



montana
HUMAN RIGHTS NETWORK

MHRN Media Guide to Reporting on Extremist Groups

Reporting on extremist groups today is extremely difficult, because the usual rules of journalism don't always apply.

You can't present "both sides" of an attack on Jewish, Indigenous, LGBTQ, Muslim, Asian American, or other community members who face discrimination without amplifying, normalizing, or encouraging more of the same dehumanizing and dangerous behavior. At the same time, mention of these attacks should be on the public record, and community members deserve to know what's happening.

How can reporters put sunlight on these issues without turning that into a spotlight?

The Montana Human Rights Network has learned many lessons about covering extremist activity during its 30 years working in Montana communities. This includes experience gained from the attacks on the Jewish community in Whitefish during the winter of 2016-2017. Many of the alt-right, neo-Nazi, and white nationalist leaders during that time became media superstars as reporters rushed to get an exclusive interview with them. The unintentional result was that media companies gave free advertising to dangerous ideologies, and these racist leaders knew exactly how to manipulate the coverage to amplify their agenda and radicalize new recruits.

We created this guide now, in June 2021, because we're seeing some of the same mistakes appear as so-called "liberty" and "patriot" groups are attacking school boards with misinformation about critical race theory, LGBTQ rights, and other issues. We wanted Montana reporters to have the best tools available to help them create accurate, objective stories without being leveraged by these groups.

Below you'll find a list of general tips plus some links to more in-depth information and analysis from reporters who have learned the hard way about the most effective ways to cover extremists.

MHRN's Quick Tips on Covering Extremists

1. First and foremost, whenever possible, **DO NOT** give these people an open mic, especially in the form of a letter to the editor, live camera, or airtime. If they are handed an unedited forum, they will use it (and you) to broadcast racist ideology, symbols, or code words that they will brag

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about later (see more under Resources). You don't want to be an accessory to their movements.

2. If you do need to quote one of these leaders, locate an original source statement from a published social media post. Most of these people write a lot of material, because they're always trying to recruit new followers. Quote that instead of the cleaned-up version they prepare for you.

Extremists are media savvy, and they know that their unpolished talking points that accurately reflect their beliefs will turn most people off. During media interviews, they try to frame themselves in the best possible light by cleaning up their language and using code phrases to secretly amplify their ideology. Taking quotes from their social media posts will help you present their ideas without getting caught in their calculated propaganda.

3. Context, research, and context. We see too many reporters lift misinformation from extremist websites and present it as fact. If they're presenting debunked talking points about COVID-19 or LGBTQ people, that needs to be mentioned. You don't need to label them as neo-Nazis or homophobes, unless there's a preponderance of evidence or they label themselves. However, it's fair and legitimate to point out that they are promoting misinformation that has been rejected by authorities on the topic.

Example: Go one step further than the statement, "The Proud Boys have been labeled a hate group by the Southern Poverty Law Center." A better approach is, "The Proud Boys have been labeled a hate group by the Southern Poverty Law Center for antisemitic rhetoric and violent activity. Several Proud Boys have been arrested for their participation in the January 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol."

MHRN can also provide context regarding the strategies and misinformation found on extremist social media and websites. It can be difficult to understand what you're seeing when you're new to reading extremist content and you're on a tight deadline. MHRN can help provide background information on various conspiracy theories that inform the worldview of right-wing extremists or point you toward other experts so you can better inform your readers/viewers.

4. Make sure you feature the perspective of the people who are harmed by an ideology or extremist movement. Too often, reporters will ask extremists for a quote but neglect to contact people of color or organizations led by people who face discrimination. In Montana, we should see more quotes from [The Montana Racial Equity Project](#), [Western Native Voice](#), [Indigenous Organizers' Collective](#), [Indian People's Action](#), leaders from the state's eight sovereign tribal nations, and other BIPOC advocacy groups. We don't hear enough from marginalized people in their own words.
5. Assess intent and impact. Reporters often assume readers immediately grasp the negative implications of any racist or discriminatory statements. Unfortunately, many people read those statements in an article or letter to the editor and assume that, if a media company published them, they must be valid, and they feel emboldened to say or do things that harm others.
6. Ask us. MHRN has 30 years of experience with extremist groups and is the state's expert on them. We can provide the most accurate and pertinent information on the groups and individuals who are active in Montana. If you have any questions, feel free to contact Travis McAdam, Program Director for Combating White Nationalism and Defending Democracy.

Resources

- Lois Beckett of the Guardian did an hour-long [presentation](#) about the mistakes reporters make when they cover people who promote racism and white nationalism.
- [Analysis](#) from Columbia Journalism Review on the *New York Times*' article that normalized a neo-Nazi. The central problem was that "the piece never manages to explain how [the neo-Nazi] came to hold the beliefs he now espouses."
- This [CJR piece](#) examines whether media should cover right wing extremism (yes) and how the lenses of age, ethnic background, connection to the community, and other factors contribute to unintentionally favorable coverage for extremists. From the article: "If you explain the rhetorical strategies, that is different than just quoting and making it seem through repetition like it's just any other kind of ideology."
- Understand how [antisemitism](#) is the [foundation](#) of white nationalism. Here's [another article](#) on the same topic.
- Here are a few examples of coded phrases that are frequently used when presenting [antisemitic](#) conspiracy theories and [militia](#) ideology. This short [video clip](#) discusses the racist roots of the militia movement.
- Please read this [full report](#) on Ammon Bundy's People's Rights movement, which has a chapter on people in Montana who are heavily involved.
- Several speakers are making the rounds to promote the militia ideology concepts of "county supremacy" and "constitutional sheriffs." Here's some [background](#) on those concepts. Please note that, since this report was created, people informed by militia ideology have used the same ideology to attack county [health departments](#), [school boards](#), and [library boards](#).
- This is a good [explanation](#) of trolling using the "OK" sign, which could pop up in a photo or TV interview. We've seen local Proud Boys using this in photos.

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