

Mayor Michael Bloomberg
City Hall

Commissioner Raymond Kelly
NYPD
1 Police Plaza

November 18, 2011

Dear Mayor Bloomberg and Commissioner Kelly:

As faculty members of the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, we are alarmed at the arrests of working news professionals during the ongoing Occupy Wall Street protests, and deeply concerned that the NYPD blocked reporters' and photographers' access to Zuccotti Park during the recent eviction of the Occupy Wall Street encampment.

The NYPD has had a distinguished track record in cooperating with news professionals in the coverage of demonstrations in New York City. For this reason we are greatly disappointed by what appears to be a pattern of arrests of credentialed journalists over the last two months, most recently a reporter and a photographer from The Associated Press, a reporter from The Daily News and a photographer from DNAInfo, all arrested at the Trinity Church lot during a demonstration on November 15.

We are equally troubled by the consistent blocking of reporters' access to the Zuccotti Park eviction earlier that morning. Numerous journalists attempting to monitor the actions of police and protestors, and to capture images of an important news event, have reported how they were forced away from the scene and prevented from doing their jobs.

We are particularly disturbed that at least one journalist reportedly had his press credentials seized by officers, and some other journalists have reported themselves or colleagues being physically assaulted by police. Such intimidation is in flagrant violation of the First Amendment and runs counter to the best traditions of New York City.

The First Amendment guarantee of a free press has long been understood to embrace a robust presence for news professionals reporting on public protests, among other events. In the case of Occupy Wall Street, both the protests themselves and the actions of police are matters of intense local, national and international public interest. The arrests of credentialed journalists and the blocking of news access to the clearing of Zuccotti Park impeded journalists' ability to gather independent information, and substantially curtailed the public's right to assess the actions of public officials and protestors alike. This is a blunt infringement on the First Amendment and does not contribute to public safety.

As Occupy Wall Street and related protests continue, we urge you to ensure that working journalists receive the full respect and support of the NYPD, including unfettered access to cover events as they unfold. Charges against journalists arrested in recent actions should be dismissed, and the circumstances of the arrests of news professionals should be fully investigated. We urge that commanders and rank-and-file officers be reminded of, and held accountable for, their Constitutional responsibility to protect and respect the First Amendment rights and privileges of journalists covering this important and ongoing story.

Sincerely,

Emily Bell, Professor of Professional Practice; Director, Tow Center for Digital Journalism

Helen Benedict, Professor

June Cross, Associate Professor

John Dinges, Lowell Cabot Professor of Journalism

Josh Friedman, Director, Maria Moors Cabot Prize for Journalism in the Americas

Todd Gitlin, Professor and Chair, PhD Program

Bill Grueskin, Dean of Academic Affairs; Professor of Professional Practice

LynnNel Hancock, H. Gordon Garbedian Professor of Journalism; Director, Spencer Fellowship Program

Michael Hoyt, Executive Editor, Columbia Journalism Review

Marguerite Holloway, Professor and Director, Science and Environmental Journalism

Judith Matloff, Adjunct Professor

Arlene Morgan, Associate Dean, Prizes and Programs

Victor Navasky, George T. Delacorte Professor in Magazine Journalism

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