

Van Jones

Lessons from a Killing

Changing news coverage of police brutality in San Francisco

By Van Jones

In the fall of 1996, the San Francisco Police Review Commission held hearings on the death of Aaron Williams, an African-American man suspected of a \$50 pet-store burglary who died in police custody. According to witnesses and police sources, a team of police led by Officer Marc Andaya repeatedly kicked Williams in the head and emptied three canisters of pepper spray into his face. Despite the fact that Williams was having difficulty breathing, the police finally hog-tied, gagged and left him unattended in the back of a police van, where he died.

My organization, the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights, and our project, Bay Area PoliceWatch, organized around this case for two years. This is our experience changing news coverage around the case and how it affected our organizing campaign for justice for Aaron Williams.

In its first set of hearings, the police commission ruled that no "excessive force" was used, that the cops' role in beating Aaron Williams was fine. The police commission was able to get away with such a ruling because of the abysmal media coverage leading up to the initial hearings on the case.

The few news reports were ridiculously biased. The coverage made it look like Aaron Williams hadn't been beaten to death, but died because of a strange new malady, "sudden in-custody death syndrome." That's how the **San Francisco Chronicle** (4/8/96), the Bay Area's leading daily newspaper, described a new phenomenon in which victims of police beatings inexplicably die, but it's somehow not a result of those beatings.

As often happens in coverage of police brutality, news reports during the hearings focused on the background and alleged misdeeds of the victim. In Williams' case, coverage focused on his alleged drug problem and referred to him as a parolee. There was virtually no mention of

Andaya's record, which included 37 prior complaints of police brutality, five lawsuits alleging racism and abuse, and one other death of an unarmed man of color.

Examining the Message

After we lost the initial hearings, we brought in We Interrupt This Message, a media activist organization that specializes in working with groups that face media stereotypes and biased coverage. They asked us to tell them what our initial media message and organizing goal had been.

Our initial media message had been "the San Francisco police department is out of control." Not even the progressive press wanted to cover the story with that message.

The problem was that people had to be completely critical of the San Francisco police department in order to agree with us that police officers shouldn't have beaten an unarmed man to death. People in the neighborhoods with experience with police brutality might agree with that message, but what about people from communities which rarely suffer from police brutality?

What we were really asking people to agree with us about was not particularly radical at all. Most people would agree that cops shouldn't beat unarmed people to death. So we focused on that.

And we had defined our goal as justice for Aaron Williams and his family. As a media message, that was too vague. When Kim Deterline from Interrupt asked us what "justice for Aaron" would look like, what we really wanted the police commission to do, we said, "Fire Marc Andaya." She said, "Say that."

Like most grassroots groups, we knew exactly what our organizing goal was—we just didn't think we could say it to the media. We were thinking of media as separate from, rather than in support of, our organizing effort.

Strategic Challenges

The next step was to look at the strategic media challenges ahead. Given the biased media coverage so far, the Ella Baker Center faced three challenges in achieving good coverage for the second round of hearings on the case. We had to rehumanize Aaron Williams, shift the focus from Williams to Andaya and establish institutional accountability for what had happened.

We had to rehumanize Williams because he had been demonized in the press. We had to rehumanize Aaron so people who had heard about the case through the media could see him as something besides some crackhead parolee who happened to die, and the loss to Aaron's family was felt by the community as a whole.

Next, we had to shift the frame and the focus of the story from the background and history of Aaron Williams, the victim, to the past misdeeds of Marc Andaya, the perpetrator. Shifting the focus of coverage to Andaya's background and record—which is where it should have been in the first place—was key to changing public opinion on the case.

Finally, we also had to establish institutional accountability for the police brutality that was happening in our communities. We had to put a name and a face to who was responsible for what happened in that neighborhood. And we needed to turn the tables and hold the police commission accountable for letting cops get away with murder.

Sharpening the Target

We had to find a way to talk about Marc Andaya that let people know he was a racist cop and a bad apple from the beginning. So we called him a name that was becoming synonymous with racist cops: We said, "Marc Andaya is the Bay Area's Mark Fuhrman."

Since the police commission had the power to fire Andaya and they were appointed by the mayor, we came up

Local Media Activist Contacts

FAIR does not have local chapters, but we do encourage people to work together for media diversity and accountability. The following are some of the many individuals and groups doing local media activism that FAIR works with. If you would like to coordinate your local media activism, please call FAIR, 212-633-6700, ext. 302.

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with a much sharper target: Mayor Willie Brown's police commission. We started putting it in terms of "Willie Brown's police commission protecting the Bay Area's Mark Fuhrman." "If Willie Brown's police commission doesn't fire Marc Andaya, Aaron Williams' blood is on Willie Brown's hands."

Our media strategy became integrated with our organizing campaign. Our primary tactic was to stop business-as-usual at the police commission, bringing 100 to 200 people to every police com-

institutional issues.

But more importantly for our communities, we collapsed the police commission. By the time the campaign was over, all three of the commissioners who had initially sided with Andaya had been removed or had quit because of the tidal wave of media and community attention. And as a result of unprecedented community pressure, Marc Andaya was fired.

On the day that Marc Andaya was finally kicked out of the police depart-

ment, the major stations interviewed Williams' aunt. Her voice broke when she said, "Now I can go to my nephew's grave . . . and tell him we got some justice for him." For Aaron Williams and the thousands of police brutality victims across the country, reframing media

For the thousands of police brutality victims across the country, reframing media coverage is a prerequisite to any kind of justice.

mission meeting and having the media there to broadcast it all. This constantly ratcheted up the pressure on the police commission, and on Mayor Brown to do something about the commission.

Brown, who had been in the background, was suddenly in the hot seat. Andaya, who had been presented as this nice police officer who had unfortunately had somebody die on him with some strange malady, became what he was, which was a menace and a terror to the African-American community. And Aaron Williams, who before had been some black crackhead who happened to die, became a valued member of a community and part of a family that was devastated by his loss.

Victory for the Community

In a four-week period, we got close to two hours of television coverage. The story went from being buried to the front page. And it made the front page repeatedly for several weeks. We also shifted the coverage dramatically. Both the *San Francisco Chronicle* and the *Examiner* editorialized against the police commission for refusing to fire Marc Andaya. The coverage's focus went from Aaron Williams' background to Marc Andaya's record to the institutional factors which allow police brutality to happen—proving that you can use an individual story to talk about

coverage is a prerequisite to any kind of justice. ■

Van Jones is director of the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights in California. He recently won the Reebok Human Rights Award for his efforts on behalf of police brutality victims, including Aaron Williams.

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why progressives keep losing california's initiative wars

by Hunter Cutting and
Kim Deterline

In the past few years a pattern has emerged from a string of explosive political campaigns in California that have sparked public debate across the nation. Launched in the form of ballot initiatives, these campaigns have attacked affirmative action, immigrants, bilingual education, and labor unions. They have divided traditional progressive coalitions, scapegoated marginalized communities, and revived formerly bankrupt social policies. The results of these battles contain profound lessons about the difference between winning and losing campaign strategies and media messages.

Hijacking the Terms of Debate

Each of these initiative campaigns has created a tremendous shift in the terms of debate. While the initiatives themselves are strongly regressive, their proponents have campaigned under the banners of equality, fairness, and even the advancement of children. Formerly the rallying cries of progressive movements, these values have been usurped by the media consultants of the right. And the surrender of initiative opponents to the new terms of debate completed the sea change in political discourse.

Proposition 209, the initiative outlawing affirmative action, was promoted as a move to "end unfair racial preferences." The response from the most vocal opponents was "mend it, don't end it." Far from challenging the idea that Proposition 209 was about fairness, this media message confirmed the notion that there was something basically wrong with affirmative action. While it may be worthwhile to have a policy discussion on how to improve affirmative action programs, the media is not the place to hold that discussion—especially in the face of a withering attack on the very legitimacy of affirmative action.

In similar fashion, Proposition 187, the initiative to deny health care and education to illegal immigrants, was promoted as stopping the purported "drain that immigrants have placed on our public schools and state resources." In a bit of surreal harmony, the official ballot pamphlet argument written by opponents of 187 opened with a statement that illegal immigration was a problem in need of a solution. Years of funding cuts to schools and public services became invisible in this debate.

Most recently, the campaign for Proposition 227, the measure to end bilingual education, argued that the best way to teach kids English was to get rid of bilingual education. In response, anti-227 rhetoric focused on secondary issues such as the cost of implementing the initiative



Ward Connerly and Pete Wilson turn in petition signatures for Proposition 209.

and the lawsuits that might hit teachers who defy the new policy. Pushing this strategy to absurdity, the No on 227 campaign mailed letters to opinion leaders and potential donors that introduced the initiative but never mentioned the words "bilingual" or "bilingual education." The basic premise of Proposition 227—that bilingual education doesn't teach English—was never debunked. By abandoning any defense of bilingual education, opponents of Proposition 227 allowed proponents to take on the role of children's champions, defending immigrants' right to learn English. That role had previously been filled by bilingual education advocates.

Conceding the Moral High Ground

While all of these regressive initiatives were cloaked in the rhetoric of progressive values, they in fact drew much of their support from a potent brew of hatred, racism, and fear. None of the major campaigns launched by initiative opponents drew out this contradiction. In a moment of dark irony, the campaign against Proposition 187 even reinforced proponents' anti-immigrant message with a radio ad played heavily in Southern California. The commercial explained that if Proposition 187 were to pass, "our" children would be at risk of catching infectious diseases from the sickness-carrying immigrant children who would go without health care.

Paralyzed by a fear of White backlash, these campaigns refused to point out the racial scapegoating inherent in these initiatives. In each case opponents passed on an opportunity to stake out a moral position the average voter could agree with. As a result, the moral high ground was conceded to proponents, who continued to campaign in the name of fairness.

Changing Public Opinion

The method behind this madness is a rule of thumb among center-left electoral strategists holding that election campaigns are a time for persuasion, not education. One should attempt not to change the minds of voters, but to make an argument voters already agree with. The terms of debate are assumed to be set, and strategists must concentrate on finding the best point of leverage available in the current political terrain. Unfortunately for the center-left, over the last 30 years the right has reshaped the political landscape in the United States. And accepting this as a fait accompli means fighting a losing battle up a very steep hill.

In accordance with the prevailing rule of thumb, managers of campaigns against the California initiatives crafted media messages to match rather than to change the attitudes and opinions of their target audiences. In the campaign opposing Proposition 227, media strategists tested the political waters by polling frequent voters (heavily White and older residents) and found that this target group did not support bilingual education. Strategists therefore decided to find and focus on secondary arguments against Proposition 227 that this target audience did support. As a result, while the pro-227 campaign directly attacked bilingual education, no one rose to defend it.

Because campaigners never clearly asserted the fundamental effectiveness and morality of policies such as affirmative action and bilingual education, voters were never given powerful reasons to support them.

Ironically, initiative campaigns are among the few things that get people to pay attention to debate over public issues. A

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california's initiative wars

Ignoring Communities of Color

The campaigns against Propositions 187 and 227 revealed the error in assuming that communities of color won't vote. The Latino community in particular was awakened by the threat posed by Proposition 187. In a campaign filled with dramatic images of immigrants swarming over the Mexican border, Latino voters could not miss the message meant for older White audiences: Brown people are a threat. That message strongly affected Latino voters, who came to the polls in unexpected numbers and have come back in increasing numbers since then.

Nevertheless, during the Proposition 227 campaign, Latino voters were still seen as difficult to motivate. In addition, early polling results registered moderately strong support for Proposition 227 among Latinos. Strategists were convinced that Latino communities should not be a high priority. On election day, however, Latino residents once again came to the polls in numbers beyond expectations, and they voted against Proposition 227. This result came after a strong editorial campaign by Spanish-language television stations aimed at changing public opinion, and an aggressive door-to-door canvassing campaign in hundreds of neighborhoods of color conducted by a number of groups including a new political actor in the state, Californians for Justice (CFJ).



Californians for Justice was one of the few statewide organizations to prioritize outreach to communities of color in the Proposition 209 and 227 campaigns.

The lack of any statewide political organization prioritizing progressive issues and the concerns of communities of color spurred the creation of CFJ during the Proposition 209 campaign in 1996. The organization has since gone on to become a street-level champion of civil rights in California and offers an alternative for fighting initiative campaigns. Like Jesse Jackson's campaign for president, CFJ has shown that communities of color can be mobilized to vote, provided they are given a reason to go to the polls.

Missing the Mark with the News Media

There were also strong similarities in the way the losing initiative campaigns approached the news media. In traditional campaign style, editorial boards of the major English-language daily newspapers were approached and, in most cases, their opposition to the initiatives was secured. Front-line news reporters, however, were largely ignored except as sources for placing favorable news stories.

This strategy proved costly, because much of the public debate on key issues in these campaigns was determined by the content and framing of news stories written by reporters. During the key early months of the Proposition 227 campaign, when news coverage framed the initiative, none of the state's three leading newspapers ran a news story about the effectiveness of bilingual programs, despite a wealth of academic work supporting bilingual education and numerous school programs that demonstrate its success. As a result, the con-

tention of Proposition 227 proponents that bilingual education was a failure went largely unchallenged in the news media.

During the Proposition 209 campaign, news reporters adopted the proponents' term "racial preferences" as a neutral description of affirmative action. Opponents of Proposition 209 failed to correct this misuse of terminology and as a result the fight to save affirmative action came to be described by newspapers as the fight to support "racial preferences." Not surprisingly, polling data indicated that while the public supported "affirmative action," it did not support "racial preferences."

Road Signs to Success

There have been a few bright moments during the initiative wars of the past few years that illuminate the possibilities for successful opposition. One of the high points in the campaign against Proposition 209 came when California State University Northridge students set up a debate on the initiative. Until that point, Ward Connerly, an "up-by-his-bootstraps" African American businessman and university regent, had been the most visible proponent of Proposition 209. But in an inspired stroke of media savvy, students invited David Duke, a former Ku Klux Klan member and national political figure,

protection. Rather than argue about immigration's net environmental impact on the planet, opponents crafted a clear and effective sound bite: "Blaming immigrants for our environmental problems is mean-spirited and misguided. It blinds us to the real culprits, like logging companies and chemical factories, and it blinds us to the real solutions, like telling developers they can't fill in wetlands for golf courses." A key part of promoting this message was careful research documenting the large support the Measure A campaign received from openly White-supremacist organizations. This extra effort went beyond simply calling people racist.

What Is To Be Done?

Center-left strategists tend to look at elections as the end in themselves, unlike right-wing strategists, who take the long view and have set out to reframe the terms of debate. We must go beyond choosing messages that match public opinion and instead craft messages that resonate strongly enough with shared values to change public opinion. To defeat future right-wing initiative campaigns—especially those powered by unspoken appeals to the fear and hatred of racism—both on-the-ground organizing and the content of our media messages must change.

Campaigns must expose both White audiences and people of color to the racial motivations behind these initiatives and debunk the myths and lies at the heart of the proponents' arguments. Precinct work in communities of color must be better organized and funded. Pressuring journalists for accurate, thorough, and balanced coverage is critical to promoting our messages. And media messages can no longer be targeted only at older White voters. They must inspire multiracial audiences in terms that everyone can understand.

Future campaigns must challenge the terms of debate and reclaim the values of fairness and equality. We have to reclaim the moral high ground on which everyone can agree. The values we fight for are widely shared, and this is our strength. Our messages must defend our agenda, or we will go on losing both battles and the war.

to speak on behalf of Proposition 209. Duke accepted the invitation, and Proposition 209 proponents reacted in a furor. The association with hate groups was clear and led voters to ask themselves whose side they wanted to be on.

In 1998, the campaign against Proposition 226 picked up on this strategy and scored a stunning victory at the polls. The initiative called for unions to seek written permission from each of their members before spending their dues on political activities. Once again, proponents framed their arguments in terms of fairness and justice. The initiative was sold as a way to protect working men and women from being forced to support political causes that they in fact opposed.

Opponents sidestepped lengthy explanations of how elected representatives and union elections work and avoided nit-picking at side issues. Instead, they spoke directly to the issue of fairness and exposed the real forces driving the initiative. A series of campaign commercials hammered home the question: If this initiative is supposed to protect working people in California, then why is the campaign being funded by a millionaire businessman from Indiana?

Opponents derailed a Sierra Club ballot initiative on immigration in a similar fashion. Brought before the club's half-million members and discussed on the front pages of the nation's newspapers, Measure A promoted new limits on immigration to the U.S. in the name of environmental

Hunter Cutting, associate director of We Interrupt This Message, is a long-time political campaign manager and media consultant to nonprofits. Kim Deterline, executive director of We Interrupt This Message, is a veteran media strategist for public interest organizations.

Research assistance for this article was provided by Angela Eaton.

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OPEN FORUM

When Perceptions Are Not Reality

Youth role
in crime
exaggerated

By Sarah Xochitl Bervera,
Malkia Amala Cyril, Ortega
Yarborough, Rocío Nieves

THE COUNTRY'S obsession with juvenile crime fills headlines and leads newscasts. The stories so dominate the news that it's fair to ask: Are the nation's newspapers reporting the news or are they selling tragedy? And at what cost to the county?

A recent Gallup Poll found that adults have an exaggerated view of violent juvenile crime. The adults polled estimated that youth were responsible for 43 percent of violent crimes. The truth? FBI statistics show that juveniles are responsible for 13 percent of violent crime, less than a third of what the adults polled thought. In San Francisco last year, juveniles accounted for 3 percent of all homicides and 9 percent of all felony arrests.

So where do adults get their misperceptions? According to a Los Angeles Times poll, 65 percent of those polled said they primarily learn about crime from the media. What is the media saying about kids and crime and how are those reports creating such distorted perceptions?

A group of homeless youth completed a study this summer of The San Francisco Chronicle and its news coverage of youth and crime. The study's results document how The Chronicle and other media help perpetuate myths about youth crime.

The study, conducted jointly by the youth group UNYTE (Unity Now! Youth Training for Empowerment) and the non-profit We Interrupt This Message, found news stories often portray youth as perpetrators of crime but rarely report when youth are victims of crime, especially when they are victims of adult crime. Almost three quarters of the news stories examined depicted youth as perpetrators of crime.

In reality, crime data show youth are much more likely to be victims than perpetrators. For every violent or sexual of-

YOUTH CRIME STEREOTYPES MISINFORM PUBLIC, POLICYMAKERS

During the summers of 1997 and 1998, 15 homeless and at-risk youth studies news coverage in The San Francisco Chronicle as part of a community organization and leadership program. This is a portion of the study.

Date	Article Headline	No. of Youth Perpetrators	No. of Youth Victims	No. of youth Perpetrators in article	No of Youth Victims in article
10 July	British Nanny	1	-	1	1
10 July	Teenagers Get Terms	2	-	1	1
11 July	Unlikely Pair	2	0	1	0
11 July	Parents Shot	1	0	1	0
11 July	Police Say Baby	0	-	0	1
11 July	Cornered Murder Suspect	0	-	0	1
12 July	Grim Wait	1	0	1	0
12 July	Cosby Hearing Closes	0	5	1	1
12 July	Molester's Privacy	0	-	0	1
12 July	Couple Allegedly	0	-	0	1
13 July	Killings Stun Antioch	0	-	0	1

Source: UNYTE study, "Juvenile Injustice"

Chronicle Graphic

fense committed by a youth under 18 years of age, there are three such crimes committed against a youth by adults.

Of the 72 articles examined in the study, 50 did not explore the roots of youth crime, yet 15 called for tougher penalties, longer sentences or increased policing. No articles examined whether tougher penalties and incarceration actually reduce youth crime.

Considering that the recent "epidemic of youth crime" has resulted in youth sentences that, on average, are 60 percent longer than adult sentences for the same crime, there's an imperative need for this kind of reporting.

The study found no article that looked at poverty as a primary or potential factor in crime. When poverty is factored in, the "epidemic of youth crime" disappears. In 1993, the crime rate among teenagers living below the federal poverty line was the same as similarly impoverished adults in their 40s, and well below the crime rates of adults in their 20s and 30s. This type of uninformed news reporting obscures youth poverty, the fac-

tor most closely correlated with youth crime.

Distorted news coverage misinforms the public and leads to bad public policy, with damning consequences for homeless and at-risk youth whose lives are regulated by adults. These laws can cost young people their education, their family, even their lives.

The youth of UNYTE, who conducted the study, call for the media and policymakers alike to investigate the root causes of crime, and stop scapegoating youth for socioeconomic problems that victimize young people most.

After reviewing the study, The Chronicle was willing to work with UNYTE to monitor and improve news coverage. UNYTE is hopeful other media will follow The Chronicle's lead and be responsible for, and responsive to, youth and their profound need for fair, accurate news coverage.

Sarah Xochitl Bervera is the program associate at We Interrupt This Message, Malkia Amala Cyril is the director of UNYTE, Ortega Yarborough and Rocío Nieves are UNYTE members.

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Opinion

BY SARAH XOCHITL BERVERA
AND ORTEGA YARBOROUGH

The lies about youths and crime

CALIFORNIA'S OBSESSION with juvenile crime has been filling headlines and leading newscasts, which in turn have prompted draconian legislation to curb the so-called epidemic of youth crime. While the media has taken the lead in reporting each detail of this "epidemic," the truth about youths and crime remains largely hidden.

A recent Gallup poll found that adults have an absurdly exaggerated view of juvenile violence. The average adult estimated that young people were responsible for 43 percent of this country's violent crimes. The truth? FBI statistics reveal that juveniles are responsible for only 13 percent of this nation's violent crime.

So where do adults get their misinformation? According to a *Los Angeles Times* poll, 65 percent of the population admits to learning about crime primarily from the media. So how does media coverage lead to such distorted public perception of juveniles and crime?

A study of the *San Francisco Chronicle* and its news coverage of youths and crime was recently conducted jointly by members of UNYTE (Unity Now! Youth Training for Empowerment) and the media activist center We Interrupt This Message. The study, covering the periods of April through June 1997 and July 1998, documents how the media perpetuate myths concerning juvenile crime and shows who ultimately pays the price.

According to the report, titled "Juvenile Injustice," news stories overwhelmingly portray youths as perpetrators of crime while rarely representing youths as victims—especially as victims of adult crime. Almost three-quarters of the news stories examined depicted youths as perpetrators. And more than half of the victims portrayed were victims of other young people.

That stands in direct contrast to the real world of crime, in which youths are much more likely to be victims than perpetrators. Crime data from cities across the country and from the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect show that for every violent and/or sexual offense committed by a youth under 18, there are three such crimes committed against youths by adults.

Furthermore, 50 of the 72 articles examined

did not even mention possible solutions to the problem of youth crime. Fifteen articles called for tougher penalties or increased policing. And zero articles examined whether tougher penalties and incarceration actually reduce youth crime.

Distorted news coverage makes for a misinformed public and encourages punitive public policy, with damning consequences for homeless and at-risk youths, whose lives are regulated by adults in power and their rules. Whether it's a member of Congress, a teacher, or a cop, a misinformed adult guided by inaccurate stereotypes can wreak untold damage on a young person's life. The media have a unique obligation to report juvenile crime accurately and in context.

"Media bias takes many forms," says Kim Deterline, executive director of We Interrupt This Message. "We don't want reporters to stop writing about true things that happen. We simply want them to be more responsible in writing *all* the facts, not just the most sensational."

When we examine the facts, it becomes clear that what we have in California is an epidemic of youth victimization. So why is the media ignoring the U.S. Census Bureau's reported 2,000 deaths and 350,000 incidences of violent and sexual abuse inflicted on young people by caretakers each year? Where is the reporting on the policies that render youths this country's poorest age-group, with a poverty rate double that of adults?

In a climate of blaming the victim, young people are facing political criminalization to justify the slashing of funding for programs that primarily benefit youths. From welfare reform to public school defunding, today's political priorities rely on "budget balancing" through divesting this country's young. Instead of examining this political current or its ramifications, reporters are contributing to the tide by choosing to prioritize stories concerning juvenile-perpetrated crime over almost all others. Biased reporting is not just about inaccurate stories; it is also about what stories are being left out altogether. ■

"Juvenile Injustice" may be viewed at sfbg.com. Sarah Xochitl Bervera is program associate at We Interrupt This Message. Ortega Yarbrough is a member of UNYTE.