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Editor [Submitted to a Boston daily]

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Cover Page Footnote

One of two commentaries included in this issue of the *Trotter Review* on a "Frontline" documentary, "Street Copy," which was shown on national television in the Spring of 1987. Both were written for publication in the major Boston daily press; however, neither was accepted and printed. They are printed here to illustrate the concern that many blacks have for potential stereotyping by the media.

“Frontline” has produced a number of programs that challenge racial stereotypes, for which WGBH deserves praise. But these will not undo the harm of this show. Boston already has a national reputation for racial intolerance. As one black woman told the *Boston Globe* several years ago, “People think this is the South Africa of America.”

Anyone watching “Street Cop” would be inclined to agree.

Kirk A. Johnson is a media analyst and research associate at the William Monroe Trotter Institute, University of Massachusetts, Boston.

Editor:

Many people in the black community (I among them) strongly object to the “Frontline” documentary, “Street Cop,” which was shown on Channel 2 on March 31. But I have even stronger objections to Ed Siegel’s review of “Street Cop,” which commends the show as “street smart” and dismisses all the serious criticisms of the show from the black community as “not convincing.” I am not exactly sure why “street smart” has such a sterling quality for Siegel, but it is disturbing that such a criterion would take precedent over the criticisms that the program stereotypes blacks and Hispanics and misrepresents and exploits an entire community.

Siegel strains very hard to justify “Street Cop” on the grounds that it “makes unmistakably clear that poverty and racism are the major villains in Roxbury.” Did Siegel watch the same program that I did? I saw a program that showed Roxbury as a monolithic entity, overrun by drugs and drug dealers and victimized by its own violence. I saw numerous scenes of drug dealers trying to outwit “the law” and one scene of a mob of screaming, hostile, potentially violent people being subdued by police officers. Although the overwhelming majority of folks in Roxbury hate and fear drugs as much, and probably more, than folks in other communities, not a single one of these hard-working, non-violent people was shown. To Siegel’s credit, he is able to read and interpret beyond the images that were shown in “Street Cop” and to conclude that the police in many ways create and encourage violence and victimize people who are poor and defenseless; but these are conclusions that require a clear understanding of how racism and poverty work. Such an analysis was not in the structure, nor in the language, nor in the images of “Street Cop.”

The tendency when watching the police (our symbols of law and justice) with the television camera obviously allied to and sympathetic to their point of view (the camera is following them and is in the back of their car)

is to see the police as heroes and the people they are contending with as criminals and wrongdoers. Even when a white detective makes a slur against Afro-Americans (“It’s no bargain being black,” says Sgt. Philbin), the tendency is to understand his point of view: Siegel says that Philbin’s comment *might* be condescending and racist (it is), but what he *really meant* was that “when a society limits the legal opportunities for advancement, then that society shouldn’t be shocked at illegal activities.” Unfortunately, Mr. Siegel, “Frontline” did not provide subtitles with intelligent analysis. What we got on “Street Cop” were instant visceral images: the good cops in the land of the vicious.

Finally, Siegel’s insistence on the remarkable similarity between “Street Cop” and “Hill Street Blues” points out the vacuity of both the show and his review. The people and the problems of Roxbury made for good television — something to shock, titillate, and entertain. If there was any redeeming value to this show, it was the panel discussion afterwards and the followup on the “Ten O’Clock News,” which tried to bring some political consciousness to bear on the intervention of media technology into a community not powerful enough to prevent itself from being misused. We all know that weekly television dramas like “Hill Street Blues,” with one hour to get their Nielsen ratings, use all kinds of manipulative devices to get a quick response; so any identification between “Street Cop” and “Hill Street Blues” is cause for alarm, not praise. Television works in powerfully primitive ways. It can show us shapes of darkness and terror and teach us to fear the other who is not like ourselves. Making the entire community of Roxbury into “The Other” was the single effect and the singular accomplishment of “Street Cop.”

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