

Letting the cat out of the bag about American television police shows

## Writer on *Law & Order: SVU* spinoff threatens to kill “looters”

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Television producer Dick Wolf, best known as the creator and executive producer of the *Law & Order* franchise, was obliged this week to fire a writer-producer on an upcoming series after the latter posed with a weapon and threatened to kill “looters” in Los Angeles.

On June 2, Wolf dismissed Craig Gore, executive producer or co-executive producer on 65 episodes of *S.W.A.T.* (2017-20) and supervising producer or co-executive producer on 68 episodes of *Chicago P.D.* (2014-20), and a writer as well of episodes on both those series.

On Facebook, Gore posted a photograph of himself, dressed in black and holding a large weapon, under a heading that read “Curfew ...” In a comment, he wrote, “Sunset [Boulevard] is being looted two blocks from me. You think I won’t light motherf---ers up who are trying to f--- w/ my property I worked all my life for? Think again ...”

When Wolf’s attention was drawn to Gore’s post, the *Law & Order* producer issued a statement that read, “I will not tolerate this conduct, especially during our hour of national grief. I am terminating Craig Gore immediately.”

Gore was slated to write and/or produce a *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* (SVU) spinoff series featuring Christopher Meloni, who played an especially thuggish cop on 12 seasons of SVU, before leaving in 2011.

A mini-biography available on IMDb.com, which was presumably either written or approved by Gore himself, explains that the future writer-producer was raised in North Carolina. Gore “was on his own by the time he was 16,” it continues, “forming a burglary/robbery crew, and became a professional thief. Craig then went to prison ... at

the age of 18. Paroled at 20, and knowing he’d be killed or go back to prison if he remained down south, Craig moved to Chicago where he received a degree in fiction/creative writing from Columbia College Chicago.”

Gore moved to Los Angeles in 2000 “and broke into the business by 2008, selling a pilot ... titled *Stray Bullets*. After that, Craig sold five original pilots” and climbed “his way up to [sic] the TV food chain.”

Wolf moved quickly to dismiss Gore because his comments and “tough-guy” posturing were an embarrassment for a franchise that prides itself on its “balanced approach” to policing. In the end, while a trifle more sophisticated than series that openly and gleefully exult in police mayhem, the various *Law & Order* series present just as dishonest and falsified a picture of the cops and their social role.

While occasionally delving into “gray areas,” for instance, an instance of police brutality, the unfair treatment of an innocent man or woman, programs such as *Law & Order: SVU* always return to their central conception: that police are honestly, if sometimes overzealously, pursuing villains and attempting to lock them away for the public’s safety.

There is nothing astonishing about the employment of an individual such as Gore, a self-styled right-wing vigilante type, on the staff of a television program in the US. It is an indication of a sharp social and cultural shift.

Series featuring law enforcement agencies, from the CIA and FBI to local police forces, are ubiquitous on American television. Long gone are the days of *The Defenders* or *Perry Mason*, where police and prosecutors were routed, if not made to look like overbearing fools, on a weekly basis.

“Bingeing on Cop Propaganda,” an article in the *New*

*Republic* in January 2020 by Nick Martin, notes that, according to a recent study, 21 of the 34 prime-time dramas broadcast on the four main networks in the fall 2019 lineup were devoted to “law enforcement.”

The study, by Color of Change and the University of Southern California Annenberg Norman Lear Center, “Normalizing Injustice: The Dangerous Misrepresentations That Define Television’s Scripted Crime Genre,” reviewed 353 episodes from 26 different crime series in the 2017-18 season. In Martin’s words, the study “provides a fascinatingly detailed look at the ways the creative forces behind these shows are essentially functioning as propagandists for American cops.”

“Normalizing Injustice” indeed makes some legitimate points. The authors argue, for instance, that their analysis suggests “that the scripted crime genre influences the public to grant even more authority to police than they already have: to break the rules, to violate our rights, to cage the beast of crime as they would have us believe it is.”

Responding to the report, Martin writes that whereas “people accused of crimes [in the various crime dramas] are rarely granted the necessary screen time for the audience to develop empathy with them or an understanding of the social and political contexts they’re coming from, the opposite is true for the cops: They are the central characters in these shows, and there’s nothing *but* room to explore their inner lives, whether as the now-saturated role of the anti-hero or the otherwise good cop making one bad decision.”

In regard to *Law & Order: SVU* in particular, Martin observes that its detective-protagonists occasionally “lose their cool. But these outbursts are just as often justified.” When the series’ central characters “strong-arm” or beat up someone accused of a crime, the action is “presented as a necessary means to an end. After all, the people they’re abusing have committed an ‘especially heinous’ crime, as the opening of the show reminds us. In fact, watching the detectives enforce this violent sense of justice is meant to be humanizing—to draw the viewer into complicity: *Who wouldn’t whale on someone this vile if they had the license to do so?*”

However, both the study authors and the *New Republic*’s Martin erroneously interpret the overwhelming television police presence as a sign, in Martin’s phrase, “of white Americans’ obsession with the supposed valor of the police.” This slanderous phrase is entirely out of place. As though the American public, black or white or anything else, had the slightest say in

the programming decisions made by a handful of giant conglomerates: AT&T, ViacomCBS, Comcast, Disney and the Fox Corporation.

It is not “white America” that is in love with the police, but the upper middle class who instinctively grasp that the forces of “law and order” are vital to the defense of their wealth and privileges. A valuable study could be conducted—although one suspects that neither Color of Change nor USC’s Annenberg Norman Lear Center will undertake it—into the correlation over the past 40 years between the growth of social inequality, and the immense enrichment of an affluent layer in the media and entertainment business, on the one hand, and the increased fascination with and veneration for “the men and women in blue,” on the other.

The current wave of mass, multi-racial protests in the wake of the heinous killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis goes a long way toward dispelling the myth that “America” has a “strange obsession with police,” again, according to Martin in the *New Republic*.

There is some indication that even certain actors are disgusted with the glorification of the police, including through their own performances. Griffin Newman and Stephanie Beatriz, both of whom either play or have played police on television, have publicly contributed to the Community Justice Exchange. Their donations will be distributed to local bail and bond funds to assist with the release of arrested protesters.

On social media, Newman commented, “I’m an out-of-work actor who improbably played a detective on two episodes of *Blue Bloods* almost a decade ago.” He encouraged other actors to match his contribution of \$11,000: “If you currently play a cop? If you make tens or hundreds of thousands of dollars a year in residuals from playing a cop? I’ll let you do the math.”

Some hours later, Beatriz, who plays a detective on *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, a police procedural comedy series on Fox, matched Newman’s donation and thanked the actor “for leading the way.”



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