

10 Tips for Journalists Covering Extremists

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Many subjects are difficult to report on, but extremist and fringe movements are particularly difficult landscapes for journalists to navigate, strewn with rough terrain and the occasional landmine. As someone who has monitored right-wing extremism for more than two decades, I've had the pleasure of reading many fine works of journalism on extremist-related subjects, but I've also seen other pieces that were less successful.

Subject areas such as the far right are often best covered by journalists as a “beat,” allowing them to develop expertise and understanding over time. However, this is not always possible, and even beat reporters have to begin somewhere.

With this in mind, here are 10 tips to help journalists cover stories on right-wing extremism in the United States. Not every suggestion may be relevant to every story or approach, but collectively they can serve as a guide for navigating some of the dangers that can occur in reporting about extremism.

1. *Don't settle for low-hanging fruit.* The world of extremism is vaster than a handful of people with prominent Twitter accounts. What white supremacist Richard Spencer tweets is rarely going to be worthy of a story. Keep in mind that there is more to the white supremacist movement than just the alt right and there is more to the extreme right than just the white supremacist movement.

2. *Don't simply interview leaders and spokespersons.* The more a right-wing extremist has talked to the media, the more likely he or she is to offer canned, calculated responses designed to give specific impressions. Some white supremacists, like Ku Ku Klan leader Thomas Robb, essentially specialize in this sort of propaganda and make themselves readily available to the media for this very purpose. Talk to lesser known extremists, including rank and file members of groups—or even extremists who don't belong to any group; such extremists usually represent the majority of most extremist movements.

Some extremist movements—the white supremacist movement among them—are generally hostile to journalists, who have to knock on more doors to find people willing to talk. This can lead to the temptation to reach out to those who are more than willing to talk to the media, but it is worth the effort it takes to find other voices—and reporters are more likely to get candid, unrehearsed answers to their questions when they do find such people.

3. *When interviewing extremists, don't ask simplistic, straightforward questions that give the subjects an easy opportunity to deny or obfuscate.* There's rarely ever any gain in asking a white supremacist a question like “Why do you hate black people?” Except for those who seek shock value, most extremists seek to deny their extremism—and refute as well whatever other negative impressions they believe people have of them. Approach their ideology and beliefs obliquely at first, so that they are less calculating and more candid.

4. *Be appropriately skeptical.* Be particularly wary of any answer given by an extremist about group numbers or popularity. If the leader of an extremist group claims their group has a thousand members, don't believe them (they don't). If they say they have grown greatly in members since a particular event (an election, a controversy, etc.), don't accept their word for it. Believe what your research tells you. Don't blithely accept self-characterizations, either. When a militia group seeks to portray itself as an innocuous neighborhood watch or emergency response team, don't accept it as fact. If they were, they wouldn't be a militia group. Be wary of “origin stories”—the stories that extremists tell when asked what caused them

to adopt a particular ideology. In most cases, there was no seminal event that caused someone to adopt extreme views.

5. *Don't allow extremists to avoid confronting the dark sides of their movements.* Don't let extremists distance themselves from the violence of their movement by brushing it off as a few bad apples or a "lone nut" or two. Similarly, don't let them brush away the ugly aspects of their ideology, either. Of course, to challenge extremists on these subjects, one needs to be familiar with them.

6. *Never lose sight of the fact that they are extremists, even if they do not foam at the mouth.* Most people do not foam at the mouth. Most extremists, when not engaged in being extremists, have more or less normal jobs, families, and hobbies. This makes them no less dangerous, of course. Don't romanticize or normalize extremists, but also don't inflate their importance. Not all extremist movements, groups or individuals are equally dangerous or problematic.

7. *Do your homework.* Right-wing extremism—like any type of extremism—is a specialty area that requires knowledge of history, ideologies, subcultures, groups and individuals, tactics and activities, and more. Many assumptions people have about the white supremacist movement or other types of extremism are incorrect in whole or in part. There are many types of white supremacists. Anti-government extremist movements like the militia and sovereign citizen movements are not white supremacist and some have large numbers of people of color in them. Know these things before conducting interviews with extremists.

8. *Utilize the expertise of others.* Before interviewing extremists, talk to people with expertise on that type of extremism to make sure that you are adequately informed. Experts can also help you parse or fact check what extremists have said in interviews, providing valuable context or information, and correcting misassumptions. Their information can help you form better lines of inquiry, too.

9. *Make sure the experts you consult are actually experts.* Sometimes people with limited or no real expertise will position themselves as experts for the media, especially after a major event such as a terrorist incident. A political science professor who has largely studied mainstream right-wing politics may not know much about the extreme right; an FBI agent who has not worked many extremist-related cases may never have had the opportunity to develop knowledge about extremism.

10. *Avoid empty expertise.* Right-wing extremism is something many people think they know a lot about, even though their knowledge may in fact be superficial. Guard against "laymansplaining"—when someone with limited knowledge of a complex subject attempts to assert truths about it. Even some people with genuine expertise on right-wing extremism may not be equally knowledgeable about every area of right-wing extremism. Knowing which sources to rely on and to what degree—regardless of whether those sources are experts or extremists—is key to reporting a good story.

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