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US journalists covering protests take lessons from war zones to try and make themselves safer

Protests in US cities have carried on throughout 2021, but journalists trying to cover them are being attacked, **Rachael Jolley** reports.

“Journalists in conflict zones have been able to largely keep reporting and visual journalism strong despite many similar obstacles. I think the protests, and clashes between left and right, or covering any event where weapons are openly displayed may require U.S. journalists to think in ways we have not before about safety,” said editor of The Oregonian newspaper Therese Bottomly.

Bottomly was talking to Index after a challenging year for her newsroom staff covering protests in the west coast state of Oregon.

On the atmosphere in Portland, Bottomly said: “We became conflict journalists in our own city.”

The city has been inundated by protests, and has become one of the regions of the country that has become increasingly dangerous for journalists to work.

Portland’s demonstrations cover everything from Black Lives Matter to immigration issues to anti-vaccinations rallies. They often involve confrontations between left and far-right groups and the police. Some demonstrators are out night after night.

With some demonstrators, spectators and police carrying weapons, the level of tension has ramped up and protests have often exploded into violence. As journalists went out to cover the news, they started to be targeted by the crowds and sometimes attacked.

In Portland buildings were regularly set on fire and clouds of tear gas billowed around the city evening after evening as demonstrators met lines of police armed with machine guns moving across the streets.

Editors like Bottomly have been forced to rethink their approach to staff safety: “We initially were most concerned about protection against police-tear-gas-type agents so provided gas masks, goggles and the like.

Several of our journalists were struck by police batons or police-fired munitions as they were trying to disperse protesters. We had safety conversations every night and the editor on duty repeatedly encouraged our journalists to put safety first, maintain situational awareness, have an exit strategy.”

Journalists did not have to cover stories where they felt unsafe. She added: “We purchased six ballistic vests to go with the helmets most of our journalists were already wearing. We also offered the option and several times engaged outside security guards to accompany our journalists and provide an extra set of eyes and ears to keep them

safe. For one protest near the state capitol in Salem, 50 miles south of our newsroom, we rented several nearby motel rooms to have a safe harbour for our teams to retreat to.”

The idea that journalists are there to cover the story news neutrally is disappearing fast, not only in Portland, and across the country demonstrators from both the left and the right have turned on reporters, clearly signalling that they felt there were the enemy.

While the rest of the world may imagine that tension in the US has decreased after the inauguration of President Biden, on the streets of some key US cities including Portland tension remains very high.

During 2021 journalists around the US covering protests have had thousands of dollars of equipment stolen, been kettled and restrained, been physically beaten, chased down streets by armed far-right groups, been tear gassed by police and even had to call the police to hold off angry crowds throwing objects at them.

Index spoke to journalists working in Washington DC, Los Angeles, Michigan and Portland about the violence they had been facing around protests in the last year.

In July photojournalist Eric Levai had \$1000 of equipment stolen when a masked members of the crowd turned on him as he attempted to cover a protest around the Los Angeles WiSpa, an area of the city which has become the centre of rallies around transgender rights.

Levai, who works regularly for the Daily Dot website as well as hosting a podcast, told the US Press Freedom Tracker website that he heard a shout, and then was charged by seven or eight people, who took his backpack with a gas mask, goggles and a tripod inside.

Levai told Index: “Protest coverage remains risky.”

He worries about wearing media ID such a jacket or badge while working because it could bring adverse attention.

“While I do carry a press badge while working, depending on my personal safety, sometimes it's safer to wear it, but sometimes not.”

Independent reporter Joey Scott, who freelances in LA, is also wary of what can happen at protests, and teams up with a buddy for safety. He told Index:

“Despite the temporary restraining orders against police, they seem more than eager to harm protesters. Most likely because they got in trouble. LAPD will be investing in millions of dollars of training to better use less-lethal weapons and to infiltrate/surveil protesters. This will all most likely be used against the press in some way. They will also be changing tactics, though in what ways it is unclear, in terms of managing protests on the ground.

When I feel there may be confrontation at a protest or rally I pack my helmet and goggles. If I find it may be particularly confrontational I pack my plate carrier to protect myself from any less-lethal rounds.

I still feel unsafe out there at the moment. The adversarial relationship between the press and police still remains the same. That said, our state just passed a bill SB98 that allows the press to remain at a riot/protest/unlawful assembly without arrest. That has not been tested in the real world yet and I imagine cops will find a way to invalidate who a member of the press is or find another excuse to arrest us. Lately, cops have been pointing their flashlights into cameras and being as confrontational as possible."

Marcin Wrona, a US bureau chief in Washington DC for Polish TV channel TVN Discovery, has been covering working in the US for many years and has seen significant changes in the past year: "I can see that the hostile attitude towards press is more and more kind of obvious, or more visible, it's easier to get yourself in a difficult situation today than let's say a decade ago."

Within a 12 month period Wrona's TV crew has been attacked at a Black Lives Matter protest and had insults shouted at them during the attack on the Capitol on January 6th. And in July this year while they were trying to cover a protest in Lafayette Square in DC the crowd turned on them, and started to damage their equipment, throw things and threaten them, forcing them to abandon filming and flee the scene as protesters chased them. Police officers on bicycles came to their aid as they fled.

Marcin said: "Those three instances show me that people do not care what country you are from, what you are reporting about, what, how truthful you are, or whatever, no, it's just enough to be a member of press to have a big target on your back."

He feels the threats against journalists at protest is already affecting reporting: "When you when you have to kind of watch your back all the time, and when you know that getting in the centre of developments may be dangerous, then then you have to make a decision. 'Okay, am I risking everything or not?' And of course, it influences reporting. I mean, there is no doubt about that."

Wrona thinks part of the problem is that people are wearing press badges and helmets with media on it who are pretending to be journalists, and this ramps up antagonism. "The word press is now used not only by us, not only by press."

Marcin says he has covered many protests through the years, including huge anti-war rallies during the George Bush era, and the atmosphere towards the media has never been like it is today.

He has now removed his address from his business cards and takes more safety precautions when preparing to cover a march or protest.

Reporting is being affected, believes Marcin. Some crews, not theirs, are starting to take security guards with them, but then he believes this can affect the reporting they can do, and who will talk to reporters.

The veteran reporter said he felt that the anger mirrored some of the narratives in the media. "Some of the news outlets are kind of chasing their audience, which is becoming more and more polarised, and then the audience is watching, you know, only things that they agree with, but those things are polarising them even more."

Journalists working in small towns have also experienced changes. In August Eric Baerren, a reporter for a paper in the town of Mount Pleasant, Michigan, was covering a school board meeting about mask wearing. After the meeting a parent approached him to get him to remove photos from his camera, The parent tried to grab his phone and kick his camera out of his hand, and the police were called.

Baerren said: "It's a very difficult environment for journalists in this country right now."

The US Press Freedom Tracker website has detailed other types of attacks on journalists covering protests this year including eggs being thrown at TV crews, plus umbrellas being opened in front of TV crews and photographers to stop them being able to work. And journalist Alissa Azar was chased and beaten by a mob of the far-right group the Proud Boys who were carrying machine guns in Olympia, Oregon.

Kirstin McCudden, managing editor of the US Press Freedom Tracker, said there were cities where more of this type of attack had been focused, but "it wasn't just one place. It was really coast to coast, and the midwest."

She said: "In Portland, there were more than 100 nights in a row of protests. And from that, we saw multiple journalists, assaulted, arrested, equipment damaged multiple times."

Numbers from the US Press Freedom Tracker database shows that of 34 incidents of equipment damage it recorded up to mid October 2021, [at least 25](#) involved cameras or camera equipment; almost all of these followed harassment because the journalist was photographing or filming.

McCudden feels the rise in attacks in journalists has happened as distrust in the media rose. And while that distrust used to be embedded in certain sections of society it was now widespread. "It's everybody."

Research from the Pew Research Center showed that trust in the media was at an all-time low, she said. "It follows that media is in the crosshairs time and again."

