

Covering hate: ‘This is not a geographic problem. It’s an American problem.’

In September 2018, racist flyers from a neo-Nazi group were left on cars parked at a community college in Southern Illinois. A few local news outlets reported on the incident and the college’s subsequent [denouncement](#) that followed.

But then the story was mostly dropped until the next year when the [same flyers from the same group](#) appeared a second time. This time a suspect was found and banned from the campus. He was never named in the media, however, and no additional reporting revealed the extent to which the organization, which is on the Southern Poverty Law Center’s [list of hate groups](#), was active in Southern Illinois.

“The incident received only cursory coverage in the local media, and I think a lot of people – perhaps both in the media and the public at large – might have been taken by surprise that such a fringe element would reveal itself so explicitly,” said Geoff Ritter, managing editor of a string of small community papers, including the Carbondale Times, Murphysboro Times and Benton News.

The lack of coverage of a known hate group, which GJR is choosing not to name to avoid giving it more attention, shows the difficulty that many news outlets face in documenting hate and extremism in their communities, especially in the aftermath of the Jan. 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol. That failed insurrection, which left five people dead, including a police officer, highlighted how white supremacy and political violence has not only grown in recent years but also has been mainstreamed in many ways.



One person was killed and dozens were injured after a car rammed counter-protestors during a rally of white nationalists in Charlottesville, Virginia, in 2017. The white supremacists and their supporters were protesting plans to remove a Confederate statue. (Photo by Stephen Melkisetian via Flickr)

Even as it has grown, community papers have struggled to document it because of a lack of resources but also because these stories are just hard to tell, especially as distrust and attacks on the media grew under former President Donald J. Trump. A 2020 [Knight/Gallup poll](#) found that while 84% of Americans say the news media is either critical or very important for a functioning democracy, 49% of those surveyed think the media is very biased and roughly three-quarters believe the owners of media companies are influencing coverage.

In October 2020, a man was [arrested and charged](#) for allegedly threatening to blow up the Belleville News-Democrat newsroom. In a voicemail left for a reporter, he complained that the

newspaper was biased against Trump and had refused to publish his letters to the editor.

Todd Eschman, the News-Democrat's senior editor, said when he first heard the voicemail message he thought about the 2018 [shootings in the Capital Gazette newsroom](#) in Annapolis in which five staff members were killed. How was it, he wondered, "that we have arrived at such a place in our history, both as a nation and as an industry, where journalists at a mid-sized regional outlets..have to be equipped with protective gear and the windows at our buildings have to be reinforced with bullet-resistant film." Others in the News-Democrat newsroom had the same concern, he added.

Since the Jan. 6 attack on the Capitol, which led to Trump's second impeachment but not a conviction, the Department of Justice has pledged to renew its focus on domestic terrorism and domestic violent extremism. More than 300 people have been charged in connection with the Jan. 6 attack in one of the largest law enforcement sweeps in U.S. history.

The story is not one that emerged primarily from small and rural communities or even communities that mostly supported Trump, according to [an analysis by the Daily Yonder](#), a Kentucky-based news outlet.

People arrested in connection with the Jan. 6 invasion are less likely than the overall population to be from rural counties, the analysis found.

About 14% of the U.S. population lives in rural, or nonmetropolitan, counties. Only 10% of the people arrested for the Capitol riot list their homes in one of these rural counties. That means rural people are underrepresented on the list of arrestees versus their share of the population, said Tim Marema, editor of the Daily Yonder, which covers rural communities and rural culture.

"It doesn't surprise me because it's proportional to where

Americans live,” Marema said. “This is not a geographic program, it’s an American problem, and it shows up where we live.”

Documenting Hate

Shortly after the 2016 presidential election, ProPublica began an ambitious project called [“Documenting Hate,”](#) in which it ultimately partnered with more than 180 professional newsrooms, around 20 college papers and many journalism schools. All told, the non-profit news outlet collected more than 6,000 reporting tips and thousands of pages of police records on hate crime. It produced more than 230 stories, including a 2019 piece on the [history of racism in Anna, Illinois](#).

The Bellingham Herald in Washington state was one of the last news organizations to partner with ProPublica before the project ended after three years. Bellingham, a community of about 200,000 just south of the U.S.-Canada border, is a mostly white community. The marches and rallies for racial justice last summer there were peaceful compared to protests in Seattle to the south.

But the town also has a history of racism in which the newspaper played a role. In 2007, it issued [an apology for its role](#) in its coverage of a 1907 riot that resulted in the rounding up of East Indian mill workers. “It’s time to apologize for the venomous racism, for the demeaning talk, for the refusal to defend human beings against a mob because of their skin tone and ethnicity,” the paper notes to its readers “We apologize to the East Indian people in our community today, and to any right-thinking person who is disgusted by the actions this newspaper took in one of the darkest times in our community’s history. We are disgusted too.”

The paper gave readers a way to offer [confidential tips](#) of suspected hate crimes, explaining what one was and how to

report it. In February of last year, before the summer's Black Lives Matters protests, it also [explained how to fight racism](#).

Editor Julie Shirley said the paper also has made a commitment to diversifying its sources, making exceptions for people whose voices might not otherwise be in the paper. "During the summer rallies, I allowed reporters to quote people as 'a speaker' or just their first name," she said. "Rallies aren't organized and there's no list of speakers. And sometimes it was unclear about who the organizers even were. But we took a leap of faith and allowed for stories we would not have gotten had we required first and last names, city of residence, before we quoted them."

False equivalency

As news outlets report on hate in their communities, the Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy has published a list of 10 tips for covering white supremacy and far-right extremism. Among them, author Denise Marie-Ordway cautions news outlets from letting white supremacists use their own terms to describe themselves or even quoting them directly. "That's because members of these groups often use code words or numbers in their remarks to signal their ideology to other extremists," she writes. "Reporters who don't recognize this coded language might unknowingly include it in their coverage."

She also warns against amplifying the message of the hate groups, something Shirley also wanted to avoid in the Bellingham Herald's coverage.

"In the past, we would hear anecdotally about hate crimes several times a year," she told GJR. "But they were rarely reported officially so we found them hard to report on with no official sources. And, we didn't want to write about incidents that only bring attention to offenders when we knew there would be no consequences. We decided to turn our frustration

around, doing stories that explained the law and how readers can be allies.”

Gregory Perreault, an assistant professor of multimedia journalism at Appalachian State University, interviewed 18 journalists in 2019 as part of a [research](#) study that sought to understand how journalists conceive of their role in covering white nationalist rallies.

It found that journalists face numerous challenges in terms of not wanting to appear biased in order to gain access to sources but also not wanting to promote false equivalency as Trump did after the violent white nationalist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, in 2017. A few days after the rally, Trump was asked by reporters about the protests, to which he responded that there were “very fine people on both sides.”

“I think one of the important things we know about these groups is that they desperately want the media oxygen to amplify their message,” he told GJR. “Journalists in some ways play right into this in their understandable interest in trying to provide a comprehensive picture of an event. This also explains why white supremacists are so devastatingly effective in their use of social media—leveraging algorithms, memes—to find ways to share their messaging. Their visibility in the last four years is certainly not an accident. They clearly not only gained a strong sense of how to ‘play’ the social media game, but also felt emboldened by our prior president.”

The trick then is to put white supremacy into context. “A common refrain among journalists was that covering white nationalist rallies was necessary to help people understand an evil side of their community,” according to the research findings. “Moreover, respondents expressed a desire to show members of their communities that white nationalism was more insidiously complex than conventional wisdom would suggest.”

That's what Ritter, the managing editor of the Carbondale Times, has found.

"I think of the scene in 'The Blues Brothers' with the Illinois Nazis," he said. "We always knew there were hate groups out there, and they were a little easier to identify. Now, at least to me, it seems, the internet has allowed this kind of thinking to proliferate in the obvious ways, but it's made the hate groups a lot more difficult to identify. That's part of what was so shocking about Jan. 6; you could see clearly how all of these fringe movements had networked and come together from the grassroots. Some of them might have looked like the 'Illinois Nazis' in the movie, but most did not. The profile of the woman who was shot and killed was devastatingly similar to that of a good friend of mine whose mind also seems to have been twisted by these dark corners of the internet, despite her otherwise sound mind and reason."

He doesn't have the answer to how local papers like his can better report the story.

"Obviously, more resources would make it easier, but that's sort of a stock answer to how to fix things in journalism," he said. "The problem gets even more difficult because the very people pulled into these movements are ones now disinclined toward trusting anything we report, so I don't know."

One way journalists could start trying to understand better, he said, is to explore the online reaction to local coverage.

"Some of this ugliness is rearing its head in our own comments sections," he said. "I see it every day on the local television station's Facebook page."

Eschman, the senior editor in Belleville, said one of the difficulties is that "it's not all Klan members or Proud Boys."

Those organizations "don't get much ink from us due to the

common industry concern that coverage could legitimize their respective messages. But hate isn't most commonly expressed in cross burnings by people in white sheets. Covering attempts to mainstream it has got to be a concern."

As an example, he said, Mary Miller, a freshman representative from the 15th Congressional District that represents southeastern Illinois, [quoted Adolph Hitler](#) in her first public address in D.C. After the News-Democrat (and others, eventually) reported it, [she apologized](#), saying she regretted the reference but defended the words. Her point, she said, was that movements grow best when the youth are properly engaged.

"From a reader's standpoint, isn't it reasonable to wonder how an elected federal lawmaker, from a sea of similar sentiments expressed by countless others, came by an obscure line from a speech given by Hitler more than 80 years ago?" Eschman said. "Was this an attempt by Miller to mainstream the author of mass genocide? And who, exactly, does she represent besides the people who elected her?"

News coverage can't ignore those questions, he said, nor can it call comments by an elected lawmaker a "one off."

"There is a part of me, however, that has the same worry that covering her legitimizes some potentially rogue ideals to others," he said.

But it's also tricky walking the line between true hate and basic fear of the unfamiliar. The News-Democrat's efforts in that regard have been "more conservative, sensitive and – again, this is strictly my view – useful," Eschman said.

Kelsey Landis reported on [a Black Lives Matter protest in Anna](#) for the News-Democrat last summer. "There were opposing opinions and, of course, some confrontations," Eschman said. "Kelsey handled the tensions with a lot of care and expressed the varying views fairly and without judgement. It was textbook, street-level journalism that followed the basic

rules of style and ethics.”

But there are still barriers.

When the News-Democrat covered another Black Lives Matter demonstration at the public square in Highland, Illinois, in September that drew counter-protestors, the reporter, Megan Vallely tried to talk to both groups. Black Lives Matters demonstrators spoke freely on the record to Vallely, who reports for the News-Democrat through a Report for America grant. “But she was rebuffed by demonstrators on the other side of the police line because they didn’t trust the ‘fake news’” Eschman said.

Miller, for that matter, also has never returned a call from the News-Democrat.

Jackie Spinner is the editor of Gateway Journalism Review and an associate professor at Columbia College Chicago. This story is on the cover of the spring 2021 issues of the magazine.