

Rapid Response Messaging

Here we offer Do’s and Don’ts for rapid response communications. While this sheet offers general considerations and best practices, it’s important to note that messaging strategy and content will ultimately depend on the dynamics within your particular context. As you read these guidelines, consider how you might tailor and operationalize them in your community. For more information on rapid response preparedness in the face of potential risks for violence in your community, including more information on the research referenced in this handout, refer to Over Zero’s “Building a Resiliency Network: A toolkit for building community resilience during a contentious election cycle”.

DO’S:

Listen to and consult with targeted communities before acting

Set and model positive norms

Tell people “who we are”, rather than “who we’re not”

Emphasize agency

Model or showcase empathy

Offer a concrete path forward for grievances

Be careful and specific when sharing information about violence or other related events

Ensure that you don’t dehumanize

Undermine biases that emerge in conflict

Use best practices for correcting mis- and dis-information

ALWAYS analyze for risk

Anticipate and prepare

DON'TS:

Don’t call for peace without offering a way to address the underlying issues

Don’t be vague or dishonest

Don’t call-out violence or tensions without also addressing the underlying issues that gave rise to it

Don’t dehumanize

Don’t signal negative norms

Don’t feed narratives of “collective blame”

Don’t raise the profile or notoriety of violent actors

Don’t repeat misinformation or rumors.

Don’t emphasize or create chaos or confusion

Don’t buy into a zero-sum frame

Read more about these “Do’s” on the following page and more about these “Don’ts” on pg 6

1. **Listen to and consult with targeted communities before acting:** Where specific groups or communities are targeted for violence, listen to them first to learn their needs, ideas, and preferences for public statements and actions.

2. **Set and model positive norms:** Show that the vast majority of people in your community do not support and will not participate in violence – especially and even in the face of escalating tensions or incidents of violence.
 - Emphasize the unifying, local identity of your community and draw on relevant community narratives and values for protecting the dignity and rights of all residents.
 - Use “we” framing to set positive expectations. “We, as the [CITY/TOWN] community, will/are/are committed to [VALUE/ACTION].” Then provide evidence that shows that this is true.
 - Stress the importance of working together across groups to be a national model for addressing hard issues, rather than serving as fodder in national electoral politics.
 - Show in addition to telling. Model these positive norms. Share stories or highlight actions that showcase the norms you are trying to set for your communities in the face of strains, escalation or trigger events. Show the specific actions that you as leaders are taking; show how many people in your community support these positive norms and are taking positive action. This provides “social proof” that the values and actions you are encouraging are possible and prevalent throughout your community.
 - > Listen to the people and communities affected by the violence. Learn about their needs and channel your resources (public platform, financial resources, in-kind support, etc.) accordingly.

3. **Tell people “who we are”, rather than “who we’re not”:** Define your community or group in positive, inclusive terms and use the community’s own words and examples. Themes likely to resonate include inclusivity, diversity, unity, agency, hope, good will, a focus on safety (e.g. everyone should feel safe voting).
 - **Why?** Asserting who we are not actually strengthens the association between “we” (our community or other group) and the very actions we are seeking to avoid. Further, in times of uncertainty, people are drawn to leaders who can define a clear identity and set of values for their group – “this is who we are and this is what we care about”.

4. **Emphasize agency:** In uncertain or tense moments, people can feel a loss of agency in deciding how they will act - especially because narratives that seek to move people towards violence often portray it as the only option (“to protect our group,” “secure our future,” etc.). This can create strong social pressures and a feeling that someone has no choice but to support violence or just stay quiet. It’s important to emphasize that people have a choice choice in how they act -- and that their values and common goals dictate that they will resist violence. This can be framed through the lens of the broader community’s commitment to resisting violence, or a particular group (e.g. a faith community, a community organization, etc.).
5. **Model empathy**
 - **Toward targeted communities:** When communities are targeted with violence and you seek to share stories from targeted communities (with their permission), model empathy toward those communities. Rather than just sharing content meant to generate empathy among audiences, modeling this empathy yourself may more powerfully generate empathy among your audience.
 - **Toward your audience:** Demonstrate that you care about them and that you understand this is a difficult and confusing time. Recognize their emotions and show a path forward.
6. **Offer a concrete path forward for grievances:** Provide clear channels and processes for addressing grievances and violence in real-time. Acknowledge any grievances that do arise, and help people understand the different options for addressing these grievances. For example, if disputes arise around the election, or if there are issues with voting (e.g. technical or procedural issues to be addressed), provide people with specific information about different options for addressing these grievances, and keep them updated on the different procedures. Note: as grievances arise, people may use many means to address them – from filing legal challenges to protest. It’s important not to discourage people from addressing grievances, but instead to help make people aware of, and encourage, ways of doing so.
7. **Be careful and specific when sharing information about violence or other related events.** If violence does happen, it’s important to be careful and specific when discussing it. In addition to the other recommendations, keep in mind the following :
 - When specific communities are targeted with violence you should be sure to listen to them before taking any action, including communicating. Learn about their needs and channel your resources (public platform, financial support, in-kind support, etc.) accordingly.

- When sharing information about violence, it's important to remember that violence can be used as a coercive tool to intimidate and silence entire communities who fear further violence and targeting. It's essential not to fuel fear and intimidation of these communities, and to instead show how many people stand in support of them and against violence.
 - Sometimes, language around violence can fuel unequal narratives between groups – or simply be inaccurate. For example, saying “violence erupted at a protest” if the violence being described is police firing teargas on protestors, is inaccurate in that it implies a spontaneous eruption of violence, likely from protestors. Being specific about exactly what happened, including not using broad passive phrasing about violence, is important for accuracy, for preventing unequal descriptions of groups relating to violence, and to ensure that you don't create a vague and broad feeling about violence and its prevalence.
- 8. Ensure that you don't dehumanize:** there are many dehumanizing narratives that portray groups as less than fully human, or with words and metaphors that prime images of animals or pests. Be careful of the words you use when describing people or events – for example, using the phrase “people swarmed onto the streets” uses a verb (swarmed) that is typically used to describe insects. Also avoid victimizing language and imagery that shows people targeted with violence as helpless. Finally, if you're talking about any group, but especially groups that are in any way marginalized or discriminated against, be sure to showcase their warmth (caring for others, empathy) and their competence (responsibility, complex emotions like concern or hope, etc.). This is because dehumanizing narratives between groups often paint members of a group as a whole as lacking either warmth or competence.
- 9. Undermine biases that emerge in conflict:** Once groups begin to have conflict with each other, certain biases and narratives can emerge. For example, we tend to think “we are acting out of love – wanting to protect our own group” while “they are acting out of hate.” Of course there is a mixture of motivations in any group, but this asymmetry between how we think of our own group and others can help cement conflict. Be sure not to feed into this narrative.
- 10. Use best practices for correcting mis- and dis-information:** It can be easy to accidentally fuel misinformation when you're trying to correct. To avoid simple mistakes, like increasing exposure to misinformation, refer to the tips for correcting misinformation on pg 7.

11. ALWAYS analyze for risk. Even well-intentioned efforts may backfire and cause unintended harm. It's critical to consider how your effort may interact with the surrounding context to amplify or defuse risks for violence or further tensions.

12. Anticipate and prepare: Use your scenario planning to think about specific messages you want to prepare in advance.

For example:

- In anticipation of tensions during the counting period, since mail-in ballots will take longer to count and the results will not be known for some time after the election, you could prepare messages celebrating the community for patiently waiting, reinforcing common identities, and keeping a sense of calm. Once counting has begun, messages should provide status updates and reinforce that this longer wait-time is expected. Throughout, continue providing procedural updates and encourage calm and the use of official channels to address any disputes. Being prepared with this type of messaging in advance can help you mobilize quickly if people are impatient or rumors about the counting process have started (or if candidates declare victory before the count has been completed!).
- As you think about messaging to keep people calm and ensure they have information throughout the voting and counting processes, be ready to amplify updates from non-partisan or bi-partisan coalitions or monitors who are observing the election.

1. **Don't be vague or dishonest.** Be clear in your messaging and acknowledge when you don't know something. It's important not to squander trust with your audience, particularly in tense moments.
2. **Don't speak about violence without also addressing the larger context and its short and long-term impacts.** For instance, the larger context may include histories of anti-Black violence, racism, voter suppression, distrust, division, etc.
3. **Don't dehumanize** or use words or metaphors that signal connections to animals. Instead, **emphasize communities' warmth and competency** (see above).
4. **Don't signal negative norms** when drawing attention to negative behaviors (e.g., violence has overtaken this community). Instead, emphasize how the community is committed to finding a peaceful solution.
5. **Don't feed narratives of "collective blame."** If you are talking about violence, be specific and clear when describing who is committing violence and how it fits into the broader context. Broad language describing violence tied to a group can fuel an associations of that group with violence, especially where stereotypes already exist.
6. **Don't raise the profile or notoriety of violent actors.**
7. **Don't repeat misinformation or rumors.** If you have to in order to provide corrective information, provide a warning that the information is incorrect first.
8. **Don't emphasize or create chaos or confusion.** Instead, if there are tensions, confusion, or a feeling of chaos provide clarifying information on what is happening and why, as well as steps being taken to calm things down. This also means that you should not use sensationalist or alarmist language, or engage in speculation about things that might happen. This is particularly important to remember as you and your network discuss possible risks and scenarios – this should be done for the purposes of planning and preparing to help your community prevent violence; messaging about these risks or speculating on how they might happen in broad public messages can actually at fuel to the fire!
9. **Don't buy into a zero-sum frame.** Instead emphasize common goals and possibilities for cooperation.

Tips for Correcting Misinformation

Correcting misinformation can be tricky, particularly because the more we hear a piece of information (even if it is being disputed), the more likely we are to believe it. Luckily, research and practice have shown us that there are effective ways to correct misinformation without reinforcing it. We outline best practices on this page.

1. Correct misinformation as quickly as possible. The more that people hear or see misinformation, the more they are likely to believe it.
2. Use positive framing. For example, if John has been accused of being a thief, the best correction will re-focus attention on what John is (e.g. “John is an honest person who is always sharing”) rather than what he is not (e.g., “John is NOT a thief.”) Why? Repeating the original accusation can strengthen the very association you are trying to undercut (John and thief).
3. Try not to repeat the misinformation, but if you have to, give a warning before you repeat it (not after!). As misinformation is repeated, it becomes more familiar and believable to people. By warning listeners in advance of repeating the association, you activate their critical thinking skills to prevent the association from unknowingly taking hold.
4. Make sure your correction comes from a source (whether an individual, institution, or news outlet) that people find credible and that represents their interests and values.
5. Prompt people to question sources of mis- and dis-information. Encourage people to consider the motive of the source: why would someone spread false or misleading information (e.g., is it clickbait that would help them earn money)? Research has shown that critical thinking and deliberation can reduce the influence of misinformation.
6. If possible, provide an alternative explanation for the evidence underlying the incorrect claim. Misinformation is more influential when people infer a causal relationship from the evidence and subsequent event (e.g., between the presence of flammable materials and a subsequent fire). A correction that simply disputes that the materials caused the fire will be less effective than one that explains the fire resulted from arson.
7. Keep your corrections simple and easy to understand. If possible, use clear and simple visualizations.
8. Consider the underlying narratives that the mis- or dis-information is tapping into. Why would someone believe the misinformation? What emotions, identities, or experiences are attached? What sense of truth or existing belief is it resonating with? Understanding this can allow you to identify the larger narratives, ideas, and beliefs you will need to tackle.