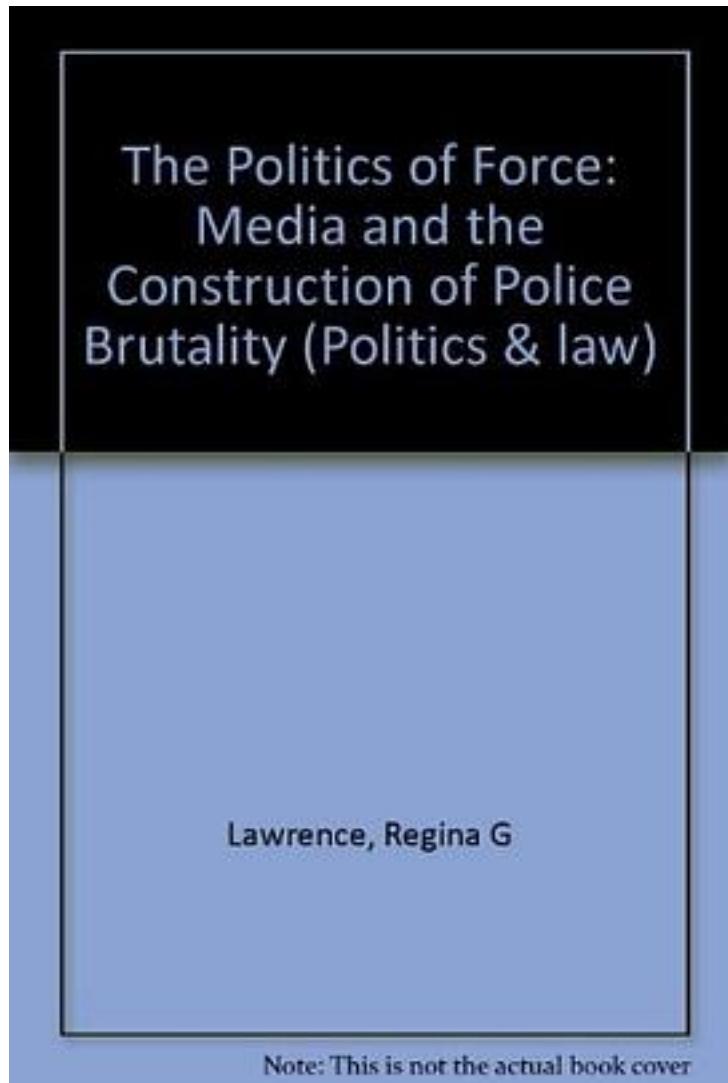


The Politics of Force



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When police brutality becomes front-page news, it triggers a sudden, intense interaction between the media, the public, and the police. Regina Lawrence ably demonstrates how these news events provide the raw materials for looking at underlying problems in American society. Journalists, policy makers, and the public use such stories to define a problematic situation, and this process of problem definition gives the media a crucial role in our public policy debates.

Lawrence extensively analyzes more than 500 incidents of police use-of-force covered by the New York Times and the Los Angeles Times from 1985 to 1994, with additional analysis of more recent incidents such as the shooting of Amadou Diallo in New York. The incidents include but are not limited to those defined as "police brutality." Lawrence reveals the structural and cultural forces that both shape the news and allow police to define most use-of-force incidents, which occur in far greater numbers than are reported, she says.

Lawrence explores the dilemma of obtaining critical media perspectives on policing policies. She examines the factors that made the coverage of the Rodney King beating so significant, particularly after the incident was captured on video. At the same time, she shows how an extraordinary news event involving the police can become a vehicle for marginalized social groups to gain entrance into the media arena.

In contrasting "event-driven" problem definition with the more thoroughly studied "institutionally driven" news stories, Lawrence's book fills a major gap in media studies. It also offers a broader understanding of the interplay between the criminal justice system and the media in today's world.

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