

CASE 9-B

**12TH AND CLAIMOUNT: A NEWSPAPER'S FORAY INTO
DOCUMENTING A PIVOTAL SUMMER**

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The documentary film *12th and Clairmount* debuted in March 2017, timed to coincide with the 50-year-anniversary of the most significant period of urban unrest in the history of Detroit and which continues to haunt the city five decades later.

Brian Kaufman, a reporter for the *Detroit Free Press* and one of the film's two editors, collaborated with a Detroit television station (Channel 7—WXYZ) and *Bridge* magazine to try to present a holistic portrait of the Detroit riots, which many Detroiters refer to as a rebellion. Those five days of unrest, in which 43 people died and hundreds were arrested, are credited by scholars and pundits alike with intensifying the Caucasian flight from Detroit proper to the city's suburbs and exurbs—housing patterns that continue to this day.

"What we tried to do was get to the heart of why this happened and it happened for several reasons, police brutality being one of them, housing segregation being another, and lack of jobs being the third," Kaufman said.

The narrative backbone of the film was the relationship between the city's African-American community and Detroit's police force which, at that time, was almost exclusively Caucasian. Through crowdsourcing, including notes from reporters working in the city at the time, archival news footage, and home movies that were first culled and then digitized to be edited into the film, viewers learned about the actions of a cadre of four Detroit police officers, known locally as the Big Four, who beat, intimidated, arrested on false pretenses, and terrorized African-American Detroiters for years before the riots broke out. The film's producers interviewed Detroiters who had encountered the Big Four, memories that remained vivid despite the decades.

Housing patterns in the city were examined, including the practice of redlining that meant, in Detroit, that African-Americans could not get traditional mortgages from banks and instead had to purchase homes on land contracts, a practice that meant that even one missed payment could, and often did, result in eviction with no recourse, including recovering the money that homeowners had paid for years. Kaufman noted that how

Detroiters of the time reacted to the riots was very much a function of where they lived. Neighborhoods in the northeast part of the city were untouched by the unrest; Detroiters alive today who lived in the city in 1967 say they were unaware of the riots at the time they were happening—depending on the neighborhood in which they grew up.

Footage from media coverage of the Detroit riots also moves the narrative forward. Prominent images in those stories include tanks on major thoroughfares in the city, looting and arson in the African-American neighborhoods most affected by the unrest, and footage of both local—including Michigan governor George W. Romney (father of 2012 Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney)—and national political leaders calling for military force to quell the riots. In the larger context of the film itself, it is possible to examine whether journalists of the time really “got” and reported the deeper story of the problems of the people and the institutions of Detroit.

The filmmakers also took some risks. In order to keep the documentary visually engaging, they had to “find” images that either never or no longer existed. This included hiring an artist to provide sketches of important people and scenes—the only way the film’s editor and producers found to maintain visual continuity.

In a review of the film by Owen Gleiberman, the *Variety* contributor, noted, “Kaufman lets us hear from people of every class and neighborhood: the melting pot of downtown, the whites in their secluded enclaves, the African-Americans who were kept out even when they could afford to buy a home, the way the practice of ‘blockbusting’ worked, with landlords indulging in greedy scare tactics like paying black children to throw a bottle through a window, thereby establishing a neighborhood as vulnerable to crime, at which point the landlord would snap up one house at a fire-sale price, then another, fomenting a wave of panicked sell-offs. This was the economic engine of white flight.”

All of this, of course, occurred in a context of the history of Detroit, one of the most racially diverse cities in the United States in 1967. Detroit was led by Mayor Jerome P. Cavanaugh, a politician who spoke for integration, was sometimes compared with John F. Kennedy, and who, before the summer of 1967, may have had presidential aspirations of his own. The riots also occurred the same summer when thousands of Detroiters heard Dr. Martin Luther King give an earlier version of his “I have a dream speech” that, when delivered at the foot of the Washington Monument several months later, inspired the nation.

The film opened the *Detroit Free Press*’ Freep film festival to sell-out audiences. It was aired on local television.

The film debuted within weeks of Hollywood director Kathryn Bigelow's *Detroit*, also timed to coincide with the summer of 1967. Bigelow won an Oscar for best director. In explaining her decision to make a film about the 1967 riots, she said: "James Baldwin said: 'Nothing can be changed until it is faced.' And in America, there seems a radical desire not to face the reality of race. So these events keep replaying."

Micro Issues

1. Successful documentary films often have a point of view. Is it appropriate for a newspaper to support and participate in such an effort?
2. Anniversaries are often used as a news peg to revisit significant events such as disasters or the 9/11 terrorist attacks. What is the role of such journalistic efforts?
3. The filmmakers said they made the film for those who did not live through the events. Evaluate this justification.

Midrange Issues

1. The use of crowdsourcing, and particularly the use of home movie footage, raised concerns about privacy and point of view. Evaluate those concerns in light of the theories of social justice reviewed in this chapter.
2. How do you evaluate the decision to employ an artist to provide sketches of significant actors in the Detroit unrest because no other visual images existed? Do you think this approach devalues the truthfulness of the message?
3. How would you describe the events in Detroit? A riot? A rebellion? A revolution? How might your choice reflect the five theories of social justice reviewed in this chapter?
4. Are such films fair to police officers serving in cities nationwide today?

Macro Issues

1. Compare the approach of *12th and Clairmount* to that of the narrative fiction film *Detroit*. Which do you believe does the better job of informing audience members about the factual events of that summer?

2. Do films such as *Detroit* and *12th and Clairmont* contribute to racial tension in the United States? Compare the portraits of the 1967 unrest with contemporary news coverage of protests in Ferguson, Missouri; Baltimore, etc.

CASE 9-C

CINCINNATI ENQUIRER'S HEROIN BEAT

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Heroin-related overdose deaths have more than quadrupled since 2010, with nearly 13,000 people dying nationwide in 2015 alone. Some of the greatest increases have occurred in women, the privately insured, and people with higher incomes—demographic groups with historically low rates of heroin use (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2017). In response, the CDC added overdose prevention to its list of top public health challenges, and President Donald Trump created the Commission on Combating Drug Addiction and the Opioid Crisis to study “ways to combat and treat the scourge of drug abuse, addiction and the opioid crisis” (The White House 2017). This designation focused on raising national awareness about the severity of the problem but stopped short of providing additional funding for treatment and research about the opioid crisis.

News media also have responded with new initiatives. Specifically, the *Cincinnati Enquirer*, a daily newspaper covering Cincinnati and its Northern Kentucky suburbs, established the nation’s first heroin beat in January 2016. While the heroin and opioid epidemic is a national problem, Ohio—and, more specifically, Southwestern Ohio—is considered its epicenter. Heroin is thought to be the most accessible drug in Ohio (Ohio State Bar Association 2017), which leads the nation in both opioid and heroin overdose deaths (Kaiser Family Foundation 2014).

Terry DeMio, the *Enquirer* reporter who heads the heroin beat, said in an interview with the author that the *Enquirer* really is just responding to the community’s need for information:

There’s a recognition that, not only is this a crisis, it’s a crisis that, even now, is not well understood. I have easily more than 100 and probably well over 100 individuals talking to me, reading my work, people