

Washington Post op-ed calls for news media to censor videos of police brutality

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An opinion piece published in the *Washington Post* last week by ESPN sportswriter and journalism professor at the University of Maryland Kevin Blackstone calls on the news media to censor images of police brutality and killings of African Americans.

The column, titled “Why I can’t watch the police videos anymore,” is accompanied by a short video (“This is why the media should not replay viral videos of black men being killed”), in which Blackstone, who is African American, demands that media outlets “give greater consideration to how they display these deaths.” What is implied is that such videos should be removed or their viewings limited by those in control.

According to Blackstone, “[w]e don’t see people having visceral reactions” to filmed episodes of sadistic police violence. Instead, “they watch this as if it’s theater.”

By people, Blackstone clearly means “white people.” This inference is made clear when he likens police brutality caught on film to postcard images of lynchings in the Deep South in the early 20th century. Asserting that such videos have “never been in opposition to the inhumanity of these acts,” Blackstone asks, “How many times have you seen a slain white body in the media?”

One might ask what gives Blackstone such penetrating insight into the thought processes of the millions of people who view the videos of police beatings and murder that so frequently “go viral” in the United States. It is likely that his assertions about the reactions of white viewers are more a reflection of his conceptions than theirs.

In fact, in the years since the 2014 police slaying of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, dozens of bystander videos of police violence against unarmed people, white as well as black, have sparked angry

protests against police brutality. In Ferguson in 2014 and Baltimore in 2015, following the police killing of Freddie Gray, declarations of emergency were issued and National Guard troops deployed to put down widespread protests, which spread beyond those cities to cities and towns across the country.

These events, culminating in the current wave of multi-racial and multi-ethnic protests across the US and around the world, refute Blackstone’s contention that “white people” who view such atrocities sympathize with the police, not the victims.

Moreover, it is false and absurd to draw an equal sign between the racial attitudes of people in America a century ago and the attitudes of the population today. Vast changes in the social outlook of the population have occurred, corresponding to the increased integration of workplaces over the past 75 years. The Great Migration of millions of African Americans from the rural south to northern industrial cities from approximately 1915 to 1970 encouraged the development of social consciousness among workers of all races.

According to a 2017 Pew study, a large majority of the population (81 percent) had views of interracial marriage that were favorable or neutral. In contrast, less than 10 percent looked upon such relationships in a negative way. In 2015, 17 percent, or almost a fifth, of all opposite-sex marriages were interracial, up from only 3 percent in 1967, when the *Loving v. Virginia* Supreme Court decision overturned anti-miscegenation laws.

Of course, racism still exists, but it is false to claim that the United States today is dominated by racism or exemplifies “white supremacy.” The most virulent forms of racism are concentrated within the frontline elements of the capitalist state, such as the police and

immigration agents who are charged with policing the population on behalf of the ruling class.

According to Blackistone, people viewing images of police violence tend not to see “that this person [being killed] was a human being.” Instead, the murder of innocent people by police is “normalized... a distant reality.”

The journalist-professor cites a National Institute of Health study from 2017 that finds “deaths [by police] that go unpunished send a message to Black communities that their bodies are police property, disposable, and undeserving of dignity and justice.” The study adds that such incidents “can bring about collective anger, grief, and hopelessness.”

In other words, the NIH warns, in addition to “hopelessness” and more passive expressions of hostility, such atrocities can stoke “collective anger” and mass opposition. In calling for the suppression of such videos, Blackistone joins in opposing such mass expressions of social anger.

Who would benefit from such censorship? Not the minority and working class victims of police violence, but the perpetrators.

In the initial days of the protests following George Floyd’s murder, some Democratic Party politicians and black nationalist allies reacted to the multi-racial character of the demonstrations by accusing “suburbanites,” i.e., whites, of “intruding” into the protests and fomenting violence. They openly expressed the fear and hostility within the ruling class toward a movement that refuted the racist narrative that has been an ideological and political pillar of capitalist rule in America for the past 50 years.

If, moreover, censorship is a positive good when it comes to police violence, then surely there are other events and opinions that would similarly be better suppressed. The logic of Blackistone’s position leads inexorably to censorship of all forms of journalism and art. Anything that could lead to “collective anger” and produce opposition to the present social order must be suppressed.

While Blackistone acknowledges the “evidentiary value” of such film, his argument for censorship puts him squarely on the side of the police. Government officials and police departments regularly seek to withhold incriminating evidence and videos from the public by claiming that such films would “upset” the

families of the victims or jeopardize an ongoing investigation. In the current protests, the police have repeatedly targeted reporters in an effort to prevent their actions from being reported. And police officers routinely fail to turn on, or deliberately turn off, body cameras to ensure that an incident is not recorded.

That the *Washington Post* is giving credence to such views is not an anomaly. Along with the *New York Times*, the *Post* has been a chief media mouthpiece for the claims that Russian online “disinformation” has “sown discontent” in American society around “sensitive social issues.” This authoritarian argument has been used to censor left-wing opposition to US imperialism on the internet and to persecute courageous journalists such as WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange.

It is the healthy, humane and democratic reaction of millions of people to the exposure of wanton police violence, thanks to cell phone videos and social media, that concerns the ruling class, as well as its media and academic apologists such as Blackistone.



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