

Minneapolis reporters covering the George Floyd protests face attacks, calls for neutral language

Matt Furber is used to being told “no” for man-on-the-street interviews. But Furber, who writes for The New York Times as a freelancer, was caught off guard when a man saw him writing on his reporter pad inside of Cup Foods in Minneapolis, where 46-year-old George Floyd had been killed by police earlier that week.

“He was furious with me that I would be there, reporting on George Floyd’s death,” Furber said. “In his mind, taking advantage of someone’s demise for my own profit.”

The man started raising his voice and insisted that Furber leave. He grabbed for the notebook several times, saying that he was going to take it.

“I was trying to understand where he was coming from,” Furber said. “I thought, he has a really good point, and I walked away.”

Even though attacks and rhetoric against the media have been on the rise in recent years, reporters who covered the rolling protests and civil unrest that have followed Floyd’s death in Minnesota have been surprised by the hostilities they’ve encountered. At rallies, some organizers advise protesters not to speak to the media and to cover their faces to avoid retribution from police. On social media networks, protest videos of police brutality circulate with titles like, “This is what the media won’t show you” even though the media are showing just that.

What's most surprising perhaps is that these attacks are coming from traditionally left-leaning quarters, the very people whom conservatives have poked the media for favoring.



The news as an institution

For many people of color, the media is as problematic as the system they are fighting. Only 22 percent of newsroom employees are [journalists of color](#) according to the 2019 Newsroom Employment Diversity Survey. This is despite people of color making up about 40 percent of the US population.

And even as most newsrooms continue to grow more diverse through inclusion initiatives by media companies, [editorial boards remain primarily white.](#)

Activists like Black Visions Collective's Miskli Noor, 34, said this inclusivity at the editorial level is an important step in the right direction in gaining better trust from

grassroot organizers. They stressed the impact of including people of color, people with disabilities and people from diverse backgrounds within editorial boards.

“I’ve seen the media maybe fall into some of its past patterns of really prioritizing just chasing a story or telling a narrative that might get headlines versus really prioritizing the most affected folks and centering those voices to do some true storytelling about what is actually happening on the ground,” said Noor, who lives in Minneapolis.

Relationships with organizers tend to be less formal than relationships with government bodies. Government bodies have long established press teams to assemble press releases and invites for press conferences. Organizations like Black Visions Collective have formed their own press teams, but they still do not yet have the long established position that government bodies have.

Noor supports the idea to have specific beat reporters to cover organizations like Black Lives Matter or other grassroots campaigns. Then, a reporter can become an expert on the field and build sustained relationships with leaders in the community. Organizers can have a point of contact to send press releases and other statements. For Noor, just having a point of contact within traditional media made getting the organization’s messaging out much more accessible.

“This time for me, it was a lot easier to talk to reporters or media who I met five years ago when we were protesting because Jamar Clark was murdered by the MPD,” Noor said. “So building those relationships and maintaining them I think is a big thing.”

Semantics of a reporting a protest

Stacey Alletto, an evening senior producer for KSTP TV, an ABC-affiliate in Minneapolis, said her team spent hours debating the appropriate wording for each story they wrote and

produced during the weeks of protests in Minneapolis since Floyd was killed on May 25.

Alletto's team decided to follow language that was coming from state and local officials and strayed from using any language that tended to editorialize the protests. As civil disobedience continued, so did those conversations. "Unrest" became a more neutral word for the station to use especially as KSTP had to report on after-curfew protesting that was peaceful, but technically illegal.

"It was a fine line, because even if it was a peaceful protest, we had the conversation of, when curfew hits, no matter how peaceful they are, they are breaking the law," Alletto said.

The words used not only to describe the protests, but the government actions and protester demands have proved equally important. Defund, dismantle, abolish, reform all have different meanings and are not interchangeable. The word choice that reporters decide to use can portray a very different set of goals and values. For example, Minneapolis Mayor Jacob Frey continues to call for police reform, meaning that the police department stays intact but with new rules and accountability measures. Organizations like Black Visions Collective aim to defund MPD, which would require taking funds away from the department and using those funds on different community safety measures.

"The actions that those words engender, are the story," Furber said. "Those things are yet to be defined."

Focus on violent events

Some organizers grew frustrated that media focused for so long on violent incidents early in Minneapolis's protest. After the first few days, protests remained largely peaceful but images of the police district's burned Third Precinct kept circulating on traditional and social media. Nic Tavares, 28,

flew out from Boston to help out the Minneapolis community following the looting of the Lake Street Corridor. Seeing CNN reporter Omar Jimenez arrested on live TV was the catalyst that led him to officially book a ticket.

“In Boston, on the East Coast, this is being portrayed as like a warzone,” said Tovares, “So I came out here with medical supplies and like gift cards and stuff and it’s not really like that scene at all.”

Following the initial rioting and looting in Minneapolis and parts of Saint Paul, protesters’ focuses turned towards supporting their community with the necessary supplies that had been wiped out when grocery stores closed. The intersection of 38th and Chicago Avenue, where George Floyd was killed is peaceful and full of community support.

“There’s been intense moments,” Tovares said. “That’s really only been when the police are around.”

Local stations like KSTP TV provided around-the-clock coverage during the first week of protests when violence was most rampant. Though there were plenty of peaceful protests, KSTP focused on providing up-to-date information on looting and fires. One day, the station stayed on air for a full 16 hours, interfering with regular programming. Even with increased broadcast time, it was difficult to show peaceful gatherings when the station needed to prioritize safety information for Twin Cities residents, said Alletto, the senior producer.

“Sometimes it’s easier to follow up on those stories than it is in the moments of all the violence and riots that need to be covered in real time,” she said.

Social media algorithms also played a big role.

“I think when people take a look at the record and really dive into it, yes, if it leads, it bleeds, that is true,” said Furber, who lives in south Minneapolis. “I mean we are all

captured by those images when it happens and it's hard to get away from it. However if you want to find out about some of the more peaceful stuff, I think you'll find that too. I believe it's there, I've seen it."

Stories still to be told

At the intersection of 38th and Chicago Avenue in South Minneapolis a memorial spans several blocks of murals, sculptures and signs proclaiming, "Black Lives Matter".

Community members block off the entrances, making sure people who enter the memorial have face masks to protect themselves and others from COVID-19. Florists hand out free flowers for mourners to place on the memorial. Tents filled with food distribute meals to those whose grocery stores closed down when the unrest began. Organizers set up a large grassroots network to make sure the people of the Twin Cities were taken care of even in the most difficult of times. One man from Saint Paul, Michael Porterfield, 60, and a few of his friends, set up a spot for young men to get their hair cut until barber shops can open up again.

"We saw a need and we thought maybe we could spread the love," Porterfield said. "Free haircuts is always a great thing."

This is what some will say the media doesn't show. To be fair, it is difficult to describe the energy in what has come to be known as George Floyd Square. It is hard to capture the degree of community Minneapolis has formed out of intense grief.

Minnesota's history with race and police brutality is long and complicated. A lifelong Twin Cities resident, this was not Porterfield's first time seeing unrest. He said that while there has been violence and destruction as well as peace in the Twin Cities, any piece of news that does not include the context of the movement, is not doing enough.

“This isn’t just George Floyd,” Porterfield said. “It’s not doing a good enough job of saying, this is the big picture, this is the long term picture, we have been doing this as a country for not 50 years, not 150 years, but 350 years and keep going back. It is time to change that narrative.”

The news stories that come after this will be as complicated as Minneapolis’s history and politics. It may take time to properly tell all the stories that come out of this unrest, but those stories are still worth telling.

“The media has to do a better job talking about those awkward truths,” Tovaes said. “If the media doesn’t start talking about it now then when will it?”

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