



May 1, 2024

A joint statement from journalism organizations to Texas law enforcement authorities

As advocates for journalists and the First Amendment rights of a free press, we demand that Texas law enforcement authorities end their misguided pursuit of criminal charges against photojournalist Carlos Sanchez, who was arrested while covering protests at the University of Texas at Austin.

In leveling an unwarranted charge of assault against a journalist who was simply doing his job, Texas authorities themselves commit an assault – on the public’s First Amendment right to be informed by a free and unfettered press.

And in charging a member of the press with interfering with a police officer’s duties, they send the message that police are free to interfere with journalists as they exercise their constitutionally protected right to inform the public.

Mr. Sanchez was livestreaming the campus protest for Fox 7 Austin on April 24 when police forcefully threw him to the ground and arrested him. While he was initially among dozens of people charged with criminal trespass, those charges were dropped and he was released on April 25 after being jailed overnight.

After his initial arrest and release without any charges being filed, the Texas Department of Public Safety (DPS) issued a [statement](#) claiming to believe “strongly in a journalist’s right to cover events of the day in a safe way.” Yet DPS officials undermined this statement by pursuing Mr. Sanchez’s arrest on a felony assault charge, alleging that the journalist’s camera hit a state trooper as the officer was confronting protesters.

After Mr. Sanchez turned himself in at the courthouse accompanied by his lawyer, they learned that the felony assault charge had been dropped. But authorities reversed course again and brought two misdemeanor charges, of assault and interfering with public duties.

We, organizations that collectively represent and advocate on behalf of thousands of journalists, strongly urge the county attorney to decline prosecution of these charges and denounce authorities’ handling and escalation of the underlying incident. In addition to preventing a journalist from reporting the news as it was happening, their actions exert a chilling effect on reporters covering protests and law enforcement’s response to them, both during and beyond the current wave of campus demonstrations.

While policing a sizable protest is challenging, we expect officers to exercise discretion and avoid over-reacting. People using large professional cameras and clearly identifying themselves

as journalists must not be punished or retaliated against for carrying out their constitutionally protected role of reporting the news.

If DPS officials wish to live up to their statement regarding the press, in the interest of justice they must stop pursuing this groundless case against Mr. Sanchez and apologize to him and the citizens of Texas for their unconstitutional actions.

Anything less will be an abrogation of the DPS' [stated value](#) to "seek and accept responsibility for our conduct" and a continued abridgement of press freedoms that the First Amendment is meant to protect.

Sincerely,

Society of Professional Journalists
Arab & Middle Eastern Journalists Association
Asian American Journalists Association
Asian American Journalists Association Photo Affinity Group
Associated Collegiate Press
College Media Association
Education Writers Association
Indigenous Journalists Association
National Association of Black Journalists
National Association of Hispanic Journalists
National Press Club
National Press Club Journalism Institute
National Press Photographers Association
National Scholastic Press Association
Online News Association
PEN America
Quill and Scroll
Radio Television Digital News Association
Society of Environmental Journalists
Media Guild of the West, The NewsGuild-CWA Local 39213
The Authors Guild
National Writers Union
The News Guild-CWA
Pacific Media Workers Guild, The NewsGuild-CWA Local 39521
California News Publishers Association
CCNMA, Latino Journalists of California
Los Angeles Press Club
San Antonio Association of Hispanic Journalists
The Coalition for Women in Journalism
The Committee to Protect Journalists
Defending Rights & Dissent
First Amendment Clinic/SMU Dedman School of Law
First Amendment Foundation
Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE)
Freedom of the Press Foundation
Media Alliance Bay Area
News/Media Alliance

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's Hussman School of Journalism and Media
Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press
Reporters Without Borders (RSF)
Student Press Law Center
Women Press Freedom
Susan E. Seager, Adjunct Professor, University of California, Irvine School of Law Press
Freedom Project (Individual)