, to discourage future coverage altogether.



© 2017 Rodney Dunning

Participants gather at the white supremacist "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville, August 2017. Credit: Rodney Dunning

## Case Study: Local Outlets on the Frontlines

### *Mainer* Pulled from Circulation

Chris Busby and Andy O'Brien serve as editor and board member, respectively, of *Mainer*, an alternative monthly publication distributed at 400 locations across south and mid-coast Maine. They told PEN America that the paper's coverage of far-right extremism has been targeted by distributors and advertisers on multiple occasions over the past three years.

In November 2019, O'Brien and contributor Nathan Bernard published "Hatebook," an exposé of a local Facebook group that served as a haven for anti-Muslim hate speech and included

<sup>219</sup> PEN America interview with Andy Downing, editor, *Columbus Alive*, November 5, 2021

<sup>220</sup> PEN America, *Losing the News: The Decimation of Local News and the Search for Solutions* (2019), <https://pen.org/local-news/>

members with ties to the Three Percenters—a prominent anti-government militia—and the neo-Nazi movement.<sup>221</sup> Following the article’s publication, O’Brien told PEN America, unidentified individuals began printing and distributing flyers to local advertisers explicitly referencing the “Hatebook” article and accusing *Mainer* of “Commie” biases and poor journalistic ethics. Complaints that the article was anti-Semitic—the cover image featured the Facebook logo reconfigured to resemble a swastika, a reference to the Facebook group in the article’s neo-Nazi ties—led to the issue’s removal and a one-month ban from a local grocery store in Saco, Maine.<sup>222</sup>

In October 2021, *Mainer* was banned from the shelves of all supermarkets in the southern and mid-coast areas of Maine who carried the publication, after it published reporting on multiple Proud Boys meetings at Mathew’s, a local bar in Portland. The article that led to the paper’s ban, “Woods Queer,” was a feature written by Pat Hogan, a Mathew’s bartender who first tipped off *Mainer* and other journalists to the Proud Boys’ meetings at the bar. Four days after “Woods Queer”’s publication, Busby was informed that the paper had been banned from up to 40 supermarket locations, representing approximately 40 percent of the publication’s total print circulation. Some of these stores have since retracted their bans, Busby and O’Brien informed PEN America—but not all.<sup>223</sup>

Busby told PEN America that the ban came after local supermarket representatives notified *Mainer*’s distributor, Masthead Maine, of complaints about the article’s use of the word “queer” as well other language deemed inappropriate for “all-ages audiences.” (“Woods queer” is a commonly used local term to describe individuals who spend extended time in the area’s forests; Hogan, the author of the piece, had himself previously spent 29 months as a hermit in the woods of Maine. The word “queer” in this context refers to strangeness, not sexual orientation.) A store manager at a Hannaford supermarket in Yarmouth, Maine, also raised complaints to corporate leadership about the story’s alleged “offensive, racist, and political comments.”<sup>224</sup>

The majority of direct complaints against the publication made general accusations of “four-letter words” and age-inappropriate content, and it is the case that, as an alternate weekly, *Mainer* publishes articles that include expletives—including the “Woods Queer” article. Busby told PEN America, however, that the paper has never received comparable feedback on other articles containing similar language. The scope and systemic nature of the backlash against the “Hatebook” and “Woods Queer” articles, he said, was unprecedented.<sup>225</sup>

Busby says that small publications like *Mainer* are especially vulnerable to the political and financial whims of local communities and businesses. Even businesses that don’t share far-right sympathies may want to avoid offending customers who do, or dealing with the negative publicity associated with distributing content perceived as inflammatory. But, Busby says, this image-consciousness can work both ways. He credits public uproar from *Mainer* readership—

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<sup>221</sup> Nathan Bernard and Andy O’Brien, “Hatebook,” *Mainer*, November 27, 2019. <https://mainernews.com/hatebook/>; Crash Barry, “Crying Nazis and Wannabe Kings,” *Mainer*, January 24, 2020. <https://mainernews.com/crying-nazis-and-wannabe-kings/>

<sup>222</sup> PEN America interview with Andy O’Brien, board member, *Mainer*, January 28, 2021

<sup>223</sup> PEN America interview with Chris Busby, editor, *Mainer*, January 31, 2021; PEN America interview with Andy O’Brien, board member, *Mainer*, January 28, 2021

<sup>224</sup> Email, October 4, 2021. Obtained by PEN America from Chris Busby on February 14, 2022.

<sup>225</sup> PEN America interview with Andy O’Brien, board member, *Mainer*, January 28, 2021

many of whom contacted the paper’s distributor and supermarket corporate representatives directly—with the ultimate lifting of several of the bans against the paper. While Busby said the backlash hasn’t impacted his team’s pursuit of reporting on local extremism, he warns that these challenges are larger than one town or region; they represent a potentially widespread issue of attempts to suppress free speech in reporting on right-wing extremism.<sup>226</sup>

## Pressures Against Independent Media in West Virginia

Dana Coester, editor in chief of the West Virginia online media outlet 100 Days, expressed that she carries similar concerns about retaliation against her nonprofit newsroom in West Virginia in response to its coverage of far-right extremism and conservative political radicalization. She told PEN America that intimidation of small local media could lead to a chilling effect on extremism coverage at the local level and erode journalism’s independence in the state.

Coester pointed to 100 Days’ focus on non-white writers, religious minorities, and other community members across the spectrum of diversity in the Appalachian region as one that may threaten some conservative members of the region, as well as to external actors who were paying close attention to what the publication was doing. As its website proudly proclaims, 100 Days in Appalachia aims “to amplify the region’s diverse voices, celebrate our successes, investigate our failures and empower our communities.”<sup>227</sup> “Our intent was to do a collective narrative that was more representative of the region—and that made some people uncomfortable,” she said. She said journalists at 100 Days, including herself, as well as family members and sources, have experienced harassment from extremist groups and individuals.<sup>228</sup>

Coester emphasized that threats to local news, especially in economically distressed regions, can come in more subtle forms as well. A local publisher may avoid reporting on certain topics for fear of losing advertisers or facing retaliation from influential community members in addition to fears of more direct threats and intimidation. “These are the unspoken realities that many local journalists navigate on a daily basis, and when a newsroom is under-sourced and struggling economically, these risks are amplified,” Coester said.<sup>229</sup> Coester also notes that threat assessments place local journalists in a higher-risk category than national journalists because they—and their family members and sources—are visible, known, and reachable as part of the community. “Whether it’s internal intimidation or external threats from coordinated actors, we as a community of journalists have to support each other to do this work, especially at the local level,” Coester said.<sup>230</sup>

The institutional repression of extremism coverage must be understood—and treated as—attacks on press freedom and free speech at the local level. This framing is especially important—and urgent—in light of the rise of increasingly far-right and anti-democratic forces in towns and cities across the country.

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<sup>226</sup> PEN America interview with Chris Busby, editor, *Mainer*, January 31, 2022

<sup>227</sup> 100 Days in Appalachia, About Us, <https://www.100daysinappalachia.com/100-days-in-appalachia/>

<sup>228</sup> PEN America interview with Dana Coester, founder, 100 Days of Appalachia, October 14, 2021

<sup>229</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>230</sup> *Ibid.*



A scene from the "Stop the Steal" rally at the US Capitol, which was followed by a violent insurrection. Credit: Tyler Merbler

Core among such democracy reporting would be journalism that doubles as civic education—explaining the nuts and bolts of our democratic institutions.



“We’ll need an entire corps of reporters with skill and support, to be the early warning system for the next big threats to the foundation of our democracy.”  
*Andrew Donohue, “Reveal” podcast*

In January 2022, The New York Times posted two new positions for politics reporters: one to cover right-wing media and the other to cover “Trump and Trumpism.” Both postings asked applicants to demonstrate “emotional fortitude” and the ability to withstand “aggressive blowback.”

## THE RISE OF DEMOCRACY REPORTING

In a December 2021 piece for *Mother Jones*, CEO Monika Bauerlein identified extremism, disinformation, calls to violence, gerrymandering, and voter suppression as part of a “coordinated assault” on democracy. The reporting on these issues, she wrote, should also be coordinated—covered thoroughly, relentlessly, and urgently, and not as disembodied news bites but as part of “the Big Story.” Bauerlein called on journalists to dispense with self-destructive even-handedness and instead stake a claim as “partisans for democracy.”<sup>231</sup>

In her final column for *The Washington Post*, in August 2022, columnist Margaret Sullivan—whose coverage of the Trump White House has driven news cycles—hit a similar note, calling on journalists to do more to counter the threats facing American democracy, stating, “Journalists simply can’t allow themselves to be megaphones or stenographers. They have to be dedicated truth-tellers, using clear language, plenty of context and thoughtful framing to get that truth across.”<sup>232</sup>

Bauerlein and Sullivan are among those media critics and journalists who conclude that the current transformation of U.S. politics by extremism requires a higher-level conceptual reframing of political journalism to place “democracy,” political participation, and the

protection of democratic structures against attack, at the center of its coverage. In the past five years, newsrooms across the country have built out existing elections coverage and created new reporting positions with a sustained focus on democracy, voter rights, and government at the national and local level. Outlets national and local have staffed up, expanded their coverage, and reframed their political journalism to place the protection of democracy at their center.

In a January 2022 article, *Washington Post* columnist Perry Bacon Jr. argued that we were already seeing “the rise of pro-democracy media,” a transition from traditional political reporting to covering democracy as a core coverage area. Bacon pointed to new reporting

<sup>231</sup> Monika Bauerlein, “What if Media covered the War on Democracy Like An Actual War?” *Mother Jones*, December 13, 2021, <https://www.motherjones.com/media/2021/12/war-on-democracy-media/>

<sup>232</sup> Margaret Sullivan, “My final column: 2024 and the dangers ahead,” *The Washington Post*, August 21, 2022, [washingtonpost.com/media/2022/08/21/margaret-sullivan-last-column-trump-2024-media/](https://www.washingtonpost.com/media/2022/08/21/margaret-sullivan-last-column-trump-2024-media/)

positions, significant shifts in political framing, and dedicated voting rights and misinformation coverage at major national organizations such as the Associated Press, *The Atlantic*, FiveThirtyEight, CNN, and MSNBC.<sup>233</sup>

Core among such democracy reporting would be journalism that doubles as civic education—explaining the nuts and bolts of our democratic institutions. Stephen Fowler, political reporter for Georgia Public Radio and host of “Battleground: Ballot Box,” the station’s podcast on 2020 election administration in Georgia, wrote in a 2022 piece, “A shining point of journalism during the 2020 election was the prominence of local and national reporting on how our election system works, explaining the complicated process of how volunteer election workers and trained officials ensured only eligible voters cast their ballots, and how the counting of those ballots—in some cases three times—should be trusted.”<sup>234</sup>

In the lead-up to the 2022 midterm elections, there was a surge in job listings at local-news outlets that reflected this reframing. To cite several examples: Both KPCC in Pasadena, California, and WITF in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, introduced civics and democracy beats aimed at “illuminating the barriers to voting and exposing elected officials who spread lies.” Oklahoma Watch, a nonprofit newsroom, added a new democracy-and-misinformation beat to its state government coverage.<sup>235</sup>

Such reporting by local journalists is especially important, as they are better positioned to identify problems in their midst, from plans for electoral obstruction to extremist threats of violence, and to reach those most directly affected.<sup>236</sup> Jessica Huseman of Votebeat says that she has been encouraging state reporters to routinely appear on broadcast television outlets, where, the Pew Research Center found in 2019, a plurality (41 percent) of Americans prefer to get their local news.<sup>237</sup> Her aim is to spread well-researched and accurate information about voting to the largest possible audience and share resources across networks and mediums. “I think that we need to meet our audiences where they are,” she says, “and if journalism isn’t doing that, that’s just a failure of business.”<sup>238</sup>

Nikole Hannah-Jones, creator of the 1619 Project, has argued that a press that took its role as a protector of democracy more seriously would look more diverse. “In order for news to be the firewall of our democracy, news itself needs to be democratized,” Hannah-Jones said in a 2021 interview with legal scholar Noah Feldman. “We need more institutions for local news and ethnic press. We need to be in a news rich environment.”<sup>239</sup>

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<sup>233</sup> Perry Bacon Jr., “Opinion: The rise of a pro-democracy media,” *The Washington Post*, January 7, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/01/07/pro-democracy-media-gop-threats/>

<sup>234</sup> Stephen Fowler, “Political journalism has to rise to the occasion – but probably won’t,” *Nieman Labor Predictions for Journalism 2022*, <https://www.niemanlab.org/2021/12/political-journalism-has-to-rise-to-the-occasion-but-probably-wont/>

<sup>235</sup> Trever Brown, “Why Oklahoma Watch is Launching a Democracy and Misinformation Beat,” *Oklahoma Watch*, January 28, 2022, <https://www.examiner-enterprise.com/story/news/2022/01/28/why-oklahoma-watch-launching-democracy-and-misinformation-beat/6577968001/>; Leigh Giangreco, “Amid Attacks on Democracy, Newsrooms Are Rethinking Approaches to the Politics Beat,” *Current*, January 27, 2022, <https://current.org/2022/01/amid-attacks-on-democracy-newsrooms-are-rethinking-approaches-to-the-politics-beat/>

<sup>236</sup> Jared Holt, “Atlantic Council’s DFRLab publishes new report in Just Security: #StopTheSTeal: A timeline of social media and extremist activities leading up to 1/6 insurrection,” *Atlantic Council*, February 10, 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/atlantic-councils-dfrlab-publishes-new-report-in-just-security-stopthesteal-a-timeline-of-social-media-and-extremist-activities-leading-up-to-1-6-insurrection/>

<sup>237</sup> “Nearly as many Americans prefer to get their local news online as prefer the TV set,” Pew Research Center, March 26, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2019/03/26/nearly-as-many-americans-prefer-to-get-their-local-news-online-as-prefer-the-tv-set/>

<sup>238</sup> PEN America interview with Jessica Huseman, Editorial Director, Votebeat, March 18, 2022.

<sup>239</sup> Nikole Hannah-Jones on the Power of the 1619 Project, Deep Background with Noah Feldman, July 28, 2021

National outlets are also refocusing on local contexts, fanning out and hiring correspondents to report on the regional tactics of antidemocratic candidates and voter obstruction. Listings for *The Washington Post's* new democracy team included two national editors as well as three state-based reporters, operating out of Georgia, Arizona, and the Upper Midwest. Each region, the *Post's* listing explained, was chosen for its history of battles over voting access and election legitimacy.<sup>240</sup> In job descriptions for midterm reporters in Pennsylvania and Texas, Votebeat, which is based in Denver but operates newsrooms around the country, emphasized the importance of covering new voting laws, election administration violations, and lawsuits at the state level.<sup>241</sup>

In a sign of the times, some listings read more like calls for hardened crime beat reporters than politics. In January 2022, *The New York Times* posted two new positions for politics reporters: one to cover right-wing media and the other to cover “Trump and Trumpism.” Both postings asked applicants to demonstrate “emotional fortitude” and the ability to withstand “aggressive blowback.”<sup>242</sup>

In the run-up to the 2022 election, CBS News announced that it would install—for the first time since it began televising elections in 1948—a dedicated democracy desk, with reporters and analysts standing by to report on threats of violence and address allegations of “stolen elections” in real time.<sup>243</sup>

The expanded democracy press corps can barely keep up with the threat. “When I first started doing the voting rights beat,” in 2017, Sam Levine of *The Guardian* told a *Washington Post* columnist, “people would ask me, ‘Is there enough to cover?’ Now, they get it. They say, ‘You must be so busy.’”<sup>244</sup>

Ari Berman, a senior reporter for *Mother Jones* and the author of *Give Us the Ballot: The Modern Struggle for Voting Rights in America* (2015), was an even earlier adopter of the democracy beat, covering voting rights since before the Supreme Court’s 2012 *Shelby County v. Holder* decision turbocharged the current wave of voter suppression. Focusing on this issue longer and more deeply than most has helped Berman discern patterns. In 2015, as Berman noticed that various states were passing laws to curtail early voting and institute strict ID requirements, he realized: “This doesn’t look like an isolated thing that one state or another is doing. This looks like a national strategy.”<sup>245</sup> By June 2021, he noted that 26 states had passed restrictive voting laws since *Shelby*.<sup>246</sup>

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<sup>240</sup> “The Post expands coverage of American democracy with new Democracy Team.” *The Washington Post*, February 22, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/pr/2022/02/22/post-expands-coverage-american-democracy-with-new-democracy-team/>

<sup>241</sup> “Careers at Votebeat: Pennsylvania Reporter.” *Votebeat*. <https://www.votebeat.org/pages/pennsylvania-reporter-202201>

<sup>242</sup> @elanazak, January 14, 2022, <https://twitter.com/elanazak/status/1482056545915613188>. The job descriptions, previously at [https://nytimes.wd5.myworkdayjobs.com/en-US/News/job/New-York-NY/Politics-Reporter—Trump-and-Trumpism\\_REQ-011524](https://nytimes.wd5.myworkdayjobs.com/en-US/News/job/New-York-NY/Politics-Reporter—Trump-and-Trumpism_REQ-011524) and [https://nytimes.wd5.myworkdayjobs.com/en-US/News/job/New-York-NY/Politics-Reporter—Right-Wing-Media\\_REQ-011523-2](https://nytimes.wd5.myworkdayjobs.com/en-US/News/job/New-York-NY/Politics-Reporter—Right-Wing-Media_REQ-011523-2), have since been removed.

<sup>243</sup> Michael M. Grynbaum, “TV Prepares for a Chaotic Midterm Nights,” *The New York Times*, October 30, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/30/business/media/tv-coverage-midterms.html>

<sup>244</sup> Perry Bacon Jr., “Opinion: The rise of a pro-democracy media,” *The Washington Post*, January 7, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/01/07/pro-democracy-media-gop-threats/>

<sup>245</sup> Jim Rutenberg, “This looks like a national strategy,” *The New York Times*, August 17, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/17/magazine/this-looks-like-a-national-strategy.html?searchResultPosition=1>

<sup>246</sup> Ari Berman, “Eight Years Ago, the Supreme Court Gutted the Voting Rights Act. Widespread Voter Suppression Resulted,” *Mother Jones*, June 25, 2021, <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2021/06/eight-years-ago-the-supreme-court-gutted-the-voting-rights-act-widespread-voter-suppression-resulted/>



Errin Haines and April Ryan, two leading Black women journalists, have spearheaded coverage particularly identifying the racial impacts of political attacks on voting rights leading up to the 2022 midterm elections. Ryan explains that in her coverage, she works to specifically link the current era of voter suppression to the *Shelby* decision, which did away with Voting Rights Act provision that required federal approval of changes to state voting laws to ensure that changes did not disenfranchise minority voters.<sup>247</sup> In terms of sourcing, Haines emphasized the importance of placing direct insights from voters and grassroots organizers, especially from impacted groups like the Black community, at the center of voting rights coverage.<sup>248</sup>

Jackie Calmes of the *Los Angeles Times* believes that right-wing extremism is not only underreported but also under-contextualized. She tells PEN America that today's democracy journalism needs to clearly portray the radicalization and antidemocratic tactics of the Republican Party, such as its refusal to accept election outcomes, as asymmetrical and historically anomalous rather than as politics as usual.<sup>249</sup>

The role of extremism in politics, writes Andrew Donohue in Harvard's Nieman Journalism Lab, is "a challenging story to cover because so much of the threat comes from one political party."<sup>250</sup> Donohue, the managing editor of the investigative podcast "Reveal," notes that "over the past four years, reporters and editors as a whole have gotten much more comfortable with openly calling out lies and baseless claims, moving away from the 'he said, she said' style of political journalism." But, he adds, they haven't completely broken the habit. "False equivalence," he predicts, "will still be a problem."<sup>251</sup> As will other occupational failings, such as the amplification of extremists, insufficient source scrutiny, and the unmediated reporting of disinformation. Combatting these failings will require sustained attention and resources. "We'll need an entire corps of reporters with skill and support," Donohue concludes, "to be the early warning system for the next big threats to the foundation of our democracy."<sup>252</sup>

The rise of democracy reporting, as an explicit response to the asymmetrical assault on our democracy, has much further to go, and it is too early to fully evaluate the effectiveness or staying power of the initiatives spotlighted here. For smaller outlets, the creation of dedicated democracy beats may not be feasible. But it is heartening that outlets are experimenting with these new approaches, because what is certain is that journalism has a critical role to play in educating the public about how democracy works, and the threats it faces.

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<sup>247</sup> PEN America interview with April Ryan, White House Correspondent, TheGrio, December 8, 2021; see also Richard Fowler, "As More Oppressive Voting Rules Emerge, Black Women Journalists Lead The Headlines," *Forbes*, September 29, 2021, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbestheculture/2021/09/29/as-more-oppressive-voting-rules-emerge-black-women-journalists-lead-the-headlines/?sh=73ab59f04dbd>

<sup>248</sup> Richard Fowler, "As More Oppressive Voting Rules Emerge, Black Women Journalists Lead The Headlines," *Forbes*, September 29, 2021, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbestheculture/2021/09/29/as-more-oppressive-voting-rules-emerge-black-women-journalists-lead-the-headlines/?sh=73ab59f04dbd>

<sup>249</sup> PEN America interview with Jackie Calmes, columnist, *The Los Angeles Times*, March 21, 2022

<sup>250</sup> Andrew Donohue, "The rise of the democracy beat," *Nieman Lab Predictions for Journalism 2021*, <https://www.niemanlab.org/2020/12/the-rise-of-the-democracy-beat/>

<sup>251</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>252</sup> *Ibid.*



“Extremism has invaded every aspect of our lives. It’s not this thing you look at in a vacuum. We need to empower every journalist in a newsroom to talk about the political implications of extremism in factually accurate ways.”

*Jessica Huseman. Votebeat*

## CONCLUSION

As extremism continues to infiltrate the mainstream, reporters on the politics beat are—and must see themselves as—also on the extremism beat. Whether covering a national election, a school board meeting, a protest, or a newly introduced bill, they must brace themselves for the hatred, disinformation, and twisted talking points that extremists inject into public discourse.

But it is not only politics reporters who need to be both vigilant and proactive about extremism. Reporters and editors across beats—including health care, criminal justice, business, and social services—must be prepared to counter extremist disinformation and tactics in their areas of expertise. “Extremism has invaded every aspect of our lives,” says Jessica Huseman of Votebeat. “It’s not this thing you look at in a vacuum. We need to empower every journalist in a newsroom to talk about the political implications of extremism in factually accurate ways.”<sup>253</sup>

In this precarious moment, journalism plays a crucial role in bolstering democracy, unearthing truth, countering mis- and disinformation, and informing the public about the nature and severity of the threats posed by right-wing extremism and asymmetric political polarization. Recognizing the heavy commercial demands of the 24/7 news cycle, a news media that is fully prepared to address these threats must invest in rigorous, thoughtful, in-depth reporting and analysis, and apply careful attention to coverage of extremists.

The extremism reporters interviewed by PEN America generally agree on several best practices for reporting on extremism: focus on trends and patterns, not violent incidents in isolation; report on actions over words; quote extremists only sparingly, carefully, and with context; avoid euphemisms that serve to minimize the threat; understand how extremists manipulate journalists; do extensive research before interviewing extremists to make any lies and disinformation easier to identify and challenge; prioritize the victims of extremism over the extremists; and build procedures and protocols to prepare for and mitigate the effects of harassment on the job.

News outlets have steps they can take to improve their coverage of white supremacy and other forms of domestic extremism in politics. Firstly, there are the pitfalls to avoid. Outlets should refrain from setting data analytics goals such as click rates for extremism coverage, and from approaching such coverage as a revenue strategy. These approaches make it easier for extremists to game the system, obtaining splashy but shallow media coverage that amplifies their reach and mainlines their message.

Media outlets should position domestic extremism as a whole-newsroom issue, rather than one limited to the politics desk. To that end, they should endeavor to provide training and

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<sup>253</sup> PEN America interview with Jessica Huseman, Editorial Director, Votebeat, March 18, 2022

resources for reporters and editors interested in gaining—or deepening—expertise on right-wing extremism, political radicalization, and disinformation. To the greatest extent practical, outlets should also approach—or include—reporting on right-wing extremism and political radicalization as an investigative reporting beat, with longer time lines and a commitment to rigor, quality, and depth.

The specific steps that media outlets should take are ultimately unique to each institution—which is why media outlets should first assess how right-wing extremism manifests itself in their communities, and develop specific plans to address it with existing staff and reporting structures. Outlets should also identify how to develop new resources to cover these issues. This is the case despite the fact that smaller or local outlets may have few extra resources to expend. (PEN America’s 2019 report *Losing the News: The Decimation of Local News and the Search for Solutions* addressed the crisis facing local journalism, and we continue to call for federal action to invest in local journalism.)

Diversity in the newsroom is not only a moral imperative in itself, but it can better equip newsrooms to thoughtfully and effectively cover white supremacy and other extremist ideologies. To that end, newsrooms must advance diversity. There are many organizations working to proactively increase diversity in newsrooms, including with specific proposals for how to achieve this goal.<sup>254</sup> One simple step that newsrooms could take, however, is to participate in efforts to compile annual diversity statistics for the profession—such as the News Leader Association’s annual diversity surveys, an important industry-wide resource that has traditionally received low participation rates.

Newsrooms must also recognize that reporting on extremism will inevitably result in harassment, disinformation, and intimidation targeting their staff and freelancers, particularly reporters who identify as people of color, Jewish people, women, immigrants, and/or as LGBTQI+—and have plans in place to address this. Media outlets have a responsibility to protect and support staff and freelancers facing abuse and threats, online and offline, including by developing policies, protocols, training, and services on safety and security. To this end, we would direct newsrooms to resources like PEN America’s Online Harassment Field Manual and Employer Best Practices guidance, the Coalition Against Online Violence’s Response Hub, and the International Press Institute’s Ontheline Protocol.

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<sup>254</sup> See e.g. the Transformative Transparency Project, News Leaders Association, <https://www.newsleaders.org/transformative-transparency-project>, and affiliated Transformative Transparency Exchange, <https://www.newsleaders.org/transformative-transparency-exchange>; The Inclusive Journalism Handbook, Media Diversity Institute, March 21, 2022, <https://www.media-diversity.org/resources/inclusive-journalism-handbook/>; Jeffrey Gottfried et al, “Journalists Sense Turmoil in their Industry Amid Continued Passion for their Work,” Pew Research Center, June 14, 2022, pp. 47-57, <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2022/06/14/journalists-give-industry-mixed-reviews-on-newsroom-diversity-lowest-marks-in-racial-and-ethnic-diversity/>; Nicole A. Childers, “The moral argument for diversity in newsrooms is also a business argument — and you need both,” NiemanLab, Nov. 24, 2020, <https://www.niemanlab.org/2020/11/the-moral-case-for-diversity-in-newsrooms-also-makes-good-business-sense/>; Clio Chang, “For More Diverse Newsrooms, It’s Time to Rebuild the Journalism Pipeline,” NiemanReports, February 28, 2022, <https://niemanreports.org/articles/diverse-young-journalists-pipeline/>; Poynter, Race and Equity in the Newsroom (offering Poynter-led trainings on diversity in the newsroom), <https://www.poynter.org/custom-training/race-equity-newsroom/>; “Tackling Diversity and Inclusion in the Newsroom,” Global Future Council on Media, Entertainment and Sport, World Economic Forum, July 2021, [https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_Tackling\\_Diversity\\_and\\_Inclusion\\_in\\_the\\_Newsroom\\_2021.pdf](https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_Tackling_Diversity_and_Inclusion_in_the_Newsroom_2021.pdf); Chanté Russell, “Advancing diversity and inclusion in the news media,” International Journalists’ Network, May 25, 2021, <https://ijnet.org/en/story/advancing-diversity-and-inclusion-news-media>; “How the news media can advance diversity and inclusion in 2021 and beyond,” Media Diversity Institute, May 18, 2021, <https://www.media-diversity.org/how-the-news-media-can-advance-diversity-and-inclusion-in-2021-and-beyond/>; Jane Elizabeth, “Challenge No. 2: Making diversity, equity, and inclusion more than theoretical,” (From: How Local News Organizations are Taking Steps to Recover from a Year of Trauma), American Press Institute, May 20, 2021, <https://www.americanpressinstitute.org/publications/articles/challenge-no-2-making-diversity-equity-and-inclusion-more-than-theoretical/>; Michelle Polyak and Katie Donnelly, “Advancing Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Journalism,” Democracy Fund, October 2019, [https://democracyfund.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/2019\\_DF\\_AdvancingDEInJournalism.pdf](https://democracyfund.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/2019_DF_AdvancingDEInJournalism.pdf)

In all these efforts, newsrooms can find valuable partners in civil society and academic institutions. Newsrooms should explore ways to better collaborate with universities on identifying and analyzing domestic extremism—particularly those with centers or faculty with expertise in extremism, disinformation, and media. Academic institutions may be well placed to offer training, education, and skill development for reporters, editors, and newsroom leaders. To this end, civil society organizations and academic institutions should offer themselves as partners in this work, including by providing training and collaboration on reporting projects. Institutions that can offer funding should direct funds to local news initiatives, especially to bolster reporting on politics, race, and extremism.

Journalists and editors alike have taken pains to safeguard the neutrality of their profession—with an approach that prioritizes presenting multiple points of view in a bid for balance. But as many journalists interviewed for this report emphasized, journalistic professionalism need not—and in fact must not—equate to neutrality between democracy and authoritarianism. They argue that fact-based contextualization, avoiding presenting every view as equally credible, and connecting the dots to illustrate how democratic rights are under threat are crucial to the journalistic enterprise.

At a time when antidemocratic extremism is a surging force in American politics, threatening to undermine our institutions and degrade or erase our cherished civil liberties, journalism is not just the country’s main vehicle for informed civic participation, but a fundamental bulwark against the erosion of democracy.

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## APPENDIX: RESOURCES

### Reporting on Extremism

Domestic Terrorism and White Supremacy: What Reporters Should Know. June 2022. National Press Foundation.

A short list of guiding principles on covering extremism, from experts in terrorism and white supremacy Bill Braniff and Kesa White.

Reporting Locally on Domestic Extremism? Here's How Not to Platform Their Violence, A Case Study. May 4, 2021. 100 Days in Appalachia. Chris Jones

Jones contrasts the local media coverage of far-right violence at Black Lives Matter protests in Kentucky and Stop the Steal rallies in Nevada to identify common errors and strengths in extremism reporting. He examines how word choice, sourcing, and story structure can contribute to more or less effective coverage.

National Media Are Platforming Domestic Extremists, Leaving Local Journalists to Deal with the Fall Out. Here's How We Can Do Better. February 23, 2021. 100 Days in Appalachia. Chris Jones

Jones identifies blind spots in national coverage of extremism and provides a list of tips for local extremism reporters. Jones encourages frank conversations between reporters and editors about editorial decision-making, focusing on victims and on holding local law enforcement and politicians accountable.

Covering Extremism: A Reading List. February 12, 2021. First Draft News. Stevie Zhang.

Zhang provides an accessible primer for journalists new to the extremism beat as well as those seeking to improve their reporting. The reading list consolidates links and resources from academic and industry sources on issues including amplification, media manipulation, bothsidesism, and personal safety.

Reporting in Contentious Times: Insights for Journalists to Avoid Fanning the Flames. Fall 2020. Over Zero.

The global anti-hate group Over Zero has developed this guidance for journalists on reporting on contentious events and subjects. While this memo was developed for the 2020 Election Season, its guidance is applicable across issue areas.

Beyond Gab: The Widespread Social Problem of Online Extremism. October 30, 2019. The Journalist's Resource. Created in collaboration with Benjamin T. Decker, founder and CEO of Memetica.

Decker identifies specific challenges in reporting on online far-right extremism. He discourages focusing on individual sites and platforms, pushing journalists to contextualize far-right platforms like Gab, an online social networking site with an extremist user base, within larger trends of online disinformation and extremism. Decker calls for shared “basic parameters” for reporting on memes, extremist symbols, and other digital content.

10 Tips for Covering White Supremacy and Far-Right Extremists. July 22, 2019. The Journalist's Resource. Created in collaboration with Joan Donovan and Jessie Daniels.

Donovan and Daniels identify the common pitfalls of extremism reporting—such as amplification, lack of historical context, platforming through direct quotes, and links to recruitment sites—and point to key angles for further reporting on extremism, including funding sources for extremist groups and anti-extremist organizing.

The Oxygen of Amplification, Part 3: The Forest and the Trees: Proposed Editorial Strategies. May 22, 2018. Data & Society. Whitney Phillips.

Part 3 of Data & Society's report proposes recommendations for journalists, editors, and everyday social media users based on the interviews conducted for the report. They include determining newsworthiness when reporting on extremism, drawing on precedents set by suicide and terrorism reporting, focusing on victims, and consulting experts in propaganda, history, and media manipulation.

Reporting on Extremism from Those Who Have Done It Best. November 30, 2017. *Columbia Journalism Review*. Pete Vernon.

Vernon provides several examples of good extremism reporting and interviews reporters including Luke O'Brien (*The Atlantic*), Charlie Warzel (Buzzfeed), and Ijeoma Oluo (*The Stranger*).

## Reporting on Extremism in Politics

'Not Normal:' What local newsrooms can do now to prepare for a series of historic elections. September 2022. American Press Institute. Jane Elizabeth.

The American Press Institute is a nonprofit educational organization dedicated to advancing innovation and sustainability in the news industry. Their September 2022 report, released before the midterm elections, is intended to help news organizations think about their politics and campaign coverage in different and more effective ways, with advice for how to re-design election-related coverage.

Covering Political Extremism in the Public Square. September 2022. Poynter.

This free, one-day online workshop was designed by nonprofit media institute Poynter to help journalists stay safe and produce strong reporting for voters leading up to the 2022 midterms.

The Authoritarian Playbook. June 2022. Protect Democracy.

Protect Democracy is a nonprofit organization dedicated to combatting efforts to undermine the right to free, fair, and fully-informed self-government. Their Authoritarian Playbook is designed to advise journalists on how to contextualize and cover authoritarian threats as distinct from politics-as-usual.

The Election Integrity Project at the University of Wisconsin. Fall 2020.

The Election Integrity Project was a nonpartisan initiative of the University of Wisconsin, First Draft, and Craig Newmark Philanthropies to inform coverage and reporting of the 2020 election. Its media toolkit and consumer/citizens' toolkit present research and strategies for approaching and consuming election misinformation and disinformation in election seasons.

Election SOS Reporting Resources. 2020.

Election SOS is an initiative dedicated to transforming U.S. campaign coverage. It offers courses, seminars, and training in extremism coverage; reporting on extremist groups and threats; citizens' agenda reporting; election scenario planning; electoral conflict; and reporting election violence, as well as a list of recommended "critical reads" for covering extremism.

Media Inquiry Expert List. 2020. Election Coverage and Democracy Network.

The Election Coverage and Democracy Network is a group of scholarly experts in politics and media offering practical, nonpartisan, and evidence-based recommendations to journalists covering elections. Its Media Inquiry expert list includes approximately 45 high-level political communications scholars for reference, with expertise in polarization, misinformation, election coverage, and hate speech.



# Navigating Mis- and Disinformation Online

An Unrepresentative Democracy: How Disinformation and Online Abuse Hinder Women of Color Political Candidates in the United States. October 2022. Center for Democracy and Technology.

The Center for Democracy and Technology is a non-partisan organization working to promote democratic values in technology. In this report, CDT explores and explains how online harassment and abuse, including targeted mis- and disinformation campaigns, must be understood as attempts to limit women's ability to participate in electoral politics and suppress their voices.

Essential Guides: Tools and Tips for Better Online Journalism: First Draft's Essential Guide to Disinformation. April 28, 2020. First Draft News.

First Draft News is a nonprofit organization founded in 2019 to identify and prevent the spread of mis- and disinformation through strategic research and training programs for journalists, content creators, and the public. This guide compiles resources for identifying and effectively reporting on disinformation, understanding how disinformation works, reporting on manipulated media content, verifying online information, and accessing closed groups. It's available in Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, German, and Sanskrit.

Understanding Information Disorder. October 2019. First Draft News. Claire Wardle.

This document breaks down the basics of mis- and disinformation for journalists: what it is, how it spreads, how to spot it, and the risks it poses, particularly in politics. This primer is the part one of First Draft's "Essential Guide to Disinformation."

A Guide to Open-Source Intelligence (OSINT). June 17, 2019. Columbia University Tow Center for Digital Journalism. Michael Edison Hayden.

Hayden, an investigative reporter specializing in extremism at the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), published this guide to the world of online research, particularly gathering and verifying information about people and events through social media. He dedicates two chapters to navigating extremist forums and websites and interacting online with hostile communities.