“Wesley Lowery’s Arrest” Video Transcript

Wesley Lowery, a reporter for The Washington Post, arrived in Ferguson on Monday, Aug. 11, two days after the shooting of Michael Brown. Two days later, he was arrested by Ferguson police. This is his account of his arrest.

Wesley Lowery
Reporter, The Washington Post

On that Wednesday, I walked up to the McDonald’s after covering this daytime protest. It was still going on, but I could break off for a few. I had to file something for another piece I was working on. I wanted to write up some of my notes. So I set up shop in this McDonald’s and you know, really set up shop. All my notebooks are out on the table, my computer’s set up, I’ve got two bags with me.

Eventually, as nightfall closes in—that protest was supposed to last until about 5 p.m. It was a planned church protest. It was supposed to wrap up. And so eventually, the church groups started to leave, but other people had arrived and started to join this protest.

Myself and Ryan Reilly—the reporter from the Huffington Post, who was also in the McDonald’s, also working—we were across the dining room from each other and we started to see people from the protests coming in, stopping by to get food. We'd make small talk with them, ask them, “Hey, how’s it going? What’s going on out there? Is it still crazy?” And, “No, nothing’s really happening. They’re setting up a little road block up the street, for some reason, but we really don’t know why.” But, it didn’t seem like much was going on.

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Being the obnoxious social media reporters we both are, we both got up and took pictures of these police officers who are now in our McDonald’s in all this gear.

This is just really strange, it’s out of place, this is not where any of the protest is happening. And we watched them have this interaction with the manager, Keith, at the front of the McDonald’s. They’re having this back and forth with him. They’re trying to explain to him, “Listen, we want to try to close all the businesses on West Florissant,” or something along these lines, “because it might get violent out there, we don’t know what’s going to happen, we don’t want any risk.” And Keith’s going back and forth asking, “Do you want us to clear all the dining room for you.” And initially the answer was, “No, we’re fine.” It’s 6 p.m. in a McDonald’s. This is actually a very important time for business.

And so the officers then came into the dining room and they gave us all a warning. They said, “Listen, you guys should all leave.” Again, being reporters, we asked, “So just to be clear, are you telling us we’ve got to go, or are you just advising us that there’s a situation?” And they said, “Well, what we’re saying to you is if you call 911, we’re not going to come respond here.”

They’re letting us know that, “You’ve been warned, things could get crazy and if that’s the case, we’re not coming back. We tried to warn you.” And again, that was fine with me. If a riot broke out in the McDonald’s where I was I, in fact, would be perfectly positioned to cover the riot that I would need to be covering. They weren’t quite sure
what to do with that response—that these two people were OK with the fact that things might happen here, that the idea that violence could happen didn’t deter us from doing our work. So they came back moments later having made the decision that this is no longer Keith’s decision, this is no longer up to McDonald’s, they’re clearing the McDonald’s, you gotta get out of here. Alright, cool. So they say, “Never mind what we said, you gotta go, you gotta get out of here, stop videotaping us. You gotta get out of here.”

At that time, one officer came over to me; another officer went over to where Ryan was. They were having what seemed to be kind of a heated back and forth. The guy was asking Ryan for his ID. He was saying, “I don’t have to give you my ID.”

Meanwhile, I’ve got my credentials around my neck and I’m having this back and forth with the officer because he’s insisting, “Stop videotaping me and pack up your stuff.” I was taping him with one hand and trying to pack up all these things I had taken out with the other. And he’s just saying, “Get out of here. You’ve gotta leave, you’ve gotta leave.” And I said, “You can see I’m working on leaving. Repeating yourself is not going to make it happen any faster.”

At one point he gestures at me with his weapon, which I particularly didn’t appreciate and I said, “Hey, don’t point your gun at me.”

I went to walk out—still videotaping—but I went to walk out of the McDonald’s. I’ve got my backpack slung over one shoulder, and I start to make my exit and I start to say to him, I say, “So, am I going to be able to get my car or what’s the deal? I’m parked in the McDonald’s parking lot, you guys are evacuating the McDonald’s.”

“Well, I don’t have time for your questions. I don’t have time for your questions.”

“Alright, sir. I’m trying to leave. What do you want me to do? Can I go get my car or should I walk up the street?”

“Well, of course you can get your car.”

“Ok, cool. Thank you.”

And so I walk, and I say, “I’m going to go get my car. I’m going to go out this door.” And as I turn, another officer emerges from the pathway and he goes, “You gotta go the other way! You gotta go the other way.”

I turn to them both and say, “Officers, you’ve told me two different things. I’m trying to leave, my car’s parked over there. Would you like me to walk out this door? I need you two to make up your mind.”

They confer and say, “Go out this door.”

So, I turn to leave, and my backpack, which is still slung over one shoulder, starts to slip off and I say, “Give me one second, I gotta adjust my bag.”

And they say, “Let’s take him. Forget this.” At which point they grab me and they push me up against the fountain soda machine in this McDonald’s and so Coke is now like spraying off my arm. I put my arms behind my back and I drop my notebook out of my hand. And I say, “My hands are behind my back, you can arrest me. It’s fine.”

“Stop resisting, stop resisting.”

“I’m not resisting.”

So, they put me in plastic ties and they walk me out of the McDonald’s and out of the corner of my eye I see Ryan still having this heated back and forth with this other officer. He hasn’t been taken into custody yet, although it seems clear that there might be something going on there. I try to yell out to him to tweet that I got arrested, essentially. I don’t have my phone and I’m in cuffs.
I’m taken outside and stood out in the street and moments later Ryan’s brought out and he’s clearly, physically upset. He says his head was slammed into the door by this officer who had taken him into custody. He’s in these plastic ties as well.

They bring us outside, we’re standing directly in front of this McDonald’s and we’re having a very heated exchange with these police officers now, in which we’re repeatedly saying, “So, are we under arrest? And if so, what are we being charged with?”

“You’ll find out!”

“So, are we under arrest? What are we being charged with? Why are we under arrest?”

And they say, “You know why you’re under arrest,” X, Y, and Z.

We’re having this back and forth, which was very intense, and they say, “We have to call a car to get these guys out of here.”

We had some more tense back and forths. They eventually conclude that we are not going to fit into the back of this thing with this guy. They call another transport vehicle for us. At which point we keep having this back and forth with these officers. We say, “This was a mistake. We’re members of the press. We had every right to be where we were. We were customers of a private establishment, complying with your order to leave. The last I checked, the St. Louis County PD doesn’t have jurisdiction over the McDonald’s that sits over on West Florissant.” But we were complying and still are stuck in this and I said at one point, “You’ve made a mistake here. This is going to be on the front page of The Washington Post tomorrow and I hope you know that.” And they said, “Well, you’re going to be in our jail cell tonight, so we hope you know that.” So that was kind of the tenor of our back and forth.

Lowery and Reilly are transported to the Ferguson Police Department and put into a holding cell with a telephone. Reilly calls his father and tells him to tweet from his account that they are being held.

We were in there what was probably half an hour, maybe 40 minutes in the cell and at some point the guy overseeing it comes out and he says, “Who are the journalists? Are there reporters down here?”

And we’re like, “We’re both reporters.”

And he says, “Alright, you’re free to go.” And opens the door and gives us our stuff.

And we’re both like, “Ok, do we have a report number? Do we have a police report?”

We’re still very upset about this. We’re going back and forth and finally the officer just said, “You either get out of here or we’re arresting you again. You gotta leave.”

So we walked out and stood in the parking lot while we called our editors, and received all these notifications from social media. People had known, some people in fact had seen the arrest. That kicked off one of the biggest days on social media. I got my phone back and I had all these voicemails, all these text messages, all these emails.

And the easiest way I thought to update all of the people was to send a few tweets about where I was and what was going on. And also, this idea that how can I as quickly as possible document what just happened?

That was the first account that had gotten out about this arrest. For much of the day, people were wondering what happened, who had been arrested, was it these journalists, where are they?

And that series of tweets was the first confirmation of these things. So they blew up in a way that we hadn’t seen in Ferguson.
In many ways, the arrest of journalists, and eventually more than two or three dozen journalists would be arrested for things as little as standing on the wrong sidewalk, stepping into the street during a protest, being confused about the instructions they were being given.

The story of Ferguson transformed into what it should’ve been all along: a story about the Ferguson police at large. Not just the specifics of this anecdote—the specifics of Michael Brown and Darren Wilson—but a story about the policing in Ferguson.

What most reasonable people have now concluded—no matter where they fall on the political spectrum, no matter how they feel about me or Ryan Reilly personally, no matter how they feel about Michael Brown and Darren Wilson personally—most reasonable people can now conclude, as the Department of Justice now has: the Ferguson PD often acted with an impunity that was unacceptable based on the way our constitution works. Arresting people for saying things they don’t like, not quickly enough following orders, and it raised a lot of those questions that people in Ferguson were talking to us about from the first day. They were telling us these anecdotes. They were saying, “Our cops are terrible. They do X, Y and Z.” And I was saying, “OK, I’ll write that down, but I’m never going to report that. I could never confirm that. There’s no way.”

It gave a validation to so many of the stories of the people of Ferguson in a way it never had been before. If they were willing to treat these two pretty boy reporters from D.C. this way, how are they actually treating the black residents of their city?