German journalists arrested in Ferguson

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20 August 2014

On Monday, two German journalists were arrested in Ferguson, Missouri, by the police and taken to prison while trying to research and report for their newspapers on the shooting of Michael Brown and the sustained anti-police protests which have followed.

Ansgar Graw, who worked for years as the US correspondent for the major daily *Die Welt*, and Frank Hermann, who has also reported for many years for newspapers like the *Stuttgarter Zeitung* in Germany and *Der Standard* in Austria, were held in a prison cell for three hours without justification and subsequently released without comment.

A few hours later on Monday night, 26-year-old *Bild* reporter Lukas Hermsmeier was arrested as he sought to report on a demonstration in Ferguson. According to his newspaper's editors, he was only released on Tuesday.

A photographer for Getty Images was also taken away in handcuffs during a demonstration on Monday, and last week, two reporters from the *Washington Post* and *Huffington Post* were arrested and held for several hours.

Each time, to the extent that they have bothered to comment on the arrests at all, the police have justified their actions with the claim that those arrested had not followed orders "to disperse." The journalists involved have rejected this assertion as false, and stated that the police simply wanted to prevent them from doing their job.

Already on Monday, Ansgar Graw wrote a detailed tweet under the heading, "News from Ferguson: A colleague and me were handcuffed and arrested for 3 hours because we did our job to investigate the Michael Brown case." With his previous impression of the US obviously shaken, he later provided a detailed account of what happened, published in *Die Welt* under the headline, "The day the US police became my enemy."

He had landed in St Louis on Sunday and had first discussed with police officers in the West Florissant Avenue, who told him that they were constantly being attacked by demonstrators with stones and bottles, even though they had not fired a shot that evening. He had heard with disbelief a black youth around the age of Michael Brown tell him, "Don't trust the police, they're part of the system. They murdered Michael, and now they want to provoke us so that they can declare martial law."

He had also heard with disbelief other comments from residents in the same West Florissant Avenue on Monday who provided a totally different account of events, "they had protested peacefully, and then at 20:30, long before the midnight curfew, the police deployed tear gas and smoke bombs without warning to disperse the crowd. But as the streets were already sealed off, the people could not leave. This increased the anger."

"It sounds like an absurd conspiracy theory," Graw wrote further on Twitter. But he wanted to investigate the accusations further, so with his colleague Frank Hermann, he took footage of the petrol station that was set alight in protest on the evening Michael Brown was killed.

"It is Monday around 2PM. At this time, the section of road is virtually empty and there is no sign of violence or a riotous gathering," Graw reported further. "Nonetheless, the police wanted to intimidate us. We explain that we want to stay on this section of road and take some photos." The commanding officer gave the "ok, but only if you are constantly on the move. If you remain still, you will be arrested. This is the last warning!"

The reports from Graw and Hermann both stated that the two journalists subsequently took small steps forward so that they could take photos, when the county officer suddenly gave the order to handcuff them with plastic handcuffs. When the reporters asked

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for his name, his response was “Donald Duck.” Only later, on the detention papers, was he identified as officer Amero. With their hands tied behind their backs, they were forced into a police transporter along with two other arrested residents, taken to a temporary operation centre before being taken to Buzz Westfall Justice Centre—a prison in Clayton, a suburb of St Louis.

During this time, they were searched on three occasions. They had to give up all notes, mobile telephones, wallets, belts and shoelaces. When Frank Hermann refused to take his wedding ring off his finger, he was threatened with solitary confinement.

Graw concluded his report as follows, “Then they actually took the famous mug shot. Welcome to the criminal records. This was all a new experience for me. I have been in several crisis regions, I was in civil wars in Georgia, the Gaza Strip, and illegally in the Kaliningrad region when the Soviet Union still controlled the travel of Westerners strictly, I was in Afghanistan, Iraq, Vietnam, and China, and I have secretly met dissidents in Cuba. But to be handcuffed and snarled at aggressively by the police, and to see a prison from the inside, I had to travel to Ferguson, Missouri in the United States of America. My childlike trust of the US police, who I defended passionately against critics as friends and helpers, in spite of their often rough actions and lack of transparency, is gone.”

In a number of television interviews, Hermann confirmed Graw’s report and agreed that the arrests “were clearly aimed solely at intimidating reporters in order to prevent them from working.”

Chairman of the German Journalists’ Association (DJV) Michael Konken, stated, “The interference of the security forces with journalists is utterly unjustified. The unrest in Ferguson is a topic of great interest which has to be reported.”

Reporters Without Borders also described the police actions as completely unacceptable. “We immediately demand that journalists be able to do their job in Ferguson without having to worry about being stopped, arrested or even shot by the police,” stated Astrid Frohloff, spokeswoman for the executive committee of the German section of the organisation.

The chief executive of the Federal Association of German Newspaper Publishers (BDZV), Dietmar Wolff, told *Die Welt*: "With all due respect for the tense situation in Ferguson, we are deeply concerned about the arrests, which ultimately leads to journalists being unable to carry out their duties. And that in a democratic state, in which the free press has a long tradition. "

The arrest of the German journalists is not only a source of great concern and debate among journalists in the US. A wave of comments and lively discussions in the press and on blogs, triggered in particular by Graw’s tweet, show that events in Ferguson are being followed carefully with great interest by millions of workers and young people in Europe, and in Germany in particular.

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