

Journalists arrested during Ferguson protests last year face charges

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Two reporters who were arrested a year ago on trumped up charges in connection with the protests over the police murder of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri have now been formally charged with trespassing and interfering with police officers.

Wesley Lowery of the *Washington Post* and Ryan Reilly of the *Huffington Post* were arrested on August 13, 2014, four days after the death of Michael Brown, and in the midst of growing protests over the police killing. The two reporters were in a McDonald's restaurant, a location used by many reporters covering the events in Ferguson. They were manhandled and arrested at the time, but soon released without charges.

Lowery has now received a summons ordering him to report to Municipal Court in Ferguson on August 24, under threat of arrest if he does not appear. Reilly is expected to receive the same summons. The charges are a brazen attack on the First Amendment right to freedom of the press, and have been widely condemned.

The trespass charge, filed almost one year after the incident, arises from the claim that the two men were allegedly in violation of the private property rights of the McDonald's outlet. The accusation of interference with the police apparently reflects the claim that they did not move fast enough in response to orders from the cops to leave. In fact Lowery was arrested on his way out of the restaurant, after being pushed into a soda machine. Reilly's head was shoved against glass.

For many months it appeared that no charges would be filed. Now, however, the St. Louis County authorities have acted within days of the expiration of the one-year statute of limitations.

Lowery has insisted from the date of the arrest that he was not in the wrong to even the slightest extent. In response to the formal charges, he stated, "Ryan and I

have maintained for the last 358 days that we were exercising our Constitutionally-guaranteed right to do our jobs, and I will be happy to explain that in court."

Washington Post editor Martin Baron issued a statement calling the charges against Lowery and Reilly "contemptible overreaching." The *Huffington Post* Washington DC bureau chief declared, "A crime was committed at the McDonald's, not by journalists, but by the local police who assaulted both Ryan and Wes Lowery of the Washington Post during violent arrests. At least we know Ferguson knows how to file charges," he added. "If Wes Lowery and Ryan Reilly can be charged like this with the whole country watching, just imagine what happens when nobody is."

The charges, filed against reporters from major media outlets, are part of the deepening assault on freedom of the press in the US as part of a broader assault on democratic rights. The killing of Michael Brown, along with that of Eric Garner in the borough of Staten Island in New York City, triggered a wave of anger over police violence and the underlying inequality enforced by the virtual police occupation of poor working class communities across the US. Protests against police abuse and killings have continued ever since, with several hundred arrests taking place in Ferguson in the last few days as thousands mark the anniversary of the death of Michael Brown.

The US government repeatedly points to attacks on journalists in other parts of the world, while similar assaults on basic democratic rights are taking place at home. The St. Louis authorities and major sections of the ruling class represented within the state apparatus are trying to intimidate journalists precisely because they know that far larger protests and struggles are in the offing.



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