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## Fatal Force: A Conversation With Journalists Who Cover Deadly, Highly-Publicized Police Shootings

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FATAL FORCE: A CONVERSATION WITH JOURNALISTS WHO COVER DEADLY,  
HIGHLY-PUBLICIZED POLICE SHOOTINGS

by

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Bachelor of Fine Arts  
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## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this project to my mother, Brenda Walker and my father (the late) Darrell Walker who have always been my biggest supporters. Mom and dad, you have pushed me to be better and have always shown me unconditional love. I could not have asked for better parents. Daddy, I miss you but I know you are smiling down on me.

I also dedicate this project to my son, Jeremy, my biggest blessing. I hope to show you anything is possible. One day when you are older, you will understand why I work so hard. It is so that you will appreciate dedication, perseverance, and God's faithfulness. I love you.

I am also thankful for the love of my brother Darrell and sister T.J. My Aunt Dianne, Uncle David, and Dr. Allegra McGrew for their support and love in my journey. Last, but not least, may the families of the victims named in this research find comfort and peace.

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Also, I want to recognize the 10 journalists who allowed me to interview them about this topic. I appreciate their insight, their professionalism, and I am grateful for their time to open up to me about this topic. You all are making a difference. We need great journalists to tell these stories and many other stories that matter.

To all of the people I have listed and the many others, thank you for being my “dream team” along my journey into academia.

## **ABSTRACT**

After the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement following the deaths of unarmed Black teens Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown, news about police shootings catapulted into the local and national spotlight through videos and messages on social media. Information about police shootings is usually reported to the public through media sources such as television, online/digital news, and social media. This study examines how television news journalists cover the issue of police shootings in the United States. Through 10 in-depth interviews with television journalists who covered highly-publicized police shootings, the author analyzes how race, journalistic norms, technology, and citizen journalists effect the way this issue is framed in the media. The author found that journalists believed they shape the storyline of police shootings through their usage of words, visuals, dependence on official sources, and even the omission of details. However, journalists argued that they tell the story objectively by being fair and telling both sides of the story. The study also finds the television journalists believe race is a factor in the prominence of a story about police shootings and that Black males are more likely to capture national headlines due to the presence of “Black Lives Matter” in the coverage. The usage of technology is also discussed as a positive influence for journalists to break out of traditional norms and connect with their viewers. The author found that there are mixed emotions amongst the journalists when it comes to citizen journalists who capture the stories, write about them, and challenge the work of traditional

journalists. The findings show police shootings and the ongoing protests have changed the way journalists work and how newsrooms cover this topic. The author suggests that journalists, law enforcement, and the public must continue to work together to better understand how this topic should be covered.

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

Journalists are the storytellers of issues that are big, small, taboo, and controversial. They are on the frontlines of major coverage from natural disasters, mass shootings and presidential elections. Traditionally, people sat around their televisions to watch broadcasts from these trusted sources to learn about what happened in the world and the communities around them. When journalists cover stories like police shootings, they help to shape the storyline of the news agenda for the audience.

Police shootings are a controversial topic that has been on the news agenda for more than 20 years. As a major player in the journalism field, *The Washington Post* dedicated an entire team to compiling the nation's first comprehensive database (Fatal Force, n.d.) that is still actively collecting data. Last year, *The Washington Post's* database found 987 people were shot and killed nationwide by uniformed law enforcement officers. As of the writing of this research, the number included 212 people that were killed. *The Washington Post* credits the 2014 shooting death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri to the inception of the database. However, one must not ignore that journalists thought the issue was so critical they built a comprehensive database before the FBI. The question remains: Why do journalists believe this topic is important to track? If journalists have created an entire database of tracking police shootings, how

does this fit into their ideals of objectivity, roles, practices, and coverage of police shootings?

In 2017, the FBI launched a pilot study to work with different agencies to track police shootings (Adamson, 2016). However, in 2016, then FBI Director James Comey testified before legislators that because of a lack of evidence, he was not sure if Black males were being targeted by law enforcement. Comey argued “a small group of videos serve as an epidemic” (Perez, 2016). It is important to note that Comey wanted law enforcement agencies to report statistics on officer-involved shootings to better understand the claims. While Comey is no longer the FBI director, the nation’s top law enforcement agency has started a pilot program to track a societal issue that is important to journalists and the communities they serve.

Journalists are prime storytellers in communicating about police shootings. They have shown the issue is salient on the news agenda for news coverage. Police shootings have garnered even more attention with the rise of social media. After the 2012 shooting death of unarmed teen Trayvon Martin by neighborhood watchman George Zimmerman, the movement “Black Lives Matter” was birthed, challenging “racial violence and prejudiced policing” (Bailey & Leonard, 2015, p. 68). While Martin’s death was not at the hands of a sworn officer of the law, it gave the media more credence to cover police shootings as a salient topic. Meanwhile, the social media response to Brown’s death in Ferguson, Missouri, prompted the hashtag #Ferguson which led to a national conversation on “policing, race, governance and justice” (Jackson & Welles, 2016, p. 397). Other National headlines of Black males killed by police include Alton Sterling, Tamir Rice, Walter Scott, Keith Lamont Scott, and Philando Castile. In the wake of

Castile's death at the hands of a police officer, Minnesota's Governor evoked race into the conversation by blatantly asking, "Would this have happened if the passengers were White?" when referring to Castile being pulled over with his girlfriend and young child in the car (Swaine, Laughland & Beckett, 2016).

The role of the journalist became even more complex in the topic of police shootings when two journalists were arrested during their coverage of the Ferguson protests. Both journalists took to Twitter in disgust, with one even posting, "I'm fine. But if this is the way these officers treat a White reporter working on a laptop for working too slowly for their liking, I can't imagine how horribly they treat others" (Stetler, 2014). The journalist, Ryan J. Reilly continued his criticisms about the police force, calling it a "huge issue" and stating he had a story to tell about it. Another blogger reporting on the practices of journalists urged the media to focus on victims, not suspects. The article, which critiqued the media's coverage of the Dallas Police shooting, stated, "poor reporting can have devastating consequences" (Benz, 2016). This comment can be considered a heavy burden on the role and practices of journalists.

While journalists have long covered police shootings, the topic exploded as public spectacle with the emergence of social media where videos, tweets, and posts have the potential to spread like wildfire. The reach of the social media messages surrounding the social media posts about police shootings is too insurmountable to properly quantify. Questions remain whether social media's role, and that of citizen journalists, possibly impact the role of the journalist when selecting the topic they deem important. However, the responsibility of journalists covering this topic is critical, as a study from Willis and

Painter (2016) found most Americans continue to consume their news about crime and violence from local media. This shows journalists outrank other sources when covering controversial topics that consumers feel matter to them. However, a Pew Research Center study shows the gap is closing amongst Americans who prefer television news (50%) to online news (43%) by only seven percentage points (Gottfried & Shearer, 2017). This is a big change, as the researchers show there was a 19-point gap between the two news platforms just the year prior.

This research aims to explore the issue of police shootings in the media. Specifically, it will examine how journalists cover this topic using race, journalistic norms, and technology. It is important to note that during this research, the author identifies a police shooting as an incident where a uniformed officer on duty shoots a subject. In journalism, police shootings are often called officer-involved shootings, but for consistency sake in this thesis the terminology, “police shooting” will be used.

### **Using Reflexivity: Purpose of Study**

My interest in this research began while I worked as an Assistant News Director in a mid-market sized television newsroom in South Carolina. Over the years I have written stories about the deaths of Walter Scott, Tamir Rice, Michael Brown, Trayvon Martin, and others. I have also answered phone calls and seen online posts blaming “the media” for being responsible for the different opinions of police shootings. I remember the first time I saw the news alert about the shooting death of Trayvon Martin in 2012. It was long before the story captured U.S. headlines. There were limited details, no identities, and the story was in Sanford, Florida, which did not have much connection to

the Midlands. The story did not make it into the local newscast that I worked that particular night. However, more than a year later, the entire newsroom gathered around the television for days watching testimony in the historic trial. Our newsroom staff planned for coverage. Then, the verdict: George Zimmerman was acquitted in Martin's death. There were sighs and outbursts coming from across the room. The phone rang; I could overhear one of the reporters asking what their angle should be now that the judgment was different from what was anticipated. The journalists in the newsroom where I worked in became invested in the story. We covered stories on "Stand your Ground Laws," reaction to the trial, and the profiling of Black males by police. Other stories took over for a short while, but before the nation and the newsroom could fully change the narrative... then came Ferguson. This story played out much different for journalists who were pulled into the story in a more hands-on and personal way. Journalists were arrested, there were massive protests, and the journalistic standards of these storytellers would be tested at a new level. Now social media was a major player and stations had to compete and depend on citizen journalists for opportunities to gather the best coverage and tell the story with multiple perspectives. Both incidents created an environment filled with debate and thought-provoking coverage. This was a test for journalists to choose their angles and select what they thought the audience needed to know.

These journalists did not just cover the story; they helped to shape the coverage. My personal experiences in the newsroom are bolstered by a body of scholarship to understand the perspectives of journalists. Iyengar and Kinder (1987) found that the media could impact the public's perception of an issue, "according to the manner in

which television news frames national issues, individuals' explanations of these issues are altered" (p. 816). They carry the burden of setting the agenda and then selecting the way the stories are told. During Ferguson, there are critiques on both sides in the way journalists handled that story. Some critics say "the media" depended too heavily on the riots and painted a negative depiction of the protestors. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to better understand how journalists view their roles and practices in covering police shootings. This is to be achieved through in-depth interviews whereby journalists share their thoughts about their backgrounds and experiences with this mediated topic.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **THEORETICAL APPROACH**

#### **Framing Police Shootings**

News media determine the amount and content of coverage of a variety of topics, including police shootings, which is called agenda-setting (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). This research will focus on framing to understand how journalists view this topic. According to Entman (1993), the process of framing is to, “select some aspects of a perceived reality to make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for item described” (p. 52). Selection and salience are key factors in framing research, which impacts how the audience thinks about an issue. “Media framing almost certainly helps shape public consciousness” (Gitlin, 2003, p. 141). These texts are important as frames are powerful in what they, “omit as well as include” (Entman, 1993, p. 54). Goffman describes framing as a “method by which individuals apply interpretive schemas to both classify and interpret the information they encounter in their day to day lives” (1974, p. 5). Research from Ritchie and Cameron (2014) shows frames have influence over people’s judgments in telling them what information is relevant and how to think about and participate in social interactions and discourse.

Frames are repetitive words or symbols and they “function to promote an interpretation of a problematic situation or actor and (implicit or explicit) support of a desirable response, often along with a moral judgment that provides an emotional charge” (Entman, Matthes, & Pellicano, 2009, p. 177). Police shootings are a heavily mediated topic that most people hear about through television broadcasts, social media, and other forms of media. How this topic is framed from these outlets could influence the way people view the topic of police shootings. In understanding the critical role of frames, D’Angelo (2002, p. 876) states, “frames that paradigmatically dominate news are also believed to dominate audiences.” This could mean that if police shootings dominate news headlines, then the topic could also be more prominent in the minds of audiences.

There are internal and external factors for media organizations to select frames which interest audiences (Scheufele, 1999). This is called frame building which is based on Scheufele’s process, which shows a journalist’s attitudes, social/cultural norms, political actors, and professional routines are all factors with how they work (Bryant & Oliver, 2009; Kim & Telleen, 2016). These factors are based on the sociological works of Gamson and Modigliani (1987) and utilize journalists’ attitudes, routines, social norms, political actions, and professional routines to explain how story is framed in the media. This includes how the story will be chosen and presented to the audience. Framing is an important factor in news story selection despite journalists perhaps not even recognizing they are doing so (Entman et al., 2009).

There is limited framing research related to the topic of police shootings. How journalists cover big stories, such as mass shootings, can be used as a guide. The influence of the media is evident in several studies in which researchers found competing



frames, including crime vs terrorism (Morin, 2016) and moral breach vs moral panic (Carlson, 2016). A study that analyzed news reports of the Fort Hood and Navy Yard shootings, found journalists were responsible for deciding how these issues were framed based on the race and ethnicity of the shooter (Morin, 2016). A comparative study which investigated news media coverage of the Virginia Tech and Columbine shootings found the media framed the Virginia Tech incident around the shooter's Asian ethnicity, even generalizing the crime to his ethnic group and placing those references in prominent places such as headlines and in the main body of the newspapers (Park, Holody, & Zhang, 2012). Meanwhile, the study also found that newspaper stories about the two Columbine shooters did not include their race, so ethnic references to them being White males were virtually absent (Park et al., 2012).

While Entman et. al. (2009) shows traditional journalists typically have no intentional or political motivation in framing topics, journalists do have a role in selecting certain frames to attract an audience. In an example of Black Power leaders, Gitlin (2003, p. 152) argues that the media "routinely" selects figures who are "deviant" of the largest portion of societal characteristics, passions, and routines to represent them. His core argument continued that news operations selected leaders of movements based on what they believed they should be: "articulate, theatrical, bombastic, and inventive in the ways of packaging messages for mediability" (Gitlin, 2003, p. 154). With the "Black Lives Matter" movement active with this topic, it could be possible leaders could be framed for "mediability," in television reports on police shootings.

## **Critical Race Theory**

Previous studies on police shootings show that Black males were 21 times more likely to be shot and killed by police officers compared to White males (Gabrielson, Jones, & Sagara, 2014). Complex issues such as race cannot be ignored when exploring police shootings. A study from McElvain & Kposowa (2008) described race and ethnicity as the most contested and highly controversial issues when dealing with police usage of force. The roots of Critical Race Theory in qualitative research trace back to the understanding and interpretations of the African American struggle in the United States (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Critical Race Theory, “focuses analysis on the discourse and images that create, maintain, and transform cultural relations of meaning and power as racial phenomena” by also “going beyond the simple overt stereotypes” that are communicated through texts (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 63). The principles of Critical Race Theory aim to understand how race and racism are embedded into the American consciousness of African Americans and other people of color (Crenshaw, 1995). Critical Race Theory is balanced on five tenets which include: race subordination, challenging the dominant belief system, social justice, experiential knowledge and studying multi-disciplinary (Crenshaw, 2002; 2011; Solorzano et al., 2000; Zuberi, 2011).

A study from Oliver (2003) showed that news reports which show Black men as, “dangerous or criminal” fuel negative stereotypes that Black men are violent and dangerous. Several studies reflect there is a racial bias against Black males which found they are viewed as inherently subhuman, criminal, and violent (Correll, Park, Judd, & Wittenbrink, 2002; Duncan, 1976; Eberhardt, Davies, Purdie-Vaughns, & Johnson, 2006; Sim, Correll, & Sadler, 2013).

Journalists are key in helping to formulate such messages for the audience. They are meaning-makers of the messages that are sent out. How they view race as it pertains to police shootings could be key to how the issue is presented and selected for their stories. A study from Chaney and Robertson (2015), shows that Black males who are killed by police are a heavily mediated topic, but only for select high-profile cases such as those which captured national headlines like Amadou Diallo or Eric Garner. Their study also supports Critical Race Theory, citing there is little to no accountability for police who kill unarmed Blacks, which suggests their lives have no value (Chaney & Robertson, 2015). A study which used Critical Race Theory 21 years after the Rodney King beating, found emerging themes that people still did not trust law enforcement, were suspicious of police officers, and connected police officers with brutality.

### **Police Shootings in the Media**

There have been numerous headlines on the front pages of newspapers, TV broadcasts, and online websites about the high-profile cases of a Black male killed by police. In 1999, West African immigrant Amadou Diallo, became a household name after he was shot 41 times by New York City police officers while reaching for his wallet (Olmeda & Marzulli, 2015). Diallo's death at the hands of officers brought protests and captured heavy media coverage.

In a content analysis of police shootings in newspapers, Walker and Boling (2017) found liberal, conservative, and African American papers were more likely to blame society for being responsible for police shootings. In their research, societal-level blame was also linked to factors of race relations in the U.S. There is a broken history between Black Americans and law enforcement agencies that causes the two

communities to fail at working together (Turner, Giacomassi, & Vandiver, 2006). This breakdown in communication and lack of collaboration did not happen overnight. Studies show it is a historic rift built into America's fabric, which is full of stereotypes that run deep for several decades (Turner et. al, 2006). Black males are more likely to be targeted by police, viewed as suspects, or a threat (Hall, Hall, & Perry, 2016). This potential bias feeds the formula of headlines bearing the names of shooting victims such as Tamir Rice, Philando Castile, Walter Scott, and Michael Brown.

### **Journalistic Practices**

The many factors of frame building, as described by Scheufele's (1999) work, are key to understanding how journalists determine whether a topic such as police shootings will be relevant. How journalists assemble their stories is known as *professional routines*. The way journalists select their stories is relevant to determining what they will identify as important for coverage. Previous research shows reporters have a relationship with specific sources and have certain daily routines they rely on to build their support on selecting certain stories (Dijk, 1985). An example of this is making "beat checks," which are daily calls to trusted sources for story ideas. Another routine that could affect how journalists select their stories is their dependence on officials and press releases (Sigal, 1973). Law enforcement officials usually confirm a disturbance such as a police shooting before they are reported over the air or published online. It is important a topic such as a police shooting must be confirmed by a law enforcement agency before it is reported by a news organization. Journalists receive their information from official sources to have credibility and attribution to be able to accurately report on topics for the public.

Otherwise, journalists would be reporting based on speculation or witness accounts, which could hurt their credibility.

Daily deadline pressures also exist for journalists as part of their routine. As for scripting, journalists also have certain habits in which they paraphrase and use quotes for stories to fit into scripting whereby they, “contribute their own frames and invent their own clever catchphrases, drawing on a popular culture that they share with their audience”(Gamson & Modigliani, 1989, p. 3). This is specifically important for a topic such as police shootings which usually would be a “breaking news” situation.

### **Objectivity**

Professional journalists hold on to objectivity as a “strategic ritual” in that they use to protect themselves from critics and mistakes (Tuchman, 1972). Objectivity for U.S. news journalists is a paramount quality in their reporting of the news (Donsbach & Klett, 1993). Skovsgaard et al. (2013) found that objectivity varied amongst journalists depending on how they perceived their role. Perception is an individual trait that varies from person to person. A journalist’s attitude towards a topic could be a factor of whether he or she believes it should be covered. However, if a journalist follows the core value of objectivity, then he or she would simply report the facts on any given story regardless of how they view the issue.

### **Episodic vs Thematic Frames**

Another factor that may shape a journalist’s view of police shootings would depend on whether the individual journalist sees the topic as an individual-level story or societal. Iyengar (1991) underlined individual-level or episodic frames as a practice where journalists focus on single events and thematic or societal-level frames as more in-

depth and requiring more data collection. Journalists are more likely to focus their stories in an episodic manner in both television and newspaper (Iyengar, 1991). Episodic is characterized as more in the moment, individualized, and personal. When connected to a certain story such as police shootings, this would mean a journalist would interview the victim's family, putting a personal factor on the story. Meantime, thematic, as defined by previous research, shows that it takes more time, requires more data collection, and is more in line with a societal view of journalism practices. While thematic frames focus on a journalist's routines, they could also tell us a lot about how journalists could potentially answer questions about how they select stories for the public. Willis and Painter (2016) found national news outlets had a more social and political (thematic) approach in reporting the Trayvon Martin case in newspaper coverage, losing touch with the human interest (episodic) approach. An analysis of news coverage describing a Muslim or Islam perpetrator who committed a crime in the U.S. was more likely to be thematic with journalists presenting the issue as "war on terror," however, when compared to someone who is identified as non-Muslim, the perpetrator was likely humanized as "mentally ill" or having their actions justified (Morin, 2016).

### **Organizational Pressures**

*Organizational pressures* are another internal factor affecting how journalists work. While a journalist's personal values and roles are factored in to how he or she communicate a message (Lee & Maslog, 2005), it is outweighed by the values of the news organization (Plaisance & Skewes, 2003). These personal values include a journalist's family, religion, and cultural environment. This is especially important when measuring a highly controversial topic, such as police shootings, which could evoke

emotion from a journalist covering a story. If personal values held a lot of weight on how the topic is covered, then the issue would be reported differently based on an individual's background. Journalists have pressures they must follow in accordance with the publisher's views or political stance, which is often reflected in the editorial tones and routines of a news organization (Gans, 1979; Shoemaker & Reese, 1991). For example, a newspaper that is conservative will be more likely to connect with limited government and individual freedoms, whereas liberal newspapers will have an adverse view of greater government and societal roles. In a 2010 study comparing liberal and conservative papers coverage of poverty, liberal papers were more likely to frame the issue as societal (Kim, Carvalho, & Davis, 2010).

### **New Media and Citizen Journalism**

Technology undoubtedly plays a role in catapulting the topic of police shootings into the minds of Americans. One of the earliest police brutality incidents caught on camera was the 1991 beating of Rodney King. While this incident was not a police shooting, it involved a Black male beaten on camera by several White Los Angeles police officers. The response from this incident started a social movement which sparked one of the worst race riots in United States history. While this was long before social media, this incident was captured on video by a bystander who sent the tape to a media organization. This caused it to become a heavily mediated issue as the video of King being beaten by officers aired around the nation.

While the incident was not caught on camera, citizen journalism following the 2014 deadly shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, also supports the power

behind citizens utilizing technology. Bonilla and Rosa (2015), analyzed “hashtag activism” to find social media was an influential force to challenge police brutality as a “misrepresentation of racialized bodies in mainstream media” (p. 4). The researchers found the initial tweets of the hashtag #Ferguson following the shooting death of Brown were to convey information as it happened. However, it was a segment of the community who generated interest on the shooting before traditional news media outlets caught on to the incident (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015). The community of Twitter users defied traditional media outlets by creating social hashtags such as: #HandsUpDontShoot, #IfTheyGunnedMeDown, and #NoAngel (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015). However, there are competing sides to this debate, as some experts claim there is not an increase in coverage. Instead they blame videos, social media, and shifting attitudes for the so-called spike in coverage (McLaughlin, 2015). No matter what side of the debate, technology and citizen journalism challenges the flow of traditional media sources.

For the sake of this research, citizen journalists are people who record, write/blog, photograph media messages, but are not employed by a mainstream media outlet. Police shootings captured on cell phones by citizen journalists and uploaded on social media platforms are shared and can quickly go viral. The convergence of technology and social media has allowed citizen journalists to thrive in capturing and sharing information with others (Mythen, 2010). Antony and Thomas (2010), credit the popularity of citizen journalism to the coverage of the Oscar Grant shooting. The 2009 shooting involved an unarmed black male who was shot in the back by BART police officer. Due to citizen journalist video, the mainstream media was forced to cover the event. Jacobs (2000) argued the diversity of participatory media challenges the mainstream “traditional” media



which is elitist and inaccessible. Citizen journalists provide an alternative view to telling stories that some believe traditional news journalists would ignore. However, with the success of citizen journalism, mainstream media organizations may have to rethink their policies. For instance, when media organizations see a video go viral on a story, they may be pressured to go outside of normal production values to get confirmation from officials and cover that story.

A case study from Robinson and DeShano (2011), showed the coexistence of citizen journalists (bloggers) and local reporters influences “each other’s internal and external practices and relationships” (p. 978). This shows that the work between the two groups overlaps to change what the other may be doing. Whether traditional news journalists agree with the work of citizen journalists, they are at least thinking about their work (Lewis, Kaufhold & Lasorsa, 2010). A survey of adults found consumers who had a more positive connection to citizen journalism did not particularly associate with professional journalism values (Holton, Coddington & Zuniga, 2013). Due to the diversity of routines, citizen journalists were more likely to use unofficial sources and opinions in the stories as opposed to the practices of traditional journalists (Carpenter, 2008). It is clear that citizen journalists have created a lane for different topics such as police shootings, which may have an effect on how the story is covered.

### **Research Questions**

For the sake of this exploratory study, the researcher poses the following research questions:

RQ1: Do journalists believe they “frame” or shape the topic of police shootings for the public? If so, how is this achieved?

RQ2: How do journalists articulate the role of race in the way they cover police shootings?

RQ3: How do journalists articulate the role of objectivity, organizational roles, and journalistic practices in their coverage of police shootings?

RQ4: In what way(s) has technology/citizen journalism affected news coverage as pertained to the issue of police shootings?

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODS**

#### **Why Interview Journalists**

The interview is one of the fundamental processes for journalists to gather information, which shows they are extremely familiar with the practice. Due to their familiarity with the technique, interviews may be an “efficient” and “effective” way to gather data from journalists (Bowd, 2004, p. 121). For the sake of this qualitative research, specific journalists were selected to be interviewed because of their experience with reporting on police shootings and their first-hand knowledge with delivering these stories to the public.

Interviews with journalists allow researchers an opportunity to tap into their inner thoughts about their roles and the stories they cover. This is especially important for controversial stories such as police shootings. By interviewing journalists, researchers are able to gain a unique perspective into their behaviors and norms (Besley & Roberts, 2010; Gans, 1979; Lewis, Kaufhold & Lasorsa, 2010; Nishikawa, Towner, Clawson & Waltenburg, 2009; Robinson & Deshano, 2011; Tuchman, 1972; Usher, 2014).

Interviews provide insight on this topic that I would not be able to receive through a survey, experiment, or content analysis. This also allows the opportunity to ask follow-up questions as noted in a semi-structured interview style. Interviews have been used successfully in previous studies involving journalists.

By interviewing journalists, Besley and Roberts (2010) investigated how reporters covered deliberative public engagement between political leaders and community members and the issues with journalists reporting on the topic. The authors suggest their results were achieved due to the nature of the qualitative interview which allowed journalists to explain how citizens play a role in public discussions on topics. In a study about journalistic norms and diversity in newsrooms, interviews with 18 journalists of color were conducted to investigate race relations and their roles (Nishikawa, Towner, Clawson, & Waltenburg, 2009). To explore citizen journalism, researchers interviewed 29 newspaper editors about their thoughts about participatory journalism (Lewis et al., 2010). As demonstrated in previous studies, interviews with journalists put them in their comfort zone. Overall, this method allows for an environment whereby the researcher and journalist can converse in an equal exchange of information.

### **Interview Procedure**

For this research, I interviewed 10 television news journalists about their roles, journalistic practices, beliefs, and backgrounds in covering police shootings. I asked specific questions about race, social media influence, journalistic norms, their background, and thoughts surrounding the topic of police shootings. The types of journalists I interviewed varied from years of experience, demographics (age, gender, race), area of expertise, and market size. Market which ranks news organizations based on the number of households they reach. For example, New York, New York is market #1 because it has the most number of viewers, while Glendive, Montana is market #210 because it has the least number of viewers. I contacted journalists through email, phone, informants, and respondent interviews (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011; Moscovitz, 2013).

Informant interviews allow you to connect with people who know what is going on in a particular field and can lead you to understand what goes on in that community. Because of my television broadcast background, I reached out to journalists I had met, and using snowball sampling, utilized them to help me connect with other journalists who covered high-profile shootings. I also contacted journalists in which I was acquainted with professionally. I also reached out to journalists who I read about through different stories that I found online. This was done by searching stories and reading who wrote them or who was covered in them. By using the contact information that I found, or that was passed on to me, I set up interviews. I also made sure to reach out to different journalists based on different backgrounds and demographics. Each journalist was required to have covered at least one high-profile police shooting, but more than half of the journalists directly covered two or more. I confirmed their role in the news coverage before I conducted the interviews.

I conducted two interviews face-to-face, one through Skype, and seven over the phone. All 10 interviewees were informed before the interview that their answers would be audio recorded and transcribed. Due to the controversial matter of this topic, I assigned pseudonyms to each of the journalists. The pseudonyms I selected were random and had no connection to anyone. I also removed specific identifiers for the journalists such as individual characteristics that could make them easy identifiable. Due to the sensitive and controversial manner of this topic, I thought the journalists would be more comfortable to speak on their behaviors, practices, and roles if their names were not used. I left in their race, age, and general market areas to give a better idea of their

backgrounds, because I believe diversity, whether race, age, or gender, adds to this research.

Lindlof and Taylor (2011) call the researcher interview a social process that ranks as one of the preeminent ways to study in the field of communications. Authors call it the “digging tool” of social science, which are “ports of entry into a person’s worldviews or ideologies” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 174). This open dialogue will be a “conversation with a purpose” (Bingham & Moore, 1959) which could not be achieved through any other methodological process.

My perspective of having a similar experience to “study sideways,” which is having a similar professional background or field with the subjects you are interviewing, (Plesner, 2011) allowed me to connect to the subjects and have conversations with similar vocabularies of industry lingo that will build to the greater understanding of theory on this research topic. This allowed me access that would differ from studying up or studying down. I was thoughtful to make sure that I focused more on their (the interviewees’) experiences, rather than interjecting my own thoughts. This is critical as my goal is to get their insight into this research topic of police shootings in the media that only journalists can provide. This is the purpose of interviews as Lindlof and Taylor (2011, p. 173) defines is to “understand(ing) the social actor’s experience and perspective through stories, accounts and explanations” and “gathering information about things or processes that cannot be observed effectively by other means.”

## **Sample Description**

The 10 journalists who were interviewed have diverse backgrounds. 5 were African American (3 males, 2 female); 4 were Caucasian (2 female, 2 male) and one Indo-Canadian (female). Their ages ranged from 24 to 64. Their professional journalism experiences ranged from 4 years to 44 years in television news, and 9 journalists held some type of journalism or professional degree. Their positions included both editorial or managerial roles which included: senior reporter, reporter/anchor, executive producer, producer, photographer. While some of the journalists had a preference to cover feature reports, most of them were assigned either general assignment, crime, or political coverage. One of the journalists admitted they worked in a conservative organization. Their markets ranged from network to large to mid-sized to smaller-sized markets. A further description of each journalist can be found in the appendix. All journalists either worked in a market where a highly-publicized shooting occurred or they were sent to cover the shooting. The high-profile shootings in which they covered directly include: Walter Scott, Philando Castile, Justine Damond, Anthony Lamar Smith, Levar Jones, Keith Lamont Scott and Michael Brown. The journalists also mentioned they had covered several other shootings that were not highly-publicized. The interviews ranged from 20 minutes to an hour and 15 minutes, with an average length, of 44 minutes. When journalists brought up a specific shooting they covered, I would ask for more specifics of a particular high-profile case. Here is a closer look at the journalists and a little more about their backgrounds. Pseudonyms are being used in place of their names.

Jenny – African American female in 20's. Almost five years of professional experience. Reporter in large market, second on-air job, but has experience in digital journalism and working on the assignment desk.

Nicole – White female in 30's, who works in a managerial role at a TV station. Has worked hands-on in several "breaking news" stories that captured the nation's attention, including a high-profile police shooting.

Samuel – African American male in his 30's. Executive producer/producer and award-winning journalist with more than 10 years of experience in several positions in a television newsroom. Has worked in three newsrooms, in two different markets. One mid-sized, the other a smaller market.

Ana – Indo-Canadian female in 20's. Ana is a reporter/anchor in a large market and has worked in four television markets which includes mid-sized and large markets. She has more about 8 years of professional television experience.

Becky – African American female in her 30's. Becky is a reporter/anchor who works in a large market and is currently in her third television market. She has more than 10 years of professional experience both behind-the-scenes and on-air.

Shannon – White female in mid-20's. Currently works in large mid-western television station. 4 years of professional experience. This is Shannon's second producing job and second television market.

Damian – African American male in his late 30's. Works in large market in the south. Also, has experience in mid-sized and smaller market in the south.

John – White male, 60's, senior reporter. John has more than 40-years of television news experience, 30+ in his current market.



Brad – African American male in his 30's who works in a large market in the southeast. Brad has worked in small, mid-sized and large markets.

Charlie – White male in his 30's who works in a network position. Has worked in two other stations, one mid-sized and the other a smaller television station. Mostly covers political news.

### **Interview Questions**

Each interview started with an overview of the project and informed consent from the journalists that their responses would be recorded. To correspond with the research questions, I used an interview guide that was divided into four categories. The questions were separated into background, professional norms, race, and technology. Small changes were made with each interview to address specifics of each journalist's experience or to clear up any issues or misunderstanding. However, the open-ended questions from each category were asked to all participants. The questions started off with background questions about their experiences. Then we progressed into the topic of police shootings to gauge whether the journalists believed the topic was an important one for the media to cover. After this series of questions, I asked the journalists about race and diversity in covering this topic. Depending on how they answered the questions, I would ask follow-ups and for more specifics. Lastly, I asked about technology including social media and their experiences with citizen journalism. Some of the journalists would answer portions of the questions before I would ask them specifically, so I asked for more specifics to clarify their answers. Due to their familiarity with the interview process, nearly all the journalists asked me whether they answered my questions adequately or in their entirety.

Some even admitted to rambling, but I believe it was good to hear their raw truths about this topic. The full interview guide can be found in the appendix.

### **Data Coding and Analysis**

I recorded the audio from the interviews using two digital recorders and computer software. Audio from the interviews was transcribed and typed for the process of analyzing the data. I used categorization and coding schemes. Spiggle (1994, p. 493) names categorization as “identifying a chunk or unit of data as belonging to, representing, or being an example of some more general phenomenon.” By using categories from individual codes, a researcher is able “to define and explain the underlying meaning of these elements” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 248). After properly categorizing the data, I separated them into themes. I then read and reread the interviews as I found the common themes.

As for interpretation, I used my background knowledge with having a clear understanding of industry practices and language to help me understand what the journalists were saying. This also helped me to be able to analyze their processes and roles within a newsroom. I used my experience with story selection, objectivity and roles of journalists to help me interpret the interviews. It also helped me to ask follow-up questions when needed. For instance, when a journalist would talk about experience with social media, I would draw upon my knowledge of utilizing social media to help me understand and analyze this theme.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **RESULTS**

#### **When to Cover the Story**

When I asked whether police shootings are an important topic to cover, journalists gave me a definitive “yes” or “absolutely.” It was evident that the coverage of this issue had been framed in a certain way, as every journalist I interviewed could tell me the name of several shooting subjects from cities around the nation, but not necessarily the exact name of the officer involved. This speaks volumes. It shows me that this story is being framed in such a way that the journalists remember who was shot, not the officer did the shooting. It also tells me that this story has been framed as an important topic because all 10 journalists I spoke with were confident in examples, stories, and names. It is also important to note that while the reporters may not know the officers in the other cases, they could tell me the name of the particular officer who was connected to a case they covered directly.

When covering police shootings, the journalists I interviewed were often the first on the scene, some of the first to tweet about it, and on the air whether they were in the studio or in the field. These journalists wore bullet proof vests, gas masks, changed their clothes, their routines, and were the first to call a police public information officer to get the facts on the case.

## **“We the Media” Frame This Topic**

It was clear from the responses of the journalists that most of them believed the media had a profound effect on the way stories are crafted for viewers. While journalists did not use the term “frame” as used in communication theory, it was clear through their descriptions that they were aware of it being something that was wrapped up in their day-to-day decision-making process. Whether it was by usage of graphics or visuals, the words, or even the story angle, the journalists talked to me about how they shape a story for viewers.

I initially noticed a difference in how the journalists switched from saying “we” to “they.” When interviewees spoke positively about how journalists affected the audience, or even about objectivity, they were more likely to say “we.” They would even say “we” could do better. However, when they spoke about blame or shortfalls they were more likely to say “they,” which suggested that they dissociated from this particular news content. In answering my first research question, I wanted to investigate how journalists thought about framing in covering a police shooting. While I did not ask them about framing directly, I asked if they believed their work could shape the thoughts of the public.

### **RQ1: How do journalists use framing or shape the topic of police shootings for the public? If so, how is this achieved?**

Journalists I spoke to believed traditional news journalists had an impact on how the public perceived this topic. “The media sometimes narrates and kind of swings the way that the public thinks, because we have so much of a huge influence,” a clear

statement from Jenny, a female reporter in the Southeast, who believes journalists have a major role in telling the story about police shootings. Shannon, a producer in the mid-west said, “a lot of the times people will find out about the shootings through the news. If we’re not doing our jobs by telling both sides of the story, then people will just kind of indirectly form an opinion.” Shannon, who has less than five years of experience, but has covered several police shootings, connected the framing of this topic to being a misstep by journalists who fail to be objective. However, she was not the only one to have this view. Nicole, who is a news manager who works behind-the-scenes, also thought it was extremely important for journalists to “tell all sides of the story” and be “well-balanced” in coverage. Becky, a Black female reporter/anchor with more than 10 years of television news experience, linked framing to objectivity as well, saying that it is a must that reporters are “responsible” and should be “the window to what’s going on.” She mentioned framing could add fuel to the flames, based on what journalists choose to show and/or say:

For me as a journalist, I feel it is imperative that we are objective, it is imperative that we don’t just get on social media and just start quoting things like, “this witness just told me that an officer shot at, well that’s not what happened like, it is imperative that we are incredibly, incredibly responsible in our reporting. It’s something intense, emotions are racing and you can cause somebody to go out in the street and to do something else in reaction to this.

Becky’s observations were filled with solutions. She mentioned that journalists could frame the conversation to a greater purpose, such as getting people involved in city council and changes within a police department. She believed framing the conversation by journalists could lead to a greater good, which was a tangible result. Throughout our

conversation, she would ask questions that she believed journalists should investigate, such as reporters challenging the official account given to them by officers. John and Charlie, who are both White males had responses that were very similar to this point. John's 44 years of experience were evident in his stance to look at the issue in a more thematic way. He looked at the underlying questions, which were more long-standing, such as community relations and diversity within the police department. There did seem to be a power struggle between police and journalists and it seems to be a fine line to keep that relationship in harmony. I noticed several of the journalists alternate with their emotions by criticizing some police officers and in the next breath praising them. One thing remained constant: This relationship between law enforcement and journalists was an important one.

Jenny, a younger female reporter, was vocal about believing the media could be biased at times. Several journalists agreed with her, saying the media crafted the coverage of police shootings and if handled irresponsibly, it could affect the audience. This was especially clear when bringing up the topic of criminal backgrounds of victims who were shot by police. Many of the journalists complained about their different experiences when battling peers in their own newsroom about these backgrounds. Jenny, a Black reporter who has about five years of professional experience, recalled having newsroom conversations about whether to include criminal backgrounds of victims with management and main anchors. She said a main anchor did not want to mention a shooting victim was a father because, "we don't know if this man was a criminal. We don't know if he threatened a police officer. You're trying to make people feel sorry for him." When I heard her story, it reminded me of the power struggles within a newsroom

that happen between beginning journalists and those in higher positions, such as an anchor. This may occur due to the different experience levels and tenure in a newsroom. While a reporter may have written the story, conducted the interviews, and have facts about the story, it is the main anchors and management team who have the authority to question or change their editorial content. Samuel, a Black male who works behind-the-scenes, agreed the media has a role in shaping the thoughts of the public with an agenda:

I felt the media is clearly trying to sway the situation, but what I will say there are oftentimes when we do have police shootings that there is information that is researched on particular parties in regards to police shootings that can sometimes seem unfair to the general public or to the customers we do serve, our news viewers.

He went on to mention the case of Walter Scott and ex-police officer Michael Slager and how he felt the media focused too heavily on Walter Scott's past, despite Michael Slager being charged. Jenny also mentioned the Walter Scott case. Damian mentioned the framing of a shooting victim's background by bringing up the examples of Walter Scott, Eric Garner, and Trayvon Martin:

It's hard to kind of differentiate that on the national level sometimes. I feel like there's a lot of that happening to the victim. Like with the one in New York, who couldn't breathe, Eric Garner, the media felt the need to point of his past criminal history. You know, why? It has nothing to do with this man, was shot or died in police custody. That's the matter at hand. That's not a shooting, so I'm sorry I brought that up. It's still like why, why bring up all of that about his past. Even with Trayvon Martin they brought up old pictures of him, or old situations with him that had nothing to do with the fact of him that he was shot killed in this neighborhood that he had every right to be in. So yeah, I do feel like the media does dig up "stuff" that doesn't need to be presented and it does create a scenario, it does give people a bad view of who that person might be.

Anna, a mid-level reporter who covered Ferguson, also agreed that journalists have a role in shaping the public's perception and that everything a reporter or producer does could have an effect on the stories that are sent out. She said it is the little intricate details like "how you craft a headline" that can have a big difference:

You know I can say a convicted drug user shot by police or I can say father of four shot by police. Both may be accurate, but how do you sum up a person's life in this context. Think how you describe the victims and the officer is very important. You know you can talk right after that about how many years they've been on the force.

Nicole, a news manager, thought it was important within a newsroom to talk out various situations amongst the team in order to avoid certain discrepancies in coverage. Nicole says those conversations were paramount in her station's coverage of the Walter Scott shooting. While she did not use the term frame, she gave an example of how her newsroom debated the usage of Michael Slager's mug shot versus his military or official police photo for a graphic. Nicole thought some photos could define "what the public's going to think of him." She said:

If we show him in a military uniform, Michael Slager in a military uniform, that's portraying him as a good guy kind of to the public. If we are showing him in maybe a mug shot, it was showing he was arrested and charged. Showing his current day status compared to what he used to be.

She says because he had been arrested and charged at that point, it was an important factor to the team that it was reflected in the coverage. Brad, a Black photojournalist who covered protests after the Keith Lamont Scott shooting, said certain "trigger words can have an effect on people too." He talked about the many other police shootings after Keith Lamont Scott, admitting that they were covered, but did not receive the attention of



the Keith Scott shooting. Brad said he converses with friends inside and outside of the media to address the topic of media presentation:

It feels like we can probably do a better job at this because you know we go out there and we say another Black man. People look at words and certain phrases and things that are said and that's how people form their opinions and thoughts too.

Shannon, a producer with 4 years of professional experience, believed that while it is a “struggle” to cover the other side of an issue when that side is not talking, it is important to find a balance for the viewers. “They are formulating their opinions based on what we are doing. So we have to give both sides and let the people decide what they want to think.” She is referring to the practice of journalists interviewing both sides of a topic to provide the audience a more accurate account of an issue. When I asked her how this is achieved, Shannon responded:

The way that we gather information, the way that we ask questions. How deep we dig into the story itself. How much we try to find out exactly what happened. Sometimes it is impossible to find out sometimes that kind of stuff. Nobody will ever truly know, except for the people who were there, will know. It's hard, you know people will formulate their opinions on that. It's kind of present, you know certain people will only watch CNN or certain people will only watch FOX news. It's just all about like the style of telling the story.

John, a more seasoned journalist, talked about how the perception of the news media is to report on crime with, “if it bleeds, it leads.” However, he believed this was no longer an issue with how stories are presented. John said he noticed over the decades that people have voiced their displeasure with back-to-back mug shots and want more substance. John who has worked in his current market for more than 30 years said the initial framework of the story comes from the public information officer within the police

department, but that it was the responsibility of a good journalist to know this may not be the entire story. John mentioned he had a long-standing good relationship within local law enforcement, which enabled him to get a more “accurate sequence of events” to have more context on the story:

I think journalism is evolving in a lot of ways including how we transmit information, how we convey information, how we shape the information that we get. We have to always be vigilant that we are not shaping our conclusions by what we’re hearing from people who are criticizing our Twitter feeds or complaining about how we covered a story. I think that it doesn’t hurt to go back to the basics. To start any coverage of any particular issue with the who, what, why, when, how, and all the things we first learned in Journalism 101. And to always be skeptical of the official version of things and to always ask questions and to always know that there are no such things, that they may sound dumb but any question may sound dumb but allows you to get a better understanding, clearer understanding of what is actually true is a good question.

John expressed he always does a little homework before reporting on a story, which allows you to “cut through the basics.” Something John said is important:

Young journalists don’t quite understand. I think over a period of time, as you put a few years on of doing this business, you understand that people who are being interviewed and you are coming at them in an informed basis don’t have to explain things from square one.

Samuel said he wanted more fairness to be included in the coverage of police shootings and he wanted to block out the “tunnel vision” he believed was taking place with journalists. He added, “If we’re going to look up background info on the victim, it should be across the board that we’re also looking up background information on the officer that is facing charges or has even been convicted.” Similar to Jenny’s response about guilt, Samuel who is also Black said, “in our society today, you are automatically guilty based on the color of your skin and then you are found not guilty after certain

circumstances are determined. So, and that's not necessarily my opinion as a journalist, that's my opinion. That's personal." Damian, an anchor in a large southern market, believed framing is achieved through media outlets constantly interjecting race into the conversation. He felt as if journalists simply stuck to presenting the facts, then shaping public perception would not be an issue. Damian did not think the police shootings were covered unfairly from a media standpoint. However, he felt like local news did a better job at covering the topic compared to national news outlets.

If you stick to the facts, I mean you're doing your job. You're informing the public about what happened. I think the public, it's their responsibility to form their own opinion to it based on the fact. Well, I also think we have a role in how we present it too. Like I said, if you stick to the facts, I think you're fine. I think because all of these shootings were happening so many times, I think we got too complacent. Producers, even anchors, and reporters, every time a police involved shooting happened, we pointed out a White police officer shot a Black man. And I think that does drive home the whole race thing. Sometimes it's just the fact that a police officer shot a person. I don't think that we have to present that it was a White police officer who shot a Black man because sometimes it might of just happened. It's those circumstances, not skin color because we are not going to point out a Black police officer shot a White man. Like, I've never seen that in any scripts but you constantly see a Black man was shot by a White police officer.

Damian, a Black male, felt that on the national level, there are many media members ready to convict the officer before all of the facts were out, especially due to public opinion, but he felt that it was rightfully so at times. Brad and Nicole two behind-the-scenes journalists with different backgrounds including their gender and race also thought the national media played a significant role in the framing of police shootings. Some of the journalists had an unfavorable opinion when it came to the role of national media on this topic saying the national news media had an agenda for website clicks and

TV ratings. They also thought the national news media was giving all media a negative connection to this issue in the public eye. Charlie, a producer who worked in network, was the only interviewee who was skeptical that journalists have the authority or power to shape the public's perception:

I don't know if they have a role in crafting perception but I believe they have a role in making sure everyone has ample access to everything they need in this situation. I don't think that the media has, or should give people help shape perception, but I think they need to lay everything out there. There's not always two fair and balanced sides to an argument and by laying all the facts out on the table, an intelligent viewer can see that. I think that's a big issue of giving both sides equal time when there may be an unequal amount of information on one side versus the other.

However, he was vigilant in making sure he kept the story as evenly reported as possible. Charlie, who also has a strong background in political news, did not believe there was unfair coverage, but instead "incomplete coverage," and that journalists could do so much more to get to the depth of the issue. Charlie and other reporters thought it was easy for the media to default to the topic of race, but there was so much more to understanding the issue:

If you have cases of police officers opening fire on people who were compliant, there's a problem there. And that doesn't matter if it's racially motivated or appears racially charged or not. If a police officer shoots somebody that's being compliant sticking their hands out of the window or reaching for their wallet like they are being ordered, there's a problem with how, something with the training or the psychological assessments of police officers and their jobs. I think it's very easy to fall into a trap of focusing solely on the question of was this a racially motivated shooting? Are police institutions consisted of prejudiced individuals? And those are important questions. I think even the Justice Department even investigated Ferguson and found out that to be the case, but I think as journalists there are a lot of other questions that need to be answered. Something I found is

a lot of the time the stories that seem to be the most boring or the angles that seem to be the most boring come out to be the most interesting.

### **Reporting on Race in Police Shootings**

It was inevitable that race would be mentioned when talking to the journalists about police shootings. All 10 journalists brought up the issue of race, diversity, profiling, and/or stereotypes of minority groups before I had arrived to this line of questioning. The journalists were steadfast in agreement that a television news organization, regardless of market, staffing, race of subject or officer, would cover a police shooting. The caveat was taking a deeper look into the prominence of the story in how the story would be covered.

### **RQ2: How do journalists articulate the role of race in the way they cover police shootings?**

Journalists did not shy away from race in our conversations about police shootings. The topic was a mixture of history, the current national climate, and race being a default issue for journalists to effortlessly cover. Charlie, a White male, said he believes it is the first question that is asked and race plays “a very big role.” Shannon, a White female, agreed that people will automatically resort to race adding, “The ones we’ve been covering, it’s been a White male shooting a Black man when he’s unarmed or there’s no reason to kill him.” However, she mentioned a difference in how her former station, which was in the South, covered the topic compared to her current station in a large Midwestern state. Shannon felt that because her current market is not as diverse, the race of the person who was shot and police officer are not much of an issue when covering this topic in the newsroom. However, Becky, a Black female mentioned race as

a factor on the national scale, but said she did not hear of other races being shot by police officers as much.

I found the majority of the journalists believed that if the shooting victim shot by a law enforcement officer was Black, the story would immediately gain prominence, leading to team coverage and potentially the national spotlight. Several others agreed, including Damian, a Black male who blamed it on the national climate. Brad, who is also a Black male, explained his personal experience with race and this topic:

People got shot after Keith Lamont Scott, like a deaf man was shot and he was a White guy. Two Mexican guys were shot another time by the same police and it seems like you can just say oh, it was a White man or oh, it was a Mexican man and it seems like life goes on. Well, maybe the Mexican people might have their protests or the White people may have their protests. It's like a lot of media knows that if a Black man gets shot by the police, it's a big deal now. You can just use that. It's gonna be a big topic. It's gonna get them the attention. I mean you just know. You know what its gonna do. I wish we uh, I don't know. I don't know how to answer it. Like I said, I love what I do, but sometimes it does make me upset with the way some of this stuff unfolds.

Similarly, Nicole said there were not any groups for other races that pushed the agenda for their racial group, like the NAACP does for Black people. Nicole, a White female news manager who works in the South, thought race or gender should not be factors in determining the type of coverage, but she thought they were due to the political climate in 2018. Like many of the other journalists, she felt it was as if the nation forced the race issue:

As much as I would hate to say it, it does. Sometimes, we question ourselves... with if it was a White guy who was shot by a Black officer would there be this much attention on this story as well. I would hope so,

because that's fair and balanced to do that, but it seems like in today's (society), there wouldn't be.

John's tone resembled that of reflection and accountability for journalists. John, a White male, thought viewers would expect a shooting to be covered by a news organization regardless of a race. However, he thought it was important to understand whether there was a pattern:

I'm sure if you broke down the stats that you could find whether not there's a pattern. I think sometimes there have been legitimate questions raised whether or not White cops tend to shoot Black subjects more often. I think in some cases yes... but it probably varies from location to location and from state to state.

John also mentioned that journalists have to be cognizant of how they are covering race and ask legitimate questions such as, "whether or not the life of a 15-year old Black kid in the North Main community is being given the same kind of value as 17-year old White college student" in a more affluent community. John's stance is that more affluent communities had influence, which could determine coverage. He is not the only one who believed journalists cherry-picked stories based on the area in which they happened. However, Anna had insight into how if the shooting was in East or North Saint Louis, what she called "the hood," that the shooting would more than likely not be covered because the ratings meters were mostly in the suburbs and her station wanted to appeal to that segment of the community. However, Anna mentioned if "anything happened in the suburbs, it would definitely be covered."

Jenny, a Black female, explained that historically there were certain disparities in the treatment of Black people in America. For instance, she said Black people were compared to “animals” such as “monkeys” and there were certain negative stereotypes that haunted the nation which effected police officers, regardless of their race. She said those “personal experiences” were a factor in how officers react to the issue of police shootings and race was a factor in how newsrooms reported the issue. While Jenny said she did not believe all journalists were unfair, she thought the mixture of race and police shootings in a newsroom got “nasty.” When talking about how it is handled in newsroom, she responded, “It gets uncomfortable and you know people try to push their own agendas.”

Samuel, a producer said, “we’re living in a time to where racism again has reared its ugly head and its sense of awareness with that. Anytime there is a police shooting, that sense of awareness, that sense heightens, that sense of high emotion always comes back to the forefront.” He also mentioned that newsrooms needed diversity to help balance out the conversation about controversial topics such as police shootings and that he served as a mediator in his newsroom to help bridge that gap. While Samuel felt as if his background as a Black male in a newsroom was important, he thought reporting on the issue needed to include race. “If it was a Black officer that killed a White man and we didn’t report race there would be an uproar about this. Especially since we live in the conservative south, and we live in a conservative state, people are very perceptive to race in the media.” Shannon, a White female, says her current news market was not diverse, so the conversation on race rarely happens. However, it was in the forefront when she worked in the South.



However, Anna, an Indo-Canadian female, says race was something that her station avoided. Anna mentioned that her particular station also had rules not to mention race in their reporting of crimes in their scripts or live shots. She says instead they must find something else descriptive, like the type of car they drove or “a special tattoo.” She thought it was odd, and she mentioned the viewers complained on Facebook, but the policy is still in place. It seems this was mainly in response to the months of ongoing Ferguson protests. Anna added, while she understood it was to “protect the station,” she also thought it was a disservice to the diverse community they served.

### **A “Special” Case on Race: Justine Damond**

An unexpected point that came out of this conversation was the shooting death of Justine Damond by a law enforcement officer. Damond, a White woman from Australia, was shot and killed after she called the police to report what she thought was an assault near her home in July of 2017. Three of the journalists I spoke to mentioned this case by name; one of the journalists had a unique connection, making some of the initial calls as the story broke overnight on a weekend.

Race was an issue that was addressed by the journalists who talked about this shooting. It is important to note that the journalists mentioned this case voluntarily, without being prompted. All of them thought it was a story that got special treatment from the media due to the victim being a White female. Jenny even mentioned that she noticed a station posted a “rest in peace” post on its Facebook page “asking viewers to send their condolences,” something she said she had never seen done by a news station for a Black male victim. Jenny said she was shocked to see the news organization ask for

sympathy. Her stance was that the station had violated the objectivity norm. Anna on the other hand, said the incident was “shocking,” but it was clear she was making the point to show that Black males were not the only ones who get National coverage following a police shooting. Shannon covered the Damond shooting and said that the fact that the officer is a person of color and the victim is a White female made the story interesting. However, once again the conversation went back to race. Shannon recounted what happened:

It was Saturday night to Sunday morning. We heard on the scanner there was an officer-involved shooting. The other producer and I decided to send the reporter. There was a little bit of push back at first because there was little information being released, but then eventually we found out, like okay, the woman died. This is something that’s going to be really big. I mean national news came here. It was a huge deal when it happened. Staffing wise as everything unfolded. We had team coverage. We sent like 6 or 7 reporters out to get different angles.

### **Race, Protests and Black Lives Matter**

The mention of protests and Black Lives Matter was also at the forefront of most of my conversations with journalists. While I did not have this in my prepared guide of questions, every journalist made sure to address the “elephant in the room” that was the protests and the Black Lives Matter movement. This was at the intersection of race and the issue of police shootings. Anna was more in tune with this issue as she mentioned being surrounded by constant protests in the market she worked. Being in the epicenter of the coverage in her Midwestern market, fallout from Ferguson became a part of her daily work schedule and life. She told me a story about how the protests, which went on for more than 30 days, caused the entire newsroom staff to work 12-hour shifts and when the teams went out in the field, they had to go with hired security. She mentioned the protests

were so intense, “we were prepared for the city to burn down.” However, Anna said some of the stations stopped covering the protests because it was not in the suburbs and the viewers “are not directly impacted by people protesting in downtown St. Louis or talking about Black Lives Matter.” She thought the traditional media was turning its back on this community and mentioned that she thought it was unfair. However, she said an unexpected result from this segmentation from “traditional news outlets” emerged in the form of “a group of individuals in the Black community who are not affiliated with the news starting their own news sites.” She said the community will show up to crime scenes and report about police shootings. Anna mentioned, “they were in the protests. They are not afraid to be arrested. They are filming their own arrests. So it has led to more maybe viewpoints coming forward. And I think that helps. What we can’t say on the news, they’re able to say.” She is referring to citizen journalists who have a clear connection to how this story catapulted into the spotlight.

Samuel, a Black male, said the recent outpouring of protests and the birth of the Black Lives Matter movement were a result of the “regularity” of several police shootings across the U.S. He says the continued coverage of “a White officer that has fired on a Black person” from places like Ferguson, New York, and Los Angeles gave a heightened reason for journalists to cover this topic. Samuel continued, “there’s always been a case of with these officers felt that there was some kind of reason that the person who they shot deserved what they got. Because if they had a potential criminal background or because they were seen as a potential menace to society.” In his observation, he connected the protests with the stereotyping of African Americans and

their need to have their voices heard. This is something he was adamant about mentioning several times during the interview.

Jenny, an African American female mentioned the case of Trayvon Martin as a catalyst, which “sparked the conversation just about African Americans being targeted by some type of official holding a gun.” Jenny added that after this case “you just saw all of these clips and stories of all of these Black me being killed by officers and the conversation just kept going,” which she says eventually lead to the Black Lives Matter movement:

I think all of those things just yelled, hey, the African American community is paying attention and I’m not going to let you paint Trayvon Martin as a thug. I’m not going to let you paint Walter Scott as a thug because he had a family and he did x,y,z. We are using our camera. We are using our organizations outside of NAACP to talk about these things and to let you know that if you’re not going to report these things. We’re going to find these pictures of Michael Brown, that’s not his mug, of him in his graduation cap and gown to let you know there’s another side to this person and not how the media is trying to paint them. I think people just got tired.

The Black Lives Matter movement was brought up in all 10 interviews. Some journalists say it gave a voice to this topic and challenged the status quo. Becky, a Black female reporter, said being in the middle of protests after Michael Brown was shot and killed meant she had to change how she worked. She started to adapt to the situation and change her clothes to connect with the protestors. Becky said it helped her become a better journalist to tell the stories that mattered to the community she was addressing. Becky also said while she remained professional, she empathized with the message of the protestors:

I think what the Black Lives Matter movement or organizers are trying to do is shed light to injustices that they feel the Black community experiences every day. They're trying to say their lives do matter, that's the point of it. Not saying that somebody else's life doesn't matter but that's the point of it. You know it's not saying that we disrespect the flag, but we're trying to draw attention to something. These athletes come from these communities! They come from these communities! So, you know ... they're using their platform the best way they know how to bring attention to a subject and they've done a darn good job at it because we talk about it almost every day.

**RQ3: How do journalists articulate the role of objectivity, organizational roles, and journalistic practices in their coverage of police shootings?**

Something I heard more than anything else within the interview was journalists telling me about balance, fairness, and objectivity. It almost felt like they were trying to convince me of something. On the other hand, I could understand where they were coming from journalistically. Traditional journalists who have formal training are taught early on to leave their personal feelings out of stories and be fair. Objectivity is key for telling a story to an audience. Even if the word objectivity was not used, journalists spoke about how they must be fair. Several journalists told me stories about how they achieved objectivity. Some even picked up gatekeeping habits. Brad says he achieved fairness by making sure to get both sides of a story when he was out covering a protest. However, Shannon said there were challenges to achieve objectivity:

So, I think it's really hard to kind of just, you know, in producing the show and writing the story. People have different ways of describing things and I think it's really important to keep it as objective as possible. I think people just kind of keep it as objective as possible. Because I think people just kind of formulate their own opinions and just resort to race.

John agreed:

What makes you a journalist is being a seeker of the truth. A person who is willing to go out there and ask questions, pertinent questions, of authority figures. It's the person who is going to seek truth and not a political agenda. And not use whatever it is that they find to advance their own causes or to carry out some sort of thing that they wish that they can see, or the thing that they wish that they can support. I mean, I think there is something as objective truth. I think there is something that is a... there is the thing that is a lie and then there's the truth. And I think real journalists only care about what the facts are and they don't about whether it fulfills a political objective or not. Hopefully the vast majority of people who practice journalism as a profession are driven by one thing only and that is I want to put the facts out as they are as best as I can establish them to anyone's ability I want the truth to be out there. If you can do that, then you can call yourself a journalist. Anything else makes you an advocate.

Some spoke about the pressures of the organization, such as the pressure to get this story on the air, the pressures to fit every police-shooting story around the nation into a show, and the pressures to be balanced. Charlie said journalists have certain pressures from the management team, and certain responsibilities for their jobs, which prevents them from doing it all:

I think that goes, that's a little bit of an issue with the both advertiser, viewer driven nature of media, that people will click off stories they don't like. Also, the sheer time constraints of reporters that you can't cover everything that you want. Unfortunately, that means a lot of really good and important content and gets left on the cutting room floor.

Despite the pressures, others, such as Becky, said it is the responsibility of journalists to cover the stories that matter to the community:

I just keep pushing and pushing and pushing. I'll just keep emailing the assignment desk. I'll keep bringing it up in the meetings and keep being like... 'It'll be a good story. Trust and believe it's a good story' I feel like we as journalists really need to fight. Because if you're not a good story pitcher, you're not a good story pitcher, it's like I do this. But if you really

care and you're really compassionate, as you should be in my opinion, if you're a journalist and when you go to that meeting you need to speak with passion about these stories and I feel like your news director, your producers would trust in you... they'll let you do it.

The journalists I spoke to also talked about building and maintaining a good relationship with law enforcement. Becky said revealing facts was important, but she worried about reporters, because she knows they do not want to “get on the bad side of the police.” John said the reporter-law enforcement relationship is important for storytelling, but journalists must properly do their job. Anna mentioned the relationship from an informational standpoint, saying that journalists depend on law enforcement to confirm stories and get the other side. However, Charlie said it is important to dig a little deeper for the full story.

In news, we run off of official sources that's how we corroborate. We have the two-source rule, the official source rule. So when you're working with police a lot of the time it's coming right from the report or the spokesperson. So it's the official word of the government.

### **Police: The “Higher... Righter Authority”**

Journalists and law enforcement agencies work together daily, whether it is to confirm information over the phone, through email, or to be on the scene of crime. This is something I know as a former journalist and something most journalists mentioned to me. Anna said that when covering the protests, journalists stood next to police officers. This is symbolic of working hand in hand. Samuel mentioned while writing stories about Ferguson from his news desk, he saw some officers on the frontlines, “just doing their jobs” with angry citizens in their faces “screaming obscenities to their face sometimes in the name of the Black Lives Matter Movement.” He even recalled moments where he

saw video of the officers crying describing it as “very poignant scenes because it humanized some of those officers” within the news coverage.

However, despite this, several journalists mentioned police officers have the upper hand and get favored treatment in society. Most of them agreed that the media hold police officers to a higher standard and Jenny said the media tend to believe officers over victims:

I don't think it's a race thing, I think it's an officer thing because, there has been Black and White officers. On the flip side, and these are, the victims are mostly Black men. I'll put it like that. The victims are mostly Black men, but the officers, this is just me speaking to my experiences as a journalist, but the officers have been Black, White, Hispanic, but the victims are mostly Black men. When it comes to the victims, I notice that they are automatically... guilty. It's like you're guilty until we prove you innocent. But the officer is innocent until proven guilty. And then that's when we see all of the special graphics coming on our television, and the Facebook posts from news stations saying rest in peace and back this officer.

Anna says she does not think that the media necessarily victimizes anyone in particular but as the media “we always show more sympathy and our coverage always continues a lot longer for the police officers than it does for the victims.” Anna also mentioned that the media and public were more likely to side with the officers:

I feel like a lot of people have stopped asking that question and they just kind of accept it as a fact of life or they just jump to conclusions about why it's happening or it's easy to side with police. Police are the good guys and anyone who resists a police officer is obviously wrong and you're taught not to do that. I just think there's so much more that goes into it and I think there's so many people who come into this before they even interact with a police officer. They are coming into this with their own issues and own experiences and it's not a level playing field for everyone.



John, a seasoned reporter, also mentioned how American society is more likely to side with the officer. A sentiment that was also echoed by Shannon a newer journalist. She says that journalists needed law enforcement to get a more accurate account of the stories they covered.

### **Technology: A Faster, More Accurate Account**

In 2018, the world is changing, including the way people consume news. Our news consumption is different and a quick Google search can introduce you to any topic, place, or thing. The journalists all agreed that technology, citizen journalists, and the digital space all have a significant effect on the issue of police shootings.

The use of technology and social media on the salience of police shootings in U.S. media was evident in the interviews with the journalists. All of them mentioned the usage of video, phones, and social media without being prompted by me. Questions about technology were not in my original interviews, but after having the issue brought up repeatedly, I added them. It is important to note that I left these questions until last in my interviews and the journalists all talked about technology before I asked about it.

### **RQ4: In what way(s) has technology/citizen journalism affected news coverage as pertained to the issue of police shootings?**

The journalists I spoke to say social media has transformed the dialogue around police shootings. Overall, journalists talked about technology in a positive light. They praised the benefits of speed, transparency, and how it kept people around the country informed about this issue. Like most, Brad said, “technology has changed a lot” and if a

“officer-involved shooting happened, 5 minutes later it’s on Twitter, it’s online, it’s everywhere. People have it up before we get there.”

I found that journalists were enamored by the speed and impact of this issue on the platform. Charlie said:

Even as recent as 20-25 years ago if there was a high-profile shooting here in my neighborhood in ---or in Columbia, it would be very difficult for people in Los Angeles or New York or Dallas or Detroit or Chicago to really hone in on what was happening there. You didn’t have widespread Internet access. You didn’t have Twitter, you didn’t have social media, so it was really big really the only time you would really see it was for a couple of minutes on network news, when they got it. Or in evening news if there was some video that dropped down. So a lot of it there wasn’t as much access to information as readily as we have now, whereas the Walter Scott shooting was viral nationwide within hours.

Samuel agreed that social media has changed how news is consumed:

I think that it’s always been an issue and in the past where there have been instances of police shootings, I don’t believe they were heavily as reported but there has been huge resurgence. And with that resurgence it’s been one after another after another after another. Because the way we consume news now it’s much faster and how digital media plays a huge role in that, in how you can get messages about certain breaking news situations right in the palm of your hand... on your phone.

Social media created a benefit for reporting whether through justice, an accurate account, or awareness. Journalists say the benefit of technology challenged the official account from law enforcement, something no one dared to do before. Nicole said body cameras in some instances may not be on or working may not tell the whole story and the cell phone video from a passerby in the Walter Scott shooting “gave the family justice.”

Anna agreed:

I think social media and the videos. When you can see someone with their back turned like, for example, with the Charleston example that was recently settled. You saw a man walking away, running away from a police officer and he was shot in the back. Some things you don't know what happened around it necessarily, but seeing something like that is jarring. And it's hard to defend that.

John said the impact of social media is wide spread:

I think it's not just effected law enforcement, I think it's affected society. There is a camera everywhere. We understand that more and more almost on a weekly basis. There's always somebody nearby who's got a camera and the fact that we got these incredible devices in our pockets now that can capture high quality video in the spur of the moment becomes... can determine the course of not just a police shooting incident turns out, but the way society views an entire segment of a community. If not for that cellphone capturing the Walter Scott shooting that case could've been had a much different outcome, much different outcome. And it probably would have because let's face it, American society has tended to default to the side of law enforcement in these situations quite frequently. We have a long, long history of that. I think that the presence of cellphones, high-quality cameras, the ubiquity of those devices... having somebody there, surveillance cameras of various kinds, and their own security cameras, dash cams, all kinds. We have an eye on everything these days. It's more so now than ever before. There is a witness standing by that could corroborate the official version of things or an officer's eyewitness version of the way things unfolded. And sometimes it turns out to be a complete contradiction of that version.

Jenny, a reporter who covered the Walter Scott and Keith Lamont Scott shootings, said the emergence of video has been the biggest evolution:

Now things are being captured on video. And when, at first, it was easy to say that this guy threatened an officer. Or maybe he or she did whatever. But now that things are being captured on video people can't say those things and run away with it. Now it makes 'em a little more challenging to push those views on people. Because if the public doesn't hear anything if they're listening to Bob Joe, whose been on the news for 50 years who feels a certain way. They're going to listen

to what he says. When you have video and Bob Joe's biases are coming out. Then you're like that's not adding up because the video, it could be something else. Yeah, I think technology plays a part with it.

Damian cited a specific case in which social media made a true impact on the national discussion:

I think social media helps to drive an increase in awareness about when these things happen. Like Philando Castile with his girlfriend being on her phone part of the time and able to actually show what happened. While hearing about what happened would bring a bunch of anger and passion across the country with hearing about that. Actually kind of seeing him slumped over like that and hearing what she was saying and the little girl in the backseat. There wouldn't of been as much outcry I don't think without seeing and hearing all of that without social media, technology with the iPhone whatever type of phone she was using. It wouldn't have been as intense. And even to find out even after seeing all of that you know some people feel as if justice still wasn't fair in that case.

While technology and social media had its benefits, some journalists were vocal about being mindful of what they post online and attempt not to insert their own thoughts and opinions. However, they thought this was not universal, as other journalists have shared their thoughts on the topic.

Technology also gave journalists a feeling of liberation. Brad, who covered the Keith Lamont Scott shooting and protests, said there were times he could carry his equipment around and the station would be live online or on air. Becky said she felt "liberated" to be able to do her job and not worry about the pressures of going on air. Technology also helped her with time stamps for better note taking, and being able to capture more visuals to better tell the story for the audience. She said she gained

thousands of followers around the world being an active participant on Twitter in her coverage of the Michael Brown shooting in Ferguson:

I was such an active person on social media. I was just recording stuff. Like I was just recording stuff sometimes and just... running. There are times when shots would rang out and I would just duck behind a car, like with a group of other people. Kind of waiting for it to end and I was still recording. Like I would just record, record, take pictures of like tear gas. I did the same thing, I covered Jason Stockley protest that happened here recently. I think it was like August, September same thing. Like I would stay there and I would just record, record, record and I would put it on Twitter for everyone to see and it's not like something I needed to confirm that it was happening... it was happening!

Nicole, a manager who worked closely on the Walter Scott shooting, cited other technological advances:

Technology like that, you know, helped the media too because we got to see the video to see more inside the story. And we're then in turn able to use new technology to tell the story by doing Facebook lives from the scene. Or reenactment video, we have a new drone that we've taken and gone out there and shown the layout of the land because, you can see in the video there's a fence and there's some open grass but unless you walk back there you really don't know what it looks like. So a drone has been able to give us, like, a birds-eye view of what this looks like. Technology is definitely advanced in the past couple of years to make our storytelling for these types of things easier and more visual.

Citizen journalists are challenging traditional journalists to improve their routines. They are also keeping traditional journalists transparent, as Becky told me citizens are watching and recording the professionals on the scene. Citizen journalists also have tremendous access and connections to the community. Brad jokingly said "they get more respect than us sometimes" and that at first he did not understand why people were on the scene with a camera until he covered the Keith Scott shooting. Anna also said they are on

the frontlines mixed in with the protestors, while traditional news journalists are sometimes standing next to law enforcement. The opinions about citizen journalists were split, with Becky being in favor of them:

I think it helps everybody be on their A-game because if you're not doing wrong, then people having cameras, people recording everything that's happening, then that shouldn't be a problem. I appreciate it, I think it helps with these police shootings. People are able to see what's happened and some of this stuff. It's not just my word against theirs. They can see and they can hear the shots. They can see what people are saying in the car or the moments before. I think all of that is so critical in these investigations. Especially when the benchmark is so hard, right? It's an officer can say I feel like my life was in danger. Well, I mean one could argue every time you go to up to a car for a traffic stop your life could be in danger. You know what I mean? I think, I think it is incredibly helpful to have citizen journalists. I really do. I think the more cameras, the better.

Brad, a photojournalist with more than 10 years of experience, said it took a bit of time, but after seeing what they are doing, he is convinced citizen journalists can have a positive role:

They're pretty much an asset to me. I'm okay with it. I think it's affected me greatly because like I seen those guys who come out there and if I'm at home and I'm looking online and I see their pages and they're at the city's council meeting or they are at the whatever, they have followers and they have people who are like good job, person, citizen journalist way to stand up for the people. Thank you for asking those questions for us. Yeah, I think citizen journalists are here to stay and I welcome them. I hope they don't put me out of a job.

On the other hand, there was a battle of trust from traditional journalists when mentioning the effect of citizen journalists. Not everyone was a clear-cut fan of the work by citizen journalists. While some journalists were on the fence, John who had decades of

professional journalistic experience, was more cautious trusting the messages that are being sent into the digital sphere:

I think it means that not everybody out there who has a Twitter account or has a Facebook account is a journalist. Just because they have access to a medium of some sort. I think people who. The fact that they have a large following on Twitter or on Instagram doesn't make them a journalist, what makes them a journalist is whether or not they have a burning desire every day to put the facts out there. And that's it. I don't think you need much more than that. And if you've got access to a medium that allows you to do that, whether it's through broadcasting or an online outlet of some sort or in a newspaper or a magazine or whatever it may be, then that makes you a journalist.

Charlie, a producer with an on-air background agreed:

The problem is now with citizen journalism everybody has similar tools to what reporters have without the training and so there's the question of there's definitely a role they can play but it needs to be information, information from citizen journalists needs to be vetted and verified and everything else before really running with it.

Nicole, who has more editorial control of news content as a manager, had concerns about the long-term impact these citizen journalists will have on the profession:

Citizen journalists, people all have our own opinion, we're a free country and there's freedom of speech but some people I think have hurt the view of the media because they think they know what's going on because they call themselves a journalist in their own community. Whereas, we are getting paid to do this and we're FCC certified and we have all the rights to license and broadcast. Where these people are running a blog or whatever and giving their opinion or whatever. There's no way to know that's truth or fact their telling.

## **What I Did Not Expect**

There are some things I did not expect from the interviews. One of them was the impact these stories had on the journalists. I was told time and time again that their lives were forever changed. Nicole, Becky, and Brad all reflected on the moments they say will stick with them forever. In both a professional and personal way. Some journalists said they now cover stories differently, and this issue forced them to make community connections. Mainly, because journalists were out in the protests day after day, expected to turn stories for their news organizations, this turned the stories from episodic into a thematic space.

Many other journalists said they watched these stories and protests unfold in other places, but they never expected these things to happen in their backyards. While some of them traveled to different areas, all of them had extensive coverage on this topic that affected them in more ways than one. They remember the scents, the sounds, and the visuals, which will forever be imprinted in their minds and journalistic experience.

I also did not expect to hear so much about Trayvon Martin as an integral part of this topic and being a reason (along with technology) for catapulting this topic into the national spotlight. While Martin's death is not a police shooting, it is a foundational piece. Nearly all the interviewees recounted the story of Martin's death at the hands of George Zimmerman, with details connecting Martin's life to the Black Lives Matter movement and police shootings. It was almost as if they read the story from a script. One by one, the journalists would say Martin was killed by a neighborhood watchman. Whether framing or coincidence, it is evident his name is engrained within the fabric of this topic.



In a way, it was sort of surreal to hear different journalists talk about this topic. Becky, who was in the forefront of one of the most historic police shootings, the Michael Brown shooting, talked about the moment she knew it would be big.

You had so many protestors who were shouting, screaming. You had people blasting their radios, with the music “f--- the police”, you had the dogs, you smelled the smoke, you just had this long line of police vehicles. We were just positioned to stay in one place and we didn’t know exactly what was going on and that was our first night of it. We just didn’t know how long it was going to last. The next day we learned that Ben Crump, who represented Trayvon Martin, was going to be representing the Brown family and that’s when we were just like, oh my goodness this is going to be... this is going to be a big deal.

Damian said the coverage of police shootings is the culmination of a variety of cases:

I think what happened was, you had a big case. And sadly, we’ve had so many of these. In recent years, so it’s hard to remember what the racial shooting was that brought this to the national forefront. I think even the Trayvon Martin case, even though it wasn’t a police officer who shot him. You have a guy who in his mind, or in his perceived role as a security or neighborhood watch, shot this young man. And I think from that, you then had a few more cases actually involving police officers. And then it just seems that they all kept happening at one particular time, so that brought a big national discussion about why all of this happening all of a sudden.

Most of the journalists, who have reported on important stories, say they never imagined covering a story of this magnitude. They became a part of history themselves. They were in the streets when the tear gas was flowing, in the court room when an officer was being sentenced, on the scene minutes after a shooting, in the middle of thousands of protestors, and witnessing buildings burning, and it was all in the name of journalism.

As for solutions, many of the journalists say they believe diversity and community policing is a must. Many of them had a genuine desire to get to the bottom of the ongoing issue in their communities and across the nation. One thing the journalists agreed is that it will be a lot of work and it will take a lot of time. I noticed that there was not a shortage of passion from the journalists to get the story right on this issue, regardless of their market, role, gender or race.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **CONCLUSION**

Through the conversations with the journalists, it was clear that race, their roles, journalistic norms, and technology all had a heavy influence on the topic of police shootings. At times, it felt as if they were reading from a script, as these points were all interconnected. If I asked about how journalists cover this story, they would naturally mention another one of my research questions without realizing it. For instance, I would ask about whether the topic is important, and the journalists would mention how Black males are being killed, how people in society are tired of it, and the cellphone videos are making the stories capture headlines.

The findings from this study show journalists believe they have a critical role in how police shootings are framed in the media. Journalists talked about how they craft headlines, decide to report on certain facts while they omit others, choose images for broadcast and prioritize talking to officials as an authority for confirmation. The journalists' belief that they are responsible for telling people how to think about this topic is in agreement with theoretical studies about framing (Entman et al., 2009; Gitlin, 2003; Goffman, 1974). It is important to note that while the journalists believed their roles had a significant impact on this mediated topic, the journalists were adamant about simply presenting the facts in a fair, balanced, and objective way. One of the biggest findings from the interviews included journalists emphasizing the notion of objectivity. It was as if

objectivity was drilled into journalists' minds. As Tuchman (1972) showed there are practices that journalists uphold to carry the torch of objectivity and protect what they do. I noticed that objectivity was being used as a shield to protect them from appearing as if they were too opinionated and justifying their practices. It is important to note that this was not a bad thing. It did not seem intentional, but simply a culmination of deadline pressures and journalistic norms.

Most of the journalists had a preachy tone when talking about objectivity. They would talk to me as if they were trying to convince me of something, that they did not have too many personal opinions about this topic. This is a standard amongst journalists not to invoke themselves into a story. Journalists are trained to work as objective storytellers who simply report the facts. There was also a sense of pride from the journalists to deliver the stories that matter, to make a change, and to try to understand topics and inform the public about them. This is in line with the watchdog and advocacy role. It was a sense of responsibility to serve the communities around them with fair and balanced information.

It is evident that the journalists I spoke to are not intentionally framing this conversation based on any motives, intention, and political motivation (Entman et al., 2009). They all told me their personal opinions about the topic are placed on the side, despite it being a challenge at times. In their conversation and through their descriptions about their roles, practices, and behaviors, it was shown that they practiced this as well. The journalists I spoke to did not just talk about being balanced and following organizational and journalistic norms, they practiced it daily through their actions. They

all spoke with a genuine passion to help and inform people about the world around them. Many of them spoke of change surrounding this topic and getting results.

All of the journalists I spoke to were extremely open and insightful when talking about this topic. Some even told me this was the first time they had spoken in depth about police shootings so freely with someone and that it felt good to do so. It was almost as if the interviews were therapeutic. Not only did the journalists have a sense of pride, but being able to reflect on their experiences was a positive moment. In the world of journalism, new stories arrive every day, so they never get a chance to fully debrief on some of the tough topics they are dealing with while on the job. For instance, the journalists talked about how this situation changed them forever in a personal and professional way. When news organizations finally debrief, it is a rare moment that is typically centered around technical problems with the coverage, not the content.

Race is always a controversial topic to talk about in today's society. It is tough for journalists not to appear as being too concerned about certain issues, as this may be pushing them towards being an advocate as opposed to being an objective journalist, which is a cornerstone of journalism. The TV journalists were very direct in mentioning the role of Black Lives Matter movement as an integral part of shaping this message and helping to make it salient. The presence of Black Lives Matter, the figures, and the protests were mentioned throughout the interviews which confirms the role of Black Lives Matter in this topic as seen in the media. However, could it be the news organizations are also shaping the conversation by constantly focusing on Black Life Matter figures for ratings, and a more interesting broadcast? Many of them mentioned

national news outlets seemed to focus on this topic in order to get higher ratings, compared to local news outlets.

The journalists thought diversity was important within a newsroom and within the community around them, especially as it pertains to the police who are serving the public. It was brought up several times that the police force does not reflect the communities they serve. A lot of the journalists even brought up the fact that this is something that should be worked on. Perhaps this is something to be further investigated. A future study could investigate how public information officers within law enforcement agencies plan to enhance their relationships with the communities they serve and how they are communicating these efforts with media sources.

The journalists I spoke to were mostly complimentary when talking about police officer relationships with the media. This is in line with their daily routines of getting information confirmed, utilizing inside sources, and even being dependent on press releases for their information (see: Dijk, 1985; Sigal, 1973). However, many of the journalists also expressed the need for more background information and investigations into the accounts of what police officers say on the record. While journalists did not want to cross the line of being too critical of the work of police officers and cause friction in their relationships, technology was forcing journalists to question the official accounts. Now that events were being caught on camera, this challenged the official police account. This is something the journalists are still working to find balance with. Many journalists walked the fine line of making sure they were demanding, but they wanted to make the point clear that more work should be done. Many expressed gratitude for the work of the men and women in blue. However, they felt as if the relationships with law enforcement

and the public lacked foundation outside of moments when things go wrong, such as police shootings of Black males by an officer. It was suggested by several journalists that police officers should connect with the communities they serve before a negative occurrence.

While the organizational pressures which surround journalists remain in place (Lee & Maslog, 2005), they were challenged by citizen journalists and the issue of police shootings that had a heavy thematic tone. After the journalists got the sound from families, law enforcement public information officers, witnesses, there was a continued pressure from the news organizations to continue coverage on the topic, including the ongoing protests. There was still a need to cover this topic. As one of the journalists mentioned, it forced them to make more connections and get more connected to the community around them. Another factor that gives this story a more thematic feel is the ongoing coverage and how newsrooms were building investigative teams around the coverage to “dig deeper” into this societal issue. It moved into a societal realm when the different journalists spoke about the many police shootings happening around the U.S. and what seemed to be an ongoing occurrence of Black males being killed by police officers. In order to properly cover this story and the ongoing protests, newsrooms were forced to change schedules, evolve roles, and utilize technology in an unconventional way. Many of the journalists talked about the news management relaxing normal guidelines to meet daily deadlines. Now, the journalists could use social media, cellphones, drones, and be in a more relaxed state to do their jobs. They were able to change how they gather information and how they disseminate that information as well.

Technology has broken down barriers in such way to allow this story to be sent to viewers faster and without as many traditional constraints. The journalists felt good about their coverage and they felt as if technology made their jobs more efficient. However, with the constant breaking of stories, it was evident the newsrooms were forced to make these changes or risk failure to cover the issue for the audience. While some of the journalists felt they had grown because of the this, it is still questionable whether newsrooms will commit to making some of these changes in the long term. Especially due to the fact they have expectations with advertisers, ratings, and newscast times they must still meet.

There seems to be a battle brewing between citizen journalists and traditional journalists. There must be a middle ground because citizen journalism is not going away. Citizen journalists have struck a chord with certain communities such as those that feel left out or silenced by traditional news outlets. This is an even more sensitive topic to discuss when talking about an issue such as deadly police shootings. When a life is lost, the communities around these stories seem to bond together or fall apart. The journalists are left to either conform or be blocked out by a segment of people who live in those communities. As described to me, this is most of the time poorer, underserved, minority communities that have historically been mistreated. This supports the foundation of Critical Race Theory. In an effort to connect with the members of the community, the journalists have changed their habits, what they wear, and how they work to do their jobs. They have evolved in such way that their official job descriptions could be completely re-written to reflect what they do or what is expected of them. Some would say evolve is



what journalists are supposed to do, but the findings show this is journalists conforming to the practices of citizen journalists.

Meanwhile, citizen journalists are also evolving into a more traditional way of doing things. While they do not have a news organization or management team to answer to, they are changing how they work. They are becoming a voice the community can trust, a role normally reserved for the traditional news reporter and anchor. This is a change that may continue to shape media messages moving forward. Citizen journalists are not restricted by deadline pressures or organizational pressures, so they have more freedom to interview and work as they please. As noted by some of the journalists, they are also deeply involved in the stories, as they are a part of the community. One of the journalists mentioned, “they come from these communities,” so for them, they have a duty to tell the other side of the story they believe traditional outlets are ignoring. This allows the citizen journalists to be trusted sources of information for this group.

However, traditional journalists are seeing this and they are conforming to it as well.

Technology has allowed traditional journalists to break down some barriers connected to past deadlines and feel liberated to do their job differently. This allows journalists to look at a deeper connection of content which is in line with thematic frames of societal values in news coverage. If journalists were to think in a more episodic way, they would simply do the story and file it away. However, this topic has forced the conventions of traditional news values, practices, and norms by way of technology, race, and journalistic norms.

My study is not without limitations. I interviewed 10 journalists who cover highly-publicized shootings. This shows two points; that it may not be generalizable to all television journalists or even newspaper journalists and journalists who have not covered

highly-publicized shootings do not share the same experiences as most of these journalists. The journalists I spoke to have a commonality regardless of their differences in years of experience, market size, gender, or race. They have all been changed by covering this topic. They all have insight into covering a topic that has captured local and national headlines, our televisions, phones, and social media platforms. All of the journalists I spoke to say the story changed their perspective on this topic and how to cover it in one way or another. Because of this, a journalist who has never been thrust into the constant protests and television coverage in a police shooting may not be able to relate to television journalists who have had to evolve with reporting on this issue. The evidence from these interviews shows that the journalists view this as a topic which needs more investigation and footwork to be understood. This is a thematic frame. However, a journalist who covers this story, does an interview, and moves on would then view this topic on an individual or episodic frame, meaning they would move on from it.

Future research on this topic could potentially look at newspaper journalists and how they cover this topic. I would be especially interested in interviewing writers and editors from *The Washington Post* and the *The Guardian*, since both outlets dedicated staffers to understanding this topic. Also, because technology is such a major part of this story, understanding the role of social media influencers with different hashtags is something I would like to explore. In the future, a mixed methods study using qualitative and quantitative methods could also strengthen the understanding of this topic. Because citizen journalism has such a heavy role in this topic due to technology, getting the citizen journalist viewpoint would be a future angle to investigate this topic as well. One could interview citizen journalists who are highly involved in capturing stories like police

shootings and are active on social media and blogs. Also, a survey from audience members about their thoughts with media coverage of this topic would provide rich data. This topic has so much potential and provides a rich trajectory for future research.

Journalists in this study who covered highly publicized police shootings are passionate about telling an accurate account of this issue. They want to make sure they are not fueling the flames of protests by including race, but they also do not want to be insensitive to exclude it from this conversation. The journalists in this study believe there is still a long way to go to build better relationships between police officers and the communities they serve, however, the media can be a buffer to improve that communication. However, journalists must balance their work to tell accurate stories to the public and continue to nurture good relationships with law enforcement. How they frame this story puts journalists in the middle, and they are conscious of how the public and police officers view the stories they broadcast on this topic.

With the emergence of cellphone videos and social media, the coverage of this topic has evolved in such a way that journalists must continue to be creative to keep up and blend in with the communities around them or be shut out by those communities. A disconnect with those communities has created a new lane for citizen journalists to prosper as trusted sources, as told by the traditional journalists. The relationship between them is a challenging one, but it forces traditional journalists to rethink their behaviors and roles to shape their coverage of police shootings.

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## **APPENDIX A**

### **INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

The questions in this section were used as a guide for my in-depth interviews with the journalists.

#### **Background Questions:**

- Tell me a little about yourself? Your background?
- Why did you decide to be a journalist?
- What type of journalist would you consider yourself to be?
- Have you ever covered a police shooting? If so, in what capacity? National news, local news... both?
- How is the staffing in your newsroom? Can it support what you would think could be sufficient coverage for a police shooting?

#### **Journalistic Role/Practices:**

- Do you believe society or individuals are responsible for the issue of police shootings?
- Has there ever been coverage of a police shooting that you thought was covered unfairly?
- Do you believe the issue of police shootings is an important topic to cover for journalists? If so what caused this issue to be of importance?
- How does your personal beliefs play a role in covering police shootings?
- Do you believe the media has a role in how the public perceives police shootings?
- What roles does the media have in shaping the thoughts about police shootings?

#### **Race Questions:**

- Do you believe race plays a role in whether a station covers a police shooting?
- What are your thoughts about highly publicized police shootings such as Tamir Rice, Keith Lamont Scott, Michael Brown, Philando Castile? Do you believe the media victimizes anyone in particular (police or shooting subject)?
- Some studies show the murders of Black males by law enforcement are more likely to be covered in the media compared to other races and/or genders. Do you agree with this research? Please explain your stance.

**Technology Questions:**

- What role does technology have in your reporting/coverage of police shootings?
- How has citizen journalism/citizen journalists affected your coverage of police shootings?
- Does social media have an effect on how you cover this story? What about your station?

## **APPENDIX B**

### **SAMPLE LETTER TO JOURNALISTS**

To Whom It May Concern:

My name is Denetra Walker and I am a graduate student in the School of Journalism and Mass Communications at the University of South Carolina. I am currently working on research that focuses on how police shootings are covered in the news media. I believe this is an extremely important topic covered by journalists, as the public trusts messages from journalists. For this reason, I would like to explore this topic by talking to you about your thoughts surrounding media coverage of police shootings. I believe your insight on this issue is critical to help scholars have a better understanding on the roles and practices of journalists who cover controversial topics for the public. I believe journalists have an important role that many depend on to understand the communities we live in and the world around us.

My interest in how police shootings are covered by media outlets started long before I enrolled in graduate school. My background is in television news. I have worked in several television markets including small, mid-market and national outlets, which I believe give me a unique perspective to study this topic. I have also worked in television news management. This sparked my initial interest, and now its feeding my research interests as foundation to an academic career. I would like to understand your process, your experience and your thoughts on this topic. As a fellow journalist, I would appreciate some of your time to interview you about your experiences with covering police shootings.

I can assure you this interview with me will only be used for research purposes to better understand our great field of journalism. I appreciate your time and attention to this matter. If you have any questions about my research, please contact me:  
[Denetra@email.sc.edu](mailto:Denetra@email.sc.edu).

Sincerely,

-Denetra Walker

## APPENDIX C

### LIST OF JOURNALISTS

Here is a list of journalists who I interviewed for this study. Please note: their names have been replaced with pseudonyms.

<b>PSEUDONYM (AGE)</b>	<b>RACE/SEX</b>	<b>ROLE</b>	<b>MARKET/AREA</b>
<b>JENNY (25)</b>	BLACK FEMALE	REPORTER	LARGE SOUTHEAST
<b>SAMUEL (34)</b>	BLACK MALE	PRODUCER/ EXEC. PRODUCER	MID-SIZE SOUTHEAST
<b>ANA (29)</b>	INDO-CANADIAN FEMALE	REPORTER	LARGE MIDWESTERN
<b>BECKY (33)</b>	BLACK FEMALE	REPORTER/ANCHOR	LARGE MIDWESTERN
<b>DAMIAN (38)</b>	BLACK MALE	ANCHOR/REPORTER	LARGE SOUTH
<b>JOHN (64)</b>	WHITE MALE	SENIOR REPORTER	MID-SIZE SOUTHEAST
<b>NICOLE (33)</b>	WHITE FEMALE	EXEC. PRODUCER	SMALL SOUTHEAST
<b>BRAD (37)</b>	BLACK MALE	PHOTOJOURNALIST	LARGE SOUTHEAST
<b>SHANNON (24)</b>	WHITE FEMALE	NEWS PRODUCER	LARGE MIDWESTERN
<b>CHARLIE (30)</b>	WHITE MALE	PRODUCER/REPORTER	NETWORK EAST

## **APPENDIX D**

### **SHOOTING VICTIMS IN THIS STUDY**

Hundreds of people are killed by police each year in the U.S. (Fatal Force, n.d.; Swaine, J., Laughland, O., Lartey, J., & McCarthy, C., 2015). The United States has more deaths at the hands of law enforcement officers above any other democratic nation. While this is not an exhaustive list, it does include men and a woman who were shot and killed by law enforcement. It is important to note that some are not shootings, but they are included as reference. Most of the incidents were referred to during my conversations with journalists, or I use them as an example:

Rodney King – on April 3, 1991, 25-year-old unarmed Black male Rodney King was beaten by four L.A.P.D. officers following a high-speed chase. A man captured the incident on his camcorder and sent the video to a television station where it aired and was released around the nation through other media outlets. King survived but had a long recovery process. The four officers were acquitted. This fueled the infamous Los Angeles riots, whereby more than 50 people were killed in the protests, while another 2,000 were injured. Two of the officers were later found guilty after the U.S. Department of Justice filed federal civil rights charges.

Amadou Diallo – on February 4, 1999, 22-year-old unarmed West African immigrant Amadou Diallo, was shot at 41 times by New York City officers in the doorway of his Bronx apartment when reaching for his wallet. 19 bullets struck Diallo and he died at the scene. The case sparked protests. The four officers say they thought Diallo matched the description of a suspect in another case. The officers were charged with second-degree murder, but all were acquitted.

Oscar Grant – on January 1, 2009, 22-year-old unarmed Black male traveling on a BART train with friends was held down by one officer and shot in the back by another. This after the officers were responding to reports of a fight. Grant later died at a hospital. The shooting was caught on several cellphones and uploaded to social media. This



caused outrage as millions watched the video on YouTube. The story of Grant's death was adapted into a movie.

Anthony Lamar Smith – on December 20, 2011, 24-year-old Black male was confronted by officer Jason Stockley and his partner confronted over a suspected drug deal in St. Louis, Missouri. A car chase ensued. Stockley's partner said Smith had a gun and Stockley shot and killed him. In 2016, new evidence was found and Stockley was charged with first-degree murder. Stockley waived his right to a jury trial and pleaded not guilty. A judge acquitted him. While Stockley happened years before Michael Brown's death in Ferguson, Stockley's trial was in the same communities healing from the Ferguson protests.

Trayvon Martin – on February 26, 2012, 17-year-old Martin was killed in Sanford, Florida, by neighborhood watchman George Zimmerman. Martin was walking back to his family's townhome after leaving a store for iced tea and Skittles. Zimmerman called 911 to report a suspicious person before ignoring the dispatcher's command to stay in the vehicle. He then followed Martin, later shooting him in the chest and killing him. Zimmerman claimed self-defense, was later charged and acquitted. The trial received heavy media attention and was televised live. Protests started around the nation, with people wearing hoodies, purchasing iced tea and Skittles to honor the murdered teen. This event is credited with sparking the Black Lives Matter movement after Zimmerman's acquittal.

Eric Garner – on July 17, 2014, 43-year-old Black male was approached in Staten Island, New York. NYPD officers confronted Garner for selling cigarettes without proper permission. A disagreement ensued, then police officers tried to arrest Garner. One of the officers put Garner in a chokehold for several seconds. A witness recorded the incident, whereby Garner could be heard saying, "I can't breathe." Garner later died at the hospital. Protests ensued claiming police brutality. A grand jury decided not to indict the officer who put Garner in a chokehold.

Michael Brown – on August 15, 2014, 18-year-old unarmed Black male in Ferguson, Missouri shot and killed by officer Darren Wilson. Brown and a friend were walking in the middle of street when they were met by officer Wilson. A confrontation ensued, Wilson says Brown reached for his gun, so he shot him in self-defense. Bystanders were also upset that Brown's body laid in the street for hours following his death. Wilson was charged and acquitted. A firestorm of volatile protests ensued against the mostly White Ferguson police force. The Justice Department investigated and found several issues within the department. A Black police chief currently heads the department. There were conflicting reports on whether Brown had his hands up before he was killed prompting the phrase, "Hands up, don't shoot" during protests.

Tamir Rice – on November 22, 2014, 12-year-old Black male with toy gun in Cleveland, Ohio. Officers were responding to reports of a person in the park with a gun that was “possibly fake.” An officer and officer-in-training arrived on the scene, with the newer officer opening fire and killing Rice within seconds of arriving on the scene. Prosecutors described Tamir Rice as big for his age. A grand jury decided not to charge the officers involved. Case sparked outrage due to Tamir’s age. Surveillance video of the shooting, shows the 12-year-old near the gazebo as the officers arrive at the park before Rice was shot and killed.

Walter Scott – on April 4, 2015, 50-year-old unarmed Black male in North Charleston, South Carolina. Officer Michael Slager pulled Walter Scott over for a tail light that was out. When Slager returned to his vehicle, Scott was seen on dashcam running from the vehicle, then a chase ensued. Slager and Scott got into a scuffle before Slager shot Scott several times as he was running away. Initial reports showed that Slager shot Scott in self-defense. However, days later an eyewitness (Feidin Santana) released cellphone video of the incident showing Scott running and was several feet from Slager when he shot at him 8 times, hitting him 5 times. The video went viral. Several investigations started, Slager was charged, but a jury deadlocked. Eventually, Slager made a plea deal, he was sentenced to 20 years in prison in December of 2017.

Alton Sterling – on July 5, 2016, 37-year-old Black male in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, reportedly selling CD’s outside of a store when confronted by two officers after a report of man with a gun. The officers report Sterling was resisting arrest as they tried to take him into custody. Then one of the officers yelled that Sterling had a gun. He was shot several times and died. The incident was caught on witness cellphone, uploaded to social media, and shared millions of times.

Philando Castile – on July 6, 2016, 32-year-old Black male in Falcon Heights a suburb of St. Paul, Minnesota, was pulled over by officer Jeronimo Yanez for a busted tail-light as he was driving with his girlfriend and young daughter. The officer asked for identification, then Castile reportedly told the officer he had a gun before reaching for his wallet. At this moment the officer shot Castile several times killing him. Moments after the shooting, Castile’s girlfriend Diamond Reynolds broadcasted Castile’s bloody body on Facebook Live as he laid there dying and the officer was still pointing the gun his way. He later died at the hospital. Ex-police officer Yanez was charged with second-degree manslaughter and later acquitted.

Terrence Crutcher – on September 16, 2016, 40-year-old unarmed Black male in Tulsa, Oklahoma was shot and killed. Officer Betty Shelby, White female officer, was responding to a call about a stalled vehicle. The witness apparently said the man thought the car was going to blow up. When officers arrived on the scene they found the vehicle and Shelby walking by. She saw Crutcher and ordered him to show his hands. Shelby

later testified that Crutcher was breathing heavily and when he placed his hands inside of the SUV, Shelby shot him. He later died. In May of 2017, a jury found Shelby not guilty of manslaughter.

Keith Lamont Scott – on September 20, 2016, 43-year-old, armed, Black male, shot and killed in Charlotte, North Carolina. Police were investigating another incident when Scott was seen by officers near his vehicle with a gun. The officers told Scott to put down his gun multiple times, in which he did not comply. Scott was shot and killed by officer Brentley Vinson, a Black male police officer. Vinson did not have on a body camera. However, other officers did have video from the scene. Vinson was not charged. The incident sparked several protests, many of which grew to be violent. Several cell phone videos emerged in which one you can hear Keith Scott's wife telling the officers not to shoot him and telling him to comply.

Justine Damond (Ruszczyk) – on July 15, 2017, 40-year-old female dual U.S.-Australian citizen, was shot and killed. Damond called 911 to report what she thought may have been an assault near her home. Officer Mohammad Noor, reported hearing a loud noise and firing his gun which hit Damond in the abdomen. Noor and his partner tried to provide aide, but Damond died. Officers were wearing body cameras, but they were not turned on until after the shooting. Noor has been charged. The case is still under investigation.