Ah, the Ice Bucket Challenge. Who doesn't love a trend built solely around charitable contributions aimed at eradicating a debilitating disease? Me. I don't, because the...
It's not about the supposed waste of water — I understand that argument, but Americans waste such ludicrous amounts of water anyway that one social media campaign doesn't even register a blip. It isn't really even about the fact that there are far more prevalent diseases than the ones we actually donate money towards solving. No, the problem with the Ice Bucket Challenge isn't the thing itself. The problem is Ferguson.

Make no mistake: more than any other story, Ferguson defines and encapsulates modern-day America. The case itself, combined with everything surrounding it and the centuries that made it possible, makes Ferguson quite possibly the most important story of the past decade. And apart from getting mad about some journalists (most of whom are white) having mean things said to them by the cops, white America doesn't seem to want to care.

I mean, I get it. I understand why white America* is going nuts over the Ice Bucket Challenge and trying to sweep Ferguson away. The entire story makes us uncomfortable for a variety of reasons. It's an ugly story in which we have to face the difficult truth that the cops aren't really the good guys, not just in Ferguson, Missouri, but anywhere (as Ferguson's lack of uniqueness proves) — an idea that conflicts with what we've always been taught to believe. Because this isn't just Ferguson; it's Eric Garner in New York, and John Crawford in Ohio, and Ezell Ford in LA. It's every PoC in every city who lives in fear that a cop will shoot them when they've done nothing wrong, and who knows that cop will almost certainly never face justice if they do so.

But the less obvious and ultimately far more important reason is that thinking about Ferguson means we have to hold up a mirror to our reflection as both white people and Americans, and it's a vision into which we'd rather not gaze. Simply put, Ferguson forces us to confront an ocean of unpleasantness within ourselves we don't want to see. Ferguson makes us feel bad, and we don't want to feel bad. The reflexive white feeling (one I have not been immune from) is the desire for Ferguson to go away.
But that's the thing about privilege, isn't it? Privileged groups can mentally switch off the issue and not think about it. Members of oppressed groups don't have that luxury, but we sure do. We can stop thinking about the truly horrendous fact that more people have donated more dollars to a fund to support Michael Brown's murderer than to his family. We can stop thinking about the fact that at least once during this whole affair, police indiscriminately tear-gassed an entire neighborhood. We can stop thinking about what's going to happen to Ferguson when the cameras leave.

Most of all, we can neatly skirt the uncomfortable truth that we should feel bad, that we should feel guilty, not just as white people but as human beings, that we even for a second forgot about the prevalence of systemic racism in America, that we stopped fighting against injustice, that anyone used the words "post-racial society" unironically. I guarantee you PoC have never forgotten any of it.

We could've used anything to help us shift our attention — sports, awards shows, whatever the hell various Kardashians are doing this week — but the Ice Bucket Challenge was the perfect distraction. Not only is it a different story, it lets us play the hero. Anyone can be a crusader for the cause of ALS research, and all it takes is getting some ice dumped on their head. The Ice Bucket Challenge comes attached to no pesky guilt or uncomfortable truths — it is pure, it is righteous, and it is easy.

Admittedly, the difference in interest is a matter of degrees — it's not as if no one's looking at articles about Ferguson. Greg Howard's excellent America is Not For Black People did over 950k unique views. Kara's likewise fantastic This Is Why We're Mad About the Shooting of Mike Brown did 650k. Rebecca's initial news post about the police violence in Ferguson (published near midnight EST, no less) did almost 350k. People clearly care about these issues.

But contrast that against this post (13.5 million uniques) or this one (4.5 million) and you start to see the difference. To be clear: I am not in the slightest way criticizing either author or site for writing those posts — you can't talk about one news story (even one as important as Ferguson) to the exclusion of all else for weeks, and the Ice Bucket Challenge, as sad as it is to admit, is a legitimate news story. But the fact that there's such an astronomical difference between the number
of users interested in the more important story and the lesser one is staggering.

None of this is to say we can't or shouldn't care about ALS. Obviously, it's a terrible disease and finding a cure would be an unquestionably good thing. But the idea that we as a nation care about the Ice Bucket Challenge even as much as we do about Ferguson — let alone far moreso — is incredibly disheartening.

We can care about both issues at once, and we should, but right now we're caring way, way more about the thing that isn't nearly as important. So by all means, donate money to ALS research — just don't for a moment think that it absolves you of our collective responsibility to pay attention to and consider the ramifications of an infinitely more important story.

*Anyone about to say "but I've seen black people doing the Ice Bucket Challenge, too!": just stop. You're embarrassing yourself.

** If you want to donate to Michael Brown's family, the Michael Brown Memorial Fund can be found here. If you want to donate to Darren Wilson, seriously, fuck you.

*Image via AP. This piece was originally posted Saturday, August 30.*

Unfortunately, we had a technical glitch and it vanished from the face of the Earth. Due to the nature of the holiday weekend, we decided to republish it, backdated to the original time of publishing.