

# Seminar 4

## Risks to Consider in Covering Civil Unrest

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## Seminar: Overview

This seminar will address dangers that can happen at home or abroad in covering situations of civil unrest from protests to mob scenes. The 2016 U.S. political conventions had journalists on edge in advance, thinking the anger and fights that had been part of the campaigns, especially that of Donald Trump, might erupt into more intense and widespread violence. Although that did not occur, the advance preparations by many news organizations and freelancers were the right approach to preparing for coverage of civil disobedience-type events that have the potential for violence.

## Instructor Advance Reading

In addition to the readings below, also read the student assigned materials. Also, each discussion question offers background reading to help you guide the discussion for that particular question.

- [“Photojournalists Bringing Gas Masks and Kevlar to Republican Convention.”](#) A report by Petapixel on the preparations by photojournalists for the Republican National Convention. Due to the security risks, some journalists wore helmets and Kevlar jackets as a basic layer of protection for the coverage until it was clear the violence risk was low.
- [“Photographers Are Gearing Up for the Republican Convention Like It’s War.”](#) A similar report by Nick Stockton for Wired.com on how photojournalists took precautionary measures for the Republican National Convention (RNC).

## Bio of Cengiz Yar

Cengiz Yar is a documentary photographer based in northern Iraq. His work is focused on mass displacement, religious and ethnic minorities, and the fight against the Islamic State.

His work has appeared in *The Guardian*, *The Telegraph*, *Maclean's Magazine*, *Foreign Policy*, *Huck Magazine*, *The American Scholar*, *Vice*, *Makeshift Magazine*, and *Mashable*. His humanitarian clients include UNHCR, UNICEF, UNDP, and Mercy Corps.

He has been featured for his work in a variety of places, including BBC World News, *Juxtapoz Magazine* and *Roads & Kingdoms*. He was awarded the Online News Association's inaugural 2015 James W. Foley Award for Conflict Freelancers.

## Bio of Aaron Mak

Aaron Mak was an intern reporter at the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* at the time of the incident covered in this seminar. He was given the assignment to cover the protest by his editor. He is a student at Yale University and has also interned at *Politico*.

## Bio of Shane Bell

Shane Bell is the managing director of Global Journalists Security (GJS), which provides hostile environment training, first aid training and other safety training for journalists, NGOs and aid workers. Before joining GJS, Bell worked for many years with journalists as a security adviser, escorting them on reporting trips in the U.S. and in combat zones overseas.

## Bio of Ayesha Mir

Ayesha Mir is a photojournalist with more than five years of reporting experience in Pakistan. She has worked for *The Express Tribune*, based in Karachi, Pakistan, and freelanced for other publications. She graduated from Emily Carr University in Vancouver, Canada, before taking on her current position at *The Express Tribune*. She also teaches photojournalism at a high school in Karachi.

## Student Advance Reading

- “You’re Asian right? Why are you even here?” by Aaron Mak, an intern with the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, was attacked during a protest. He describes the experience in this *Politico* story.
- “Female news reporter 'attacked' live on air as woman 'grabs her head and punches her in face'.” *The Daily Mirror* published footage as the reporter was punched in the face during a live TV session.
- “Index on Censorship: journalists now under 'unprecedented' attack.” Jane Martinson reports on a study by the *Guardian* that finds growing hostility toward media around the world has led to a rise in assaults on individuals and on press freedom.
- “In My Bag: RNC Edition.” New York-based photojournalist C.S. Muncy writes about his preparation for the RNC.
- “Tennis balls, coolers, lasers: What's been banned at the RNC.” In *USA Today*, Eliza Collins lists the objects banned from the RNC and its surrounding premises. Guess what? Guns weren’t on the list.

## Instructor Notes

Beneath each question that is to be posed to students, there are notes and bullet points intended to help instructors focus on the information, controversy and/or issues that students should learn and debate.

### ***These are some of the ideas we hope you and your students will consider:***

Journalists often find themselves covering civil unrest, whether protests, picketing or mob violence. What may seem to be an ordinary protest can quickly turn into a violent situation.

As in reporting situations discussed in the previous lessons, it is important to have thought through how to manage the risks and what to do if things turn violent. A journalist’s safety as well as the safety of colleagues is the top priority.

Dual goals then arise: Reporting accurately and completely as a situation turns chaotic and dangerous and minimizing risk to avoid injury or worse.

The best way to mitigate risks is preparation. Assume that controversial issues such as abortion, police shootings of African Americans, or divisive political campaigns or rallies against a corrupt official have the potential to become violent. Really think about the rhetoric being used and the

types of groups involved. Do not assume that because similar events have not been dangerous, your assignment will be safe to cover.

The riots in Ferguson, Missouri, and Baltimore are good examples. Dangerous assignments are not always those involving conflict areas or foreign postings.

Much depends on a journalist's ability to think and react quickly in situations that can take a nasty turn in the blink of an eye. Again, advance preparation – even practicing some responses to danger – can help reporters react correctly without thinking.

You and your students will review two reporters' experiences and discuss thoughts on how you might have reacted.

Before the start of each scenario exercise, you should give the background of the reporter who wrote this scenario and explain that the scenarios are real experiences that those reporters experienced.

After reviewing the scenarios, you will listen to a video interview with Shane Bell and provide a written document with advice from Mir.

### Scenario One: Cengiz Yar

Instructor should give the background of the reporter who wrote this scenario and explain that the scenarios are real experiences that the reporters providing them went through. Distribute Scenario 3 and give the students time to read it. Tell them for this scenario, they are playing a U.S. freelance reporter, and gender is irrelevant to the scenario.

### [Handout 1: Republican National Convention in Cleveland](#)

*It is the summer of 2016. You are a freelance photographer and have been assigned to cover the Republican National Convention in Cleveland. Tens of thousands of protesters are predicted to fill the streets, along with thousands of police officers. The anticipation of violence is high with many news outlets reporting on it in the weeks leading up to the July convention. The weather during the convention is supposed to be in the 90s.*

*The city of Cleveland has a restricted zone in downtown that limits the items allowed near the convention hall. Included in that list are gas masks and tennis balls - not included are guns because Cleveland has a law allowing registered gun owners to carry concealed weapons.*

*Pro-gun activists from around the country likely will be traveling to Cleveland to exercise their right to carry weapons. Black Lives Matter protesters are heading to the city as well, as are branches of the Black Panthers. Members of Bikers for Trump are riding in from South Dakota and anarchists like Black Bloc are said to be traveling from the East Coast. There is also the possibility of Trump not receiving the Republican nomination, which could lead to violence on the streets from his supporters.*

*Your editor assigns you to cover the protesters and environment outside the convention hall as well as some Cleveland voices from around the city only. You will not have to go into the*

*convention hall to cover the speeches and nominating procedures. You will be outside and mobile on the streets. There will be thousands of other reporters and photographers covering this event so the competition for compelling stories and imagery will be high.*

## **Discussion Points for Handout 1**

### **1. What are the possible threats to your safety?**

Your biggest concern at this point is the use of weapons from either side. Things are likely to get heated due to the presence of opposing groups. Anarchists are certain to take advantage of the situation.

In such scenarios, you need to be cautious not just of the threat from the protesters, but also from law enforcement personnel, lest they mistake you for one of the anarchists. Another cause for concern is the use of nonlethal force by the law enforcers. Always be on the lookout for police activity. If they are putting on gas masks and riot gear, it's best to start making your way to the periphery.

You will probably be carrying expensive equipment with you, making you a target for opportunists within the crowd.

Some of the protesters may be averse to the media and may target you simply for being there. Be on the lookout for any signs of aggravation.

You want to get the best images and footage but keep in mind that getting too caught up in the motion of the crowd may drag you into the center and when something suddenly kicks off, you may not be in the best position to safely evacuate the premises. Always stay on the periphery and know your exit plan.

### **2. What will you be wearing?**

- You will be running around with protesters in an urban environment in the middle of summer. Primary concerns should be staying mobile and cool. Wear lightweight clothing, good solid shoes and jeans.
- The shoes should have hard toes so that you won't be injured if people step on your feet if there are running or fast-moving crowds.
- Wear jeans or sturdy pants when covering protests because they are difficult to rip and add some layer of protection. Shorts also lead to exposed skin in the event of chemical agents. For this reason, also pack a long-sleeved shirt in your day pack.
- Bring a T-shirt to change into and some deodorant. Being able to freshen up quickly makes a world of difference and will make you more comfortable and better able to work and face future challenges.

### **3. Due to the security restrictions downtown where most of the protesting likely will take place, what might you bring to protect yourself that is different from other protests?**

- In a normal protest situation that might result in tear gas, you should bring a gas mask. You aren't allowed to wear a gas mask in Cleveland but may still need to protect your

eyes and lungs from chemical agents. Yar picked up a pair of swimming goggles and a chemical painting mask and kept them with him for the week.

- A bike helmet or skateboard helmet is also a lightweight piece of protection to strap to your bag just in case rocks start flying. You also can buy a helmet that looks like a baseball cap but is hard enough to protect your head; make sure it has straps under your chin so it doesn't fall off.

#### **4. Should you bring body armor?**

- While some journalists wore body armor and others brought it, wearing body armor makes you stand out as a target. You will stand out to both the police and to the protesters and, as a photographer, it is better to blend in. Body armor also adds to the expectations of danger.
- Wear body armor when you're covering a war, but not in a situation where it will make people more fearful or as a way to showboat. Body armor isn't a joke and should be worn seriously and in serious situations.

#### **5. What should you discuss with your editor?**

- Be sure to get an assignment letter stating that you are working for the news organization so that you can get credentials. Credentials come from the House Press Gallery.
- Make sure you have a list of lawyers in case you are arrested. The Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press has lists.
- As with any possibly hostile situation and assignment, you should have a detailed check-in plan with your editor and possibly a risk assessment. I typically use a family member as a check in and do that nightly while on assignment. Here is a sample checklist you can use:
  - [ACOS Safety Checklist](#)
  - ["What To Expect When You're Protesting: An Activist Guide To The RNC & DNC"](#) by Nathan Tempey

#### **6. What other preparations could you make?**

- Pack water, a press pass, candy bar, protein bar
- Have plenty of whatever medicine you normally take
- Cash: Always carry around hard money
- Medical kit
- Travel as lightly as possible so you'll be able to move around more easily and last longer in the field
- Create meeting places with other journalists and buddy-up. If you feel like situations are getting out of hand, pair up with someone and watch each other's back.

#### [Handout 2: Republican National Convention, cont.](#)

*It is the second day of the Republican National Convention in downtown Cleveland. The events so far have not been violent, crowds are small, there are masses of journalists and thousands of police. It's the middle of the day, and you're extremely hot. A mass of police and journalists*

*surround a group of men arguing. A scuffle breaks out and you are stuck between the police and protesters, including the men who are arguing. There is shoving.*

*Some small objects, most likely plastic bottles, are thrown through the air. The confrontation appears to be between masked anarchistic protestors and the conservative gun rights group InfoWars.*

*You've seen people with handguns on their hips in the crowd and others earlier in the day walking around with rifles. The police, of course, are armed, and there are police snipers in nearby buildings. The situation appears to be escalating quickly.*

## **Discussion Points for Handout 2**

### **1. What do you do in terms of location – stay in the crowd, move? What gets you the best photos?**

Yar backed up and allowed the other journalists to surround the scene. He determined that he did not need close-up action shots for his story and being able to observe the melee from a short distance worked as long as he could maintain a view of the action. He stayed close enough that he could get back into the scrum if he felt it was warranted.

### **2. How did you prepare for the day's work? Did you have a safety as well as a photography/storytelling plan?**

Preparation is key. No matter the assignment, what makes the job easier and more efficient is essential groundwork. Having a pre-ordained plan not only allows you to focus better, it helps alleviate many of the risks carried by certain assignments.

The Rory Peck Trust offers a template on drafting an assignment outline even before you assess the risks.

#### **1. Create an outline**

To be able to identify risks, you need to properly outline what your project is. Try to identify and list the key building blocks of the project: all the sequences, interviews, travel plans and actions that are vital to your plans.

#### **2. Locations and brief schedule**

Where are you going, when and for how long?

#### **3. Assignment details**

Give specific details of what you intend to cover to complete your assignment. What will you film, photograph, record, report, write? Include relevant meetings, sequences, interviews and locations. This will act as the basic foundation of your risk assessment. It will give you a clear idea of what you want to achieve and how you want to achieve it.

#### **4. Project-specific risks**

Is this a sensitive topic? Are you reporting in a high-risk location or at a high-risk event? Are the people you are meeting under surveillance? Might they be put at risk if

they talk to you? What could you do to mitigate risks? For instance, could you leave sensitive interviews to the end of your visit so they are less likely to affect your plans?

[Salama](https://salama.io/#/), a free risk-assessment application designed by Knight Fellow Jorge Luis Sierra, helps journalists mitigate digital and physical security threats. Visit the following link, fill out the form and the application will guide you on the best way to mitigate risks and scale the level of risk on your assignment. <https://salama.io/#/>

### Scenario Two: Aaron Mak

Tell students they are an Asian-American intern reporter at a mid-size daily newspaper in the Midwest, the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, and are about to return to college after a summer of reporting.

#### [Handout 1: Milwaukee Sherman Park Riots](#)

*It is Aug. 13, the last day of your summer internship. But your editor has an assignment. He sends you to the city's predominantly black and socioeconomically underprivileged Sherman Park neighborhood. There had been reports of a fatal shooting in the area. Because you have reported at crime scenes in the past without incident, it seemed like a routine assignment. But when you arrive you learn that the shooter is a policeman and the victim is a well-liked member of the community. An outraged crowd is forming around the cul-de-sac where the homicide occurred. This did not concern you because you had spent much of the summer covering police brutality protests, all of which had been peaceful.*

*You begin to suspect that the protest could turn violent when some in the crowd start shoving forward and throwing rocks at the police officers who are guarding the crime scene. In demonstrations that you've covered in the past, making any sort of physical contact with law enforcement is usually an unspoken line that protestors won't cross.*

*The police conducted their on-scene investigation throughout the afternoon, during which time the crowd grew progressively larger and more unruly.*

### Discussion Points for Handout 1

#### Should you have shadowed an activist?

- Activists typically command respect within the communities they represent, so the rioters would not likely have attacked if we had an activist vouching for us. I was fortunate enough over the course of my earlier reporting to have developed a relationship with the community leaders at the protest, who escorted me out of the area after the attack; they had enough clout to make sure no one else assaulted me as we left. In the future, I'm going to make sure to remain within earshot of a prominent activist in potentially volatile situations.
- You should have called your editor to develop an emergency plan. Mak said he was too concerned with reporting. But he – and you – also incorrectly assumed that even if a riot did erupt, you would be safe because you are a reporter and Asian-American.

### [Handout 2: Milwaukee Sherman Park Riots, cont.](#)

*At sunset, the officers place the body into an ambulance, pile into their squad cars, and begin to leave. Just as the last car in the procession is about to pull out of the cul-de-sac, someone runs up and smashes its back window. This emboldens others in the crowd to follow suit, and soon the rioters are smashing and setting fire to parked vehicles and small businesses that line the streets of the neighborhood. You run after the mob to capture video of the turmoil on your cell phone.*

*You also call your editor and inform him that a riot has broken out. He sends another reporter and a photographer, both white men, to help with the coverage. You meet them at a nearby intersection. Moments later, a phalanx of armored police comes marching down the street behind you. One of the rioters fires seven gunshots from the other side of the intersection. The police disperse, and your colleagues and you dive behind a Chevy Suburban. Once it seemed like the gunfire had ceased, the photographer walks off to take more pictures, while the other reporter and you remain behind the car. Minutes later, a man shouts, “Get your white ass out of here! You better not let me fucking catch you!” You see a group of around 20 people chase the photographer down the street. You don’t have a plan to diffuse the situation, but feel you can’t leave your colleague to fend for himself. You decide to run after him and make sure that he isn’t assaulted. It may not have been the right call, but you’re not sure what else you can do.*

*The photographer drops the bulky cameras around his neck so that he can run faster. Worried that you’ll lose all of his work, you run over to retrieve the gear. He stops and looks back, at which point you yell at him to keep running. You’re realizing that picking up the cameras and shouting at him were ill-considered moves that likely endangered both of you. The mob realizes that you are associated with him, and so they begin chasing you.*

### **Discussion Points for Handout 2**

- You should have contacted your editor and all the other reporters at the scene to devise an escape plan once you sensed that the protest would spin out of control (i.e. when protestors began making physical contact with police). After you had fled the area, you still didn’t know where your colleagues were.
- You should have identified a rendezvous spot in the event that the reporters were separated, requested that someone sit in a car nearby who could transport you away from the scene, and created a group chat so that you could communicate with each other at the same time.
- Your colleagues and you should have stayed together once people started destroying property. Splitting up made it difficult for you to look out for each other, and for your editors to ensure your safety.

### [Handout 3: Milwaukee Sherman Park Riots, conclusion](#)

*Because the photographer was a much faster runner, the mob caught up with you first, threw you to the ground and pummeled you.*

*A few onlookers saw what was happening and ran up, yelling, “Stop, he’s not white! He’s Asian!” The attackers, after taking a step back to examine you, run off into the night. An activist who has been a source in earlier reporting on police violence comes over to help you get up from the ground and escorts you to a nearby park. Other people you have interviewed in past protests hear about what happened, and they too come over to make sure you are not attacked again. You call an editor and ask her to pick you up. Your two colleagues had also managed to run to safety, unharmed, and you meet back at the newsroom.*

### **Discussion Points for Handout 3**

#### **1. Do you need to think about how a crowd might react to you based on your gender, race or ethnicity? Is that something to consider in assessing risk?**

- As a reporter, you may think of yourself as an impartial observer, but that isn’t necessarily how other people see you. You and the other reporter and photographer should have considered how your races were going to affect the way the crowd viewed you and would react to you.

#### [Tips from the Pros](#)

**Paul Burton**, training director for hostile environments and emergency first-aid for Global Journalist Security, has trained hundreds of journalists, aid workers and others on safety measures in the field. Here is a brief outline of his tips on reconnaissance prior to a protest or rally and recommendations for operating during the event.

#### [Handout 1: Tips from Paul Burton](#)

##### *Global Journalists Security Risk Assessment Strategy for Protests & Civil Unrest*

- Visit the venue a day before. Relate the map to the ground. When you see a map, it shows various side streets and lanes that may turn out to be your exit route if needed. But some of these side streets may be blocked by law enforcement. Explore the area and map out your best exit plan.
- Take a physical copy of the map with you. Often, cellular connectivity is limited in areas where many people have gathered.
- Speak to law enforcers posted at the venue a day earlier. What sort of risks are they anticipating? What sort of precautions are they taking?
- Take account of your means of communication. The government has the authority to turn off cellular transmitters and you don’t want to be caught in that situation.
- If you believe there is a chance of violence, take a helmet with you. Also, carry a basic first aid kit. Make sure to bring plenty of water with you to stay hydrated.
- In some cases, body armor can be a useful tool. Other times, it could make you stand out. You may want to decide whether to wear the body armor based on the situation on the ground.

- Download and familiarize yourself with tracker apps to follow the movements of your colleagues in the field. There are several apps available for both Apple and Android users.
- Travel in pairs when possible.
- Always remain cognizant of your surroundings. When taking pictures or using your cell phone, make sure your peripheral vision is clear. Try to stand with your back against a wall when using your cell phone. This way, no one can sneak up behind you.
- Be on the lookout for signs of escalation. You want to be able to take pictures or footage of violent incidents and then quickly move away from danger.
- Get on the ground as quickly as possible if you hear gunshots.
- At protests that have a tendency to grow violent, always track the crowd dressed in black. They are likely to be the ones that will cause trouble. Make sure you identify yourself as a journalist. Know the difference between anarchists and violent anarchists. The latter may hurt you and try to steal your equipment.
- Don't try to go between two sides of a crowd. Stay on the sidelines or in front of the crowd. Remember: you are not invincible.
- If you do come face to face with a hostile actor:
  1. Avoid
  2. Escape
  3. De-escalate.

Show video of **Shane Bell of Global Journalists Security** talking about some of the tricks of the trade; how to keep yourself and others safe when the mob suddenly turns on you. Situational awareness is key, he says. (NOTE: Instructor can pair up students to practice some of the moves Shane talks about.)

Video featuring Shane Bell (Approx. 6 mins)

<https://vimeo.com/207861637>

Handout 2: Covering Protests in Pakistan: Photojournalist Ayesha Mir

*In Karachi, there are several types of protests. One happens outside the Karachi press club: A few people, usually peaceful, protest for a short time, then disperse. Second is a political protest that is in the protesters area so it has a good chance of being safe to cover. Third is a protest that is a collision between two parties and nearly always gets violent. The fourth type, which is now rare and is expressly to show violence, is "Ishq e Rasool Day." The Pakistani government ordered citizens to observe the day in condemnation of an anti-Islam film. AFP reported that violent protests erupted in several cities, resulting in 20 dead, 200 wounded and major property damage.*

*When I am assigned to a protest, the first thing I do is discuss with my editor what kind of photos the media outlet is looking for – close-ups, intimate shots of people, wide shots of the crowd or the people who plan to give speeches. Each scenario requires me to plan differently.*

*If I am going from home to the protest, I wear clothes suited to the event: socks and sneakers, jeans (must have pockets), a scarf and a longer shirt (more like a Kurta) that will be worn for a*

*very particular reason. Pakistan is a male-dominated country; few women are photojournalists and even fewer work for newspapers and are out in the field during such events. If this was my ideal world, I would have been wearing a button-down shirt that would be easy to maneuver in. However, men are not used to seeing women run around with a camera in such situations so it makes sense to dress in a way that avoids inappropriate stares.*

*I carry a backpack at all times. It holds my camera, extra lenses, extra memory card, extra battery, a notebook, pens, a medicine kit and my press card.*

*I make sure my phone is charged, but I have my power bank in case it dies. I also have an extra phone on me with another number.*

*If the protest is by a political party, then knowing which party is in charge is essential. If it is a majority party, then it's easy to cover because the organizers make sure people, especially journalists, can go anywhere.*

*I always make sure my car and driver are close by but not in harm's way if the protest gets violent, and that I can reach them by phone.*

*It's also important to have a "friend" – maybe a reporter from my organization or another, especially if they have a bike. I tend to have my eye out for these friends, make conversation with them before and during the protests, and sometimes we bounce ideas off each other for good subjects to photograph.*

*As soon as I get in my car to go to the venue, I make sure everything is in place, like my backpack, phones, concepts discussed with the editor. When I reach the venue, which is usually early, I tend to locate a person or a friend. Then I look around to find the best places from which to photograph. I also take a few test shots just to see if my settings on the camera are fine. Once the protest starts, I start to take photos of the people, some close-ups and look for "color" images. As the crowd tends to increase so does the competition, and I have to make sure I stand my ground and not let people in front of me. This usually ends up with me getting elbowed in the ribs and people standing in front of me because I am a woman. I also get groped sometimes by the public with the worst part being you don't know who did it.*

*If the protest is peaceful, which you can usually tell in the first hour, then it's easy and fast to photograph. But if there is even the slightest bit of tension, you have to watch for the worst. If a fight breaks out, I look for a little high ground, usually a TV satellite car to stand on and photograph from. If not that, then I take a few steps back and keep my camera higher and start to click the center where people are fighting. If there is tear gas, then I stand close to the police because it gives me a shot of the tear gas being fired and the people being fired at.*

*I was told by a fellow photographer that your life is more important than your photograph. So keeping that in mind, I make an exit with the friend if I can locate him or her and make my way to a safer place.*

## **Discussion Points for Handout 2**

### **1. Have you thought about the need to assess risks when covering protests? Have you experienced a protest that became violent?**

- The idea of assessing what type of protest you are covering to determine the likelihood of violence is important. How would you go about planning based on what you've just learned?
- Get in the habit of creating a checklist of risk assessments before heading out to an assignment. As an exercise, don't look at the handouts and write what you think are the five most important preparations.