

Pittsburgh Post-Gazette censors accurate reporting of protests against police brutality

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Two black journalists at the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* have been barred from reporting on the continuing protests over police brutality sparked by the police murder of 46-year-old George Floyd. In addition, the output of other journalists and photographers has been removed from the paper's website in a direct act of political censorship.

Alexis Johnson was told last Monday that she was no longer allowed to report on the Pittsburgh protests.

Photo journalist Michael Santiago was also told that he could not report on the protests. He says he was not given a reason why. Santiago was part of the team that won the Pulitzer Prize for their coverage of the 2018 fascist massacre at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh.

The paper has claimed that Johnson's reporting is biased, citing a tweet posted by Johnson on her personal Twitter account which, in a sarcastic fashion, questioned the rationale for the police crackdown on peaceful protesters protesting racism.

The tweet shows four photos of garbage and debris piled up on city streets and bears the caption, "Horrible scenes and aftermath from selfish LOOTERS who don't care about this city!!!!... oh wait, sorry. No, these are pictures from a Kenny Chesney concert tailgate. Whoops."

The reference is to the summer concerts featuring country singer Kenny Chesney that have been notorious in Pittsburgh for leaving garbage. In 2016, concert-goers left a staggering 46 tons scattered around the concert site.

Following her removal, many other staff members on the paper reposted her tweet with the hashtag #IStandWithAlexis. On Thursday evening, the paper responded by removing two articles of two other reporters who had covered the protests.

Lauren Lee had written a story about a peaceful protest through Pittsburgh's East Liberty neighborhood, while Ashley Murray had written a story about statements from City Council members about police brutality and reforms they said the council needed to discuss.

Both articles and accompanying photos were published on the paper's website, but were taken down and did not appear in the paper's weekend print edition. The paper's social media postings still listed the articles. Viewers who clicked on the links received the 404 "page not found" error.

Newspaper Guild of Pittsburgh President and *Post-Gazette* reporter Mike Fuoco stated that the articles were removed because of the writers' support for Johnson.

The Newspaper Guild also pointed to the racist nature of the censoring of Johnson and Santiago. In a letter to members, Fuoco wrote: "at a time when issues of race and racism and unequal treatment under the law are finally being verbalized so all can hear, the *Post-Gazette* sees fit to remove one of its few black reporters, someone who has lived the experience, from coverage of such a mammoth issue. Remember this is a newspaper that promoted to executive editor the person who wrote the 'Reason as Racism' editorial and shamed an iconic newspaper forever. So, there are not only contractual issues but also racial issues at work here. And we will not stand for either."

In the Twitter feed, several reporters who are Jewish noted that they were not pulled from reporting on the Tree of Life Synagogue massacre.

The censoring of reporting is based not solely on race, as both Lee and Murray are white. But their stories reported the protests as peaceful and discussed the problem of racism within the police.

The removal of the stories coincided with the newspaper's reporting of the protests as being dominated by looters and criminals, justifying the police repression. Articles about peaceful protests cut across the paper's editorial line.

The paper replaced Lee and Murray's articles with a report on the arrest of a 20-year-old youth for allegedly starting a riot when he spray-painted and smashed the windows of a police car during last Saturday's protests.

Video of the incident shows a lone actor with several protesters urging him to stop. Many at the protest also questioned why a police car was left unattended in the middle of the protest. Those actions were used by the police as the pretext for cracking down on the protest, which had gone on for hours, and arresting 46 people.

Similarly, last Monday, after demonstrators had been marching for hours throughout the East Liberty neighborhood, police fired rubber bullets, tear gas and pepper spray at them, driving the protesters down a street where they were corralled and 22 were arrested.

Again, the police claimed they were responding to protesters' violence, but two separate videos of the attack show marchers gathered peacefully. Less than 30 seconds after giving the order to clear the street, police began attacking the crowd.

At least three residents of nearby apartment buildings who were filming the assault from their windows have been targeted by police and threatened with search warrants and arrests.

Once known as a liberal newspaper, the *Post-Gazette*, which has a virtual monopoly as the only daily published in the city, has shifted far to the right since the election of Donald Trump. In March of 2018, Block Communications, Inc., the family-owned company that runs the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* and its sister paper, the Toledo *Blade*, merged the two papers' editorial boards.

Shortly afterwards, the paper published its unsigned editorial headlined "Reason as Racism," which justified Donald Trump's references to African nations as "shithole countries" and attacked those who called Trump a racist.

Soon after, in June 2018, the paper fired longstanding editorial cartoonist Rob Rogers, who was a critic of conservatives in general and Trump in particular. Rogers had worked at the *Post-Gazette* for 25 years and was a runner-up for a Pulitzer Prize.

Protests continue throughout Pittsburgh. This week, workers from all the major hospitals took part in protests, many still wearing protective gear from working with COVID-19 patients. Doctors, nurses and other staff at UPMC, the largest hospital chain in the city, came outside and took a knee for nearly nine minutes, representing the time that police held their knee on George Floyd's neck.

On Monday, over 500 Pittsburgh teachers and other school employees marched for two miles from one school building to another.

Police have not made any additional arrests since the initial days of the protests. On Friday, the chief of police marched with protesters on Friday and took a knee alongside them. The police presence remains strong, however, with hundreds of officers mobilized in full riot gear. Three police helicopters regularly fly over protests to monitor their movements.



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