

“The Role and Challenges of a Free Press” Video Transcript

Brooke Gladstone

Host, “On the Media,” NPR

What we saw in Ferguson was essentially the press being treated no differently from everybody else. And a lot of people say: “Well, why should they be?” Well, it’s because the press is representing you, the press has the megaphone, the press can tell the outside world.

The Constitution doesn’t make a distinction between the individual and the press when discussing our First Amendment rights to free speech. They’re all the same, they all mean the same. Now as time went on and the person who owned the printing press became the spokesperson for many, many people or particular interests and other people didn’t have an equal opportunity to express themselves to the wider world, there became a very clear distinction between the press and the public.

That distinction isn’t as critical now as it used to be because everybody has a megaphone, right, with a telephone. And everybody can reach the outside world.

But in arresting the press, in assuming that their very presence was a provocation, was a clear indication that the police did not want what was going on photographed, documented, made available to the rest of the nation.

Kenya Vaughn

Reporter, *The St. Louis American*

In the same sense that everyone has become some form of a journalist with their smartphones, they’ve also become a watchdog through their respective newsfeeds, and the things that they watch, and the things that they say, and the things that they share.

But there are people in certain situations where they don’t have a voice and the media and media people have the opportunity to be the voice for the voiceless. If you interrupt or impede that voice in any way, then there are a whole community of people who have no way to let the world know that they’re suffering or even that they are doing good things. So we need the media to have the right to share stories for the sake of the community.

Wesley Lowery

Reporter, *The Washington Post*

My experience in Ferguson underscored the belief I already had—but really highlighted it for me—the importance of being 1) willing, to ask hard questions and being willing to stand up and assert the rights that we do have.

Very often, the media, or the members of the media are the representatives of the people, by and large, and that if the police were unwilling to allow us to write and report and take photos in the way we’re constitutionally empowered to do, what other things are they not allowing people who don’t have cameras and press passes to do? It underscored how vitally important us asserting those rights were.

The other thing was, I think journalism fundamentally in the United States of America, the reason we have a free press is to hold the powers that be to account, to ask the hard questions, and to stand up for the voiceless people, for the disempowered people.

You look at all of the arrests, hundreds of arrests made in Ferguson, Missouri, of peaceful protesters because the police instituted a five-second rule where you could not stop walking for more than five seconds. That was very quickly—once the ACLU sued—found to be completely unconstitutional.

We in fact have a constitutional right to stand on sidewalks whether that's with a sign or not. Without journalists willing to ask the hard questions about, well, "No, why do we have to move? Why can't we stand here? Also, what's going to happen to all these arrested people who haven't been charged yet? Can we get a police report for those 600 people?" Without those questions being asked, those people would have to deal with the consequences of this in a way that would've been completely unfair and unconstitutional.

I remember flying back into Ferguson, Missouri, in October and on that day, having a front-page story about all of these arrests that had happened during these protests. We dug through all the arrest records and concluded, essentially, that they had been done largely without rhyme or reason. People who were never told why they were under arrest, people who were never given any explanation, who were released without a police report, people whose bail or bond had been applied seemingly randomly.

These are all issues of people's rights. And without a free press, without a press that's willing to ask hard questions of police—and that doesn't mean that the press is against the police. It's not an anti-police thing; it's a pro-freedom thing. It's about knowing that we live in a structure, in a society, where we're allowed to ask hard questions of the powers that be, that our social construct relies specifically and fundamentally on a society in which we ask hard questions of the people to whom we give power. Ferguson underscored that in so many ways.

Student Notes