

## “Citizen Watchdogs and the Future of News” Video Transcript

### **Wesley Lowery**

Reporter, *The Washington Post*

Social media created Ferguson. Without social media—specifically Twitter—but without social media by and large, there is no Ferguson, Missouri. Mike Brown remains a generic name that we use for filler and does not invoke the specific images.

What I remember specifically is I remember seeing the tweets of the young man whose apartment was right in front of the shooting site and watching the series of tweets from him: “The police just killed someone. Oh my gosh! Oh my gosh! What’s going on?”

Then watching the Instagram video of Brittany Noble of KMOV, who happens to be a friend of mine, so we already were linked on social media, and I remember watching the video that she took of Lesley McSpadden moments after the shooting when she had arrived, jumping up and down in agony, screaming. This was a video on Instagram, this wasn’t something that went out not even on YouTube, it wasn’t something that was on Twitter at the time, this wasn’t something that was being broadcast by KMOV. This was something she put on her Instagram page and it ended up blowing up.

I remember the Instagram photo, and eventually a Twitter photo, of Michael Brown’s stepfather holding the sign he made in cardboard saying, “The Ferguson PD just executed my unarmed son.”

Those images were the images that created Ferguson. Then the images of the police standing on top of fire trucks with their weapons drawn as a small, and eventually large, group of angry residents gathered. The images of Michael Brown’s body staying on the ground for four hours.

Social media was there. Social media was on Canfield Drive long before the first reporter arrived. It was there immediately and it propelled this story in a way that this story never, ever would have been told. It never would’ve become that national story that it was were it not for social media.

### **Pat Gauen**

Public safety editor, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*

I think the value of Twitter stunned me. Up to that point, it was out there, but it was a novelty that didn’t have a lot of purpose, and Ferguson gave Twitter quite a purpose and one that continues now.

I think there is a lesson that law enforcement has to learn about this event and social media that I never considered before and I don’t think law enforcement considered before either.

In the past, you controlled the mass message by controlling the information you gave to the news media. We had the only loudspeakers, essentially. We had printing presses, TV and radio had broadcasts towers, but before the Internet, there was no big mass access to an audience except through us. So if the police could slow us down, shut us out of information, mete things out as they chose, pick their time to reveal things, they controlled it. There was no competition for us in the message getting out. They still controlled the narrative. Ferguson showed the peril of that.

**Larry Morris**

**Graduate Student, Webster University**

I got a lot of emails and a lot of people telling me that I was their source. While they were out of town, they came to my page to see what was actually happening, because they didn't necessarily trust what they saw on the local news stations or the big news stations and whatnot. So I feel like being a responsible media participant, it's your responsibility to help put people on the right path, and putting people on the right path may not always be in line with what you think, but what's right. Because that's what it's all about: getting what the correct information out there, so people can be skeptical the right way.

**Craig Cheatham**

**Reporter, KMOV (1999–2015)**

Everybody's playing the watchdog. I still think that the organized journalism organization has the most credibility and does the best job of practicing journalism. But boy, in Ferguson some of these folks really did a terrific job of documenting events.

They caught police in some bad situations and the cops were called out for it. Mainstream media followed the lead of some of these bloggers or protesters and used the video and then would hold police agencies and those officers accountable, but it would start from the home video of the protesters.

Absolutely their coverage, in some cases, was good and made a difference. No question about it. A lot of it was noise and a lot of it just made everything more difficult, and there was an awful lot of incorrect information that they claimed was gospel and it wasn't, and it made things much worse. But if you could dive into that forest and find the one or two things in the forest that were true, it was a great story, and when they did that, when they presented that, it was a public service.

The challenge was finding that needle in a haystack of public service through all of the noise that was out there. And that was very difficult to do. It was really tough sometimes.

**Brooke Gladstone**

**Host, "On the Media"**

I followed the role of social media in generating the interest in the case, and the public and I discovered actually that there was a pattern that in the anatomy of a lot of these shootings, starting with Trayvon Martin, that made them public, whereas before they were community affairs that never got any attention and social media was enormously important.

A black person dies in an urban neighborhood. I mean, you hear stories like this all the time. Is that a story? What, you know, what happened there? Why do we need to cover it? I mean, let's face it, you know, most of the media are still run by people for whom these neighborhoods are not familiar. Neighborhoods with which they don't identify—white middle class people. And the hard-nosed cynics might say, "This really isn't a story." Or they would cover it once or twice and that's that. For it to become a national event or possibly the source of the proverbial national conversation, you need people to care, and to get people to care you need families, you need circumstances, you need specifics.

It helps to have a pattern of injustice. You need a hashtag so that all of the interested parties can come together and shout in a body, "Attention must be paid!" And so that's what's happened: is that suddenly the killing of an unarmed black person, an unarmed black man is news—national news, because a story in Florida, and a story in the Carolinas, and a story in Missouri all feed each other and somehow convey the message that there's something

wrong, there's something wrong in our justice system—something that the majority, the people who weren't victims of it, could so easily ignore.

I'm gonna say something that's probably going to seem totally counterintuitive, but I think that Ferguson is one of the best things that has ever happened to American democracy, because how many people gunned down in our cities do we know about? Very few compared to how many there are. Where is the outrage? There isn't. Okay, so finally a spotlight on something that's been going on forever and taken the police by surprise. Where did this spotlight come from?

Of course there are gonna be clashes, and it's great that people called it "Fergustan" because it got the police to fire its chief and get a new one and create change where change seemed very nearly impossible. There is something glorious about seeing our democracy fail and then seeing something happen.

How do you make people say: We want your eyes here, we want your ears here, we want your expertise here, we want our voices out there? And you do that by organizing, and you organize by social media. And with a hashtag, a trending hashtag, you can have a million people, with minimal effort, saying, "Yeah I care about this. You should be there, you should cover this."

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## **Student Notes**