

# Allegations of Police Misconduct and the Treatment of Journalists During the G20

BY MARY DEANNE SHEARS



**S**ome were hit with rubber bullets, some beaten by police.

Their cameras were seized, sometimes broken. Film was destroyed. Some were arrested and charged. Several were held in cages for up to 20 hours, denied food, water and access to legal help. Others were “kettled”—hemmed in by police for up to four hours in pouring rain. One was asked if he was born in Canada. Another had her power wheelchair taken.

All had one thing in common: They were journalists, simply doing what journalists do—reporting, recording and taking pictures of a news event, the G20 summit in downtown Toronto, on the weekend of June 26, 2010.

As Canadian Journalists for Free Expression (CJFE) President Arnold Amber said in a June 28

news release: “When a major disturbance occurs in Canada’s largest city, the role of the journalist is to inform the public.”

Most reporters say they were targeted *because they were journalists*—harassed by police, their credibility questioned. Many felt they were no longer in Canada, that democracy and freedom of speech had vanished, that journalism had become a risky business.

Lisan Jutras, blogging for *The Globe and Mail*, told a police officer she was with CTV Globemedia, and “immediately my wrists were grabbed and I was forced into handcuffs. I said my press ID was in my bag but nobody was interested in seeing it. Nobody said anything, except my police escort, who said, ‘You have been charged with



conspiracy to commit public mischief.”

Immediately following the summit, CJFE asked journalists who had covered the events to tell us about their experiences in an online survey. Thirty responded: Seven were from mainstream media, two were student journalists, nine worked for smaller publications or alternative media, 11 identified themselves as freelance/independent or volunteers, and one was not a journalist. All but two had problems with police simply for trying to do their work.

“The press was treated like a potential enemy of the police and was systematically denied access and

information. In many cases this included violence, detention, confiscation of equipment,” says Jesse Freeston of The Real News Network, a subsidiary of Independent World Television.

Christopher Pike, a freelancer with the *National Post* & Xinhua News Agency, told CJFE: “An Edmonton police officer demanded to see my press credentials, taking my Parliament Hill pass forcibly off my neck and telling me ‘That doesn’t mean shit to me,’ and I was then told to get on the ground. ... I was never warned ... I was verbally threatened before and after I was arrested, and never advised of my legal rights, was never given a phone call.”

Pike was kept in a 20x10-foot cell with up to 40 people for just under 24 hours. There was a

portable toilet with no door and no toilet paper.

Bethany Horne, a freelancer with Alternative Media Centre (AMC) credentials, was kettled. “I was wearing my accreditation pass at all times ... and it felt like a liability,” she says.

Horne adds that the psychological conditions were unlike anything she’d experienced before. “The police made me feel like reporting was a risky business. They made me feel like there might be something wrong with carrying a camera, or with being in the presence of a peaceful protest.”

Wyndham Bettencourt-McCarthy, on assignment for *Torontoist*, was struck by police. “While running through the crowd of protestors being pursued by police, I was struck from behind by an ... officer ...”

Bettencourt-McCarthy also states: “I did not interact with police at all prior to the hit.” Like others arrested, she was not able to see the officer’s badge. In early November, Toronto Police Chief Bill Blair admitted to a House of Commons committee investigating the policing of the G20 protests that up to 90 officers face disciplinary charges because their identification was not visible.

David Parker represented a campus community paper. “They asked me if the AMC was a legitimate press or if it was ‘underground press.’ The officer who harassed me asked if I was born in Canada ...”

Shawney Cohen, an independent filmmaker who has worked for the National Film Board and TVO, told CJFE: “In my years being a documentary filmmaker ... I have never witnessed more police in numbers in one contained area of a city including [in] countries at war.”

These journalists want to say loudly and clearly that they were just doing their job, acting within their rights.

“I think that [the] *Charter* is very clear on the point that all Canadians have the right to a free press,” Freeston stated, adding that “for a press to be free, people who are entrusted with authority ... need to be open to scrutiny by media.”

Colin O’Connor, a G20-accredited photographer who was arrested and detained for nearly



**Police arrest G20-accredited photojournalist Colin O'Connor at Queen's Park.**

24 hours while covering protests for the *National Post*, asked, “Why [was] a professional photographer with clearly visible credentials ... arrested? ... I was shocked to be sitting in a jail as a professional photojournalist working for a national publication.”

He says the conditions were bleak. There was a cold, open toilet. It took “endless hours” to get any real response for food and water.

Norman Morcos is a photojournalist working for the agency Zuma Press. “Without any warning we were kettled ... [We] were complying with the implied order of moving towards the small exit but police kept hitting us with their batons. Toronto police were involved. There were no protestors at the time. My hand was crushed from a baton hit. I have three fractures to one bone. [It was an] unwarranted brutal assault.”

Michael Talbot is with Citytv/Rogers. “Like many I became cornered by riot police. There was no way out. [I] approached a wall of officers, handing [them] my business card and explaining that I was a member of the media. I was pulled out and arrested at that time.”

Talbot doesn't recall anyone reading him his rights, and he wasn't given the chance to make a phone call or contact anyone. “I was angry and

anxious because I was tightly zip-tied with my hands behind my back ... I had difficulty breathing due to the anxiety and position of my arms and body.”

Talbot also reports that the conditions inside the Eastern Avenue detention centre were “grim.” “Someone must be held accountable for the decisions which robbed so many innocent individuals of their rights,” he says, adding, “I am merely a citizen and whether I'm taking photos for a website or marching for a cause I should be able to freely assemble and walk down any street without being arrested and thrown in a cage when I have committed no crime.”

Vincenzo d'Alto, an independent photographer, had his Fédération Professionnelle des Journalistes du Québec press pass hanging around his neck, and says he is “not sure why I was the target of a rubber bullet.”

Farzad Fatholahzadeh, a field producer for CTV News with G20 accreditation clearly visible around his neck, recalls, “I was not warned. I was arrested and detained for nine hours. ... I witnessed a lot of questionable conduct by police and the conditions the prisoners were held in.”

Horne wants to see reform of policing tactics in Canada. “Intimidation is an infringement on our right to speech and the police were readily engaging in this through the weekend.”

Adds Pike, “For the time of the G20 it felt as if we were no longer in Canada, we stepped into a ... universe where the *Charter of Rights* didn't exist.”

All of the journalists who shared their stories with CJFE remain haunted by the experience, as should all who care about democracy, the right of journalists to pursue their jobs without fear and, above all, our inherent right to freedom of expression. 🍀

*CJFE has filmed interviews with some of the journalists affected by the G20 policing. To view the videos, please visit [cjfe.org](http://cjfe.org).*

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