

Whose Police State? Media Focus on Right to Bear Arms, Ignores Search and Seizure Abuse

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The aggressive tactics of law enforcement, an ongoing controversy in communities of color, have recently come into the national media spotlight—if briefly—as the constitutionally dubious practice of arbitrarily stopping and frisking ([mostly](#) black and Latino) citizens by police officers was put on trial in federal court in March ([NPR](#), [3/21/13](#)). But you would be hard pressed to know much about the issues if you get your news from national mainstream television.

When it comes to conversations about citizens' rights, the lion's share of coverage has gone to perceived infringements on constitutional rights that are of concern mostly to white Americans—like gun ownership.

When the Sandy Hook massacre put gun control back into the national conversation, the debate over personal gun ownership rights undoubtedly resonated predominantly with their disproportionately white (and conservative) supporters ([Pew Research Center](#), [1/13](#)). The passions that arise over gun control were on display when Internet radio host Alex Jones ([Extra!](#), [2/11](#)) argued on [CNN's Piers Morgan Tonight](#) ([1/7/13](#)) that gun control represents a “police state.”

The fact is that many Americans feel that they are living in a police state ([Raw Story](#), [3/6/13](#); [CounterPunch](#), [2/8/13](#))—but few get a platform to talk about it. One can only imagine the national dialogue on racial profiling and violations of the Fourth Amendment—protecting individuals against “unreasonable searches and seizures”—if national media paid attention to those who passionately oppose stop and frisk ([Extra!](#), [3/12](#)).

Though stop and frisk is seen by many as just as much a constitutional issue as the right to bear arms, a scan of TV coverage between January and March of this year found only 26 mentions of it on the three major cable outlets [CNN](#), [Fox](#) and [MSNBC](#) (most on [MSNBC](#)), and just three mentions on the networks [ABC](#), [NBC](#) and [CBS](#). During this time period, a federal judge ruled part of the New York Police Department's policy unconstitutional ([New York Times](#), [1/9/13](#)), Oakland's proposal to hire former NYPD commissioner William Bratton—a prominent stop-and-frisk proponent—got a huge public pushback ([Colorlines](#), [1/23/13](#)), and the major federal case against stop and frisk got underway.

Over the same period, broadcast networks [ABC](#), [NBC](#) and [CBS](#) mentioned “gun control,” “gun rights” or “Second Amendment” 350 times; these were brought up almost 1,700 times on cable outlets [CNN](#), [Fox News](#) and [MSNBC](#).

But it's not just a numbers issue; it's also content. Of the three network mentions of stop and frisk, one (**CBS News**, 1/24/13) focused on a call for more aggressive policing in Oakland—despite an ugly history of police brutality and racial profiling (**Colorlines**, 7/7/12)—and mostly ignored the mounting local opposition to police tactics (**Wall Street Journal**, 1/23/13).

More egregiously, another **CBS** story (1/23/13) misrepresented one black activist's impassioned [speech](#) at an Oakland City Council hearing, misleadingly portraying her fear of police abuse as “fear of gun violence,” to frame its narrative of a fearful town in need of a supercop like Bratton. After the activist publicly decried the network's “slandering attempt to use my passion to sell the very thing I am opposed to” (**Political Fail Blog**, 1/24/13), **CBS** added an editor's note to the online version of the story—but made no on-air correction.

Finally, on **ABC's This Week** (2/24/13), conservative George Will pointed to stop and frisk as an effective strategy to control gun violence without impeding Second Amendment rights—even if it meant violating the Fourth Amendment rights of those the police frisk.

So why the discrepancy in coverage? One might argue that it is precisely because these are issues that predominantly affect and concern blacks and Latinos in America. In *Manufacturing Consent*, Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky wrote of “worthy” and “unworthy” victims when analyzing the mainstream media's Cold War coverage. When applied domestically, it's hard not to see those concepts mapping onto race and ethnicity. Studies suggest there is already a media bias when covering missing children of different races (**Communication Research Reports**, 9/10).

Eventually it becomes clear that even when communities of color get the majority of attention of police officers, their stories will be given a minority of coverage by corporate media.

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