

Cops Has Been Defunded



Photo: Sean McCormick

By Sean McCormick

After 32 seasons, Cops – a reality television show once described as a “[one-celled amoeba](#)” by co-creator Stephen Chao – has been cancelled by Paramount.

On June 9, a Paramount Network spokesperson made a no-frills [statement](#) regarding the cancellation to the New York Times. “Cops’ is not on the Paramount Network and we don’t have any current or future plans for it to return,” they said.

Even though Paramount officials did not elaborate on their reasoning for the cancellation, the recent resurgence of the [Black Lives Matter](#) movement and the global protests over [George Floyd’s death](#) make a partnership with a show like Cops morally repugnant and potentially bad for Paramount Network’s evolving brand. As evidence, on June 1, Paramount and other Viacom channels [went dark](#) for eight minutes and 46 seconds to commemorate the amount of time that former Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin had his knee on Floyd’s neck.

This is not the first time that Cops has been cancelled. In 2013, the Fox network dropped the show upon the conclusion of its 25th season. Racial justice advocate group [Color of Change](#) had been pressuring the network to cancel the show and created a [petition](#) that received over [35,000 signatures](#). “With its history of dehumanizing and racially inflammatory portrayals of people of color, Cops paints a damaging and distorted portrait of crime and the criminal justice system,” Color of Change claimed in an excerpt from their petition.

Cops was immediately acquired by Viacom cable channel Spike TV in 2013 for its 26th season. Maybe Spike TV would work with Cops’ production company, Langley Productions, to update the show’s format to be more commensurate with the public’s [increasing calls](#) for racial justice and [police oversight](#)?

Nope.

It was business as usual. Then-president of Spike TV, Kevin Kay, in an [interview](#) with TV Guide, made it clear that Spike TV had no plans to meddle with the show. “We told them (Langley Productions), ‘You guys know this better than we do.’ It’s perfect, we have a tremendous amount of trust,” Kay said. Kay later stepped down as president of the Paramount Network (formerly Spike TV) during Viacom’s consolidation in October 2018.

This tone-deaf level of hands-off management from Spike TV invited Cops’ seven-year slide into irrelevancy. Had there been any introspection and objective thinking then, the show might have implemented some critical adjustments that could have countered the public’s increasingly negative perception of police behavior. Instead, they doubled down on their original, lurid formula of heavily edited, seven-minute segments – where the good guys always get the backstory-less bad boys off the street.

They might have gotten away with it, too, if it hadn’t been

for those meddling kids and their cell phones.

Cell phones with built-in video cameras.

Since Cops switched networks in 2013, social media has been inundated with [material](#) from amateur videographers. The rise of public platforms like YouTube ushered in an era where content trumps production values. Just about any stunt or mishap can be viewed on demand these days – including the [actions](#) of abusive police officers.

All of a sudden, police shows like Cops, and its younger, hotter cousin, Live PD, began losing control of their sacred narrative – that police officers are perennially competent professionals, capably dealing with the worst society has to offer. With the entire planet now able to witness a seemingly endless series of unedited negligent and [violent police incidents](#), a show like Cops seems anachronistic and disingenuous.

Cops raison d'être was to broadcast a 22-minute pro-law enforcement commercial and recruitment tool every Saturday evening. Public relations-improving propaganda is what Langlely Productions provided to [troubled police agencies](#) for access to their officers and hardware in lieu of any financial compensation. As Cops allowed each department to [approve everything](#) that was to go on the air, these agencies had little to lose by allowing the show to film in their cities. With this editorial control, each police department could dictate their own version of reality.

Until now.

Over three decades, Cops provided a weekly justification for Nixon and Reagan's "[war on drugs](#)" and perpetuated rock-bottom expectations of minority groups – often showcasing and making light of people who are struggling with addiction and neglect.

In a way, Cops continued the work of the Jim Crow laws that

allowed even the poorest whites to feel superior to people of color.

Langley Production's "one-celled amoeba" did not evolve and adapt to the prevailing environmental conditions, and now it's extinct.