# Can Academia and the Media Handle the Truth?

**Robert Maranto · Martha Bradley-Dorsey**

If Trump's election to the U.S. presidency represents anything, it represents a rejection of elite gatekeeper institutions such as academia and the mainstream media, whose roles include distinguishing fact from opinion, discerning the difference between, say, climate change denial and climate change skepticism. Such gatekeeping is vital to liberal democracy in a vast republic, where citizens can't possibly absorb all the information required to participate effectively in public affairs.

But do those elite institutions deserve populist contempt? Sometimes. Those of us in academia and elite media are humans. Our personal values, friendships, and desire for continued employment may determine which research questions we ask, and in turn which facts we emphasize, and which we omit. Particularly on social media, whether one posts police beating protestors or rioters torching buildings—in a nation of 330 million it is easy to find either—inevitably reflects the values one brings to the table. Black Lives Matter offers a case in point.

Few policy quandaries would seem to demand a disinterested examination of empirical data more than emotionally charged police shootings of civilians, especially of African American civilians. Yet those who would be in a position to produce such data and to utilize it have failed to do so. As then FBI Director James Comey lamented in 2015 regarding the Ferguson, Missouri unrest, his Bureau "didn't know whether the Ferguson police shot one person a week, one a

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year, or one a century." For a variety of reasons, our gatekeepers failed to address an issue we rely on them to resolve, keeping vital information from a public that requires it to make useful decisions.

As Berkeley professor Franklin Zimring chronicled in *When Police Kill* (2017), only in the 2000s did the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics develop a small, under-resourced program counting police killings of civilians. Neither police chiefs nor police unions much wanted this data to see the light of day, for fear of how it might be used. After all, they are government bureaucrats whose jobs could, depending on the output, be made more difficult by the release of such data. Academia should have jumped in where bureaucrats had failed, but the field of police-involved killing of civilians hasn't thrived because scholars are reluctant to explore such politically explosive subjects. Many social scientists have fled the field for fear of being labelled "racist" if their empirical findings question progressive assumptions. This is not an overstatement. In the past month we have talked with two different professors, both ethnic minorities who stopped researching racial questions for just this reason.

An article in the winter 2018 issue of *AQ* suggests that even established scholars studying any aspect of race and crime are subject to strict ideological scrutiny. In "Race, Crime, and Culture," well-published CUNY criminal justice scholar Barry Latzer recounts the troubling tale of getting his manuscript on the history of race and violent crime in America accepted for publication with Columbia University Press (CUP), but then having that decision overturned by a more "representative" faculty review committee. Initial reviews by criminal justice experts hired by CUP hailed Latzer's manuscript as "[e]xcellent, Intriguing. Tremendous effort, tons of care in documenting your observ[a]tions," and "all who study American crime in historical perspective will need to address his analysis." But CUP decided that race and crime were so politically sensitive that they would seek "more reviews—particularly from preeminent African American scholars." Communications between the publisher and Latzer after the manuscript was rejected indicate the additional reviewers believed Latzer's "identifying a subculture of violence within certain segments of the black community is tantamount to 'blaming the victim.'"[1]

So while researchers like Zimring, Latzer, and a handful of others have done invaluable work, the self-censorship of scholars due to the politicization of academia has clearly had a deleterious effect on the availability of information on police shootings.

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[1] Latzer's book was ultimately published as *The Rise and Fall of Violent Crime in America* by Encounter books in 2017.

This flight of the empirical social scientists has left the academic study of racism to radical activists and postmodernists. With few exceptions, widely cited professors study and apply the most esoteric and radical theories associated with Critical Race Theory and Black Lives Matter to understanding race, crime, and policing. At the same time they eschew the mundane but practically useful empirical questions such as how many people cops kill, under what circumstances, and what could be done to save civilian lives, as one of us recently documented.[2] One of us, working with two other co-authors, one of us has devised a metric ranking which police departments do and which do not do a good job of protecting civilian lives, in the hope of encouraging laggards to copy best practices. More than a few professors have asked us "why anyone would study *that*?" The truth is a researcher's best chance of getting cited and promoted in academia comes by advocating defunding the police, not exploring ways to improve policing.

Our constitutional system allows activist groups to form, and these groups vary across a wide ideological range. Yet only certain activists are welcome in the world of academia and the elite media. Elites despise populist-leaning police unions, but Black Lives Matter has elite respectability. The journalist Heather Mac Donald of the Manhattan Institute has produced reams of work which undermines the concept of "systemic" racism, instead identifying high criminality rates as the primary cause of black overrepresentation in our criminal justice system. Her work has won her a Bradley Prize (2005) and made her a best-selling author. But she is perceived as giving aid and comfort to police unions, so her views go unheard in academia. Her very presence on college campuses precipitates violence.[3] It is fair to say there'd be no scholarly awards for Mac Donald even if she were an academic social scientist. Likewise, writing blue lives matter one hundred times on your college essay will not get you admitted to Stanford; writing Black Lives Matter a hundred times already has.[4] Upscale parents and college admissions consultants are no doubt paying attention.

Unfortunately, activists are not generally associated with policy reforms based on accurate empirical data—that has never been part of the job description. Saul Alinsky taught outrage and how to target enemies, not how to analyze problems, compromise with fellow citizens with whom one disagrees, or promote incremental

[2]Robert Maranto, "How Academia Failed to Improve Police Practices," *Wall Street Journal,* June 10, 2020.

[3]Howard Blumestaff, "Protesters disrupt talk by pro-police author, sparking free-speech debate at Claremont McKenna College," *Los Angeles Times,* April 9, 2017.

[4]Avalon Zoppo, "Teen Accepted to Stanford After Writing #BlackLivesMatter 100 Times on Application," NBC News, April 5, 2020.

change. Alinsky's 1971 primer *Rules for Radicals* advocates unity, fostered by creating an enemy: "pick a target, freeze it, personalize it, and polarize it."

So what happens when large segments of academia and elite media accept support for activism as the criteria for good research and reporting, or when any who question an activist agenda risk rebuke, censorship, or even unemployment? That mindset seems unlikely to produce practical results, but it is where we now find ourselves.

Academia is the canary in the coal mine when it comes to the "cancel culture" associated with the politics of victimization. More than a decade ago, long before it became common for computer programmers, politicians, football coaches and players, and others in almost all occupational fields to be fired or otherwise punished over accusations of racism, one of us faced accusations of racism from *white* colleagues for initiating a partnership between our overwhelmingly white flagship state university and high-performance charter schools serving African American children. Our education school has never sent our graduates to teach in the heavily non-white areas these schools serve, so the partnership seemed like a good idea. The accusations caused some sleepless nights, but with protection from an African American administrator who saw the need for serving black communities, nothing came of the informal accusations and the program took off, albeit delayed, modified, and with someone else running it. The people making the charges were not bad people, but education professors defend their turf, and even a decade ago, calling something racist was a good way to freeze an innovation. As anyone paying attention knows, such accusations are now far more common, far nastier, and institutionalized in university diversity and inclusion offices. These offices have had remarkable success labeling an increasingly wide range of actions and opinions racist or sexist, as sociologists Bradley Campbell and Jason Manning document in *The Rise of Victimhood Culture* (2018).

A harbinger of such behavior at the intersection of academia and journalism came in the 2015 University of Missouri protests when videos captured a communications professor recruiting "some muscle" to stop a student reporter from covering a progressive demonstration. The University of Missouri is known for its highly ranked school of journalism, and even as recently as 2015 a *communications* professor requesting physical force to muzzle journalists was considered bad form. Under public pressure, Missouri fired the professor, who then landed at a better university, albeit in a worse faculty post.

Today, the press-muzzling communications professor would likely keep her job, perhaps even gaining status for her physical bullying. This censorious mindset has played out in numerous ways in recent months in academia and elite media, but two events stand out.

"Woke" staffers at the *Philadelphia Inquirer* forced longtime editor Stan Wischnowski to resign for approving the title "Buildings Matter Too" for a commentary by the newspaper's Pulitzer Prize winning architectural critic, who expressed solidarity with those protesting racism, but decried rioters' destruction of historic buildings.

More prominently, staffers forced *New York Times* opinion editor James Bennet to step down after he permitted—not endorsed but permitted—a commentary by U.S. Senator Tom Cotton urging the federal government to consider using troops to quell riots. As Cotton wrote, past presidents deployed troops to keep order, including during the 1992 Los Angeles riots and to stop racist violence in 1957 Little Rock, where U.S. troops saved lives accompanying black students into a newly desegregated school. Cotton's position had considerable public support across racial lines, and his provocative missive is the sort of thing newspapers at one time published frequently. The *Times* claimed that Bennet had not properly fact checked Cotton's piece, but few if any journalists believe that.[5] Cotton's staff detailed the fact-checking process for his *Times* article in *National Review*.[6] If this piece were not properly fact-checked, then no commentary ever was.

Essentially, woke staffers played the race card to punish an editor willing to publish views they found offensive, and the nation's leading newspaper, the *New York Times,* caved. The very clear message is that today, just as surely as being accused of supporting communism in the 1950s could get you fired, offending Black Lives Matter *will* cost you a job in elite media. We shall see if either Bennet or Wischnowski find further employment in the press, but the same holds true for the non-elite, "aspiring" media as well. The talented young *Intercept* writer Lee Fang only barely groveled sufficiently to keep his job after daring to report an interview with an African American who expressed concerns about black on black violence. Black violence takes far more black lives than police violence and is a concern in many African American communities, but Fang was punished for reporting it.[7]

Privileging elite loyalties over independent thought empowers Black Lives Matter, but will cost black lives for at least three reasons. First, standing above criticism corrupts any informal group or formal organization. Consider Penn State's football team in the decades-long Jerry Sandusky child sexual abuse

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[5]Steven A. Holmes, "I love the *New York Times*, but what they did was wrong," *CNN.com*, June 10, 2020; "The *New York Times* self-indicted fiasco," *Washington Post*, June 9, 2020.

[6]Rich Lowry, "The Inside Story of the Tom Cotton Op-Ed that Rocked the *New York Times*," *National Review*, June 5, 2020.

[7]Matt Taibbi, "The American Press is Destroying itself," https://taibbi.substack.com/p/the-news-media-is-destroying-itself.

scandal, or the Catholic Church not so many years ago. In both instances an organization held above reproach in the public eye became deficient in upholding the standards with which they originally gained the public's trust. It is likely something similar will befall Black Lives Matter, a group that already rejects any traditional notions of accountability, merit, or transparency as constructs of white supremacy. Second, as those of us from blue collar backgrounds who have lived in high crime places can attest, police need reform, but de-funding of police or ordering officers to "stand down" has already led to increased crime and the taking of (disproportionately) more black lives.[8] Third, media and academic censorship of these complex subjects limits knowledge, and we need facts to reduce violent crime and police misconduct. There may already be evidence that honest, transparent information on police shootings could foster change. Since 2015, when the *Washington Post*'s widely used national database of fatal police shootings began, the number of unarmed black shooting victims is down 63 percent, from 38 to 14 in 2019.[9]

As Princeton Professor Keith Whittington argues in *Speak Freely: Why Universities Must Defend Free Speech* (2018), free speech mattered little in academia before the late 1800s. Back then American colleges trained ministers or provided networking for the rich——missions more suited to imposing orthodoxy than encouraging inquiry. In the twentieth century, as American higher education embraced generating and disseminating knowledge, "the core value of the modern American university [became] free inquiry, not indoctrination." The same time period witnessed the shift from a partisan press to modern attempts, however imperfect, at objective journalism. But with the widespread aggrandizement of Black Lives Matter, not to mention the uncritical acceptance by some education leaders and schools of the *New York Times*'s 1619 Project, it seems the role of the media has shifted from inquiry to indoctrination, which justifies severe censorship of apostates.

But suppose the *New York Times* has it wrong and Whittington has it right, and we need to know more? Will we find out more through censorship, or free speech and debate? How will trust in America's institutions be strengthened when even the more reasoned non-progressive views—some of which are held by a broad section of the public (for example, that violent suspects should not be released without bail)—are deemed unworthy of expression?

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[8] Rocco Parascandola, Brittany Kriegstein, John Annese, "Murders continue to surge in NYC with 38 killings in the last four weeks," *New York Daily News,* June 15, 2020.

[9] *Washington Post* "Fatal Force" database, accessed Sept. 1, 2020.

One fact completely left out of current discussions is that in a given year only one in about 669 police officers kills someone. Very few cops kill, and many of the killings cops do commit are justified. That is a very risky thing to say in academia or the media, but it is also empirically true. Nationally, African Americans are overrepresented among those killed by police when total population is the baseline (23.1 percent killed vs. 13.4 percent of total population—2018), but are underrepresented when the incidence of violent felonies is the baseline (54.9 percent of murders, 13.4 percent of total population—2018.)[10] At this point, it is far from clear how much police killings reflect racist policing or behavioral differences among suspects, given that violent criminals are disproportionately African American. Using total population percentages as a baseline for determining police discrimination is flawed. After all, 95 percent of those killed by cops are male, a statistic few consider ironclad proof of police privileging female offenders.

Not all the facts on police violence comfort the right and center. Only about one in a thousand cops who kills receives a felony conviction, raising serious questions about whether local justice systems police their own. Can we trust local bureaucrats to hold other local bureaucrats accountable? The nature of police work also requires police and prosecuting attorneys to work together closely, often resulting in close relationships between police who kill and prosecutors who would normally prosecute such wrong-doing. On this and many other matters people across ideological lines might support substantial criminal justice reforms. Moreover, some forces like the New York Police Department excel at both fighting crime and not killing civilians; others fail and need reform. The ivory tower shows little interest in understanding why.

You cannot find the facts outlined above anywhere in elite media; at least we haven't. On matters of race, the media has joined significant segments of academia in being post-factual. Can a post-factual media and academia build better policing and save black lives? Can it rebuild broad public trust in institutions? We don't see how.

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[10]Federal Bureau of Investigation, Criminal Justice Information Services, Uniform Crime Reports, *2018 Crime in the United States.*