Copaganda

CLAPBACK

A RESOURCE TO FIGHT BACK

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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CreaTV San José inspires, educates, and connects San José communities, using media to foster civic engagement. We connect our communities with the training, tools, and platforms to share their stories and perspectives through digital media.

www.creatvsj.org

Disinfo Defense League is a distributed national network of organizers, researchers, and disinformation experts disrupting online racialized disinformation infrastructure and campaigns targeting people of color.

www.disinfodefenseleague.org

Generation Justice (GJ) is a multiracial, multicultural project that trains youth to harness the power of community and raise critical consciousness through leadership development, civic engagement, media production and narrative shift in the areas that most impact New Mexicans - racial justice, health, education, early childhood development, and economic security.

generationjustice.org

The Tech and Social Change Project at the Harvard Shorenstein Center on Media, **Politics and Public Policy (TaSC)** conducts research, develops methods, and facilitates workshops for journalists, policy makers, technologists, and civil society organizations on how to detect, document, and debunk media manipulation campaigns.

shorensteincenter.org/programs/ technology-social-change/

Line Break Media
Line Break Media is a creative agency and video production company that crafts stories into powerful instruments for change.

www.linebreakmedia.org

MediaJustice boldly advances racial, economic, and gender justice in a digital age by fighting for just and participatory platforms for expression. We harness community power through the MediaJustice Network of more than 80 local organizations to claim our right to media and technology that keeps us all connected, represented and free.

mediajustice.org

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COPa-gaNdA?

COPAGANDA IS POLICE GENERATED PROPAGANDA

COPAGANDA SUSTAINS A GRIP ON OUR COLLECTIVE IMAGINATION TO ENVISION A WORLD WITHOUT POLICE.

INTRODUCTION

With True Crime on the rise as one of the most popular genres in media[1], increased rates of mass shootings[2], and murders by law enforcement reaching a record high in 2022[3], it's become more necessary than ever to debunk police-generated propaganda or as we describe it, **copaganda**. In a society that normalizes policing and surveillance, from facial recognition technology in sports arenas[4] to cop reality shows[5], we must foster critical thinking over the reach policing has in our lives. Current strategies to deal with disinformation, which are largely rooted in replacing "fake news" with truth, are insufficient to deal with copaganda. Debunking copaganda is not about the quest for objectivity, it's about analyzing power.

The police are one of the most influential media figures in the country. If you don't believe me, just watch your local news and take note of how often you hear the phrase, "police sources say". Most police departments have a dedicated marketing budget and public information officers that deal with the media[6]. For decades, police have been put into our minds as the only solution to violence. And when a major crisis happens, copaganda is used to justify more policing, despite proof that policing does not address root causes of violence in our communities. Even after our abolitionist movements have called for the mass defunding of policing, most police budgets have increased in the years following mass protests in 2020. Ultimately, copaganda sustains a grip on our collective imagination to imagine a world without police.

The case studies in this project, written by the Technology and Social Change Project and informed by MJ grassroots Network members,underscore how copaganda minimizes our collective perception of harm. For example, in the case study about how Walgreens manufactured a crime wave, researchers debunk the oversaturation of stories related to drug store theft and "tough on crime" narratives in the Bay Area. Despite the scale of harms done by corporations affecting millions, such as wage theft by CEOs and the release of toxic chemicals into the environment[7], we are oversaturated with news of drug store theft

1   Dominick, Nora. *Buzzfeed*. "Netflix's "Dahmer" Is Getting Criticized By People, Including The Family Of One Of His Victims, And Here's Why" https://www.buzzfeed.com/noradominick/jeffrey-dahmer-netflix-series-criticism-victims-family

2   Bushhard, Brian. *Forbes*. "611 Mass Shootings Recorded So Far In 2022—Second-Worst Year For Gun Violence In Almost A Decade" https://www.forbes.com/sites/brianbushard/2022/11/25/611-mass-shootings-recorded-so-far-in-2022-second-worst-year-for-gun-violence-in-almost-a-decade/

3   Levin, Sam. *The Guardian*. "'It never stops': killings by US police reach record high in 2022" https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2023/jan/06/us-police-killings-record-number-2022

4   Fight for the Future. *Medium*. "Backlash forces UCLA to abandon plans for facial recognition surveillance on campus" https://fightfortheftr.medium.com/backlash-forces-ucla-to-abandon-plans-for-facial-recognition-surveillance-on-campus-ebe005e3f715

5   Anderson, Robin. *Salon*. "The "copaganda" epidemic: How media glorifies police and vilifies protesters" https://www.salon.com/2023/01/08/the-copaganda-epidemic-how-media-glorifies-police-and-vilifies/

6   Karakatsanis, Alec. Public Relations Spending By Police. https://equalityalec.substack.com/p/public-relations-spending-by-police

7   Weill, Kelly. *Daily Beast*. Rail Company Already Pissed Off Environmentalists Before Ohio Train Crash. https://www.thedailybeast.com/norfolk-southern-pissed-off-environmentalists-in-atlanta-before-east-palestine-train-derailment

and transit fare evasion in mainstream news. Although crime levels are much lower than they were decades ago, we are told these stories to push policing as a solution and to distract from the major corporate harms done to our communities.

The process for creating this curriculum included nearly a dozen listening sessions with grassroots MediaJustice Network members across the country. Through these listening sessions, I learned the consequences of disinformation for MediaJustice Network members are deeply personal. They spoke of severed friendships due to right-wing podcasts, no longer seeing family who believe the COVID-19 pandemic is a hoax, and fractured relationships between youth and elders in our movements. Through their stories, I learned that copaganda is as much about the consumption of death for the purpose of spectacle[8] as it is a denial of grief for families separated because of the system of policing. Their experiences showed me that debunking copaganda is about collective sense-making. In a carceral system that is systematically death-making and grief-denying,[9] debunking copaganda is life-affirming. Many of our MediaJustice Network members are Black and brown people who constantly have their lived experiences denied because of copaganda. Their truth-telling helped shape the prompts within this curriculum, along with our project team that worked together for several months to shape the curriculum. Combining the expertise of researchers, independent media makers, youth radio hosts, journalists, and organizers, these individuals built the foundation of this curriculum to be precise and thoughtful in its questions.

I believe imagining is a key discipline for getting ourselves out of the constant loops of rage, online disinformation, hate speech, and doom scrolling that only serve to distract us and direct more profit to Big Tech billionaires. MediaJustice has fought to deplatform white supremacists and will continue to support content moderation policies that put our communities' safety first[10]. However, we also believe that as online spaces are viewed and utilized as public squares, they should be democratized and treated as public goods. This means we cannot continue to rely on social media platforms that are privately owned and centrally controlled by billionaires. We are dreaming and planning for a world beyond existing mainstream online platforms. This curriculum is a step in resourcing ourselves and our MediaJustice Network in building trusted information streams as we get there.

Thank you for embarking on this effort towards debunking copaganda with us.

In solidarity,

RUMSHA SAJID
National Field Organizer
MediaJustice

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[8]   Hartman, Sadiyah. Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America. Oxford University Press. September 1997.

[9]   Devich-Cyril, Malkia. *In These Times*. "Grief Belongs in Social Movements. Can We Embrace It?" https://inthesetimes.com/article/freedom-grief-healing-death-liberation-movements

[10]   Hayes, Myaisha. *MediaJustice*. "Musk, Trump, & the State of Twitter". https://mediajustice.org/news/mediajustice-statement-musk-trump-the-state-of-twitter/

"IN A CARCERAL SYSTEM THAT IS SYSTEMATICALLY DEATH-MAKING AND GRIEF-DENYING, DEBUNKING COPAGANDA IS LIFE-AFFIRMING."
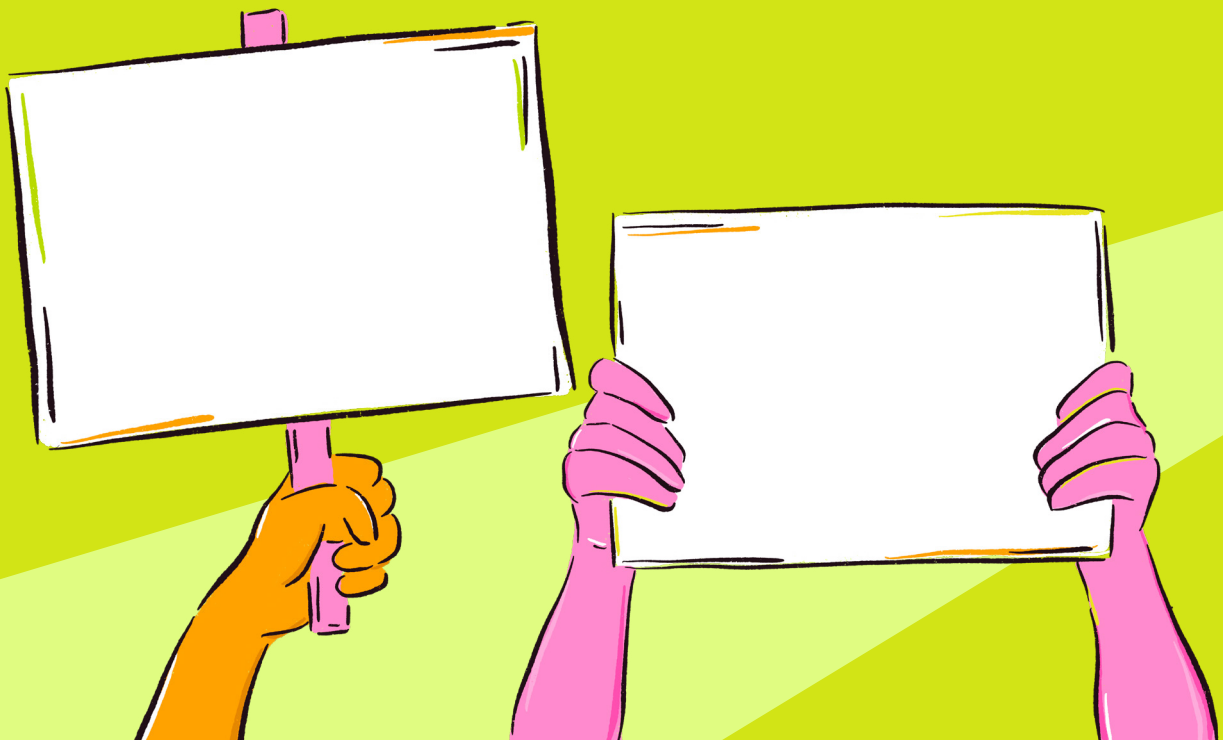
GLOSSARY

Abolition[1] (in relation to the prison industrial complex or "PIC"): a political vision with the goal of eliminating imprisonment, policing, and surveillance and creating lasting alternatives to punishment and imprisonment[2]

Copaganda: police generated propaganda.

Debunking: exposing the falseness of an idea or belief.

Disinformation: information that is deliberately false or misleading, often spread for political gain, profit, or to discredit a target individual, group, movement, or political party.

Narrative: a story filled with assumptions and world views that are passed off as "common sense" but are deeply influenced by the belief systems of those who construct them.

Misinformation: information whose inaccuracy is unintentional, and spread unknowingly.

Prebunking:: the process of debunking lies, tactics or sources before they strike.

Propaganda: using one's power to share a narrative, especially with loaded or emotionally-charged language, in order to influence other people's opinions

Racialized Disinformation: strategically uses fake racial or ethnic identities and/or focus on race as a divisive issue to polarize groups.

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1   If you want to learn more about abolition versus reform, check out this resource by Interrupting Criminalization, Project Nia, and Critical Resistance: https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5ee-39ec764dbd7179cf1243c/t/630398e383d20c0139686f16/1661180144236/Abolition+Binder_Web+Version.pdf

2   Definition by Critical Resistance: https://criticalresistance.org/mission-vision/not-so-common-language/

COPAGANDA IS BOTH NARRATIVE AND ACTION BY POLICE

Copaganda is used to achieve political goals. Many of the following instances are a failing of policing or are rooted in a desire to controlling public perception.

Often, when policing fails it triggers a copaganda response. These examples are not an exhaustive list. Instead, it is starting point to help us understand the **"how"** and **"why"** behind seeing common tropes of copaganda in the media.

CITY BUDGET RELEASE

copaganda narrative

"There's too much crime, crime rates are going up" to justify police budgets.

copaganda action

Buy more policing equipment, high-tech surveillance tools, and further disinvest from public services like housing, education, and healthcare.

DISTRICT ATTORNEY RACE

copaganda narrative

"There's too much crime, crime rates are going up"

copaganda action

Police endorsing a recall movement for a liberal District Attorney.

MASS SHOOTING

copaganda narrative

Narratives stating "we need more policing" especially the expansion of surveillance tools.

copaganda action

Police releasing contradictory or in-consistent information, criminalizing mental health, and ignoring gun regulation.

MILITARY SURPLUS & FEDERAL GRANT PROGRAMS MILITARIZING LOCAL POLICE

copaganda narrative

Hysteria around the threat of terrorism locally, co-opting disaster relief narratives

copaganda action

Purchasing more surveillance and policing equipment without public oversight.

LEGISLATION RELATED TO CRIMINAL JUSTICE REFORM BUDGET RELEASE

copaganda narrative

Crime rates, "we need more prisons" or "society will collapse if we don't have police"

copaganda action

Trying to block legislation or reform that lessens our reliance on policing.

A COP ON TRIAL

copaganda narrative

1. "Not all cops are bad"
2. Assigning morality to the actions of victims

copaganda action

Trying to make police officers seem brave and innocent. While also criminalizing victims of police violence by detecting if they used drugs.

WAVES OF (IM)MIGRANTS, REFUGEES, AND ASYLUM SEEKERS

copaganda narrative

"We have to secure our southern border" or "criminals, drug dealers and rapists are crossing the border illegally"

copaganda action

More funding for borders, immigration detention, separation of families, surveillance, and military.

MOVEMENT PROTEST

copaganda narrative

Language of "riots" or destruction of property

copaganda action

Criminalizing and arresting protestors and dissent, stopping protest.

RECRUITING NEW OFFICERS TO THE POLICE FORCE

copaganda narrative

Racist symbols in police recruitment ads

copaganda action

Carrying out policing with a white supremacist police force.

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THINK ABOUT COPAGANDA IN YOUR COMMUNITY...

Use the following outline to **write** out an example of copaganda in your community. This can be anything that increased policing in your community, such as an increase in police funding or the adoption of surveillance tools in your community.

WHAT

WHEN

HOW

WHO

WHY

CASE STUDIES: AN IN-DEPTH STUDY OF COPAGANDA

These case studies were instances of copaganda identified by MediaJustice Network members by using the framework in Activity II. Through information provided from Activity II, researchers from the The Tech and Social Change Project created deep-dive case studies for each instance of copaganda.

These case studies serve as examples of pervasive copaganda within our communities by dissecting the different forces that shape the copaganda locally.

Read the following two case studies:

Case Study: Trading Up The Chain: How Walgreens manufactured a crime wave using business & local news publications

Case Study: Minnesota Police Department Ride-Along

Trading Up The Chain: How Walgreens manufactured a crime wave using business & local news publications

by Brandi Collins-Dexter and Frankie Enzler

Region: Throughout the country with focus on the San Francisco, Bay Area

Date: Approximately October 2020- January 2023

Tactics deployed: viral videos; testimonials/anecdotal stories; uncorroborated anonymous sourcing

Vulnerabilities Exploited: Active crisis; Breaking news events; Election period; Wedge issue

Attribution: Business (Walgreens)

Targets: Local and national Democrats, particularly those labeled "progressive" or who have supported decriminalization for low level crimes, including theft (explicitly District Attorneys); Legislation

Network terrain: Business and local news publications; social media platforms; potentially community apps such as NextDoor

Strategy: Trading up the chain. "Trading up the chain" is the process of getting a story from a small, local, or niche platform or media outlet to a more popular, national news service.

Goals/desired outcomes: Financial gain and/or offset financial losses; mainstream media exposure by "trading up the chain" to avoid fact checking or counter voices; muddying the waters and public discourse on defunding the police, surveillance and protest movements.

Potential other desired goal: To distract the public from bad publicity stemming from several missteps.

Overview

On a January 2023 earnings call, Walgreen's chief financial officer, James Kehoe told shareholders that they "might have cried too much" when drumming up fears about organized retail theft targeting stores across the country and the San Francisco Bay Area in particular. Kehoe acknowledged on the call that the company had overinvested in "largely ineffective" private security companies and mechanisms. He also noted that shrinkage–which had been used to describe mass losses sustained through things like theft and damaged goods, had gone from 3.5% of sales to closer to the "mid twos."

This announcement came after two years of feeding public hysteria through planting the narrative that "organized" retail theft (or crime) was endangering communities and creating an economic and accessibility crisis in cities like San Francisco. What now was being brushed off as crying wolf had already resulted in a number of major impacts with long term implications. These include the roll back of laws championed by racial and social justice advocates, an acceleration of surveillance networks and displacement in gentrifying areas, and possibly the successful recall of at least one progressive district attorney that had publicly pledged not to waste office resources on victimless crimes.

Though their CFO's remarks have now been widely reported, as of the date of this study there have been few attempts to trace the media origins, scale and potential real world impacts of Walgreens' disinformation campaign. This case study attempts to offer more insight into how a manufactured crime wave was used to benefit multiple corporate and political

interests at the expense of communities. The data included here comes from a data set pulled by the team from Factiva. For additional data sets and analysis there have been recent stories/reports released by The Marshall Project and the Center for Just Journalism.

The time period we looked at was between October 2020- the January 2023 earnings call. We did not look at evidence of previous campaigns of this nature. Most of our findings focused on California politics, both due to our collaboration with MediaJustice Network groups in San José and because of the disproportionate amount of media focus on this issue of retail theft in California.

Manipulation campaign planning and origins (Fall 2020)
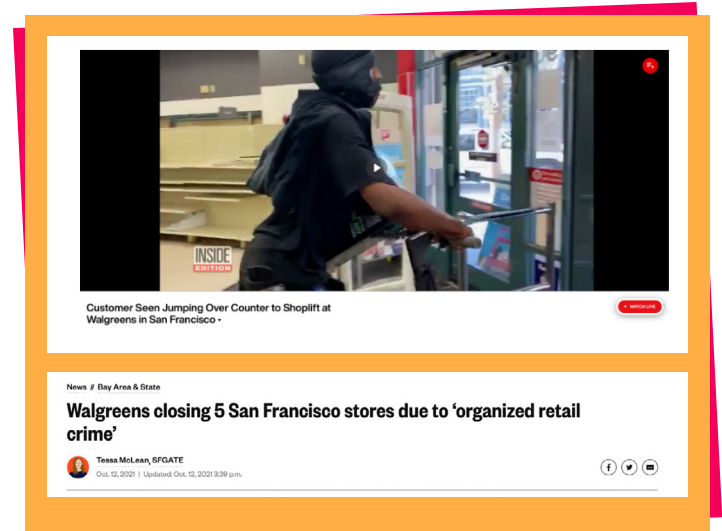
The earliest evidence we could find of a campaign pushing an alleged "organized" post-pandemic retail crime wave hitting Walgreens stores was in articles published in and around October 12, 2020. Articles released by the San Francisco Chronicle, SFGate and rereported on by outlets

such as Daily Mail and Business Insider cited rampant shoplifting as the cause of Walgreens store closures in California. "Organized retail crime in San Francisco has increased the challenge for all retail, and Walgreens is not immune to that," company spokesman Phil Caruso said at the time. The articles also noted that "California law states that theft of goods valued less than $950 is treated as a nonviolent misdemeanor."

Later that month, a video pushed by pseudo news program Inside Edition across several platforms showed who appeared to be a darker skinned young man (with their face covered), jumping over a counter to grab goods before leaving the store on an electric scooter bike.

Building the narrative through the San Francisco Business Times (Winter-Spring 2021)

On February 26th, 2021, Alex Barreira, a beat journalist for the San Francisco Business Times published a more detailed article titled "Small businesses in S.F. are fed up — and fighting back". This is the first of at least 12 articles Alex Barreira would author for SFBT covering organized retail theft at Bay Area Walgreens stores.

Barreira– who covers hospitality, retail, restaurant, tourism and foodtech news for the outlet– alleged that less policing and prosecution of property theft had made the California Bay Area increasingly unsafe. Interviewed business owners argued that underpolicing had created "a more inviting environment for crime, along with the economic pain and desperation caused by the pandemic." Because of that, they argued, business owners were being forced to use private security and mass surveillance mechanisms to safeguard stores and the community against organized retail theft.

This appears to be the first time purported rising crime rates were attributed directly to progressive San Francisco District Attorney Chesa Boudin, who by that point had been in office for just over a year. Also targeted was California Proposition 47, passed in 2014. Prop 47 is a state ballot measure that recategorized some nonviolent charges– including property crimes of less than $950– as misdemeanors, rather than felonies, as part of an initiative to reduce overcrowding in prison, barriers to future employment and the school to prison pipeline.

Lloyd Silverstein is the primary focus of the story. Silverstein is a business owner in Hayes Valley (a once predominantly Black neighborhood in San Francisco that was raised by a highway in 2005 and was a flashpoint in gentrification fights during and after the Great Recession). In addition to owning sunglass company Optical Underground, Silverstein chairs the Hayes Valley Neighborhood Association's merchant group. (He also may or may not be this person, but I was unable to confirm).

Silverstein was interviewed by Barreira about the recent public release of a letter to public officials orchestrated by Silverstein and other Hayes Valley Neighborhood Association officials. Barriera personally validates the content of the letter, writing:

…merchants laid out what I've heard anecdotally dozens of times from national retailers to mom-and-pop shops alike — that property crimes are committed in broad daylight with impunity, that if a crime is reported police are too busy to investigate, that if a suspect is arrested they aren't charged, and that if charged a suspect is released before their hearing.

The article relied primarily on anecdotal evidence and self-reported information from business owners like Silverstein. Also included was the voice of long-time Castro neighborhood business owner Terry Asten Bennett. The Castro, a historically working class, diverse LGBTQ+ community, has also been immersed in a gentrification fight as more tech workers have moved in. Bennett, who has referred to herself as a straight ally who supports protests against injustice, was featured in several articles in later 2020 and through 2021, linking the 2020 BLM movement and street protests, as well an increase in homelessness during the pandemic, as the impetus for making the Castro community increasingly less safe.

The DA's office was asked to comment on the allegations and responded with the below:

When I followed up with the District Attorney's office for numbers to support this, I received the following from a spokesperson: Between March 2020 through the latest data for January 2021, of more than 7,400 reported burglaries in San Francisco, police made arrests or citations in 803. Of those, 630 were presented to the DA's office for prosecution.

"We took action in 493 of those (that includes new filings as well as things like probation or parole violations) and filed new charges in 417 of them," said Rachel Marshall, director of communications and a policy advisor for Boudin.

"As you can see, our office only ever is presented with a tiny fraction (less than 10%) of the residential and commercial burglaries that occur in San Francisco."

The article includes testimony and comments from more business owners and the precautions they have taken. Chris

Larsen, co-founder of blockchain payment protocol Ripple Labs Inc. claimed that due to rising crime he had to invest $5.6 million funding a network of over 1,000 high-definition cameras that covers more than 135 blocks in the city. Notably, Larsen built a network of 1,000 surveillance cameras all over town, which he installs and maintains through his company Applied Video Solutions.

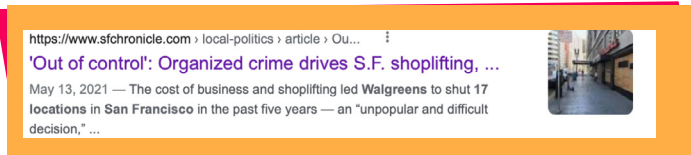Larsen discussed working closely with San Francisco PD and neighborhood groups noting:

> **"WE KEEP HEARING THAT THE MAJORITY OF CRIMES IN THE CITY ARE LED BY AN ORGANIZED BUT FAIRLY SMALL NUMBER OF PEOPLE," LARSEN SAID VIA EMAIL.**
>
> **"GAINING EVIDENCE ON THE BEHAVIOR AND REPETITIVENESS OF THESE CREWS IS REALLY KEY TO ELEVATE LESS SERIOUS PROPERTY CRIMES TO WHAT IN MANY CASES IS ORGANIZED CRIMINAL ACTIVITY."**

The claims made here could not be substantiated by the TASC team through publicly available data around theft statistics beyond those mentioned in this case study, which come directly from the companies themselves.

Reporter Alex Barreira published 11 more articles from February through December
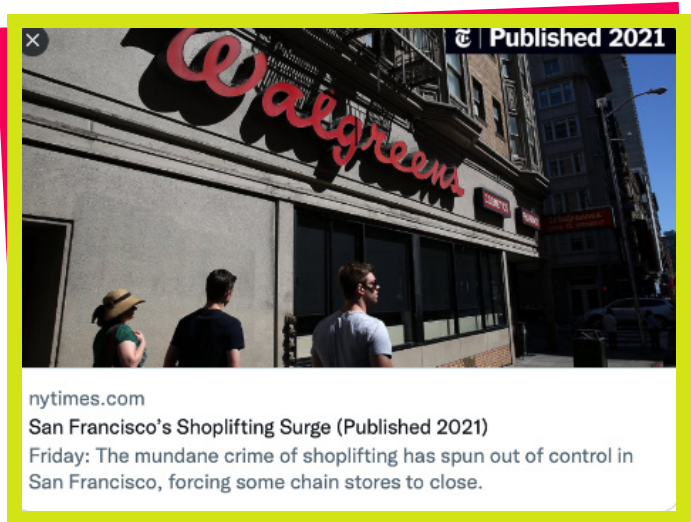
2021. Most of the early stories that were not authored by Barreira were still primarily generated via news stories from business reporters documenting earnings calls or running features on business owners or alternatively local news beat reporters covering breaking news in the Bay Area.

https://www.sfchronicle.com › local-politics › article › Ou...
'Out of control': Organized crime drives S.F. shoplifting, ...
May 13, 2021 — The cost of business and shoplifting led **Walgreens** to shut **17 locations** in **San Francisco** in the past five years — an "unpopular and difficult decision," ...

The executives of Walgreens' corporate headquarters did not comment in Barreira's original article. But at a board of supervisors hearing in May 2021, representatives from Walgreens alleged that thefts at its stores in San Francisco were four times the chain's national average, and that as a direct result of the thefts it had been forced to close 17 stores in the region. This sound bite got picked up and repeated uncritically in several liberal and right-wing media outlets.

STAGE 2

Seeding the campaign across platforms

nytimes.com
San Francisco's Shoplifting Surge (Published 2021)
Friday: The mundane crime of shoplifting has spun out of control in San Francisco, forcing some chain stores to close.

Viral videos of "brazen" theft at Walgreens stores (often video taped by security guards, store owners/employees or journalists) similar to the first story that appeared in October 2020, spread across social media platforms and on national television programs and news outlets. This is what helped propel a local business story into a national phenomenon.

"Organized Retail Theft" Becomes a Wedge Political Issue (Summer 2021)

In May 2021, Republican leadership in Congress released a memo, "Violent Crime Has Soared In American Cities As Democrats Began To Defund The Police,". The memo explicitly cited rampant organized retail theft in San Francisco as an indication of lawlessness driven by "defund the police" rhetoric. Over the course of the year, the frame of "defund the police" would lose steam, as framing of violent lawlessness at stores like Walgreens were used to reinforce the belief that police could restore safety to local communities.

On June 4, 2021 a second article (the first being the February SFBT article by Alex Barriera) appeared linking DA Boudin to a Walgreens organized retail theft ring. But the article painted retail theft as a national problem attributed to the "Democrat left". "Blame Criminals, Democrat Left for Today's Crime Surge,"an opinion piece by Deroy Murdock appeared in the Heritage Foundation publication The Daily Signal:

"The Democrat left also has created PINOs—prosecutors in name only.

Chesa Boudin is San Francisco's George Soros-funded district attorney. Boudin now stays busy not throwing books at crooks. His refusal to prosecute shoplifters who steal less than $950 contributed to the closure of 17 Walgreens stores in San Francisco.

In Los Angeles County, likewise, far-left District Attorney George Gascon is flinging the jail cells open as quickly as the hinges allow. 'Gascon is releasing criminals before the officer finishes the report—literally—because of his no-bail policy,' a frustrated L.A. prosecutor told me."

It is noted in the article that "The Daily Signal publishes a variety of perspectives. Nothing written here is to be construed as representing the views of The Heritage Foundation."

On June 14, 2021, a video posted on Twitter, showed a person (who appeared to be a younger man), loading items from the shelves of a Walgreens and putting them into a plastic garbage bag. The person, who had a pulled up neck scarf and sunglasses obscuring their face, was then recorded mounting a bike to ride out of the store while the store security guard filmed the incident but made no attempt to interfere before trying to grab the bag as the person rode by.

The video quickly made the rounds online, and as of January, 2023 had over 6.3 million views, nearly 5,000 Retweets/6,000 quote tweets and nearly 16k "likes." According to Fairness & Accuracy In Reporting (FAIR), a media critique organization, over a 28 day period, over 300 news stories were generated on the 21-second clip.

The viral video was recorded and posted by Lyanne Melendez, a Bay Area local news reporter with ABC/Walt Disney Owned KGO-TV (ABC7). The tweet was targeted towards then San Francisco District Attorney, Chesa Boudin, with hashtag #NoConsequences.

The June viral video in particular marked a spike in articles being generated on "organized" retail crime or theft.

On June 16, 2021, right-wing provocateur Ben Shapiro published a follow-up op-ed on the Daily Signal that was reprinted in several online publications. The article, titled "How Blue City Governance is Destroying American Cities," blamed progressive local governance as decreasing safety and increasing property theft at stores like Walgreens, specifically citing the viral video.

Members of the Democratic Party such as Representative Nancy Pelosi (who represents the district San Francisco is located in), President Biden and others issued responses condemning organized retail theft. Progressive/left members in the Democratic party, such as Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, came under fire for calling into question the legitimacy of the organized retail theft claims.

Political Responses

Other retailers such as Walmart, Target and– to a lesser extent– CVS, publicly and on shareholder calls, validated claims of organized retail theft rings and lobbied legislators at the national level to respond.

In 2021, a bipartisan bill called the IN-FORM Act was introduced and passed in congress. As part of the hearings the Walgreens CEO and others testified that rampant organized theft and shoplifting at their stores were being fenced on platforms like Amazon and were forcing local stores to have to shut their doors. The bill skews heavily towards protecting the interests of companies like Walgreens but does little to protect consumers. The INFORM Act was passed with little documented public resistance from civil society.

In 2022, U.S. Senators Catherine Cortez Masto (D-Nev.) and Chuck Grassley (R-Iowa) introduced legislation called The Combatting Organized Retail Crime Act. A mirror House bill was also introduced. If passed, the bill would establish "a co-ordinated multi-agency response" to "organized retail theft." According to a press release issued by Cortez Masto's office:

The bill establishes a Center to Combat Organized Retail Crime at Homeland Security Investigations that combines expertise from state and local law enforcement agencies as well as retail industry representatives. It also creates new tools to assist in federal investigation and prosecution of organized retail crime, and help recover lost goods and proceeds.

Going into the 2021 and 2022 election cycles, candidates running for office– particularly people running for mayoral and DA positions– attempted to distance themselves from labels of being "soft on crime," responding to bad faith arguments that were invalidated by data. In California, in January 2022 it was announced that both Democrats and Republicans in the state were trying to weaken Prop 47. According to CalMatters: A Democratic bill would reverse a key aspect of Proposition 47 by reducing the felony threshold for petty theft and shoplifting, while a Republican one would overturn Prop. 47 altogether.

In 2022, DA Boudin, who had been the target of a disproportionate number of attacks, was recalled. According to Open-Secrets, a single PAC, "Neighbors for a Better San Francisco", accounted for two-thirds of the money spent in favor of the recall campaign (nearly $4.8 million of the roughly $7 million spent against Boudin). It was noted by SFGate, that many of the donors had traditionally donated to Democratic Party candidates and causes. In all, the overwhelming majority of financing for the recall campaign both in the Neighbors PAC and other major donations came from dark money donors in either the real estate industry or the finance industry. The next biggest donations to the recall campaign all came from donors in the tech industries.

Mitigation attempts

Stories about the organized retail theft at Walgreens stores in the Bay Area explicitly were used to muddy the waters and create a confusing and disorienting information environment, making it difficult to distinguish what is accurate from what is false. A number of "debunking" articles were released by various outlets including The

Atlantic, The Guardian, NPR and other more niche outlets, as well as researchers and crime analysts and local housing and labor activists. Local outlets like SF Chronicle, who were responsible for spreading the initial hysteria, also attempted to put the claims into context. However, credible or authoritative sources were forced to compete with misdirection, speculation, unfounded claims, or outright false information. Some of these include:

> **Conflating** the story of luxury goods "organized retail theft rings" that have been investigated by police and have led to arrests, with unaffiliated, hyperlocal stories about in store robberies and theft without verification beyond pseudo anonymous testimonials or information provided directly by the companies themselves.
>
> **Conflation** of issues around housing insecurity amid rising rent and housing prices with perceptions of criminality. Or identifying individual actors as being part of organized retail theft.
>
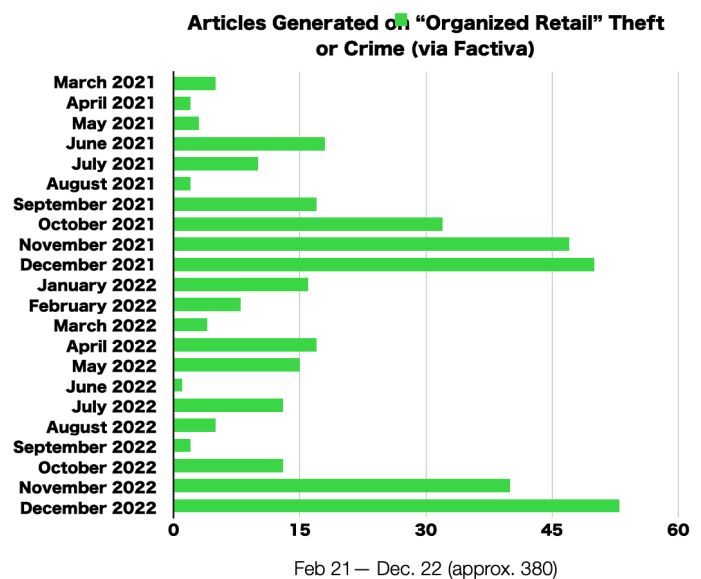> **Targeting** of "progressive DAs" (in particular Chesa Boudin) for what is framed as urban lawlessness based on viral videos, information provided by business owners, and community testimonials– despite limited evidence documenting a rise in crime and evidence that most of these sorts of alleged larceny thefts don't even get reported to the DA's office.

The use of viral videos and images in particular, help ensure that histrionic stories travel further than the stories correcting the mis and disinformation. Research indi-

cates that accepted beliefs about the scale of "violent" organized theft have allowed for an unhindered increase in surveillance in the Bay Area and an uptick in business for the surveillance industrial complex– which for years has built one of the more robust anti-surveillance movements in the country.

Discussion

Between 2018-2022, there were approximately 987 news stories generated about organized retail theft, of which 792 were released in 2021 and 2022. Of the articles released in 2021 and 2022, an estimated 47% (approximately 380) mentioned Walgreens being affected by organized retail theft. The number of articles increased significantly during the October- December news and election cycles in both 2021 and 2022.

Articles Generated on "Organized Retail" Theft or Crime (via Factiva)

Month	
March 2021	
April 2021	
May 2021	
June 2021	
July 2021	
August 2021	
September 2021	
October 2021	
November 2021	
December 2021	
January 2022	
February 2022	
March 2022	
April 2022	
May 2022	
June 2022	
July 2022	
August 2022	
September 2022	
October 2022	
November 2022	
December 2022	

Feb 21 — Dec. 22 (approx. 380)

In scanning the nearly 380 articles, identified through news aggregator Factiva, there were a few common themes.

1. Nearly 40% of the Walgreens articles

singled out organized retail theft in California, where .06% (586) of their total stores(8,886) are located in the US. For comparison sake there were significantly fewer stories generated about organized retail theft at CVS stores despite there being significantly more both in total (9, 667) and in California (1,150).

2. Approximately 1 in 4 news stories included direct quotes from law enforcement that a crime had actually taken place or a person taken into custody. The numbers reported came from either earnings or stakeholder calls or directly from Walgreens spokespeople and were coupled with anecdotal evidence from local business owners (or viral videos). When law enforcement were mentioned or cited beyond that, it was in reference to the broad number of reported crimes, to reinforce in nebulous terms an "organized" crime wave, or to say they were looking into the incidents.

3. In stories about Walgreens and organized theft, the most referenced public official was DA Chesa Boudin, with the second most mentioned being Governor Gavin Newsom. The third most mentioned was President Biden. Only a handful of the stories were able to point to a police report being filed or some type of supporting evidence that actions had been taken that would prompt action from the DA's office.

4. The most prolific generator of stories about Walgreens and organized crime was the Daily Mail (examples below), which produced approximately 40 articles over the two year period, starting in June 2021. The most frequently mentioned figures in those articles beyond Chesa Boudin and Gavin Newsom, were Illinois Attorney General Kwame Raoul, George Floyd, George Soros (who was frequently linked to a

"woke DA" agenda) and other DAs such as Chicago's Kimberly Foxx and Philadephia's Larry Krasner.
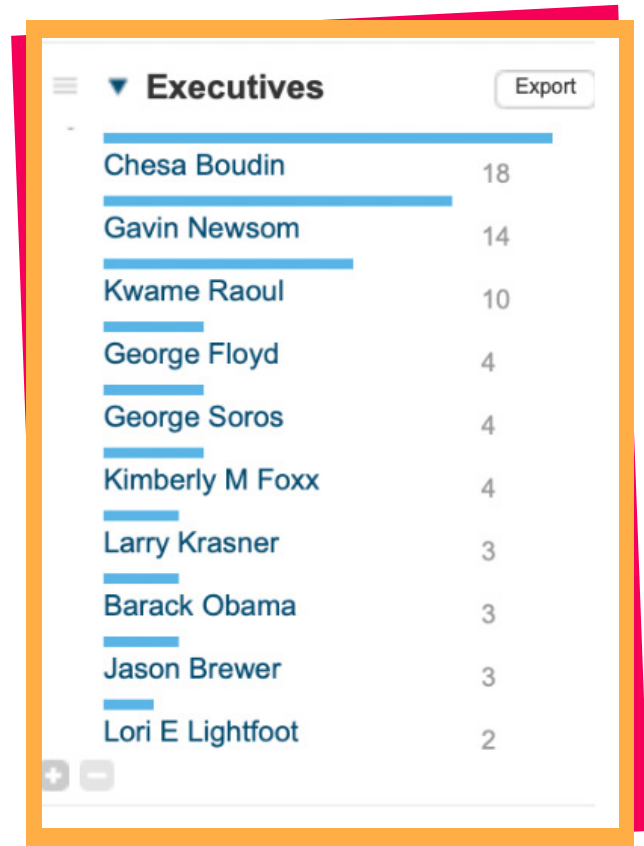
5. A disproportionate number of articles were specific about talking about minimum sentencing for theft under $950, a direct critique of Prop 47. The language in the articles look very similar to language drawn up by the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) in the early 2000s. ALEC is a corporate-funded table of global corporations and state politicians who try to influence state and national legislation. According to ALEC Exposed, the Organized Retail Theft Act was adopted by ALEC's" Criminal Justice Task Force" at the Annual Meeting in July, 2005, approved by the ALEC Board of Directors in August, 2005. ALEC has attempted to distance itself from the legislation after public criticism and pushback which resulted in the passage of legislation such as Prop 47. According to ALEC Exposed:

This is part of a set of bills favored by corporations designed to increase criminal penalties for retail theft. This bill in particular creates a new class of felony, **"Organized Retail Theft,"** if one person steals goods over a certain amount and sells them to another person. This bill would benefit large retailers such as Wal-Mart, which was a member of the ALEC Private Sector board...

"Organized retail theft" refers to when **two or more persons are involved in theft of retail property** from a retail establishment, with **value exceeding $1,000 (the amount will be $500 or more above the present state felony theft level** and not below $1,000 in any state), aggregated over a 180-day period, with the **intent to sell that retail property to a retail property fence** for monetary or other gains.

Walgreens is not currently listed as a member of ALEC. Previously, Walgreens publicly stated it would not renew its membership with ALEC, when it came under pressure from advocates in 2012 for ALEC's role in drafting Stand Your Ground bills. The passage of the INFORM ACT establishes a publicly accepted narrative that organized retail thefts in operation are being used to fence retail property online,

which can help forward efforts to pass a broader organized retail theft act similar to the one originally drawn up by ALEC or water down legislation like Prop 47 in other states.

In an Medium article discussing June 2021 Walgreens theft and other viral videos shared in 2021, journalist Lam Thuy Vo interviewed reporters and data analysts about how decontextualized videos create a sense of a rising crime wave locally and nationally. These sorts of videos, which have not only impacted online discourse but have shifted how local and national reporting is done, often do not address or reconcile the reality that reported property crimes have dropped overall in the last 20 years. Even when the reported numbers went up in 2021 and 2022 they still did not reach pre-pandemic levels. Despite this, media and politicians still continue to rely on decontextualized content, non subject expert testimonials (e.g. "person on the street" observations) and cherry-picked statistics, as Vo notes in her article:

Crime and media narratives around it have been a political battleground for decades, and many observers said the current conversation around crime must be understood in the context of the George Floyd protests and the increased calls for defunding police departments. Local politicians, advocates and scholars said the panic over rising crime is a direct backlash to the push for criminal justice reform over the past two years.

[Covering Crime in the Age of Virality](#), Lam Thuy Vo, Jun 2, 2022.

In this particular case study, the crime wave narrative is being reinforced by viral videos and anecdotes presented as data, but is not being driven by traditional political and crime beat reporters. Instead the frame of organized retail theft was pushed by trade outlets and pseudo news/tabloid publications that relied on commentary from longtime business owners, high level corporate executives, and CEOs. Statements made in earnings calls, comments to press and congressional testimonies, were uncritically reported. The frame and perspective of business owners were the dominant frame, not civil society, crime data experts or even members of the community who were not private business owners.

Despite this, data that had previously been reported in business publications were often not mentioned in newer articles. For example, in December 2019, CNBC reported that Walgreens had announced [plans to close roughly 200 stores in the U.S.,](#) (less than 3% of its nearly 9,600 locations across the country). At the time Walgreens reported that "the closures are part of a cost-cutting plan, and will help it focus on more profitable locations." No mention of organized retail theft was mentioned. At that point, the cause was said to be shifts

in consumer habits and preferences. Specifically challenges from online delivery companies like Amazon, who announced plans to move into pharmaceutical delivery, which remained one of the primary consistent sources of revenue for drugstores like Walgreens and CVS.

Even as recently as October 2020, the same month the first set of viral videos we identified of Walgreens thefts were circulated, Walgreens executives said on earnings calls that store closures were due to a pandemic era loss in customer traffic in cities that normally attract a lot of tourists (specifically naming Chicago, San Francisco and New York City, where the majority of organized crime theft stories were focused). These previous proclamations were not referenced in the majority of organized retail theft stories.

This case study demonstrates how corporate actors continue to leverage public discourse around wedge issues such as policing, community safety and gentrification to forward their own agendas ranging from financial gain, mitigating losses and welding political influence to reputational and crisis management. They used a friendly and familiar venue (business publications or local beat reporters) to trade up the chain messaging around organized retail theft that was picked up by further reaching publications such as the the New York Times. When picked up by pseudo news outlets like Daily Mail, these publications in turn politicized the content and used it to target the Biden Administration, state and local Democratic officials, with a disproportionate focus on California Governor Gavin Newsom and former San Francisco D.A. Chesa Boudin. More research would need to be done to definitively link these articles to the recall election results of D.A. Boudin.

Walgreens and other companies following suit, pushed organized crime ring narratives not as a means to increase funding for police departments or law enforcement, but to push their own private agendas. In the case of Walgreens, various possible motives include:

- Justifying to shareholders and community members increasing private security and surveillance mechanisms (both CVS and Walgreens both applied for patents during this period for more inhouse unique surveillance and data collection mechanisms)
- Potentially offset losses and reputation damage from negligent behavior
- Representatives from Walgreens also met with area DAs about alleged theft and organized crime hitting their stores less than a month after losing a historic lawsuit and having to pay out billions for their role in the spread of Opioids. They also lost over a $100 million dollars from investing in Elizabeth Holmes' fraudulent company, Theranos. They also had to pay out millions to former workers after losing a lawsuit around wage theft.
- As an excuse to circumvent public promises made post BLM 2020 to unlock Black targeted beauty products and goods and also raise prices for goods
- "This is not petty theft," Walgreens representative James Kehoe said on a January 6 call with investors. "It's not somebody who can't afford to eat tomorrow. These are gangs that actually go in and empty our stores of beauty products. And it's a real issue."
- They also used these narratives to make allegations against online competitors like Amazon and political opponents in local offices.

The stories were fed to industry and trade publications, then were then picked up, amplified and exaggerated by outlets with demonstrated partisan leanings (e.g. Fox News), in service of targeting Democratic party candidates and elected officials at all levels. Companies did this while carrying out symbolic actions, releasing solidarity statements or implementing various short lived policy initiatives (unlocking beauty products) in solidarity with movements against police brutality, racial profiling and calls for checks and balances on law enforcement.

To this end, in the example of Walgreens, it was not crime beat or political reporters, but business and industry reporters who validated the frame of "organized retail theft" by uncritically reporting statements from company executives, trade organizations and earning reports. These reporters are unlikely to have the same level of specific training, experience and access to resources as crime beat and political reporters. It may not be a part of standard practice to ask critical questions, look for police reports, check police blotters, talk to local officials or otherwise verify claims being made.

Additionally, because crime and political news are not their primary beats, reporters may not have time or inclination to fact check, validate or clarify claims such as those of "organized retail theft." Though research has convincingly demonstrated that overreliance on police accounts in news reports present a number of framing, accuracy and legal issues, as government actors there are in theory public accountability mechanisms that are not in place when dealing with private actors.

Similar to the ways crime beat reporters rely on sources within police departments to generate stories, these reporters have a

vested interest in maintaining open lines of communication with company representatives. This presents a potential conflict of interest and could further disincentivize the implementation of industry-wide guidelines around fact checking certain types of claims made during earnings calls or other venues.

Community apps like NextDoor can become vectors for campaigns such as these, helping to ensure that stories in niche or partisan publications, or ones that would only circulate in certain (e.g.) right-wing filter bubbles are circulated through community spaces.

MINI CASE STUDY

How misinformation is circulated on community apps to accelerate gentrification and skew discourse in local elections

Region: San José, CA (The Alameda Neighborhood)

Date: October, 2022

Strategy: Use of social media to spread messages focused on attacking specific political figures, legislation, and political parties broadly.

Goal: Unknown, but potentially to impact the local mayoral election and other criminal legal system and legislative initiatives.

Network Terrain: NextDoor

The San José Walgreens/CVS Theft case study identified by the MediaJustice Network, is demonstrative of how eyewitness, unverified accounts of local crime are both politicized and used to reaffirm bias, discrimination, over policing and displacement. Particularly the Technology and Social Change Project (TASC) was asked

to look at the direct connections between the San José 2022 Mayoral race and misinformation on Next Door.

San José Mayoral Race

In 2022, San José Mayor Sam Liccardo termed out, prompting a hotly contested mayoral race. Going into the November election, $8.5M was poured into the race, with 51% coming from special interest groups. Due to state laws regarding primary elections, political parties cannot nominate candidates for mayor, although going back to 1967, many leading candidates in the race have identified with the Democratic Party and all elected mayors have been from the Democratic party. San José uses council-manager governance, meaning the position of mayor holds no more voting power than a member of the city council and has no veto power over passed legislation. Previously, the City Council had to approve any hires or dismissals, and the city manager directs city staff and department heads.

In 2021, the City Council voted to give the Council and the mayor joint power to nominate the city manager. This takes the sole responsibility away from the the mayor.In part this was due to concerns about how the mayor might work in tandem with the city manager to declare civil emergency in response to protests like the BLM protests in 2020.

In the 2022 election, the top two candidates going head to head, were Matt Mahan and Cindy Chavez. Mahan is fairly new to the local political scene, coming from the Silicon Valley tech sector and start up culture. Mahan served less than a year on the city council before announcing his mayoral run. However he is not new to politics, as his start company focuses on civil tech and he has long been involved with

national politics stemming from his time at Harvard, where he was a friend and colleague of Mark Zuckerberg. As City Council member, Mahan was one of two members who advocated for stronger mayoral powers and he was prolific in co-drafting and pushing legislation. Chavez has a long political history, having held various political offices in the city since 1999, since 2013 she has served as Santa Clara County supervisor representing Downtown, East and South San José.

Two major issues going into the election were solutions for homelessness (and addressing housing insecurity in the city, and perceptions around public safety. Matt Mahan, who would win the 2022 election, was best able to line up business owners, particularly from the real estate and tech sector, behind him. He built a campaign that didn't require some of the traditional institutions and structures Democratic party candidates have relied on to win, such as support from labor unions, other politicians (locally and nationally), and civil society institutions.

We were not able to find evidence that Mahan's campaign used community apps like Next Door to spread disinformation about local crime rates and organized retail theft. Core to his campaign and tenure as a member of the City Council was a constant beating of the drum around issues of retail crime, theft, the need for increased surveillance and technology within the city being rolled out and scaling up law enforcement presence.

Particularly, he made attacks on defunding the police a cornerstone of his campaign, even as, according to the San José Spotlight, " there [had] been little public conversation around the topic for months." Additionally, there has not been funding rerouted away from the San José police

department, in fact funding has increased by $41M since 2019. Local politicians, advocates and even the local police union (who, it should be noted, endorsed his opponent Chavez for mayor) alleged that Mahan used divisive rhetoric and critiques of "defund the police" as a political signifier. His goal, some alleged, was not to support programs that would have a positive impact on public safety, but to scare certain voters into believing disinformation and myths about a rise in crime and absence of resources for the San José police department.

Mahan is the latest in a line of employees from a number of tech companies who have run for local elections or who have won appointments to city planning commissions and have created political groups to lobby on transit and housing issues in the Silicon Valley/Bay Area region. For example, Adrian Fine, a city strategist with Nextdoor, ran and was elected for a term for the Palo Alto city council (he decided not to run for a second term). As part of his agenda, Fine ran on a platform of easing restrictions for apartment buildings to get built in some parts of the town, expanding housing for tech employees.

We were unable to find direct evidence that start up politicians like Mahan are intentionally circulating disinformation campaigns on tech platforms to forward their cause. However there are clear signs that this new generation of politicians are pushing a tech and corporate interest driven agenda. Policies championed and implemented have succeeded in ushering in surveillance technology, accelerating gentrification and displacing communities—disproportionately communities of color.

Myths and beliefs about rising crime rates and organized retail theft, which continue to be circulated on community apps have validated their political causes. Based on

information about the demographics of people on apps, particularly NextDoor, these types of private industry fixes may potentially be accepted by liberal voters in Democratic strongholds as a better alternative to increasing police budgets. Cases like these show that movement building and abolitionist work has to be multi-pronged in its approach, tactical awareness and target identification.

NextDoor

In 2011, NextDoor launched "to build happier, safer places to call home." The co-founders initially leaned into the brand identity of replicating idyllic suburban comforts in urban neighborhoods, which many community organizers and social justice advocates would contend was laced with racist implications. According to one journal article, the original copy on the website included the line "fences are sometimes necessary…" This would be one of the first of many hyper-local platforms to either implicitly or explicitly deputize citizens as vigilantes.

When NextDoor launched, it drew immediate comparisons to Craigslist. Similarly there are posts about jobs, housing, for sale, items wanted, services, community service, and gigs. But while Craigslist was more centered around classified ads and discussion spaces were secondary, Next-Door focuses on community discussions– often centered around perceived crime in the community– the community advertising part of it is secondary (though ads by third party companies plaster the pages). Also, pseudonymity and anonymity is a defining feature of Craigslist as a means to guarantee a certain amount of safety, autonomy and increased protection from discrimination and harassment.

NextDoor, on the other hand, delegitimizes anonymity as a means of safety. Instead the creators of the app insist that online vetting, using one's real name, photo and showing proof you live in the neighborhood is core to ensuring public safety. Because of that dynamic, protection/freedom from discrimination, harassment is an inevitable casualty of the app. Studies have demonstrated that implicit and explicit bias on the platform has made people of color, younger people and people with unstable housing particularly susceptible to overpolicing and surveillance without reasonable cause.

Today, NextDoor has more than 270,000 neighborhoods across 11 countries on the app. The company generates money through advertisers that pay to present ads on the site. Part of what makes Next-Door the most compelling app compared to others is that it, because of its more diverse content and engagement model, is positioned to exploit voids left by the collapse of local news infrastructure. Next-Door brands itself as being truly anchored in the community and working to create a positive, but "vigilant" space. People are encouraged to introduce themselves and are given virtual gifts (such as cookies or flowers) as a welcome to the neighborhood.

The experience on the app is relatively contained to the city you are able to establish residence in. You can monitor other neighborhoods but the content is more restricted. The lack of transparency across the app makes it challenging to research and see how news travels in different regions.

Users are given algorithmically generated recommendations and push notifications based on local content and also content from other cities and neighborhoods. There is no public disclosure of the differ-

ent data points that go into algorithmically driven content beyond engagement rates.


Walgreens at The Alameda

On or approximately around October 8, 2022 a NextDoor user in San José posted a firsthand, eye witness report of theft at a "Walgreens at The Alameda."

The post received a lot of engagement and comments.

Engagement around the post is from people from Greater Rose Garden and Naglee Park, Naglee Park in particular is relatively far away from the location of the pin drop. With anecdotal and grapevine language being used to affirm a supposed dangerous pattern.
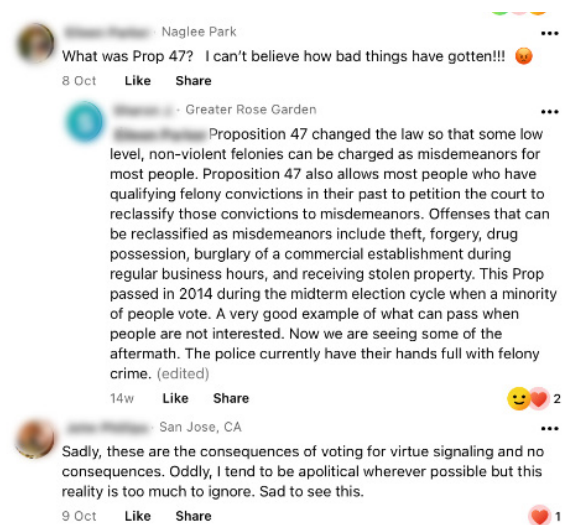
At the same time that stories were pushed in the media about rampant organized retail theft, comments on NextDoor also pushed the narrative. In addition to relying on links to the stories being circulated, some users applied grapevine techniques to add a level of first hand credibility ("I heard/saw this happen" or offering a statement of fact with implied intimate knowledge).

Part of the potential motivation of people participating in the discussion can be gleaned by the political direction it takes, with a particular focus on "prop 47." Walgreens, along with a number of other larger retailers, have been pushing for a repeal of prop 47 (more below).
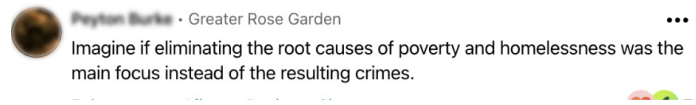
"Prominent newspapers are parroting police and retailer talking points about a supposed shoplifting "surge" that they say is "out of control," despite the lack of evidence or any apparent investigation into whether such evidence exists. And that narrative is dangerous, providing grist for political opponents of criminal justice reforms who use fear of rampant crime to advocate more harmful and discriminatory carceral policies....The source

for this information? The retailers themselves, backed by anecdotal reports from law enforcement...The Chronicle and the Times also reported retailer claims that criminal justice reform is to blame, particularly Proposition 47, which California voters passed in 2014 to reduce penalties for thefts worth less than $950. According to supermarket chain Safeway, the new law, which has been a critical tool in fighting mass incarceration, led to "dramatic increases" in shoplifting losses."

The location matters because the mapping of the area is so segregated that a local person would be able to make certain assumptions about ethnicity, class and other potential identity markers just based on where the pin was dropped. It is also a place where gentrification fights are unfolding between longtime local residents and tech workers driving up pricing and displacing communities. Google has being moving towards building an 80-acre project in Downtown San José, which would include up to 6K homes, 7.3M sf of offices, 500K sf of retail near Diridon Station:

The original poster calling it a Walgreens before being corrected and naming that it was a CVS is also noteworthy, in part, because this was at one of the peak times where stories about Walgreens organized retail theft were being circulated. The number of CVS stories about this were considerably lower and were not being seeded across as many platforms.

There were several rebuttals on the thread, but as demonstrated above, one off in thread conversations with strangers (even if neighbors) are no match for the onslaught of media manipulation techniques applied at scale across various platforms on and offline.

Peyton Burke · Greater Rose Garden

Imagine if eliminating the root causes of poverty and homelessness was the main focus instead of the resulting crimes.

We were unable to confirm the story being shared here through news sources or searches through public records. This appears to be the only account of this happening. There were, however, a number of articles and news stories about that CVS location closing.

One such example was a local story aired and posted on Tuesday, November 29, 2022: CVS closure impacts convenience, access to prescription pick-up for SJ neighborhood by Amanda del Castillo, a Bay Area local news reporter with ABC/ Walt Disney Owned KGO-TV (ABC7). This is the same outlet that posted the viral video of the Walgreens theft.

The story, posted on Tuesday, November 29, 2022, attributed the store closure to a growing homeless population. Similar to Walgreens theft stories, they primarily interviewed a local business owner– Vaslav Taranduke, a former software engineer who worked in big tech going back to 1991 before opening up a local brewery.

His concerns that the homeless population was driving out businesses, contradicted with an included statement from Nanci Klein, Director of San José's Office of Economic Development & Cultural Affair:

"Of course the closure of a general retail store such as a CVS is a loss to a neighborhood, and we hope a similarly useful new tenant will soon take over that space on The Alameda. We understand that the closure on The Alameda is part of a CVS company-wide initiative, and was chosen for closure because it was nearing the end of its lease."

This statement is confirmed by earnings calls and news content posted a year earlier:

Drugstore chain CVS plans to close about 900 outlets over the next three years — nearly 1 in 10 of its locations — as it continues its move away from retail and toward health care services. The company announced Thursday that it would shutter 300 stores per year for the next three years. "Changes to our store footprint won't start until the end of Q1 2022 – we'll provide more details, including specific locations, when available," a spokesperson told the Business Times. A list of locations that will close was not immediately available. San Francisco Business Times, November 18, 2021:

In response to the SFBT additional requests for comments back in 2021, a CVS representative added: "Our store optimization plans have nothing to do with the recent spike in theft across the retail industry. Rather, we are responding to accelerated changes in consumer retail behavior, and how consumers want simpler more convenient, ways to access, healthcare."

Despite this, it still continues to circulate on NextDoor that the store closures are due to rampant shoplifting.
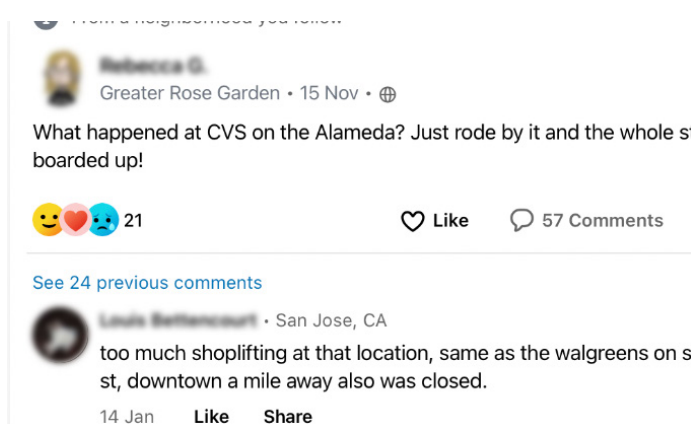
Content Moderation

Content moderators are local users that are usually early adopters or regular, engaged users. They have the power to decide whether something violates community standards, and also receive the notifications when people complain about other people's content and are empowered to decide whether the content should come down or the person removed from the platform.

Paid NextDoor moderators are brought in based on the appeals process, though some moderator decisions can not be appealed and as much as possible people are encouraged to resolve all issues through direct engagement with the content moderator. The process does not seem to take into consideration potential volatile real world dynamics between neighbors in the community or discriminatory experiences with the content moderator both on and offline. Since 2020, NextDoor executives have increased training for content moderators. However, there's not a lot of information on what sorts of training content moderators go through, which contributes to an uneven experience across the platform.

There is also no publicly available demographic data about content moderators, e.g. race, gender, age breakdowns. Do the moderators reflect the demographics of the neighborhood? There also doesn't appear to be a democratic process for selecting content moderators or a term limit to how long they can do it.

Demographics	Socioeconomics		Social Media
Age **25-34** 40.06%	Employment Status **Full-time work** 46.42%	Household Income **Low** 59.08%	Social Media Preferences **Facebook** 49.05%
Sex **Male** 64.77%	Education Level **University or College** 45.91%	Household Size **3–4 persons** 42.5%	

User Profile

Via SEMRush

• About 13% of American adults report using The NextDoor App (according to a 2021 study from Pew) though NextDoor claims that the app is used in 1 out of 3 homes in the US.

• White Democrats are more likely than White Republicans to say they use Nextdoor (20% versus 12%)

• According to Pew, the platform has a higher adoption among women (16%) than men (10%), and is used by more White adults (15%) than Black (10%) or Hispanic (8%) adults.

• The platform also has comparatively low adoption among adult ages 18-29 (5%), with adults in the 30-49 (17%) and 50-64 (16%) age groups being the highest adopters.

• Usage increases as household income increases, as well as with the level of educational attainment. The platform is also used most by urban (17%) and suburban (14%) adults, while only 2% of rural adults report using it.

• They have a policy against discussing national policies on the main/general feed, people can join subgroups within the app but ND does not automatically recommend those groups to people.
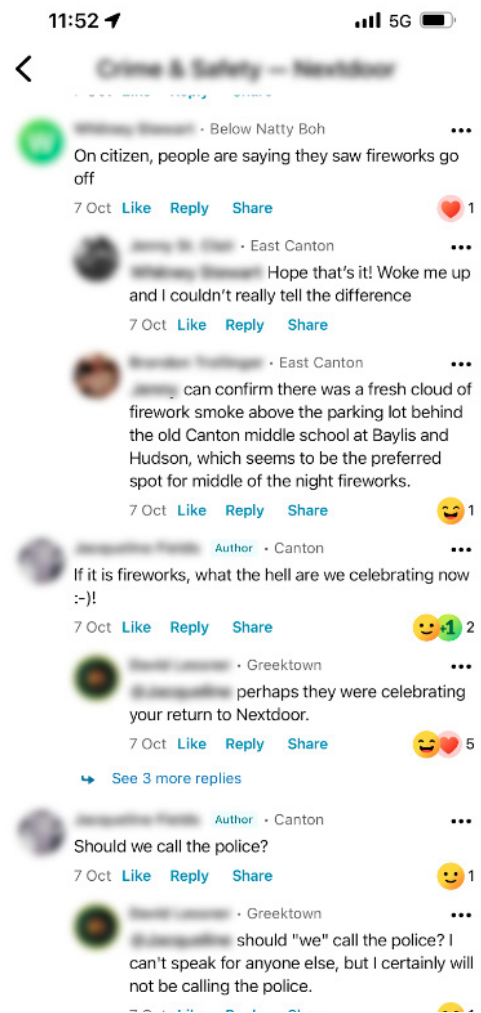
NextDoor as a Liberal Response to BLM and Local Justice Issues?

Anecdotally when looking through Nex-tDoor and reading various source material, there was a notable trend of people sharing perceived suspicious behavior or potentially alarming events (e.g. possibly hearing gunshots) and inquiring whether or not to call the police. Public discourse would then revolve around whether the police should be contacted, with some people inquiring why someone would go on the app first instead of already just contacting law enforcement directly. Additionally there are reports of incidents (e.g. theft of packages) without indicators that the person also intends to report the theft to–or share posted ring/surveillance footage with– local law enforcement.

Additional links to like NextDoor threads used for the purposes of this case study:

https://nextdoor.com/p/Gf7RN-p7dnjks?utm_source=share&ex-tras=NjMzOTAwMjM%3D

https://nextdoor.com/p/JX_5jqz-tx--?utm_source=share&extras=N-jMzOTAwMjM%3D

https://nextdoor.com/p/fDtg89L-jSyZr?utm_source=share&ex-tras=NjMzOTAwMjM%3D

Conclusion

We were unable to make a direct link between the San José Mayoral race outcome and disinformation spread on community apps. However, we believe we have been able to show Walgreens had spent years moving the Overton window (a term coined by neoliberal think tank, the Mackinac Center for Public Policy) on acceptable punitive policies for victimless property crimes, with a focus on making retail theft a wedge electoral issue in traditionally progressive and Democratic party dominated regions. The significance of that has long term impacts for local communities, groups disproportionately impacted by targeted policing/surveillance, cash bail and unfair sentencing practices, as well as advocates who have organized around reforms/abolition of the current policing and criminal legal system.

This happened despite publicly available data and other evidence that such wide-spread claims did not match retail industry or government crime report statistics. As reported by Tesnim Zekeria and Judd Legum in their piece "How Walgreens manufactured a media frenzy about shop-lifting":

Publicly available data, however, contra-dicts the theft-wave narrative. The number of shoplifting offenses dropped 46 percent between 2019 and 2021, accord-ing to the FBI's crime data explorer. The National Retail Federation (NRF), a trade group that represents retailers like Wal-greens and has amplified the theft-wave narrative, has also found that shrink de-clined to 1.4% of total retail sales in 2021, from 1.6% in 2020

This also happened despite local government officials, advocates– and users on online platforms and apps like NextDoor– attempting to mitigate in real time the mis/disinformation being spread about rampant organized retail theft.

Characteristics of misinformation content on community based apps and other content channels

1. Is unfalsifiable: It can't be proven wrong. Nebulous and vague use of "organized retail theft" which conjures in people's minds a large-scale organizing effort across several stores or even cities.

- "Organized retail theft" refers to when two or more person are involved in theft of retail property from a retail establishment, with value exceeding $1,000 (the amount will be $500 or more above the present state felony theft level and not below $1,000 in any state), aggregated over a 180-day period, with the intent to sell that retail property to a retail property fence for monetary or other gains.

- Use of decontextualized or outlier viral videos as proof of concept.

2. Relies heavily on anecdotes: The evidence largely comes from personal experiences and testimonials— moreover the anecdote leads to the sweeping conclusion instead of the using an anecdote to illustrate a conclusion reached through a rigorous research and reporting process.

3. Cherry picked evidence to support claims– Uses favorable evidence while ignoring or minimizing disconfirming evidence. The companies have said x but we talked to "people" (vague and non specific in number, context or credibility/authority) who disagree.

4. Uses technobabble: Words that sound scientific but don't make sense (in this case "Organized retail theft") which in their case could be used to mean two or more people walk into a store and steal toothpaste, but implies something entirely different to a layperson.

5. Commits logical fallacies: Arguments contain errors in reasoning

- Falsely equating homelessness to criminality
- Using videos of people who are not established to be homeless as proof that a "homeless problem" is responsible for "organized retail theft"

MAPPING THE MEDIA CONTROL POLICE HAVE IN YOUR COMMUNITY

This tool is a group activity for journalists, organizers, and media makers to come together and map what kind of influence local police departments have in the media. Some of the questions in the chart may require additional research, but we encourage folks to first look to one another to answer questions they are not sure how to answer.

For smaller cities, there may be no media department within the police force.
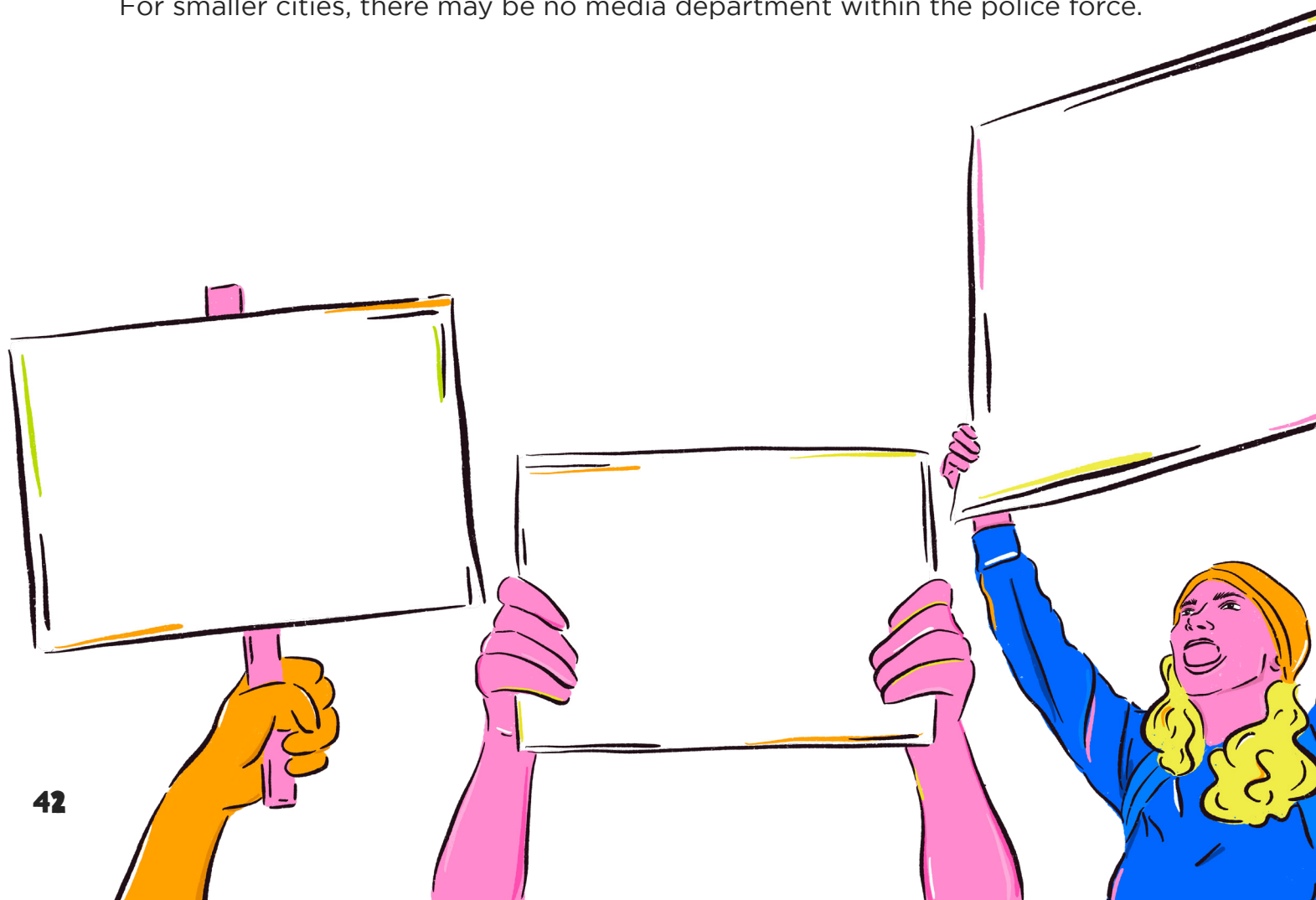
LIST CULTURAL VIEWS

Are there any cultural views on policing existing in the community that you have to confront?

LIST WHAT YOU KNOW ABOUT THE POLICE MEDIA DEPARTMENT
(IF APPLICABLE)

How are they structured? What do you know about them? Do they have connections with local media outlets?

LIST DOMINANT NEWSPAPERS

What are the political leanings of prominent news papers in your community?

YOUR LOCAL POLICE DEPARTMENT:

LIST LOCAL TV NEWS / RADIO

What are the political leanings and what relationship do they have with local police? Who is their audience?

LIST DOMINANT INFLUENCERS

Which respected people, on and offline, echo the voices of police? These can be folks on social media, but also think of people in the city council, local housing departments, etc.?

Minnesota Police Department Ride-Along

by Brian Friedberg and Nadia Shaarawi

Ride-Along History

Police Ride-Along programs began in the 1950s. "Ride-along" is a catch-all term for private citizens or media who accompany first responders on assignment or patrol, here specifically police. Initially referred to as "Police Youth Patrols," ride-alongs were designed both to improve community relations by granting media access to patrols, curb youth crime, and recruit new officers from local young adult and teenage populations.[1] According to the National Police association, ride-along programs serve several purposes, primarily "educating the public about the stark realities of police culture and the formidable defenses they employ to accomplish much on behalf of so many."[2] Today, many youth-targeted ride-alongs are subsumed under "Citizens Police Academy" programs or the Boy Scouts of America's "Law Enforcement Explorers," and both teens, adult citizens and may apply for ride-alongs via local police departments. While ride-along programs vary by region, all require applicants to submit to a background check and adhere to a strict dress code, and certain restrictions placed on journalists vary by region.

Ride-alongs have been useful to police as a form of propaganda and managing public relations via controlled, strategic media encounters. The format was popularized by the Nightwatch radio program (1954-55), where reporters spent an evening alongside police officers in Culver City, California.[3] At the conclusion of the programs run on radio, Nightwatch transitioned to television, considered the first police-based reality program,[4] and a clear forerunner to the long-running ride-along reality program Cops.

Ride-along programs were well received by mass media since their inception, due in no small part to the new avenues of reporting it opened for press willing to paint

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1   Youths to Ride With Police. 1969. New York Times. 56.
2   Stephen Owsinski. Ride-Alongs Not Just Along for the Ride. May 24, 2022. National Police Association. https://nationalpolice.org/ride-alongs-not-just-along-for-the-ride/
3   Nightwatch. https://www.otrcat.com/p/nightwatch
4   'Nightwatch' As Television Series. 1955. The Hollywood Reporter, 136(38), 11.

law enforcement in a favorable light. The original Culver City program received positive press from the New York Times in 1968, as did a similar San Diego program in 1970.[5] In a 1971 Washington Post article titled "Can a Cop Also Be a Friend?: Police Attempt To Make Friends," detailing the efforts of a new police community relations unit in Montgomery County, Maryland, ride-along programs are discussed as a way to improve trust with law enforcement officers in poor communities.[6] Similar projects were proposed in other states like Nevada as part of public relations programs, where ride-alongs were thought to be a way for "citizens to acquaint themselves with police problems."[7] Mass media use ride-alongs from a variety of locations to depict the supposed hardships facing police, like a 2016 New York Times report which aggregated 10 different ride-alongs from across the US titled "One Police Shift: Patrolling an Anxious America." In this article, police from various districts are given an uncritical platform to make essentialized claims about Black and Latino populations and sensationalize claims that justify their militarization, particularly one officer's claim that "We're trained for Armageddon."

There have been many problematic uses of ride-alongs as police propaganda from activists and privacy advocates. In a 1995 NYT article titled "Wanted: A Kinder, Gentler Cop," photojournalist Joséph Rodriquez accompanied LAPD officers on ride-alongs following the 1991 Rodney King riots. Police chief Williie Williams, the city's first black police chief, used the ride-along program in an attempt to improve relations and emphasize a new "community policing" agenda after the

highly-publicized beating of King and the chaotic protests that followed. Not all of public relations moves like these were successful, and a ride-along around that time by a Washington Post reporter resulted in federal rulingTK Wilson vs Layne, 1999, which decide that "it is a violation of the Fourth Amendment for police to bring members of the media or other third parties into a home during the execution of a warrant when the presence of the third parties in the home was not in aid of the execution of the warrant."[8] While media ride-alongs while executing warrants were disallowed, the practice continued solely with officers performing routine patrols.

In "An Unholy Alliance: The Law of Media Ride-Alongs," legal scholar Karen M. Markin outlines problems with press ride-alongs, beginning with describing the various reasons why journalists would take them. "…ride-alongs allow the press to check on government, a press function that flows from libertarian theory," she writes. Additionally, "…ride-alongs satisfy the public's right to know, a press function that flows from the social responsibility theory."[9] She argues neither reason is sound or constitutional, and claims the haphazard implementation of ride-along programs "throw off kilter the roles of the press, public, and government," and that together "these two institutions [police and press] end up trammeling the citizen's rights for the sake of their own self-promotion or profit."

MPD Post-Floyd

5   Nancy J. Adler. Youths on Cost Study the Police. 1968. New York Times. 33; San Diego Police Ride With Youths. 1970. New York Times109.
6   LaBarbara Bowman. Can a Cop Also Be a Friend? 1971. The Washington Post, F1.
7   Nevada State Bar Journal 34 (1969): [i]-66
8   John R. Vile. Wilson Vs Layne 1999. The First Amendment Encyclopedia. 2009. https://www.mtsu.edu/first-amendment/article/336/wilson-v-layne
9   Karen M. Markin. An "Unholy Alliance": The Law of Media Ride-Alongs, 12 CommLaw Conspectus 33 (2004). https://scholarship.law.edu/commlaw/vol12/iss1/5

After the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis Police officers in May 2020, and the subsequent local and international protests for Black Lives it inspired, the Minneapolis Police Department has been subjected to increased scrutiny for its crimes against the poor, violence against marginalized people and protesters, coverups, and Minneapolis liberal admin-istrators the target of national right wing media. In June 2020, Minneapolis Mayor Jacob Frey made a public commitment to police reform in an oped for the Star Tribune titled "Worldwide change must start in Minneapolis." In the piece, Mayor Frey promised to stem the "social trans-mission" of police misconduct by using "technology" and "algorithms" to better identify officers who have repeatedly used excessive force against citizens. Taking office in 2018, Mayor Frey campaigned on reforming the city's housing policy and improving police-community relations, and implemented moderate changes to the MPD, including updating their body cam policy and militarized training protocols.[10] In 2019, Mayor Frey ran afoul of then President Donald Trump, whose campaign accused the city of overcharging them for a "Keep America Great" rally set to be held downtown.[11] President Trump and his sup-porters again criticized Mayor Frey in 2020 for his handling of the protests following Floyd's murder, making the Mayor a hated figure on the right, and celebrated by liberals for his rebuttal of Trump's claims.[12] Local activists have been deeply unsatis-fied with Mayor Frey's performance and

seeming lack of commitment to campaign promises.

MPD saw strong support from right wing representatives, locally and nationally, following the murder of George Floyd. In September 2020 State Rep. Jim Nash, R-Waconia went on a ride-along with MPD officers. Nash claimed the police were "be-ing beaten down by the endless onslaught of negativity they have faced," and was awarded a"MPLS RIOT" commemorative police coin for his support.[13] Minneapolis Police Union Bob Kroll, an anti-reformist and "Cops for Trump" supporter, resigned early in January 2021. Kroll, already an incendiary figure before the murder of Floyd, became a lighting rod for the MPD's response to BLM protestors and his depar-ture was celebrated by political adversary Mayor Frey.[14]

MPD is treated differently by right wing media than liberal and left news, and as such has given uneven access favoring sympathetic conservative outlets. In a January 2021 article for The Reformer, Max Nesterak details disciplinary action taken against an anonymous female officer who spoke out against the "toxic culture" of the MPD to GQ the month after Floyd's murder.[15] The department refused to com-ment, consistent with a defensive media blackout.

In April 2021, the US Department of Justice opened an investigation into the MPD for the "pattern and practice" of systemic illegal conduct, civil rights violations and

10   Brandt Williams. Mpls. mayor touts 'stronger, clearer, more precise' body cam policy. April 4, 2018. MPR News. https://www.mprnews.org/story/2018/04/04/minneapolis-to-announce-changes-to-body-cam-era-rules, Andy Mannix. Minneapolis to ban 'warrior' training for police, Mayor Jacob Frey says. April 18, 2019. Star Tribuned. https://www.startribune.com/minneapolis-to-ban-warrior-training-for-police/508756392/
11   Quint Forgey. Trump picks new fight with Minneapolis mayor. October 8, 2019. Politico. https://www.politico.com/news/2019/10/08/trump-picks-new-fight-with-minneapolis-mayor-038988
12   Lauren Aratani. 'Trump knows nothing of Minneapolis': mayor hits back at president's tweets. May 29, 2020. The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/may/29/jacob-frey-donald-trump-minneapolis-mayor-tweets-riots
13   Paul Walsh. Cop gives '#MplsRiot2020' coin to lawmaker after police ride-along in Minneapolis. September 3, 2020. Star Tribune. https://www.startribune.com/cop-gives-mplsriot2020-coin-to-lawmaker-after-police-ride-along-in-minneapolis/572298452/
14   Abby Simons. Minneapolis police union president Bob Kroll announces intent to retire. January 12, 2021. Star Tribune. https://www.startribune.com/minneapolis-police-union-president-bob-kroll-announces-intent-to-retire/600009352/; Noam Scheiber, Farah Stockman and J. David Goodman. How Police Unions Became Such Powerful Opponents to Reform Efforts. June 6, 2020. New York Times. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/06/us/police-unions-minneapolis-kroll.html
15   Max Nesterak. Minneapolis police chief disciplines officer for speaking out about 'toxic culture'. January 9, 2021. Minnesota Reformer https://minnesotareformer.com/2021/01/09/minneapolis-police-chief-disci-plines-officer-for-speaking-about-departments-toxic-culture/, Laura Bassett. A Minneapolis Police Officer Opens Up About the Toxic Culture Inside the Department. June 10, 2020. GQ. https://www.gq.com/story/minne-apolis-police-officer-interview

the use of excessive force on protestors.[16] As a result of this very public investigation, MPD's long history of abusive and criminal behavior was recalled by activists and journalists.[17] "Excessive force complaints against Minneapolis officers have become commonplace, especially by African-American residents," wrote Furber, Eligon and Burch for the New York Times, and indicate a "deep rift" between the city's citizens, progressive leadership and the police department.[18] Local activists launched the Yes 4 Minneapolis campaign, "a Black-led, coalition-model campaign that seeks to replace the Minneapolis Police Department (MPD) with a new department of public safety by amending the Minneapolis City Charter."[19] One of many "defund the police" initiatives following BLM 2020, the new "Department of Public Safety" ordinance was proposed as a Charter amendment but did not pass, despite a pledge by the City Council to reduce funding for the police force and reduce the number of officers hired.[20]

Reports of "surging" crime following the murder of George Floyd, and the failed attempt to curb police overreach by the City Council resulted in a local backlash against the defund initiatives.[21] In May 2021, the Office of Minneapolis Mayor Jacob Frey released a document detailing organization and procedural changes to the MPD, committing to an additional 730 officers to be added to the department by June 2022.[22] Speaking to CBS Minnesota, Mayor Frey blamed calls to defund the MPD lead to a spike in crime TK.[23] Lawyers for conservative think tank Center of the American experiment filed a suit on behalf of 8 Minneapolis residents from high-crime neighborhoods. This successful suit, ruled by Judge Jamie Anderson in July 2021, ordered the city to add more police to combat a five-year high in violent crime.[24] A 2021 Minneapolis Police Department Overview from Mayor Frey's office cited rising crime, poor public relations and staff shortages as reason to increase spending,[25] resulting in a $191 million dollar budget for 2022.[26] Additionally, since 2020, the city has paid approximately $22 million in compensation and disability pensions to hundreds of officers who quit the department, citing PTSD diagnoses.[27] These payouts have been described as "untenable" by City Council member Jeremiah Ellison, and condemned by other council members and local activists. Samantha Belcourt, the officer who infamously maced a group of BLM protestors in 2020, was one of the recipients of PTSD payouts by the city.[28] The former officer, now a frozen banana stand operator in Arizona, cited a ride-along as her inspiration for getting into police work.

MPD Ride-Alongs

16   Andy Mannix. Justice Department to probe whether Minneapolis police have 'pattern and practice' of miscondut. April 21, 2021. Star Tribune. https://www.startribune.com/justice-department-to-probe-whether-minneapolis-police-have-pattern-and-practice-of-misconduct/600048448/
17   Tim Dickinson. Minneapolis Police Caught on Video 'Hunting' Activists. October 13, 2021. Rolling Stone. https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-features/minneapolis-police-video-hunting-activists-jaleel-stallings-1241227/
18   Matt Furber, John Eligon and Audra D. S. Burch. Minneapolis Police, Long Accused of Racism, Face Wrath of Wounded City. May 27, 2020. New York Times. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/27/us/minneapolis-police.html
19   Yes 4 Minneapolis. https://takeactionminnesota.org/take-action/yes-4-minneapolis/
20   Steve Karnowski and Mohamed Ibrahim. Minneapolis voters reject replacing police with new agency. November 2, 2021. AP News. https://apnews.com/article/2021-election-minneapolis-cc108d1707d9cb8c-baa6135bb60e7fbd
21   Holly Bailey. Minneapolis Violence surges as police offiers leave department in droves. November 13, 2020. The Washington Post. https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/minneapolis-police-shortage-violence-floyd/2020/11/12/642f741a-1a1d-11eb-befb-8864259bd2d8_story.html
22   Office of Minneapolis Mayor Jacob Frey. A minneapolis Model for Community Safety & Accountability. May 17, 2021. City Of Minneapolis. https://www.minneapolismn.gov/media/-www-content-assets/documents/Minneapolis-Model-for-Community-Safety-and-Accountability.pdf
23   CBS Minnesota Staff. Mayor Frey: Calls to Defund MPD have Had An Impact As Crime Spikes. May 10, 2021. CBS Minnesota. https://www.cbsnews.com/minnesota/news/mayor-frey-calls-to-defund-minneapolis-police-have-played-role-in-crime-spike/
24   Carma Hassan, Omar Jimenez and Ray Sanchez. Judge orders Minneapolis to add more police officers. July 2, 2021. CNN. https://www.cnn.com/2021/07/02/us/minneapolis-court-police-funding/index.html
25   Office of Minneapolis Mayor Jacob Frey. Minneapolis Department Budget Overview. August 13, 2021. City of Minneapolis. https://lims.minneapolismn.gov/Download/FileV2/24988/2022-Budget-Presentation_Police.pdf
26   Liz Navaratil. Minneapolis police spending rises as defund movement fades. December 11, 2021. Star Tribune. https://www.startribune.com/minneapolis-police-spending-rises-as-defund-movement-fades/600126143/
27   Randy Furst. As police claims of PTSD soar in Minneapolis, public officials scramble to find solutions. April 2, 2022. Star Tribune. https://www.startribune.com/as-police-claims-of-ptsd-soar-in-minneapolis-public-officials-scramble-to-find-solutions/600161709/
28   Deena Winter. The Minneapolis police officer who maced protesters and bystanders is unmasked by court documents. December 7, 2022. Minnesota Reformer. https://minnesotareformer.com/2022/12/07/the-minneapolis-police-officer-who-maced-protesters-and-bystanders-is-unmasked-by-court-documents/

During this period of increased scrutiny and reformation of the MPD's power post-2020, ride-alongs, particularly those staged with sympathetic press, were a crucial tool in the laundering of police reputation via media collaboration, and may be responsible for a rise in public fear of a crime wave. In 2021 and 2022, MPD granted media ride-along access between August and October of both years, resulting in sympathetic coverage of police, and the narrative that crime spikes were not related to poverty or other social problems, community distrust of law enforcement was unjustified, and that ultimately more police, not fewer, were needed to maintain social order.

This trend isn't unique to Minneapolis. In cities around the country following the summer of BLM and subsequent "defund" initiatives, ride-alongs with local and national press were useful to help rehabilitate police image and counter rising calls to defund. In June 2021, CNN secured a ride-along NYC's 46th precinct, the basis of authors Jim Sciutto's and Shelby Vest's sympathetic article titled "We spent two nights on patrol with the NYPD. Here's what they told us about spiking crime in the city."[29] "The growing animosity creates real dangers for these officers on the beat," they wrote in reference to community distrust of the police in urban areas. "We are never going to let it go back to the bad old days. We have a spike in violence right now, as many other cities do," one officer told the CNN reporters, claiming police would "need help" in lowering crime rates. While not addressing Minneapolis directly, the article highlights how these supposed spikes in crime fol-

lowed the Floyd protests.

In Sept, 2021, before MInneapolis city elections, Democratic Representative Angie Craig asked fellow House members to attend a police ride-along to "help better understand the challenges and dangers officers routinely face."[30] That same month, a Star Tribune article titled "To have your eyes opened, join a cop for a ride-along" depicted a department unable to keep up with rising crime. Written by Elijah Norris-Holliday, at that time a candidate for City Council, the article urges "anyone who cares about policing in our community to see what I saw and do a ride-along with the police," and condemns defund agendas as potential threats to police functionality and public safety.[31]

On October 20. 2021 CBS affiliate WCCO aired a segment featuring a police ride-along with reporter Reg Chapman.[32] In the segment, the featured officer, Sergeant Andrew Schroder, discussed automatic gun violence and local gang rivalries, blaming staffing shortages on the department's inability to investigate shootings in a timely manner. "The people expect a level of service," Sergeant Schroder told Chapman, "often times we can't give it, not because we don't want to, but because we're not able to right now." That same day Mike Forceia of the American Indian Movement recorded an encounter with police wherein the officers claim to be engaged in a police shutdown after the prosecution of Floyd killer Chauvin.[33] The following day, WCCO aired a follow up to their ride-along segment, presenting a "both-sides" reaction to the call for increased policing.[34] Cathy Spann, who at

29   Jim Sciutto and Shelby Vest. We spent two nights on patrol with the NYPD> Here's what they told us about spiking crime in the city. June 22, 2021. CNN. https://www.cnn.com/2021/06/22/us/new-york-crime-wave-ride-along/index.html
30   Eddie M. Plot twist: Minnesota Democrat proposes bill for House members to go on police ride alongs. September 13, 2022. Law Enforcement Today. https://www.lawenforcementtoday.com/democrat-proposes-bill-for-house-members-to-go-on-police-ride-alongs/
31   Elijah Norris-Holliday. To have your eyes opened, join a cop for a ride-along. September 17, 2021. Star Tribune. https://www.startribune.com/to-have-your-eyes-opened-join-a-cop-for-a-ride-along/600098365/
32   Ride-Along With A Minneapolis Police Officer Patrolling The North Side. October 20, 2021. WCCO-CBS Minneapolis. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MmPU8sfyCyg
33   Javier Morillo-Alicea. Minneapolis Police Dept: If they can't police like Derek Chauvin they won't police at all. October 20, 2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vWnHhir-WuA
34   Both Sides Of Mpls. Policing Debate Respond To WCCO Ride Along. October 21, 2021. WCCO-CBS Minneapolis. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uNzwePp6bT0

the time was running to represent Minneapolis' 5th ward, praised the ride-along, and called for Minneapolis citizens to vote against the upcoming Ballot Question 2, the "Replace Police Department with Department of Public Safety Initiative." Representing Yes4Minneapolis, Corenia Smith argued for a replacement of ineffective MPD with public safety personnel. The segment ended with a statement by Major Frey advocating reform, not replace, to voters. On November 2, 2021 the Replace Police Department with Department of Public Safety Initiative lost at the ballot box, the momentum of the movement seemingly broken by pro-police media and countersignaling from the Mayor's office and others in the local Democratic party.[35]

On April 27, 2022, the Minneapolis Department of Human Rights released findings from a two year investigation into the MPD. Titled "Investigation into the City of Minneapolis and the Minneapolis Police Department," the report found that "the City and MPD engage in a pattern or practice of race discrimination in violation of the Minnesota Human Rights Act," and that officers routinely used excessive force against Black citizens. Additionally, the report found that the MPD used "covert" social media accounts to surveil Black communities and criticize public officials who spoke out against police abuses. As part of this investigation, Minneapolis Department of Human Rights researchers completed ride-alongs in all five Minneapolis districts. Speaking to the Star Tribune, Human Rights Commissioner Rebecca Lucero said the report "paints an unsettling picture of the city of Minneapolis and the Minneapolis Police Department engaging in a pattern of racial discrimination over the past decade," and Mayor Jacob Frey said the findings made him "sick to my stomach" and they uncovered abuses were "repugnant, at times horrific." Sherral Schmidt, president of the Police Officers Federation of Minneapolis, addressed the report to the Star Tribune "We look forward to examining the evidence that was used to come to their determination so we can move forward as a department," she said. "We are committed to moving forward in a way that addresses identified issues head on, and restores the community's faith in those who are entrusted with public safety."

In June 2022, right-wing Minnesota outlet Alpha News captured what they called "a gritty, first-person perspective of crime and punishment in the worst neighborhoods of Minneapolis."[36] Alpha News, whose known founders were active in the Tea Party and Libertarian Party (and several founders and funders who remain anonymous) consistently publish articles uncritical of police.[37]

On August 3, 2022, Fox News's Laura Ingraham visited Minneapolis and spoke with MPD police officers, two years after her first visit surveying property damage following the protests.[38] Citing a MPD report about a 39% increase in violent crime and blaming "radical leadership" for the decline in sworn officers - down from 900 to 550. Acknowledging no wrong-doing, the MPD officers interviewed by Ingraham claimed increased scrutiny made it hard to do their job, and that race relations weren't a problem either in their dealings with the community or internal dynamics within the police force.

35   Minneapolis, Minnesota, Question 2, Replace Police Department with Department of Public Safety Initiative (November 2021). Ballotpedia. https://ballotpedia.org/Minneapolis,_Minnesota,_Question_2,_Replace_Police_Department_with_Department_of_Public_Safety_Initiative_(November_2021)
36   Kyle Hooten. EXCLUSIVE: Alpha News tags along for Minneapolis police operation, June 20, 2022. Alpha News. https://alphanews.org/exclusive-alpha-news-tags-along-for-minneapolis-police-operation/
37   Michael Brodkorb. The Mysterious launch of Alpha News. March 10, 2015. Star Tribune. https://www.startribune.com/the-mysterious-launch-of-alpha-news/295815641/
38   Ingraham Angle. Ingraham speaks with Minneapolis officers two years after the George Floyd riots. August 3, 2022. Fox News. https://www.foxnews.com/video/6310349344112

In reporting following Ingraham's visit, The Reformer, writer Deena Winter questioned how Fox was able to secure access for an MPD interview when many other local and national outlets were denied access.[39] Steve Pomper, writing for the National Police Association, dismissed the Reformer's coverage as "left wing bias," defended police actions as a stance against "tyranny," and condemned Mayor Frey and the City Council as "Soros-esque" radical leftists.[40]

In late August 2022, Townhall writer Juilo Rosas's request for a police a ride-along was declined by City Hall.[41] The Intercept dubbed Rosas as part of the "Riot Squad" - a group of right-wing journalists whose reporting distorted the BLM movement and over-amplified isolated incidents of violence in conservative media. Rosas's used ride-alongs to craft sympathetic messages of law enforcement and border patrol agents in the past.[42] Townhall alleged the decline of Rosas's ride-along request came from Mayor Frey's office, claims amplified by Fox News and other conservative outlets.[43] For Townhall, editor Spencer Brown claims the mayor's office refused to respond to his inquiries, and speculated as to reasons why. "Is it because the reality on the ground doesn't match the rosy picture painted by Democrat leaders who've overseen the city's decline into chaos?" wrote Brown. In a statement to Fox News, Rosas echoed this suggestion of unfair treatment as being part of a larger plot by the city to suppress stories supportive of police. "It's a shame,

but not surprising, that the Mayor's office doesn't want the public to know what MPD officers are having to deal with on a daily basis. While Townhall got a story out of the trip, it wasn't the story I wanted as it should've been about the brave men and women of MPD," he wrote.

Following Rosas' well-publicized ride-along denial, The Minnesota Reformer published an account of writer Deena Winter's ride-along with police titled "Policing Minneapolis amid a staffing shortage," suggesting in the wake of George Floyd's highly publicized murder that the MPD was "struggling to contain crime."[44] Speaking to Mother Jones later that month, local artist and organizer with Reclaim the Block D.A Bullock stated police were "gaming the system" via disability payouts, and that such spending was "contrary to this idea that we're reforming this police department."[45]

In early September 2022, before Minneapolis city elections, Democratic Representative Angie Craig proposed a bill that would require fellow House members to attend a police ride-along to "help better understand the challenges and dangers officers routinely face."[46] Her proposal followed a ride-along that she took in August. "It's clear to me that the last few years have brought about increased challenges for the men and women who do the important work of keeping our communities safe," she stated in a press release, "and I will continue to seek out their input and perspective as we work on the first job of any

39   Deena Winter. Minneapolis mayor didn't know about MPD interview with Laura Ingraham of Fox News. August 5, 2022. Minnesota Reformer. https://minnesotareformer.com/briefs/minneapolis-mayor-didnt-know-about-mpd-interview-with-laura-ingraham-of-fox-news/
40   Steve Pomper. Minneapolis Mayor Upset Cops Told Laura Ingraham the Truth About Public Safety. September 1, 2022. https://nationalpolice.org/minneapolis-mayor-upset-cops-told-laura-ingraham-the-truth-about-public-safety/
41   Spencer Brown. Minneapolis Blocks Townhall from Police Department Ride-Along. August 23, 2022. https://townhall.com/tipsheet/spencerbrown/2022/08/23/why-wont-minneapolis-democrat-mayor-let-townhall-embed-with-police-department-n2612139
42   Julio Rosas. January 19, 2022. https://twitter.com/Julio_Rosas11/status/1483995490228359170
43   Joséph A. Wulfsohn. Minneapolis mayor's office blocks Townhall's Julio Rosas from scheduled ride-along with police. August 23, 2022. Fox News. https://www.foxnews.com/media/minneapolis-mayors-office-blocks-townhalls-julio-rosas-scheduled-scheduled-ride-along-police
44   Deena Winter. Policing Minneapolis amid a staffing shortage. August 25, 2022. Minnesota Reformer. https://minnesotareformer.com/2022/08/25/policing-minneapolis-amid-a-staffing-shortage/
45   Eamon Whalen. The Police Are Defunding Minneapolis. August 30, 2022. Mother Jones. https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2022/08/minneapolis-police-defund-george-floyd-city-budget/
46   Office of Congresswoman Angie Craig. REPRESENTATIVE ANGIE CRAIG SET TO INTRODUCE RESOLUTION TO CONNECT LAWMAKERS TO LOCAL LAW ENFORCEMENT. September 6. 2022. https://craig.house.gov/media/press-releases/representative-angie-craig-set-introduce-resolution-connect-lawmakers-local-law Eddie M. Plot twist: Minnesota Democrat proposes bill for House members to go on police ride alongs. September 13, 2022. Law Enforcement Today. https://www.lawenforcementtoday.com/democrat-proposes-bill-for-house-members-to-go-on-police-ride-alongs/, Peter Kasperowicz. Minnesota Democrat wants all newly elected members to do law enforcement ride-alongs. September 12, 2022. Fox News. https://www.foxnews.com/us/minnesota-dem-encourages-law-enforcement-ride-alongs-to-better-understand-policing-challenges

public official: ensuring public safety."[47] On September 15 2022 the city formally released its proposed biennial budget for 2023-24, featuring nearly $400 million in funding for the MPD over two years, a $3 million raise from 2020.[48] Local critics of this budgetary increase suggest that police misconduct was ultimately costing the city, with little to show in mitigation of rising crime.[49] Later that month on September 25, 2022 CNN article "Once nicknamed 'Murderapolis,' the city that became the center of the 'Defund the Police' movement is grappling with heightened violent crime."[50] At the last minute, an MPD spokesperson calls off an interview with CNN reporters.

In October 2022, Minneaplis City Council approved a $700K settlement for protestors subject to "unreasonable and excessive force" by the MPD following BLM protests of 2020.[51] Despite the high cost for police brutality, the budgetary allocations for the MPD weren't significantly challenged. After cutting nearly 1 million from the proposed 195 million budget, Minneapolis City Council was criticized

by newly appointed Police Chief Brian O'Hara, who claimed the city didn't have a sufficient number of officers at hand.

Analysis

Well-publicized ride-alongs with local and national news organizations all occurred here within the August-October range before an election or budget proposal. These ride-alongs portrayed Minneapolis as succumbing to an officer shortage, and that high homicide rates and crime rates must be countered by hiring more police, as they are currently understaffed and traumatized from 2020.These pro-police narratives, reinforced by strategic ride-along collaborations with media, helped justify increasing police budgets, defeat reformist or abolitionist efforts, and draw national attention away from Minneapolis' handling of police brutality, instead creating the impression of a city overwhelmed by violent crime, struggling to allocate funding for even more police.

47   Office of Congresswoman Angie Craig. REPRESENTATIVE ANGIE CRAIG JOINS BURNSVILLE OFFICER IN RIDE-ALONG TO SEE FIRST-HAND THE DAY-TO-DAY CHALLENGES FACING LOCAL LAW ENFORCE-MENT. August 31, 2022. https://craig.house.gov/media/press-releases/representative-angie-craig-joins-burnsville-officer-ride-along-see-first-hand
48   Mohamed Ibrahim. A snapshot of Mayor Jacob Frey's proposed police budget. September 15, 2022. https://www.minnpost.com/public-safety/2022/09/a-snapshot-of-mayor-jacob-freys-proposed-police-budget/
49   Eamon Whalen. The Police Are Defunding Minneaplis. August 30, 2022. Mother Jones. https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2022/08/minneapolis-police-defund-george-floyd-city-budget/
50   Rob Kuznia. Once nicknamed 'Murderapolis,' the city that became the center of the 'Defund the Police' movement is grappling with heightened violent crime. September 25, 2022. CNN. https://www.cnn.com/2022/09/25/us/minneapolis-crime-defund-invs
51   MPR News Staff. Minneapolis City Council approves $700K in settlements over police actions during protests. October 21, 2022. MPR News. https://www.mprnews.org/story/2022/10/21/minneapolis-city-council-approves-700k-in-settlements-over-police-actions-during-protests

MAPPING COPAGANDA

This is a tool for to understand how copaganda is spread. You may focus on any type of local copaganda you've seen.

Use the examples on the next page to help you get started.

PREBUNK* THE INFORMATION

What information or counternarratives could you share to prevent someone from believing in the copaganda before it reaches them?

AUTHORSHIP

Have you looked into the writer? If the copaganda is posted online, have you and your people reported it for harmful messaging?

DEBUNK THE INFORMATION

Why is this inaccurate? What is missing from the story that needs to be amplified?

TYPE OF COPAGANDA:

LOOK CLOSELY AT LANGUAGE

Do they use passive language? Are the individuals completing the action named directly? If not, who are they? Are there stereotypes or tropes being used in the message?

WHO PROFITS?

Look up who funds the newspaper or media outlet you saw the copaganda printed in.

*Garcia, Laura and Shane, Tommy: "A Guide to Prebunking".

IDENTIFYING INFORMATION GAPS WITHIN YOUR COMMUNITIES

In order to fight disinformation, who in your community are you potentially missing because of information gaps? How will you build trust with these groups?

Communities we often excluded from information streams include: elders, youth, disabled folks, unhoused folks, those without internet access, and non-English speakers.

WHO DO YOU NEED TO ADD TO THE CONVERSATIONS YOU'RE HAVING?

HOW CAN YOU REACH AND BUILD WITH THEM?

WHAT INFORMATION STREAMS DO THEY TRUST?

HOW WILL YOU DISRUPT THE COPAGANDA THEY CONSUME?

FACILITATOR'S GUIDE

ACTIVITY ONE

Copaganda Is Both Narrative And Action By Police

Often, copaganda is seen as a passive action without naming clear actors or intentions behind the narrative. This resource disrupts that by defining copaganda by both the narrative and the action.

Discussion questions for participants:

• Were there any examples here that were surprising to you?

• What additional types of copaganda are coming to mind after seeing this resource?

• Why do you think copaganda is hard to spot?

ACTIVITY TWO

Think About Copaganda in Your Community

MediaJustice Network members and Jaime Longoria added their own case studies of copaganda that researchers later used for deep study and research in Activity III.

Discussion questions for participants:

• Are you unsure if something should be classified as copaganda? Let's talk through it.

• How did it feel to write out an instance of copaganda from your community?

• What sections were easy to write out? Why?

•What sections were more difficult to write out? Why?

Case Studies: An In-Depth Study of Copaganda

These case studies serve as examples of pervasive copaganda within our communities by dissecting the different forces that shape the copaganda locally.

Discussion questions for participants:

• What stuck out to you most from these case studies?

• Were there any aspects of the case study that resonated with the situation in your community? If so, how?

• What resources do you currently have to debunk copaganda in your community?

Mapping the Media Control Police Have In Your Community

Some of the questions in the chart may require additional research, but we encourage folks to first look to one another to answer questions they are not sure how to answer. For smaller cities, there may be no media department within the police force

Discussion questions for participants:

• For questions you do not know the answer to, where will you look to find them?

• Are there additional questions you need to answer in order to understand the police's influence on the media locally?

Mapping Copaganda

Together, think of an instance of copaganda you want to map more clearly. You may use a narrative you wrote for the first activity and analyze it more deeply here as a group.

Discussion questions for participants:

• Is there anything you feel is missing from the map outline? What would you add?

• For the question "who profits" can you think of any corporations, business owners, or groups that make money from this copaganda?
(e.g., corporations manufacturing crime waves, police relying on private contractors for their surveillance tools)

• What questions do you think were difficult to answer? Why?

• If you could go back and research one of these sections more deeply, which one would it be?

Identifying Information Gaps Within Your Communities

This section serves to support folks in the next steps of what we can do outside of the training to reach new audiences and name what we have control over to develop a strategy to build with more people.

Discussion questions for participants:

• What question was most difficult to answer?

• What are potential challenges to doing this?

• Who can you potentially partner with to get this done?

HOW CAN I CLAPBACK AGAINST COPAGANDA RIGHT NOW?

- **Be critical of crime statistics:** there is overinflation of crime statistics and oversaturation of stories related to interpersonal harm in the media. This is often because when corporations mess up, they pay fines and sweep it under the rug. When people mess up, them and their families are harmed by their incarceration.

- **Be critical of the ways you see police show up in all media you watch:** a great example of this is done by Eteng Ettah, MediaJustice's Narrative Director, in her Scalawag article called Abolition on TV as well as this report by Color of Change called Normalizing Injustice.

- **When you see a story about crime ask yourself:** does this address the root causes of harm? When you see a story about small theft, such as stealing from a drug store, look at the language people use that is often racialized and classed.

- **Use the activities and questions in this guide:** to do your research on your local police department, dominant local media, and connect with organizers, independent media makers, and journalists.

- **Prebunk the copaganda:** this means having conversations with community members before the copaganda even starts. How are you critical of the structures of policing in your community right now, and how can you start the conversation?

- **Keep telling your stories:** our MediaJustice Network of over 80 grass-roots organizations is filled with media makers who are amplifying their own stories and lived experiences everyday.

- **Follow on the ground coverage** and share information from trusted journalists.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

A Guide to Prebunking by First Draft

Closing Ranks: State Legislators Deepen Assaults On The Right To Protest by Nora Benavidez, James Tager, and Andy Gottlieb

Copaganda: Police Trials as a State and Media Kettling Tool by MPD150 and MediaJustice

Don't Be A Copagandist by Interrupting Criminalization

Hidden in Plain Sight: Racism, White Supremacy, and Far-Right Militancy in Law Enforcement by the Brennan Center

Mapping Far Right and Anti-Immigrant Movement Alignment with County Sheriffs by Political Research Associates

Power, Platforms and Politics: A Landscape Report on Asian Americans & Disinformation

Source Hacking: Media Manipulation in Practice by Joan Donovan and Brian Friedberg

The Media Manipulation Casebook