

Factsheet: Reporting at Protests

Background

Protests can be newsworthy events, and in some cases can determine the political or social course of a country for years to come. Covering protests is therefore a crucial part of a journalist's responsibilities, but can often be one of the most dangerous. According to the [U.S. Press Freedom Tracker](#), nearly half of all press freedom incidents in the US — such as arrests of and attacks on journalists, or searches and seizures of newsgathering equipment — occurred at protests.

It is therefore of utmost importance that journalists take precautions to protect their own safety when reporting from protests, as well as to protect the integrity of their information to ensure they retain the trust of their audiences in what may be turbulent and complicated circumstances.

Safety and Security

Ensuring your own safety at a protest should be a journalist's first priority. This is not purely a selfish need; it also protects the security of the information you seek to report on, the integrity of your profession, and the safety of those who may need to rescue you. Journalists should be aware of threats from the police, from protesters, or from unexpected counter-protesters.

Physical security

The vast majority of protests are peaceful and non-violent. However, in some exceptional circumstances violence may erupt, and it is best to be prepared for how to handle such a situation. In these situations, some [general guidelines](#) on physical security include:

1. Understand the right to protest peacefully. To understand how this right is protected under international law, see the [Civicus Protest Resilience Toolkit](#).
2. Get close enough to observe the scene without putting yourself, or others, in direct danger. As a general rule, stay on the edge of large crowds. Know the history of similar events, so you have an understanding of the likelihood of risks.
3. If you are a journalist, clearly identify yourself as such when asked, and make sure you have press credentials on you at all times. Everyone — including citizen journalists — has a right to record public events. In the unlikely event that you believe the media may be treated in a hostile manner, you may wish to consider more carefully whether you display your credentials openly.
4. Respect police officers and always abide by all laws and regulations. Keep your hands open and visible if police approach you, and do not make sudden moves. Make sure to stay in places where the general public is allowed, and do not impede or disrupt law enforcement in any way. Different countries have varying stances about journalists' right to record police officers, which you should be aware of ahead of time. Be careful not to escalate any situation involving a police officer.
5. In circumstances where either the authorities or protesters may treat the media with hostility, try not to draw unnecessary attention to yourself. Wear long sleeves and pants to protect your skin. Do not wear lotions or oils on your skin (which cause pepper spray and tear gas to stick), jewellery, lanyards or anything that could get pulled or caught, or used to hurt you. If you are concerned about being identified, make sure any identifying marks or features are covered.

6. Plan your escape route, and always be aware of your surroundings and potential route out if tensions rise. Journalists whose mobility is limited may want to carefully consider the risks of reporting from a situation where a quick exit may be necessary.
7. Be aware of the level of your phone battery and other technical limits or requirements of your gear, such as where they may or may not work, storage limits, etc.
8. Carry the essentials with you: a first aid kit, water bottle, snacks, portable phone battery, eye protection and face masks, flashlight, press credentials, ID etc. Consider whether other protective gear may be necessary, such as a body-armour vest or protective headgear, if there appears to be a real risk that the protest is likely to turn violent.
9. Be wary of what information you publish or broadcast that may compromise the safety or either the police or protesters in real-time.
10. Stay in constant contact with your newsroom, or — if you are a freelancer — make sure there is someone who knows where you are at all times. You may also want to consider going with a colleague or other journalists to be able to watch each other's backs.
11. Know your legal rights, and have your attorney's contact details on you. It may help to provide your newsroom and your attorney with details of the closest police station to where you will be working ahead of time, in case of arrest. You may also consider writing important phone numbers on your body in the event that your phone is taken away. Depending on the jurisdiction, you should be aware of your rights with regard to handing over equipment or content. If arrested, ask for legal representation immediately, and do not answer any questions without it.

Digital and data security

In contexts in which our lives are increasingly documented online and sensitive information is stored in the data trail we leave behind us, digital security is a crucial skill for journalists to master, not only to protect themselves but their sources as well. This risk is elevated when reporting from protests where the likelihood of arrest is higher, or of harassment from protesters.

Here are some common guidelines for protecting your gear and your data during a protest:

- Use a strong password on your phone and disable any facial recognition or fingerprint access, as this can be used to force access to your phone
- Use encrypted communications to secure your information, such as Signal. During times of protest, states frequently resort to attempts to [disable encrypted means](#) of communications to disrupt protest activities and reporting on them. It is therefore also wise to have a back-up method of communication, such as a regular phone call or radio, if possible. Although the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression has [declared](#) that “such attempts to interfere with the freedom of expression unlawfully pursue an illegitimate objective of undermining the right to peaceful protest under the Universal Declaration and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights,” it is still a common phenomenon, and one journalists should be prepared for.
- Keep a back-up memory card on you in case somebody demands you hand over footage. It is also a good idea to regularly back up or wipe your data if possible.
- Take photos and videos without unlocking your phone.
- Enable full-disk encryption on your device if possible.
- Turn off location services on your phone, or enable airplane mode if there is a possibility of police using the evidence of your location against you after the fact. Alternatively, and depending on the circumstance, you may wish to enable someone else — such as your newsroom — to continuously access your location on an app such as Google Maps, if you believe that may make you safer.

- Download offline maps and plan meeting spots ahead of time to ensure you know where you can exit or meet colleagues in case you get separated.
- Consider using specifically-designed security apps, such as [ProofMode](#) from the Guardian Project.

Filming protests can be a particularly difficult task for a journalist, and one which requires taking certain precautions to ensure the viability of the content. [Witness](#) provides additional guidelines specific to safely and effectively filming protests or police misconduct:

- Be prepared by understanding the local laws regarding filming, having a security plan, and memorising emergency contact information.
- Record yourself speaking into the camera to verify that you are the one filming.
- Turn on automatic date, time and location capturing features, or alternatively film landmarks or street signs to verify the date and your location.
- Be intentional about when you capture the identity of individuals, for example if capturing the details of an arrest or violence, or when it is best to keep identities anonymous by filming only the backs of people's heads or their feet.

It is also important to note that human rights protections relating to the rights to peaceful assembly apply equally to acts of collective expression through digital means. [General Comment No. 37](#) on Article 21 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights clearly states that collective action and communication online or using digital services are protected under article 21, and that states should refrain from “unduly blocking Internet connectivity in relation to demonstrations,” from geo-targeted or technology-specific interference or hindering of connectivity, and that states should ensure that “self-regulation by Internet service providers does not unduly affect assemblies and that the activities of those providers do not unduly infringe upon the privacy or safety of assembly participants.”

Psychosocial care

Covering a violent protest may be a difficult and emotional event for a journalist. It is important that you prioritise your own care and wellbeing, and acknowledge the impact that this difficult work may have on you.

- Recognise feelings you are experiencing, and know that they are all valid.
- Consider talking to a trusted friend, advisor, colleague, family member or a professional to assist you to process your experiences. Regular check-ins may be helpful.
- Prioritise any self-care activities that support your wellbeing, such as exercise, meditation, digital detoxes, sleep, etc.
- Try to limit unhealthy coping mechanisms such as alcohol or drug use, as they may be inadvertently worsening anxiety or dulling your natural coping skills.
- Consider accessing free self-help resources such as apps or other tools.
- For more tips, see the [NMVRC tips here](#).

Reporting Tips

Reporting from a protest can be complicated, and it is necessary to take certain steps to ensure the integrity of the information you report so as to retain your audience's trust, and also to keep you and your colleagues safe.

Verifying information is crucial. For example, crowd estimates of protests are often unreliable, as event organisers or authorities may have incentives to either inflate or under-estimate them. Witnesses may have their own agendas, or may have been caught up in the emotion of the moment and provide unreliable evidence. Journalists should make sure to probe potential witnesses, verify all information, and seek out alternative points of view. In that same vein, however, when reporting on statements from participants at a protest a journalist should be careful not to assign them motives, and stick only to what the participants say and do.

Social Media and Disinformation

Social media and content generated by citizen journalists are increasingly important sources for journalists reporting on protests today. There is [some evidence](#) that in recent years newsrooms have shifted their stance on user-generated content (UGC) quite substantially, and it now forms a crucial part of regular reporting on protests. Naturally, using such content depends on the existence of solid newsroom practices for processing and verifying UGC, something journalists should be aware of. Coverage of UGC should always be clearly marked as such, and verified to the greatest extent possible.

At times of mass protests, disinformation is often rife, used as a tool by various parties to stoke discontent or to polarise participants, or by the state or police to disrupt protests. It can also undermine the good work of journalists seeking to accurately cover protests by obscuring the truth and compromising the integrity of reporters. To combat misinformation, [PEN America recommends](#) the following actions:

- Do not assume content is legitimate; carefully verify all content from social media. For more information on how to do so, see First Draft's [pocket guide](#) on how to verify videos.
- Take care to verify any information stemming from online accounts or email addresses related to a protest.
- Watch out for false news sites that are often designed to mimic legitimate news sources, particularly local news. For help, see [PolitiFact](#) by Poynter and [NewsGuard's](#) tracking centre.

Further resources

For more detail on journalists' legal rights in the US, see [this resource](#) from Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press.

For more information on physical security, see [Troll Buster's tips](#) for physical safety at protests or the polls.

The Committee to Protect Journalists provides more detailed guidance for journalists, including on covering civil matters and disturbances, [here](#).