

Baltimore: Unverified 'Threats,' Uncritically Reported - A Tradition as Old as Protest

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Baltimore gang members denied evidence-free claims that they had declared a truce to “take out” police officers. (WBAL-TV)

As I discussed in my [previous post](#) on the Baltimore Police Department’s inflation of the “purge” threat last Monday, there’s increasing evidence the department routinely uses the media to hype punitive threats in anticipation of crackdowns. Other journalists are taking note as well.

First there was the blockbuster, entirely evidence-free claim by the BPD that there was a “credible threat” that “the Bloods and the Crips had teamed up to kill cops” (CBS News, [4/27/15](#)). That was quickly denied by several gang members, one of whom told WBAL-TV ([4/28/15](#); Raw Story, [4/28/15](#)):

We want to tell the people of the city right now, of Baltimore City, that the image that they’re trying to portray of the gangs in Baltimore—the BGF, the Bloods, the Crips—we did not make that truce to harm cops.... We did not come together against the cops.

As Zoë Carpenter of The Nation ([4/30/15](#)) reported, the Baltimore police’s use of Twitter had become less information-driven and more Ministry of Truth-driven:

Some of the information that the department has provided to its 127,000 Twitter followers seems to have been at best incorrect and at worst deliberately misleading. “A group of criminals have just started a fire outside the library located at Pennsylvania Ave and North Ave,” the police [tweeted](#) on Tuesday night. But [according to Guardian reporter Jon Swaine](#), it was the police themselves who caused the fire, when sparks from a tear-gas grenade landed on trash.

Individual tweets were often framed as safety advisories, but together they created a selective narrative of events that later bled into news coverage. On Monday afternoon at 3:01 pm, the department [warned on Twitter](#) and Facebook about “a group of juveniles in the area of Mondawmin Mall. Expect traffic delays in the area.” Half an hour later, the police said that kids had started throwing bricks; 15 minutes after that the department reported that an officer had been hurt. Later, media accounts would [describe](#) a violent riot started by teens who were hungry for a fight.

But as eyewitnesses pointed out, the cops had shown up in full riot gear just as a high school near the mall was letting out. The police shut down the subway

station and the bus lines, effectively [trapping](#) the students. “Those kids were set up, they were treated like criminals before the first brick was thrown,” one teacher [wrote](#).



Buzzfeed accompanied its story relaying Baltimore police claims of being threatened with a photo of a Baltimore police officer looking around nervously.

“Social media functioned as a sort of virtual riot gear,” Carpenter wrote—“manufacturing the narrative of violence in the digital realm as the police were [escalating](#) it on the ground.”

On Friday afternoon, hours after prosecutors announced that six police officers would be charged for the death of Freddie Gray, BuzzFeed([5/1/15](#)) [reported an “exclusive” internal “leak”](#) from the Baltimore Police Department of a sergeant “warning” his superior officers that Baltimore residents were randomly challenging the heavily armed BPD to combat:

A Baltimore police sergeant informed his Eastern District superiors Friday afternoon that officers “are now being challenged on the street.”

The letter, provided to BuzzFeed News from an anonymous source, warned of heightening tensions between police and residents on a day when many locals have taken to the streets to celebrate.

Sgt. Lennardo Bailey told the “Eastern Command Staff” [sic’d]:

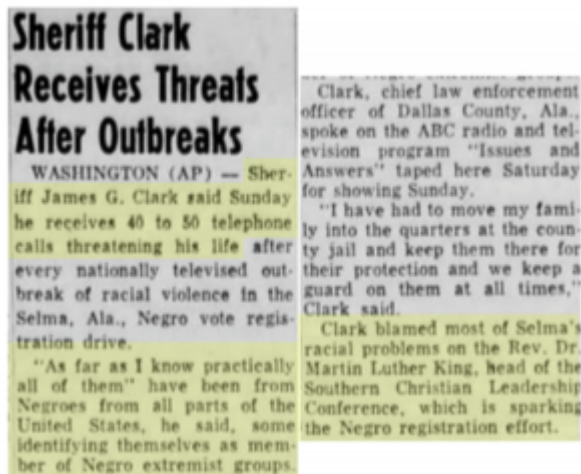
“I have been to five calls today and three of those five calls for service; I have been challenged to a fight. Some of them I blew off but one of them almost got ugly. I don’t want anybody to say that I did not tell them what is going on. This is no intel this is really what’s going on the street. This is my formal notification. It is about to get ugly.”

Why would BuzzFeed uncritically republish the assertions of a police department with a history of hyping threats to justify crackdowns? The reason they can pass this off as “news” rather than outright stenography is the way the story is framed—as a story about a story, thus making it newsworthy even though the substance of the claims are without evidence.

Had Sgt. Lennardo Bailey approached BuzzFeed—or virtually any news organization—with accusations he had been randomly challenged to fights on the streets, the reporter would have asked for proof: details, witnesses, arrest records. But by writing a letter to a superior (it’s unclear if that’s standard operating procedure in the BPD) and “leaking” it to the media,

that letter itself becomes the story, regardless of whether or not its contents make much sense or have any corroborating proof. By simply repeating “police concerns” that Baltimore residents are, en masse, challenging police officers to hand-to-hand combat, this narrative permits the police department (presumably the source of the “leak” to BuzzFeed) to smuggle in accusations of protester threats without having the messy responsibility of providing evidence.

It’s a tactic as old as civil rights protests themselves. Consider this Associated Press article from March 8, 1965:



Associated Press (3/8/65)–the first day of the march from Selma to Montgomery

Sheriff James G. Clark said Sunday he receives 40 to 50 telephone calls threatening his life after every nationally televised outbreak of racial violence in the Selma, Ala., Negro vote-registration drive.

“As far as I know practically all of them” have been from Negroes from all part of the United States, he said, some identifying themselves as member[s] of Negro extremist groups....

“I have had to move my family into the quarters at the county jail and keep them there for their protection and we keep a guard on them at all times,” Clark said.

Clark blamed most of Selma’s racial problems on the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, head of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which is sparking the Negro registration effort.

It’s the same tactic: The police call up the press, tell them how worried they are about all the threats they’ve received, and are never asked to show a shred of evidence said threats actually exist. The press repeats these claims, and the fundamental propaganda meme—that protestors are threatening the police—is disseminated unquestioned.

Maybe next time the Baltimore Police Department tries this—which they no doubt will—the media can try asking for a bit of evidence before repeating?

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