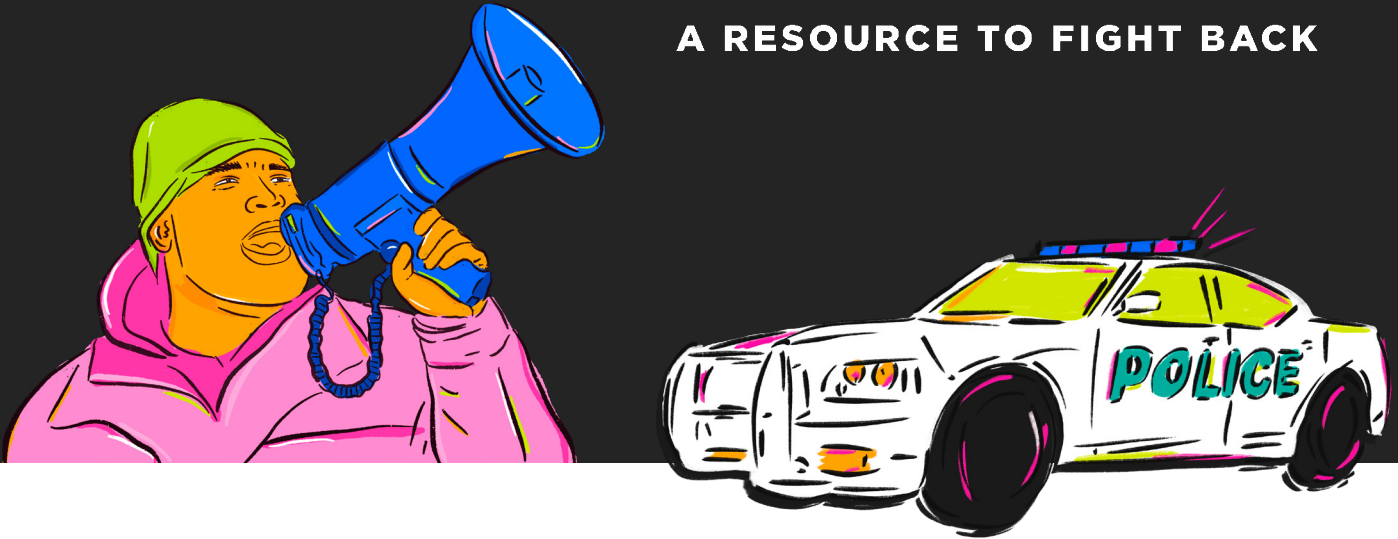


Copaganda

CLAPBACK

A RESOURCE TO FIGHT BACK



Media Portrayals of Police and White Supremacist Symbols: An Analysis of Copaganda in Bernalillo County

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BACKGROUND:

The following case study is an exploration of police-generated propaganda in Bernalillo County, New Mexico. Developed through a partnership between Generation Justice, the Harvard Shorenstein Center, and MediaJustice, the following case study explores disinformation spread by police.

The Bernalillo County Sheriff's Office (BCSO) featured white supremacist imagery on their vehicles resembling the "Thin Blue Line" flag and the text: "Always Choose the Hard Right." At a public hearing in October 2022 with an advisory board for the Sheriff's Office, community members criticized this white nationalist and far-right-aligned symbol. During the hearing, community members also pushed back on the office's relationship with On Patrol: Live, a reality television show whose crew began filming officers engaging with the Ber-

nalillo County community. On October 28, the Albuquerque Journal Editorial Board also [published](#) criticism of the department-show partnership.

The analysis we present below details the history and impact of 1) “Thin Blue Line” and 2) reality television contracts with local police. Both of these issues discussed at the hearing detail copaganda tactics – particularly their normalization of police violence and the use of white supremacist symbols. The case study details methods community members used to fight back against copaganda, as well as national interventions preventing copaganda’s further dissemination.

CONTEXT: POLICE VIOLENCE IN BERNALILLO COUNTY

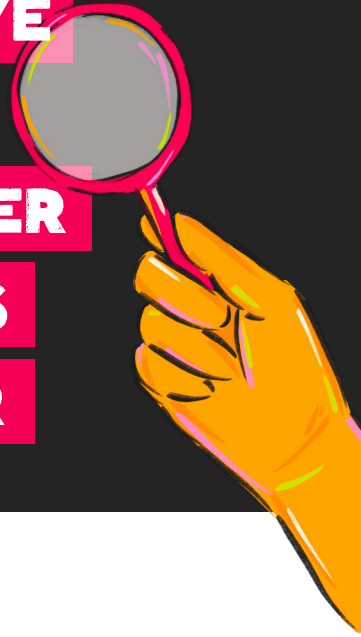
According to the [Mapping Police Violence](#) project, New Mexico had the highest rate of killings by police of any state in 2023 – in a year when more people were killed by police than any other year in the past decade. Albuquerque police in particular, killed people at the highest rate among the 50 largest U.S. cities. While police departments across the country deploy a variety of tactics to curry favor with the public and seed narratives about the lack of resources at their disposal, their actions continue to harm communities. Showing the reality of policing is integral to building the political momentum necessary to hold the institution accountable and end its violence.

In 2012, the Department of Justice [launched](#) an investigation, carried out by the Civil Rights Division and the U.S. Attor-

ney’s Office for the District of New Mexico, into the Albuquerque Police Department for a “pattern or practice of excessive force.” The investigation followed concerns raised about the significant number of shootings by the department’s officers since 2010 – there were 37 shootings, with over 20 deadly shootings.

In March 2014, after this investigation began, the police killing of James Boyd sparked protests and calls for accountability in the community. A 911 caller had [reported](#) Boyd, a 38-year-old unhoused man dealing with mental illness, for illegally camping in the foothills northeast of the city. By the time Boyd agreed to leave and started packing his belongings, as many as 40 officers were on the scene. As documented on one of the officer’s helmet cameras, Albuquerque police detective Keith

"PATTERN OR PRACTICE OF EXCESSIVE FORCE" AFTER CONCERNS WERE RAISED ABOUT THE SIGNIFICANT NUMBER OF SHOOTINGS BY THE DEPARTMENT'S OFFICERS SINCE 2010: 37, WITH OVER 20 OF THEM BEING DEADLY."



Sandy, and SWAT team officer Dominique Perez shot James Boyd in the back after a four-hour verbal confrontation. Boyd was the 22nd person the Albuquerque police had killed in four years. Later, a dashcam recording revealed Sandy commenting on shooting Boyd before even approaching or meeting him. The footage allowed the public to push back on the initial department narrative painting Boyd as a criminal. According to [reporting](#) in Rolling Stone, this created the momentum for prosecuting the officers, a diversion from the pattern of complete police impunity community members were used to.

The case would [end](#) in a mistrial, with the district attorney dropping charges against both officers. [Reporting](#) for KRQE in October of that year, journalist Jeff Proctor – who would cover several aspects of the case over the years following the killing – wrote about the culture and practices of the “elite” Repeat Offender Project team,

of which Sandy was a member. In 2017, the Department of Justice [closed](#) an investigation into James Boyd’s shooting, stating there was not enough evidence to pursue federal civil rights charges in the matter. Proctor’s investigation was often [cited](#) as fuel for national reporting on the case. Since then, he continues to discuss challenges with reporting on the police ecosystem.

Following national uprisings calling for police accountability after the murder of George Floyd, the Sheriff’s Office Advisory and Review Board (SOARB) was created in 2020 as a separate entity from BCSO. Its purpose is, according to the [website](#), “to create stronger community ties between the residents of Bernalillo County and the Bernalillo County Sheriff’s Office.” KRQE also [reported](#) that the board has the goal of improving “public transparency and accountability with the Bernalillo County Sheriff’s Office.” In contrast with the BC-

SO's Internal Affairs Division, which investigates citizen complaints privately, the SOARB holds public hearings and solicits input from the community at monthly [meetings](#). While it does not necessarily have direct oversight over the BCSO or access to its internal investigations, SOARB has [reportedly](#) been involved in the establishment of a New Mexico state law requiring sheriffs to wear body cameras.

THE "THIN BLUE LINE"

In the October 2022 public hearing in Bernalillo County, community and board members expressed concerns about images seen on a BCSO recruitment SUV that included "Thin Blue Line" flag symbolism and the phrase: "Always choose the hard right." A BCSO captain responded that it signified a commitment to "do the right thing, no matter how hard that choice is," also defending the image shared in the July 2022 Tweet. Images used on police and recruitment vehicles were reportedly designed by cadets and approved by the Sheriff and other leadership. The board said it had received "almost exclusively negative comments about the images," according to [coverage](#) of the meeting.

One of the earliest documented [uses](#) of the term "Thin Blue Line" referring to police was in 1922, when New York police commissioner Richard Enright used it in a public relations campaign. It had previously been used in a poem to refer to the

Union army during the Civil War, which in turn referenced the "thin red line," a military term describing a Scottish regiment in the Crimean War. The "Thin Blue Line" was later popularized in the 1950s by the Los Angeles Police Department Chief William Parker's use of the term, as well as being the title of the television show the department produced. Notably, Parker's [tenure](#) was marked with racism towards Black Los Angeles residents, anti-immigrant rhetoric, and a move towards militarism in police departments. In 1988, filmmaker Errol Morris made a documentary titled "The Thin Blue Line" about the murder of a Dallas Police officer and the ensuing trial and wrongful conviction of Randall Adams. The use of the term as the documentary title referred to a quote by a prosecutor in the case, with the documentary highlighting rampant police corruption. According to a New York Times [review](#) at the time, it was used as "an ironic, mythical image of a protective policeman on the other side of anarchy."

In 2014, the "Blue Lives Matter" movement began as a direct pushback to the Black Lives Matter movement, supporting police departments and officers in response to protests against police brutality towards Black people. Despite violence against police officers already carrying higher penalties, the movement has used a [narrative](#) of a "war on police" to push for further legal protections for police officers. This has included creating hate crime laws applicable in instances when officers are targeted. The Blue Lives Matter movement started to make heavy use of the "Thin Blue Line"



flag, with the imagery also more visible in cities like New York City and Dallas after high-profile incidents where police officers were injured or killed.

The “Thin Blue Line” flag (also frequently called the “Blue Lives Matter” flag) would later make appearances at Trump rallies, the 2017 Unite the Right white nationalist [rally](#) (in some cases alongside Confederate flags), and the January 6, 2021 [attack](#) on the Capitol (when Trump supporters and right-wing conspiracy theory believers attacked several police officers).

In response to the association with right-wing violence and hate groups, various jurisdictions at the local to national level have acted (either on their own or in response to public criticism) to address

the use of “Thin Blue Line” imagery. After the January 6th Capitol event in 2021, the Madison police chief [banned](#) its use, citing what she believed to be its co-optation. She said, “My intent is not that we reject outright the symbol for what we understand it to represent, nor do I believe it to be inherently racist/fascist as many purport.” Later on in January 2023, in response to a public complaint, LAPD Chief Michel Moore [ordered](#) officers not to display the “Thin Blue Line” flag at public events or station lobbies, nor as a patch on officer uniforms or police vehicles. He maintained he did not agree with the interpretation of the symbol as “undemocratic, racist, and bigoted” but that “extremist groups” had “hijacked” it to the extent that it needed to be removed from public settings. Despite his avoidance of criticizing the origin or supposed purpose of the symbol, the Los Angeles Police Protective

League, the department's union, reportedly [saw](#) his decision as representing a lack of support for the department's officers.

As for the Albuquerque Police Department's relationship to "Thin Blue Line" and "Blue Lives Matter" memorabilia, KRQE reported that in [November](#) 2018, an APD officer "got in trouble" with the department after a complaint was made for having a "Thin Blue Line" flag vehicle decal.

The department at the time cited a rarely-enforced rule forbidding personal stickers, decals, or front license plates on vehicles, and cited a previous instance where it had been enforced against a "Don't Tread On Me" bumper sticker. KRQE News 13 [found](#) several "Thin Blue Line" license plates, flags, and generic decals on APD vehicles when reporting on the complaint. Later, in November 2021, a Reddit user [posted](#) about a "Thin Blue Line" flag on a vehicle, with discussion in the comments including disagreement about the significance of the "pro-police" symbol and its relevance to the Black Lives Matter movement. In July 2022, a Twitter user shared [images](#) of BCSO vehicles with "Blue Lives Matter"-esque imagery - in October, the Bernalillo County Twitter [replied](#) indicating that the Sheriff's Office Advisory and Review Board would "discuss concerns raised in this tweet [sic]" later that month.

DISCUSSION

It is notable that law enforcement leaders who have taken action against "Thin Blue Line" imagery have echoed the idea that the symbols have been co-opted. This type of language reflects the proliferation of the idea of white nationalist and far-right "infiltration" of police forces. While recruiting and increasing membership within law enforcement and other powerful institutions is absolutely part of many groups' white nationalist agendas, even those trying to intervene or measure the problem may misname it as somehow separate from how racism, discrimination, and white supremacy are built into the foundation of policing.

Systemic and institutional racism go beyond white nationalist group affiliation, and state violence is more structural than individual instances and perpetrators of interpersonal violence by the police. "Thin Blue Line" or "Blue Lives Matter" imagery is deployed unequivocally in support of police. However, the success of demands to end its use seemingly depends on the ability to tie interpretation of the imagery to hate group affiliation or recruitment, rather than relating it to the inherent violence of policing.

In other words, if a police chief were the target of a demand to end the use of "Thin Blue Line" memorabilia, then an argument that policing is inherently fascist, and therefore pro-policing symbolism is inherently fascist and should not be used by the police force, would be less likely to

succeed in comparison to illustrating how community members may interpret the “Thin Blue Line” flag as a link to the Proud Boys or another white nationalist group.

Pushes to ban “Thin Blue Line” symbolism or “Blue Lives Matter” references could be an important intervention to hamper recruitment of white nationalists to police forces. Furthermore, they could provide necessary damage to the visibility of violent pro-policing movements – however, they do not address the presence of related beliefs or ongoing racism in police departments. However, several police departments have conceded to demands from community members to cease use of these symbols. This indicates this type of campaign ask is suited to efforts targeting the least movable actors in the policing media ecosystem: the leaders of police departments themselves. Assigning blame to independent hate groups for fascism or white nationalism can sometimes be strategically simpler than addressing systemic issues. Depending on the audience, it can be far more challenging to discuss how policing is tied directly to fascist movements.

POLICING: AS SEEN ON REALITY TV

On October 14, 2022, the SOARB held a public comment [session](#), during which several community members raised complaints related to On Patrol: Live. One couple shared that they felt deputies pri-

oritized interacting with the show’s camera crew over helping them after they were involved in a car accident. People also expressed concerns about being filmed without their consent. While no community members spoke positively about the show during the meeting, BCSO Public Information Manager Jayme Fuller stated the department had received positive feedback about police appearance on the show. Fuller also responded to concerns raised by the public about filming by [saying](#) that she was, “... confident [her] captain and deputy chief will look into any sort of concerns that somebody might have.” As of October 2023, it appears that the department does not have an ongoing filming relationship with On Patrol: Live.

Eventually, on January 5, 2023, the office of newly elected Sheriff John Allen [announced](#) that they would be “taking a break” from filming On Patrol: Live, having negotiated an early end to the contract with [plans](#) to “reevaluate [the department’s] participation” in the spring of 2023. Later that month, the SOARB released its annual [report](#) recommending an end to the relationship with the show and changes to images used on department recruitment vehicles, as “there is some [concern](#) that some of these symbols are associated with anarchy and right-wing groups.” Sheriff Allen’s [response](#) to the recommendation about the show partnership was: “I want to focus on crime; we heard about that today. I don’t want deputies to be worried about TV cameras, to be worried about administrators scheduling TV shows. We are focused on one thing right now, and that is crime within Bernalillo

"EVEN WITH SUPPOSED PRIORITIES OF TRANSPARENCY OR TRUTH-TELLING, THE SHOW'S CREW HAS TO MAINTAIN A RELATIONSHIP WITH THE DEPARTMENT, AND THUS MAY HAVE TO COMPROMISE WHAT THEY AIR TO ENSURE THAT RELATIONSHIP CONTINUES."

County." He also stated the department was exploring alternative images for its vehicles.

Reality television documenting American policing is not new, and has roots going back decades. The show *Cops* launched in 1989 on Fox as "an experiment in documentary television." A [New York Times review](#) at the time called out the racist implications of its selective depictions of criminality. John J. O'Connor wrote:

"The dominant image is hammered home again and again: the overwhelmingly white troops of police are the good guys; the bad guys are overwhelmingly black. Little is said about the ultimate sources of the drugs, and nothing is mentioned about Florida's periodic scandals in which the police themselves are found to be trafficking in drugs."

This is, pure and simple, tabloid entertainment, prefaced with a quick disclaimer that "all suspects are considered innocent until proven guilty in a court of law." For purposes of the show, however, the court of law is the video camera, which is kept running even when the trapped suspect protests its presence. We are reminded several times that "this program shows an unpleasant reality" and that "viewer discretion is advised." That should keep them from switching to another channel. And the packaging clearly owes a debt to "Hill Street Blues," right down to the hand-held camera and the screen going black as the dialogue continues. There is even a score with a disco beat. Reality, evidently, requires nips and tucks.

The willingness of ordinary folk to expose their private lives on television is, of course, an astounding phenomenon that astute producers know how to exploit.

“Cops,” for instance, features a painful at-home exchange between one policeman and his wife, who is clearly distressed about their failing marriage.

This intensely private situation is played out before a camera with pathetic candor. In another scene, a policeman snares white drug buyers in a black neighborhood and warns, “Don’t you know what happens over here to white boys like you?” The racism is so casual, so taken for granted, that the only response might well be despair.”

A 2007 [study](#) by Old Dominion University researchers found that 45% of alleged offenders in Cops episodes surveyed were Black, while Black people represented 28% of people arrested that year. Leaving aside the broader potential for bias and structural factors leading to that 28%, the numbers clearly showcase severe misrepresentation of demographics. In 2013, after a [campaign](#) by Color Of Change, Cops was canceled by Fox, then [picked](#) up by Spike TV (later to become the Paramount Network). Then in 2016, A&E launched Live PD, one of its top-rated [shows](#) with an average of [2.4 million viewers](#). By 2020, it had six spinoffs.

Live PD set itself apart from Cops by airing footage that was unedited and comparatively less curated. A&E would [refer](#) to Live PD in March 2020 as “news” due to its perceived “live” nature and move away from glamorizing just the action-packed aspects of policing.

However, the nature of the filming and airing process led to controversies over the use of their recorded material. A July 2020 [report](#) by The Marshall Project indicated footage was broadcasted on a delay, and

frequently included edited clips filmed in advance, not aired “live” and unedited as implied. It also found that police departments were often given the opportunity to review “live” videos and sometimes get to “approve” what made it to air.

In 2020, Paramount and A&E responded to pressure following the racial justice uprisings in response to the murder of George Floyd and ended Cops and Live PD,” with Cops just having filmed its 33rd season.

Cops returned with a move to Fox News Media in [September 2021](#). Live PD was revived as On Patrol: Live and moved to the network Reelz, still produced by the same company (Half Moon Pictures under Big Fish Entertainment). Reelz CEO Stan Hubbard [claimed](#) it was a “new show,” implying its purpose was different: “I do think in today’s world, being able to have transparency with police and law enforcement to see how they do their jobs and 2022 is really important.” Since On Patrol: Live began airing – with the same host as Live PD, Dan Abrams (also chief legal analyst for ABC News) – A&E has [sued](#) Reelz, calling the show a “clone” that violates its intellectual property rights.



Similar to the previous ban instituted by the mayor of Albuquerque in 2004, other jurisdictions have banned or regulated reality television partnerships with police. In [2018](#), the Spokane City Council passed regulations intended to limit negative portrayals, requiring the shows to get consent from those filmed, acquire proper insurance, obtain a business license, and submit to review by the police department, among other rules.

Then in [2019](#), Live PD and A&E came under fire for destroying recordings of the police killing of Javier Ambler in Texas. Following this, the Texas legislature passed the Javier Ambler Law in [2021](#) to forbid reality television partnerships with state police.

DISCUSSION: THE CONSEQUENCES OF POLICING & REALITY TV

Albuquerque has a long history with police officers being filmed for reality television programming. The show Cops first [began](#) filming in the city in 1995, broadcasting over 20 episodes with footage from Albuquerque over several seasons until Mayor Martin Chavez ended the show's partnership with the Albuquerque Police Department (APD) in [2004](#). At the time, he stated that it made the city look "horrible" and placed too much emphasis on crime in the city.

During the DOJ investigation into the department's overall behavior, which did [conclude](#) that the department had "systemic deficiencies" including "failed accountability systems" among its three patterns of excessive and deadly force, Cops [returned](#) to Bernalillo County, this time partnering with the County Sheriff's office instead of the APD for its 26th season.

At the time, some county leaders stated their [disagreement](#) with the decision to allow filming, and the Albuquerque mayor's office said they had not been contacted about the return to filming.

Mayor Richard Berry's spokeswoman Erin Thompson [said](#) at the time that, "... had we been [approached about participating], Mayor Berry has made it clear that he would have declined."

Then in 2022, the BCSO announced it would be part of On Patrol: Live, a re-vamped version of the show Live PD. As an example of what viewers could expect, BCSO Special Operations Commander Captain Nicholas Huffmyer shared his [thoughts](#) that, "... the community really likes when we do some of the shoplifting, anti-shoplifting initiatives and some other things." Some reports stated that the show's network Reelz paid the county [\\$1,000](#) a week to film, though the network has also said that they do not compensate featured departments beyond any licensing fees.

Reality television shows have long been critiqued for misrepresenting how much of what they portray is "unscripted" or "unedited." No matter how much producers tout

the realism or transparency of what they show on screen, they make active choices to film, order, edit, and air footage. The most popular examples of reality programming often cater to viewers' most simplified or diluted ideas of people or places.

They are not accountable to the public or to any version of the truth; they are simply responsible for being watched by as many people as possible, and to entice as many advertisers as possible. In the case of shows like *On Patrol: Live*, they are dependent upon partnerships with law enforcement to be able to fill their shows with content.

Therefore, even with supposed priorities of transparency or truth-telling, the show's crew has to maintain a relationship with the department, and may have to compromise what they air to ensure that relationship continues.

This challenge exists not only for this type of programming, but even for conventional news teams or journalists who may make decisions on what to report based on their desire for ongoing access to sources within the department, or even experiences like police ride-alongs (as discussed in another case study in this curriculum).

In her book *Reality Bites Back: The Troubling Truth About Guilty Pleasure TV*, feminist author Jennifer Pozner outlines some common challenges in the entire form.

Though her work focuses on shows more explicitly in the realm of recreation or entertainment, her assessment of biases ring true for shows like *On Patrol: Live*.

She writes:

“ Reality TV’s ideological and commercial biases stem from a combination of institutional factors, including:

- **Financial and political agendas of megamerged media monopolies;**
- **Big Media networks and producers pandering to advertisers’ and owners’ profit motives without regard for the impact of their entertainment (and news) programming on viewers or our larger culture;**
- **Limited access of women, people of color, low-income people, LGBT people, and other marginalized communities to the means of media production, distribution, and information communication technology;**
- **Marginalization of women and people of color from positions of decision-making power within media companies; and**
- **Funding restrictions that limit independent media alternatives.”**

As corporate and media actors have adapted since 2020 to address or stave off accusations of racism and discrimination, antiracist movements have experienced wins and setbacks.

While calls for diversity or more nuanced portrayals onscreen have yielded important new opportunities, there are limitations on any possible progress in a format like that of Cops or “On Patrol: Live.” Police procedural television, both fictional and “reality,” enjoys a tremendous amount of popularity in the current media environment.

Highlighting the toxicity of the genre and the impact it has on our society is a significant hurdle.

It is an integral part of the copaganda ecosystem, and understanding the incentives behind how it is created can allow for improved targeting of the actors within it for possible intervention.



QUESTIONS FOR COMMUNITY DISCUSSION:

Cultural Views and Influencers

- Who are trusted sources of information in our community whether or not they're telling the truth?
- Outside of mainstream media, where else are people going for information in our community?
- How are police viewed in our community?

Local News

- What are the most popular TV, radio, and newspaper outlets in our community?
- Who owns these media outlets, and what do you know about them?
- What are the alternative media outlets in our community?

The Police

- When do you see the police in the news?
- Who is the public information officer for the Albuquerque Police Department? And for the Bernalillo County Sheriff's Department?
- What do we know about these public information officers?
- Beyond the news, how else are police departments sharing information?