



Oct. 20, 2020

To the Executive Editor of the Associated Press and the Presidents of the News Divisions at ABC, CBS, CNN, Fox, MSNBC and NBC:

With only weeks to go before one of the most important elections of our lifetime, how the media cover the campaigns, the voting process and the results is critical.

Election-season coverage, especially on Election Day, is one of the most essential duties that the media perform in a democracy. And by all measures, this election is unlike any other we have experienced. We are living through a global pandemic, racial-justice uprisings are taking place around the country, misinformation and disinformation abound on social media, and the president has deliberately sought to undermine trust in the media and the election process — even refusing to commit to a peaceful transfer of power should he be voted out of office.

As *Washington Post* media columnist Margaret Sullivan wrote recently: “With the stakes of the election so high, news organizations need to get it right.”¹

We, the undersigned collection of media organizations, press-freedom groups, progressive organizations and leaders in the journalism space, are writing to urge you to rise to this moment by prioritizing coverage that condemns hate and gets it right — not just first.

As you consider and set policies to shape your election coverage, we believe the following guidelines are baseline steps your newsroom should immediately take. We offer these guidelines in support of the media’s mission to inform the public, and recognize the many challenges journalism is facing right now.

1. Do not repeat baseless claims of voter fraud

President Trump and his administration have been spreading disinformation about so-called “voter fraud” to try to delegitimize the election results.² Do not repeat these claims — or give airtime to

¹ Margaret Sullivan, “Here’s what the media must do to fend off an election-night disaster,” *The Washington Post*, Sept. 6, 2020:

https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/media/heres-what-tv-news-must-do-to-fend-off-an-election-night-disaster/2020/09/04/c94cee50-ed1c-11ea-b4bc-3a2098fc73d4_story.html

² Nicholas Riccardi, “AP FACT CHECK: Trump’s big distortions on mail-in voting,” *the Associated Press*, Sept. 17, 2020:

<https://apnews.com/article/virus-outbreak-election-2020-ap-fact-check-elections-voting-fraud-and-irregularities-8c5db90960815f91f39fe115579570b4>

political or pundit statements that do so — without independently verifying their accuracy and labeling them as false information if that’s the case. Instances of voter fraud are extremely rare, and reporting on baseless claims without fact checking them first only adds to the false narrative that voter fraud poses a significant threat to the election’s integrity.³ Giving these unverified and dangerous statements oxygen only undermines the election process. It endangers voters, especially in communities of color, and can lead to widespread suppression efforts and intimidation — and give local officials license to implement draconian policies that disenfranchise voters.

2. Reject coverage that fuels partisanship, hate and violence

Police are murdering Black people with impunity and white vigilante groups are targeting those who peacefully protest against racial injustice. President Trump is calling on white-supremacist groups like the Proud Boys to “stand by,” making racist statements and encouraging hate groups to join an “Army for Trump” to monitor polling sites and potentially turn out in the streets should he be voted out of office. Public officials who engage in racist attacks and incite violence must be challenged, and should be held accountable without giving oxygen to white supremacists. Do not interview or directly give airtime to groups like the Proud Boys, refuse to publish any manifestos or calls for violence, and center the lives and perspectives of people who are impacted by hate and violence.

3. Cover and confront Trump’s attempts to derail the election directly. Don’t default to “both-sides” framing.

President Trump is the main culprit for spreading lies about the integrity of the upcoming election, and his actions at the first presidential debate show that he is trying to undermine the entire electoral process. Despite his blatant attempts to derail the debate, many outlets claimed that both he and Vice President Biden traded insults and barbs. This false equivalency is extremely dangerous — and it gives the public a distorted impression of what actually transpired. When it is clear that Trump alone is subverting the democratic process, call it what it is, challenge partisan claims that the president is simply hot-tempered and reject attempts to equate his actions with those who challenge his lies.

4. Support and amplify local-news reporting on voter-suppression tactics

Local journalists are on the ground during election season, talking with voters, poll workers and officials. These journalists are often the first ones to report on state and local voter-suppression policies and intimidation tactics, including disruption at polling sites.. President Trump has urged his so-called “Army” to go to polling locations and watch people — a direct call for his supporters to intimidate voters and possibly cause violence. The integrity of elections depends on votes being counted and on voters being able to cast their ballots without interference. This is especially important this election season given how different the voting process will be in many locations. As national outlets, it is critical that you

³ “The Myth of Voter Fraud,” The Brennan Center for Justice, accessed on Sept. 29, 2020: <https://www.brennancenter.org/issues/ensure-every-american-can-vote/vote-suppression/myth-voter-fraud>

support local-news coverage of what’s happening on the ground, and lift up any attempts to disenfranchise voters. Beyond amplifying voter-suppression tactics, you can hold officials to account, provide resources to local reporters to investigate these claims, and give a spotlight to local attempts to deny voters their fundamental rights.

5. Prepare your audience now for an election that will likely not be decided on election night

Right now, news outlets know that it’s likely that the vote count for this election will extend well beyond election night. While political observers, members of the media and highly engaged voters may also be aware of this, this isn’t necessarily common knowledge. In your pre-Election Day coverage, promotions, voting guides and more, prepare your audience for a process that might take more time to resolve than during previous elections. Doing so informs voters, builds trust with the public and can avoid uncertainties or impatience on election night.

6. Protect the integrity of the election by demonstrating restraint before declaring “winners.” Challenge any attempt to halt vote tallying.

In a high-stakes election, there may be pressure on outlets to “call” races early. Resist this urge. Experts agree that it’s likely that candidates with leads on election night might see those disappear as mail-in ballots are tallied.⁴ As we have learned during previous elections, the rush to declare winners adds to public confusion. It is always better to get the results right rather than focus on being first. Getting results wrong will lead to distrust in media coverage — and could lead to public officials discrediting the legitimacy of your reporting, or worse, challenging the election’s validity.

In addition, those in power at the local, state and federal level have tools at their disposal to delegitimize and interfere with election outcomes. Political manipulation that seeks to produce outcomes through any method other than counting all votes must be challenged with vigor. Hold officials accountable for counting all votes through robust reporting and by refusing to call races until all votes are tallied.

Reporting should seek to build trust between reporters and the public, backed by verified facts and context, and with an understanding that many people fear for their health, safety and future. While sensationalism and hyperbole may be good for ratings, it will only add more tinder to the fire. What we need now from the media is authoritative reporting that informs and unifies our country, challenges racist narratives and lives up to our democratic ideals.

⁴ “The ‘Red Mirage’ and Other Election Night Coverage Catastrophes,” On the Media, WNYC, Sept. 11, 2020: <https://www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/otm/segments/red-mirage-and-election-night-coverage-catastrophes>

We applaud the difficult yet necessary work of journalists, and we stand ready to assist and support your outlet as you enter into a pivotal moment in our country.

Signed,

Free Press Action

Advance Native Political Leadership

Baltimore Quaker Nonviolence Action Project

Boston Institute for Nonprofit Journalism

Brave New Films

Care2

City Bureau

Color Of Change

Common Cause

Count Every Vote! Maryland

Defend Democracy

DemCast

Democracy Initiative

The Devil Strip

Election Protection Arizona

Estlow International Center for Journalism and New Media, University of Denver

Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR)

Faithful America

Fight for the Future

Fix Democracy First

Generocity

Georgia Coalition for the People's Agenda

Greenpeace US

Hearken / Election SOS

Indivisible

Indivisible Outer Cape

Kairos Action

Liberty Tree Foundation

Mainers for Accountable Leadership

Maryland Peace Action

Maynard Institute

Media Alliance

Media, Inequality, and Change Center

Media Innovation Collaboratory

Move to Remove

Movement Alliance Project

National Hispanic Media Coalition

Native Public Media
News Co/Lab, Arizona State University
Open Circle Company
Open Media Foundation
Outlier Media
Peoria People's Project
The Philadelphia Association of Black Journalists
Progress Arizona
Public Citizen
Southern California Public Radio
SumOfUs
Technical.ly
Trollbusters
Tully Center for Free Speech, Syracuse University
Voting Rights Lab
WAVE (Women for American Values and Ethics)