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### **Black Lives Matter: The Digital Mobilization of Citizen Journalists**

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# BLACK LIVES MATTER

## The Digital Mobilization of Citizen Journalists

Story & Photos by Julie Navarro

**"I'M A WHITE PERSON. I GREW UP  
WHITE, I HAD A ROUGH UPBRINGING  
BUT I WAS WHITE"**

**-SEAN BECKNER-CARMITCHEL**

CITIZEN JOURNALISTS DOCUMENTING PROTESTORS SHUTTING  
DOWN THE 110 FREEWAY IN SOUTH CENTRAL, LOS ANGELES.



Many issues that have been bubbling beneath the thin facade of American society have exploded to the surface in the year 2020. The unlawful murder of George Floyd at the hands of Derek Chauvin lead to historically large, global demonstrations against police brutality. The issue of having marginalized communities living in fear because of institutionalized racism in our country has caused collective hindsight to be just

that—2020. Videographers, photographers, and documentarians have been essential in keeping people informed about what actually happens during these protests through digital mediums. These citizen journalists are capturing the protests, while simultaneously capturing the public reaction to their newly discovered presence. In Los Angeles, despite facing violent adversity from state and reactionary forces, citizen journalist Sean Beckner-Carmitchel

(Instagram@acatwithnews) remains determined to use his video work to amplify Black voices for the movement.

“I’m a white person. I grew up white, I had a rough upbringing but I was white,” said Beckner-Carmitchel. “When I was in the streets, I didn’t have to be afraid that something would happen to me like what happened to Tamir Rice. I never had to worry about being ‘respectful’ to people of authority”. Sean’s



description of a white childhood exemplifies the difference in experience compared to Black and Brown lives. Recognition and acknowledgement of white privilege is a key component to his acceptance as an ally to the movement, as it is a bare minimum concept to better understanding race relations in the U.S as a white person.

Journalism is one of the most virtuous activities a person can do to participate in the betterment of society because a society can only function as well as its community is informed. The population with access to factual news coverage will be better informed to make wiser decisions than the population without access. It is the duty of the journalist to provide the public with the accurate information they need in order to make the best possible decisions for their lives, communities, and societies. Many mainstream media networks, either intentionally or not, tend to perpetuate a perspective that confirms bias instead of providing impartial information.

In Los Angeles, a city

famous for its cameras and news cycles, mainstream media outlets seldom cover the daily protests that occur across all sides of the city. Notable coverage only occurred at the very beginning of the protests, when rioting and destructive protesting was at its highest. The last major coverage on The Black Lives Matter Movement (BLM) by a mainstream news source was during a shooting involving two Compton sheriffs. On September 12th, KPCC reporter Josie Huang, reported on the scene of the crime before being violently arrested. For many activists, their only source of reliable, neutral news relating to the protests comes from a handful of journalists & photographers doing the work out of pocket. These anti-profit citizen journalists documenting the Black Lives Matter demonstrations have proven that a movement is only as strong as its media outreach & documentation.

The evolution of communicative technology has transformed journalism. Where anyone with access to the internet and a smartphone can be a journalist. Now audiences can turn to the world wide web for their news, no longer having to rely on scheduled televised programming. This is both a blessing and a curse in the search for truth, as the standard for who can claim the

title of journalist drops, so too does the average quality of the content. According to a Michigan Institute of Technology study, false news spreads six times faster on Twitter than factual news, causing a demand for trustworthy information.

Social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter have fundamentally changed the way we communicate as well as the way we consume news for better and for worse. This change has paved the way for citizen journalists. These journalists have been documenting news in a first-person narrative style inspired by Gonzo journalism. This style of journalism has a greater emphasis on emotion and personal experiences. Directly contrasting journalism’s traditionally detached style and reliance on the “on-the-record” facts, this alternative form of journalism has allowed activists to effectively display the movement factually and in real time.

Activists like Beckner-Carmitchel, and his ally Vishal Pratap Singh (Instagram@vishal.p.singh or Twitter@VPS\_reports), have

mobilized social media platforms like Instagram into anti-profit news outlets prioritized on documenting protests from the first-person perspective of a frontline protester. This means filming the police as often as possible to

provide video evidence on police and protester interactions, as well as evidence to dispute false claims made about protesters, the police, or the protest itself. This digital

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PROTESTORS ARE SCATTERED IN THE STREETS OF LOS ANGELES; A SKATER HOLDS A SIMPLE SIGN PROUDLY.



inclusion has proven invaluable for protest documentation and for disseminating that information by the protestors and for the protestors. By keeping the LA protests consistently on people's news feeds, the protestors provided unedited and transparent videos that provided a varied perspective on the protests. While conventional media outlets highlighted the violent scenes of "rioting," protest live streams showed the much calmer reality.

On Oct. 16, 2020, Los Angeles sheriffs shot and killed 25-year-old Fred Williams, a young Black man from the Willowbrook neighborhood. The following weekend, a vigil and protest was held in his name, calling for murder charges against the officers involved. Organizers, community members and others marched alongside William's family. Beckner-Carmitchel recorded the whole thing. An anonymous protester, covered head to toe in solid black clothing, identified only as "Lucky," passionately explained how Beckner-Carmitchel's work has influenced his involvement in activism.

"Following Sean and Vishal has kept me up to date with pretty much every major protest there is in the area. If I don't get to make it to a protest, and I'm worried about how it's looking because I have comrades there or I wanna see how police are reacting, or even if I just want to hear what speakers are saying, I can trust that everything I missed will be online for free," Lucky said.

"We can't take that for granted. Sean and others like him are the people I tell non-activist

**"IF YOUR REPORTING DOES NOT UPSET AN OPPRESSIVE STATUS QUO, IF YOUR REPORTING IS NOT A THREAT TO THE ESTABLISHMENT, IF YOUR REPORTING DOES NOT TELL TRUTH TO POWER: THEN YOU'RE NOT ENGAGED IN THE OLD CRAFT OF JOURNALISM. YOU'RE ENGAGED IN THE YOUNG CRAFT OF PUBLIC RELATIONS."**

**@VISHAL.P.SINGH**

friends of mine to follow immediately because they capture what it is like to be a protester from the first-person video perspective. When I tell my friends that the police were shooting rubber bullets at innocent people, it doesn't elicit as much of a reaction as a video of someone getting shot would. We have to see things for ourselves in order to truly understand it sometimes. If George Floyd's murder wasn't caught on video, a lot of people wouldn't be fighting for Black lives right now," said Lucky. Sean and others like him are using the camera to its fullest potential.

Due to Beckner-Carmitchel's open stance against police brutality, he has been harassed,

threatened, arrested, and shot at, not just by police, but also by white supremacists, such as The

Proud Boys. Although the dangerous and draining nature of the work has changed his life in various ways, Beckner-Carmitchel remains passionately dedicated to using modern-day technology to amplify Black voices and keep the fight alive.

"I was a more active frontline protester until I realized that the BLM narrative was being switched. There's skepticism when Black, Brown, and Indigenous people speak up about their issues," Beckner-Carmitchel said. "There's a bigger burden of truth that's put upon them.

I realize that is something that during protests, I can correctly assist with. I'm a firm believer in BLM having Black voices lead rather than using my own, so I'm gonna uplift them."

He explained how making BLM a part of his life had expanded his understanding of racism to greater levels, even as someone who had always acknowledged racism in the U.S.

"Being involved with BLM on a daily basis made me realize that the problems are woven into the fabric of who we are more than I previously thought," Beckner-Carmitchel said. "And I realized we can't go forward without a reconciliation of the history of this country. This country was started on a genocide, built on a genocide, became a superpower on this genocide, and it continues it to this day. Just because



PROTESTOR HOLDS A POWERFUL AND ARTISTIC SIGN, LOS ANGELES CALIFORNIA.



it's in different forms and in the shadows doesn't mean it doesn't exist and isn't still occurring."

Beckner-Carmitchel's work is inspired by both contemporary and historical activists that paved the way for today's citizen journalism. The alternative forms of media and methods of activism utilized during the 1960's would go on to provide a blueprint for the future history of resistance in the United States.

"I'm a big fan of the Yippie movement of the 60s. I think Abbie Hoffman was a genius. A counter-cultural revolutionary in the 60s who believed in using pop culture iconography and humor to shine a light to the system," Beckner-Carmitchel said. "He's one of the first people to really start organizing the Yippie movement...Changing it from pockets of 'smoke weed' to live-ins, dine-ins, became a common talk show guest... Rueben Salazar is also a big influence on me."

Reuben Salazar was

a civil rights activist and reporter for the Los Angeles Times. He was also the first Mexican-American journalist from mainstream media to cover the Chicano community. Salazar was killed by a tear-gas projectile fired by LA county sheriff deputy Thomas Wilson during the National Chicano Moratorium March against the Vietnam War on Aug. 29, 1970 in East Los Angeles, California.

"Salazar is a bigger influence on me now. I didn't expect it but there were definitely some emotional moments during the Chicano Moratorium anniversary. That hit me personally realizing that 'oh shit, that could be me for sure,'" Beckner-Carmitchel said.

He states how journalism has evolved and that one does not have to be completely "neutral" to display

truth. "I am an antifascist. That doesn't mean I'm not showing the truth. I am not trying to do what Associated Press or writers are doing, I don't think that's all the world needs," Beckner-Carmitchel said. "When you're capturing the police consistently beating people and consistently oppressing people's First Amendment rights, I don't think that it's biased to say that's wrong. There's no balanced way to write about an imbalanced thing. If you're killing someone unarmed, I don't think there's a second side to that."

He detailed some of the violent reactions he had faced, with the worst not coming from the hands of law enforcement, but instead an assault by right-wing extremists in Beverly Hills, to which police offered no aid or response.

"The scariest day of my life was at Beverly Hills. They brought bear mace, I was totally blinded. Getting hit on the head with that baseball bat. I realized I could be killed," Beck-

ner-Carmitchel said. "I was arrested three weeks prior to that for filming a peaceful protest. I must have been 10 feet away from the police and I got arrested. And [The Proud Boys] can beat and mace me, and get no charges."

This incident was certainly traumatic, but the experiences of citizen journalists are not always so horrific. Beckner-Carmitchel's journey has also included a wealth of gratitude for the positive moments he has been able to witness along the way.

"The best memories happened at Black Unity Camp. Seeing people cooperate, seeing birthday parties. Seeing people dancing at night. Seeing moments of joy. Some of the most powerful moments are people leaving jail when I volunteer for jail support. A crowd of people clapping, realizing that they did something powerful. Every once and awhile we'll

see a kid saying, daddy or mommy. Seeing their child not understand everything but being proud of their parents is powerful in and of itself," said Beckner-Carmitchel.

Sean's unique experience as a citizen journalist fighting for Black lives has provided him plenty of wisdom, allowing him to hone his craft and improve his methods. He generously shares his knowledge with anyone looking to get involved, especially those looking to follow in his footsteps.

"Outside of frontline journalism, we need rural people,

we need people in colleges in rural cities. We need them to be active in their communities. It is crucial. We need them to know BLM is more than just the major cities, Yorba Linda, Riverside, Humboldt... We need them everywhere," Beckner-Carmitchel said. "It lets America know that it's not just west coast liberal elites protesting, it's people who care about their community from all over."

"Tips for frontline journalism would be, as much as possible, be sure to introduce yourself to the people you are filming. Make sure







A POWERFUL ANTI-HATE SIGN, LOS ANGELES CALIFORNIA.

they are okay with being filmed. Keep the camera on the police as much as possible because they're more likely the ones who need to be captured. Especially in rural communities where they don't have body cams," said Beckner-Carmitchel.

"We need conversations. I don't care who you are, there's a perspective you don't know or don't have that you need to know about. We need to have dialogues, even with evil. Evil doesn't do well against dialogue. There are prob-

lems that Black and Brown people face that I may not even be aware of. There are cultural issues that white people may be themselves perpetuating and not even be aware of. We don't have a culture of educating ourselves, of accepting new opinions, admitting that you were wrong. We all have a responsibility to become more educated and to actively seek out information," said Beckner-Carmitchel.

Without quality journalism that upholds truth, justice, transparency, and accountability above all else, civil rights that many citizens have today

would not exist. Information that is considered public knowledge would have been swept away and forgotten if it was not for individuals dedicated to the betterment of society taking the time to inform the general public. Brave and resilient frontline citizen journalists like Beckner-Carmitchel have played a vital role in maintaining awareness in Los Angeles. They have provided a blueprint for effectively filming the police and protests for the benefit of all. Activists are leading the way for aspiring citizen journalists in lesser-known communities.



PROTESTORS PRESENTING POWERFUL DEFUND THE POLICE SIGNS, LOS ANGELES CALIFORNIA.