

Walter Scott Shooting: Media Were Already Running With Police Fantasy When Video Exploded It

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Theme: [Media Disinformation](#)

The New York Times ([4/7/15](#)) released a video of a black South Carolina man Walter Scott being shot, casually and without apparent mercy, eight times in the back by white police officer Michael T. Slager. The [media's outrage](#) after the video's publication was righteous and swift. The state of South Carolina followed suit, [filing murder charges](#) against Slager. Indeed, the video offers no ambiguity whatsoever.

Before this shocking video surfaced, however, most of the local press coverage, [per usual](#), followed the police's official narrative and amplified a storyline that, in retrospect, was entirely made up.

The Scott shooting, as Think Progress's Judd Legum [pointed out](#), provides unique insight into the way the police use inherent asymmetry of information to assert their narrative:

Between the time when he shot and killed Scott early Saturday morning and when charges were filed, Slager — using the both the police department and his attorney — was able to provide his “version” of the events.

He appeared well on his way to avoiding charges and pinning the blame on Scott.

Then a video, shot by an anonymous bystander, [revealed exactly what happened](#).



ABC affiliate WCIV: reporting from the police POV.

In all police killings, one side—the victim—is, by definition, dead. So the “both sides” type of reporting we’re so often used to almost invariably becomes a one-sided airing of accounts, facts and selective details from the police side that the corporate media repeats without

question. Indeed, Charleston's local ABC affiliate [would begin](#) their report with, what turned out to be, an outright lie:

NORTH CHARLESTON, S.C. (WCIV) — A man involved in a traffic stop that turned into a physical altercation with a North Charleston police officer died Saturday after being shot by the officer.

But the New York Times video shows there was no “physical altercation.” There was someone being shot in the back eight times while trying to run away. The report would go on to mix up police assertion with fact again, seemingly [inventing witnesses](#) who weren't there:

Police and witnesses say Scott tried to run from Slager before turning to fight for the officer's taser. It was during that scuffle that the officer fired his service weapon, fatally wounding Scott.

But what witnesses? I have asked the reporter, Greg Woods, to name the witnesses he documented; as of press time, he has not responded. Woods did not, in any of his reports, actually quote any witnesses saying they saw a “fight.” What appears to have happened is that Woods was *told* by police there were witnesses and he reported it, uncritically.



CBS affiliate WCSC adopts deceptive police framing of fatal shooting: “He Took My taser.”

In [another piece](#)—that, in fairness, did have interviews with the victim's family—local CBS affiliate WCSC effectively handed the report over to North Charleston police for their uninterrupted retelling of events:

Slager deployed his taser weapon to detain the driver but was unsuccessful, Pryor said.

Police say an altercation then began between Slager and Scott, resulting in a fight for the officer's taser.

During the fight, Scott gained control of the taser to use it against the officer who then fired his service weapon at the suspect, Pryor said.

While en route, the sergeant reported that he heard Slager say that he deployed his taser and was requesting for back up units, and seconds later reported “shots fired and the subject is down, he took my taser.”

We now know, by the sheer accident of someone filming the event, this narrative was false. We know Scott never “gained control” of a taser, and we know Scott only received medical attention from police minutes after they planted a weapon on him and handcuffed him as he lay dying. But the media, in an effort to report “both sides,” ends up transcribing the deceptive police report verbatim.

While providing an initial qualifier of “spokesman said,” NBC affiliate News 2, [would do one better and go on](#) to drop this modifier altogether and simply report the police account as fact:

The officer deployed his department-issued taser in an effort to detain the driver, which was not effective. An altercation between the officer and the driver took place, leading to a struggle over the officer’s taser. During the struggle, the suspect gained control of the taser to use it against the officer.

The officer then discharged his service weapon to stop the threat.

Even though lifesaving efforts were conducted by officers prior to EMS’s arrival and EMS efforts on scene, the suspect was pronounced dead.

We now know this account was categorically false, yet it’s presented in the report as a straight recounting of events. The unnamed reporter doesn’t even bother to run through the motions of quoting police or qualifying these various claims with “police say”; it just becomes, like so many local media accounts in the wake of police violence, a forum for authorities to uncritically provide their perfectly honed-if not at this point clichéd-narratives.

“There was an altercation.” “They reached for a weapon.” “The officer feared for his life.” One can practically write the police reports before they do.

What makes this case revealing is that, unlike in so many other cases, video evidence exists that can be contrasted with what can be seen to be a police-created alternative fantasy. A fantasy that had been presented as reality by initial police reports, and thus the media’s subsequent reciting of those reports. Without the video, that fantasy would have almost certainly gone unquestioned.

In a corporate media environment where government officials are routinely given benefit of the doubt while those outside of power are treated with incredulity if not hostility, perhaps the Scott shooting can serve as a stark reminder to crime reporters that in the wake of a police killing, what police say should be treated with as much skepticism as any account offered up by those whose lives and careers are on the line.

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