

**Amnesty International**  
*Digital Verification Corps*  
**&**  
**Utrecht University**  
*Open-Source*  
*Global Justice Investigations Lab*

*Attacks on Journalists Reporting from Protests*



[Image](#) taken by Nathalia Angarita

Report conducted by Utrecht University students participating in the Global Justice Open-Source Investigations Lab within the scope of Amnesty International's global project "Attacks on Journalists Reporting from Protests".

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## **1. Executive summary**

Journalists fulfil an integral function in an open and free society, where they, as “[public watchdogs](#)”, foster transparency and accountability by sharing much needed information on injustices. Yet, violence against journalists has been on the rise in recent years. According to Reporters Without Borders, over [1800 journalists](#) have been killed since 2000, and [many thousands](#) have been arrested while doing their work. Nevertheless, as is the case for all individuals, journalists’ right to freedom of expression, including the right to report on protests without illegitimate interference by law enforcement, is protected by international human rights law. Specifically, [Article 19\(2\)](#) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights ensures the “freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of [their] choice.” This right equally applies in instances of protests, and protects them from arbitrary, illegal, unnecessary or disproportionate interference from law enforcement officials.

Our team of open-source researchers, through the techniques and tools of open-source investigation, verified numerous instances where journalists have been targeted by police officers while covering protests across the world – as exemplified in the two case studies below. These findings underscore the need for a comprehensive international legal framework proscribing interference with journalists’ and media workers’ activities, especially when they monitor and cover protests and assemblies. The recurrent use of excessive force by law enforcement agencies must be prohibited by the international community and regulated in accordance with guidelines on media workers’ right to freedom of expression, in order to ensure the necessary protection to the professional activities conducted by journalists on the ground.

The following report outlines several instances of violence by law enforcement agencies against journalists and media workers during protests globally. Using the applicable legal framework of international human rights law, this report will showcase discovered and verified case studies, and will conclude with a set of recommendations.

## **2. Methodology**

The section below will describe the methodology used for this investigation. First, both the parameters of the required content for the project and the sourcing approach will be presented. Then, the importance of archiving the content to be analysed and documenting the research steps is explained. Subsequently, the steps in the verification process will be presented, and lastly, the factors taken into account in evaluating the footage are discussed.

### **Sourcing Content**

Amnesty International’s open-source investigation workflow starts with gathering images or videos that depict possible human rights violations. The focus of our project was on police violence against journalists during protests, with this report as a part of a larger project of Amnesty International Digital Verification Corps: “Attacks on journalists reporting from protests”.

To conduct our investigations, we looked at the political and social developments in the following countries: Bolivia, Brazil, Bulgaria, Colombia, Italy, Poland, Turkey and the USA. The timeframe was between the years 2020 and 2023. By reading national and international news articles, we determined the cause and scope of the protests. This also allowed us to determine when exactly these events took place. Of course, not every protest was reported on in the media, so we also explored various social media platforms to identify relevant keywords, hashtags, locations and dates. Such words included “protest”, “demonstration”, “violence”, “attack”, “police”, “journalist” and “press”. To find relevant material, we translated these words into the languages spoken in the respective countries using different translation tools. Moreover, as many regions use different social media platforms, we assessed the social media landscape beforehand.

With this accumulated knowledge, we then started to systematically search on the relevant social media platforms using the identified search terms and hashtags. We found our content primarily through X and Facebook, but some were found on news websites. Messaging applications were also used to find sources, but their usefulness depended on the different regions of the world, as most South American countries relied more on WhatsApp, in which chats are mostly private, while Eastern European countries tended to place a greater significance on the more accessible platform Telegram to communicate and share information.

## **Preservation**

The next phase in the open-source investigations workflow involves preserving all content that we plan to analyse and potentially utilise in future research projects. This is crucial when dealing with open-source content, as content may be deleted by the uploader or removed by social media companies.

Each researcher created Excel files to keep track of used search terms and platforms. Separate repositories were also created to archive all our findings comprehensively. This included the exact web addresses of the findings and their archived links, the details of any videos found, the text of relevant posts, the date of the incident and when the videos and photos were posted, and the coordinates for the incidents.

## **Documentation**

The project is data-intensive with the uncovering of hundreds of videos that were preserved and verified. To effectively analyse these pieces of content, a robust system for storing, structuring and retrieving data was essential. All content was collected within a spreadsheet, our “Mastersheet”, with all relevant data: item code, country, name of the researcher, social

media used for discovery, warning whether the video is graphic, link to the material, publication date, original text and description of the content.

261	JO284	Brazil	Researcher	Twitter	No	<a href="https://twitter.com/Midia1508/st">https://twitter.com/Midia1508/st</a>	14/07/2021	Repressão violenta da PM no at Police used what seems to b
262	JO285	Brazil	Researcher	Twitter	No	<a href="https://twitter.com/Midia1508/st">https://twitter.com/Midia1508/st</a>	14/07/2021	#13J   Nesta terça-feira (13), en Cameraman for a journalist v
263	JO286	Brazil	Researcher	Twitter	No	<a href="https://twitter.com/Midia1508/st">https://twitter.com/Midia1508/st</a>	25/07/2021	#24J - PM prende jovem após rε A group of journalists record
264	JO287	Brazil	Researcher	Twitter	No	<a href="https://twitter.com/Midia1508/st">https://twitter.com/Midia1508/st</a>	24/07/2021	24/07/2021 — Repressão na m: One journalist is pushed viol
265	JO288	Brazil	Researcher	Twitter	No	<a href="https://twitter.com/luanapsol/statu">https://twitter.com/luanapsol/statu</a>	06/12/2023	⚠️ A PM está encurralando ε The police use pepper spray
266	JO289	Turkey	Researcher	Youtube	No	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch">https://www.youtube.com/watch</a>	26/06/2022	Onur Yürüyüşü öncesi gazeteci The Police assault a crowd c

After verification, the data was exported as a .csv file with shared spreadsheets created for the analysis phase.

## Verification

Before using any content acquired during an open-source investigation as evidence, it undergoes verification for authenticity and accuracy. The verification process includes analysing a) the content’s origin; b) its source; c) the time and date of the depicted event; d) the location where the content was recorded; and e) identifying any corroborating evidence that supports its content. The verification process is described in detail in the case-studies below.

## Evaluation

The last step of our research consists in an assessment of whether the action depicted in gathered materials appears to violate the [Amnesty International guidelines](#) or Human Rights law as described below.

Among the factors considered: how clearly a human rights violation is depicted in the verified media, the compelling nature of the content, and whether it can be supported by other evidence. The Amnesty International team will then determine what conclusions can be definitively drawn from the verified footage and compare these findings with reports from Amnesty’s field researchers, other NGOs and news outlets to ensure consistency.

## 3. Legal framework

Journalists’ right to report on protests without illegitimate interference from law enforcement officials is protected by international human rights law. Article 19(2) of the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights \(ICCPR\)](#) enshrines the right to freedom of expression which includes “freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of [their] choice.” Thus, journalists’ right to seek, receive and impart information about protests by monitoring and covering them is protected under this Article. State parties to the Covenant thus have the positive obligation to respect, i.e. not to interfere with the right, to protect it from interference by third parties and private entities, and to fulfil it by ensuring conditions conducive to the full realisation of this right for everybody.

According to the [United Nations Treaty Collection](#), the ICCPR counts 174 state parties as of May 2024, all of which are consequently obliged to respect, protect and fulfil the right to freedom of expression of all individuals, applicable also to journalists reporting from protests. Those states which have, however, not ratified the ICCPR and are thus not bound by it, might be bound by regional human rights law. Taking as an example the [American Convention on Human Rights](#), state parties, e.g. Brazil or Colombia, are bound by Article 13(1) of said Treaty which enshrines the right to freedom of expression. Moreover, various scholars argue that the right to freedom of expression has entered into customary international law and is therefore binding on all states save for persistent objectors, which do not exist in this context. Evidence of both the consistent and uniform practice of those states which are not party to the ICCPR yet recognise the right to freedom of expression as set out in Article 19, as well as evidence of *opinio juris* – the belief that this practice is legally required – indicate that [the right has indeed acquired customary nature](#) and is thus binding on all states.

The right to freedom of expression is, however, not absolute. [Article 19\(3\)](#) of the ICCPR stipulates that limitations are allowed if they fulfil the requirements of (i) being provided by law; (ii) serving the legitimate aim of protecting one of the grounds laid down in Article 19(3), those being (a) the respect of the rights or reputations of others; or (b) the protection of national security or of public order or of public health and moral; and (iii) being necessary and proportional. Thus, any arbitrary, illegal, unnecessary or disproportionate interference in the form of violence by law enforcement officials against journalists during protests is prohibited under international human rights law.

Moreover, journalists' right to report from protests is not only protected by their right to freedom of expression but by their right to peaceful assembly too, which [Article 21](#) of the ICCPR enshrines. In any protest or assembly where violence might occur, law enforcement officials have the duty to distinguish between violent protestors and other individuals assembling or monitoring said assemblies, which is why even [in the case of violent protests, journalists' right to peaceful assembly remains](#). Similarly, their right to liberty and security ([Article 9 ICCPR](#)) as well as to freedom from torture and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment ([Article 7 ICCPR](#)), both of which are also enshrined in customary international law, protect journalists from indiscriminate violence and detentions.

Generally, journalists have been recognised to perform a crucial role in safeguarding the right to information and expression of the public. Their work helps to hold the state and its police forces accountable. [Various human rights bodies](#) and [courts](#) have underscored the essential role of an unhindered and free press for democratic societies. This “public watchdog” function becomes even more crucial when journalists cover and monitor instances of protest where the public exercises its right to freedom of expression and assembly, making journalists' right to observe these protests and cover potential infringements by law enforcement officials paramount.

#### 4. Case studies

The following section provides insight into two case studies, which highlight the violent use of force by law enforcement officials, and the methods and techniques used to uncover, analyse, verify and assess the open-source content. The first case study concerns an incident in Brazil during [protests in July 2021](#) against the government. As violence against journalists is far from uncommon in Brazil – at least [30 reporters have been killed](#) during the last decade – it is paramount to continue documenting and analysing incidents like this. The second case study takes us to the United States of America (USA) during the [Black Lives Matters protests in 2020](#). Especially in the USA, the [response of law enforcement](#) to these demonstrations was frequently violent, making the role of journalists covering these protests even more important and urgent.

##### Brazil

To find videos of incidents in Brazil we focused on protests happening throughout 2021 and went through the content on a month by month basis on social media. Using the keyword “ForaBolsonaro” we discovered the account of a media group, Mídia1508, that had posted several videos on protests including one which is the focus of this case study. The [video](#) of the incident was posted on X on the 25th of July 2021 and shows the arrest of a protester, and there were many photographers and camera people present at the scene. From the description of the post, we could discern that this event occurred in Rio de Janeiro. With regard to chronolocation, there was an indication that the event occurred on the 24th of July, 2021 due to the hashtag “[#J24ForaBolsonaro](#)”. Clicking on this hashtag leads to numerous posts and photos about protests in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil on the 24th July 2021.

At the 1:30 mark of the video, we see that the police start to become very aggressive towards the media workers as one of them is violently pushed. This is shortly followed by the use of pepper spray against the crowd of photographers and camera people and what appears to be a flashbang grenade being intentionally thrown into the crowd. Shortly after, we see one of the police officers in the background pull a pin from the grenade in his right hand.

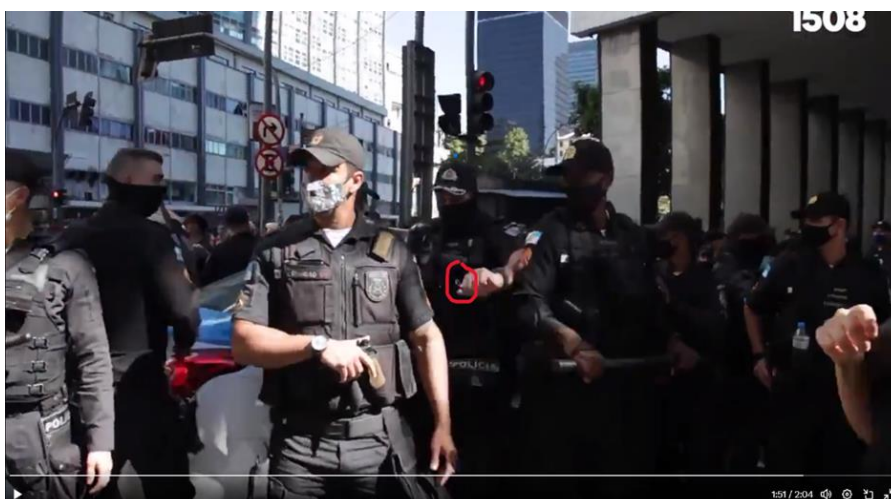


Image: Screenshot from [video](#)

A few frames later, the same police officer is seen throwing something into the crowd with his right hand, and after an additional four seconds, the grenade detonates.

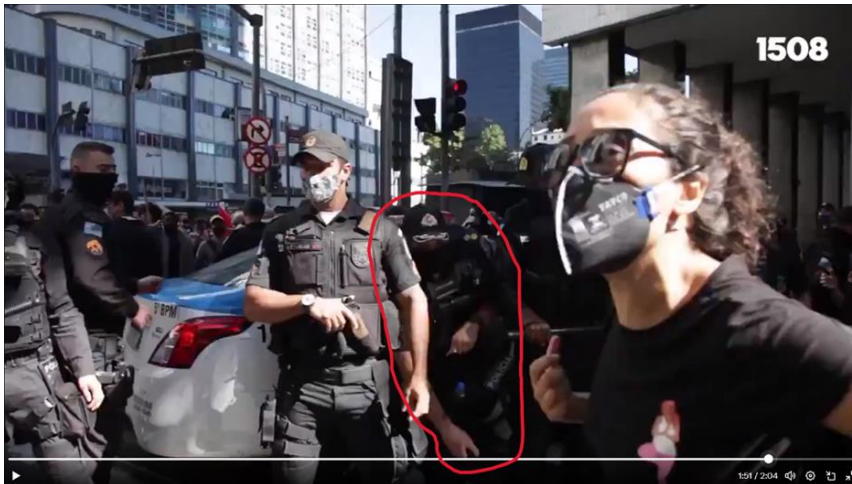


Image: Screenshot from [video](#)



Image: Screenshot from [video](#)

To geolocate the incident, we used several videos. From the background of the initial video, it was possible to determine that the event occurred at an intersection. Additionally, a green road sign was visible. After a Google search looking for a source providing information on road signs in Brazil, we found a website called [RhinoCarHire](#). The only light green road sign with information on it is a sign for highways. While the entire sign cannot be seen due to sunlight reflecting off it, at least one of the words can be identified. While very difficult to determine at first glance, we were able to discern the word by going through the video frame by frame. After using light and colour filters on the image, it becomes easier to make out the white of some of the letters against the sunlight. The best frame appears at 1:19 which, as can be seen below, shows the word “Copacabana”.



Image: Screenshot from [video](#)

Copacabana is a district of Rio de Janeiro that borders the sea. According to a map of the area, there is only one highway that leads straight to Copacabana. We can infer that the area in question must be a street that is relatively close to the highway, and upon examining the map of the region it became clear that there are only four entry points into the highway from the main part of Rio de Janeiro.

Additionally, we were able to find another video that gave further details to help find the location. In that [secondary video](#), we see that a shop called “Borelli” can be identified. When the name is entered into Google, four shops with the same name appear in Rio de Janeiro. However, only one appears near one of the entry points of the highway.



Image: Screenshot from [video](#)

Another important clue turned out to be the graffiti that is seen clearly in the second video.

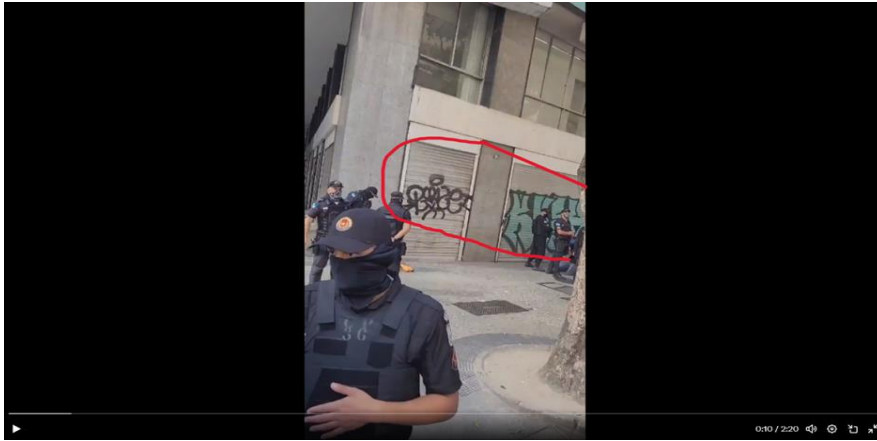


Image: Screenshot from [video](#)

Also, the pillars near the arrest and the patterns of floor tiles found on that street served as a last distinctive feature.

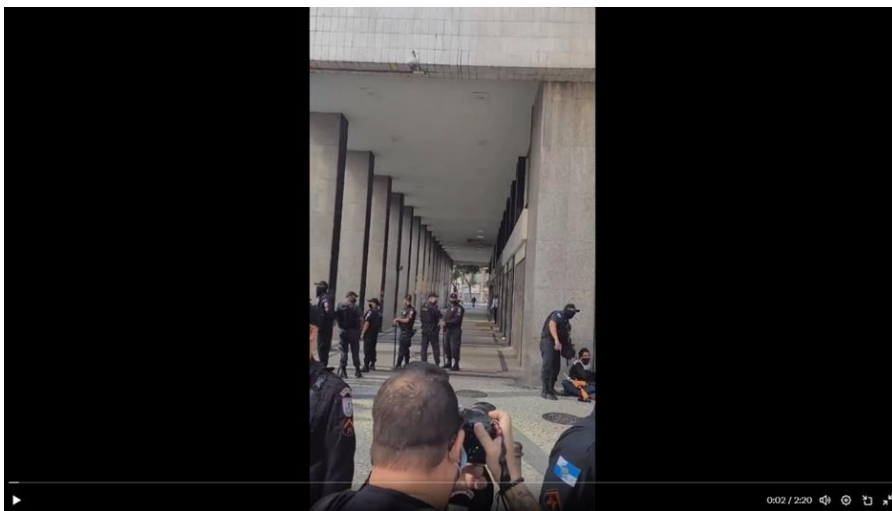


Image: Screenshot from [video](#)

Once we located the “Borelli” shops on Google Maps, Google Street View was used to view photos of the street in question. We were able to match all of the aforementioned details from the videos with the location we found on Google Street View. The exact coordinates for this incident are: [-22.906231, -43.177256](#).



Image: Google Maps screenshot [-22.906231, -43.177256](#)

## Evaluation of potentially illegitimate use of force

Hand-held chemical irritants, such as pepper spray, are [employed](#) to incapacitate or deter a violent assailant, or to aid in the lawful arrest of a suspect who is violently resisting. They are designed to be sprayed in the face of a person from a distance of up to several metres, delivering the active chemical to the eyes, nose and mouth, causing irritation to the eyes, upper respiratory tract and skin.

According to Amnesty International's [Guidelines](#), pepper spray can be used legitimately:

- in self-defence or defence of others against persons who pose an imminent threat of injury to another person; or
- to make the person stop the violent behaviour through temporary incapacitation but not to cause severe injury or lasting health effects to the person.

It is prohibited to use pepper spray:

- when a person offers only passive resistance or does not present a threat to another person;
- when the person has already been brought under control; or
- to punish the person.

At the 1:45 mark in the video, we can clearly see that the policeman used pepper spray to push away a photographer. The photographer was not attacking police or any other person, nor was he engaging in violent behaviour. It appears to be an incident of random spraying at a crowd without any legitimate reason. Moreover, the pepper spray was used from a too-close distance, creating a high risk of eye injury or burns for the photographer. Hence, there is a likelihood that the spray was used illegitimately.

At the 1:51 mark, we can see that police launched a grenade against the crowd of protesters, seemingly without any kind of warning. At 1:55, what appears to be a flash-bang grenade explodes in the middle of the crowd of people. Grenades should only be [utilised](#) when the level of violence has escalated to a point where law enforcement officials cannot contain the threat by solely targeting violent individuals. Disorientation or distraction devices, like pyrotechnic flash-bang grenades, are intended to [provide](#) a warning or assist in making a safe arrest, particularly during high-risk operations.

In the present case there was no visible violence, and there was no indication that a violent escalation of the protesters was imminent, making the use of a flash-bang grenade highly questionable and potentially illegitimate.

Thus, the use of both pepper spray and a flash-bang grenade against the peaceful crowd of photographers was seemingly unwarranted and disproportionate.

## USA

Making use of the advanced search options on X, the search was limited to tweets made starting from May 25, 2020, the day of the death of George Floyd which sparked the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests in 2020, and certain terms were excluded from the search, as protests taking place around the world, for example in Hong Kong, would also be shown when searching in English. The terms used to find this particular video were “reporter”, “police” and “protest”. This led to a [tweet](#) that used a [video](#) that was originally posted to X on May 30, 2020, taken during the Black Lives Matter protests in Kentucky, USA.

This video depicts a livestream of WAVE 3 News, with reporter Kaitlin Rust, as is visible in the caption. This reporter is wearing a yellow vest, holding a microphone and reporting in front of a camera when a police officer approaches and shoots what appear to be pepper-spray projectiles, or pepper balls, right at the reporter and camera. [WAVE 3 News](#) themselves have reported that a Louisville Metro Police Department spokeswoman commented that officers do not use rubber bullets and that the reporters were likely hit with pepper balls. The news report itself took place on Friday, May 29, 2020, as indicated by WAVE 3 News. According to the article, the protest itself took place from Friday night to the early hours of Saturday morning. In the video, taking place at night, the time is shown to be 9:43, which confirms that the event happened when it was still Friday, the 29th of May.



Image: Screenshot from [video](#)

The caption of the news broadcast reads “Police in riot gear” and “5<sup>th</sup> street – Louisville”. As can be seen from the images below, the video shows a big, white building, with a distinctive statue on the left of it.



Images: Screenshots from [video](#)

At first, this building appeared to be a government building, so, combining this information, we looked up “5<sup>th</sup> street Louisville government building” on Google Images and immediately got a result that looks similar to the visible building (below, on the left).



Image: [Louisville City Hall](#)



Image: [Louisville City Hall](#)

One of the results that came up was Louisville City Hall. Searching for this, the picture on the right (above) appeared, showing the City Hall and containing a statue like the one visible in the video.

Looking around the area to pinpoint the exact location showed the following: the City Hall itself was present, while the statue was not. However, going back to the data from July 2019, the statue reappears, while in data from 2021, the statue is not visible anymore.



Image: Google Maps screenshot [38.151487, 85.4536](#)

Besides the statue and the building in the background, there were several other clues. As can be seen below, both the parking metre and the streetlight on the sidewalk matched the location. Not only are both visible in the video but also their distance from one another matches the one in the video.



Image: Screenshot from [video](#)

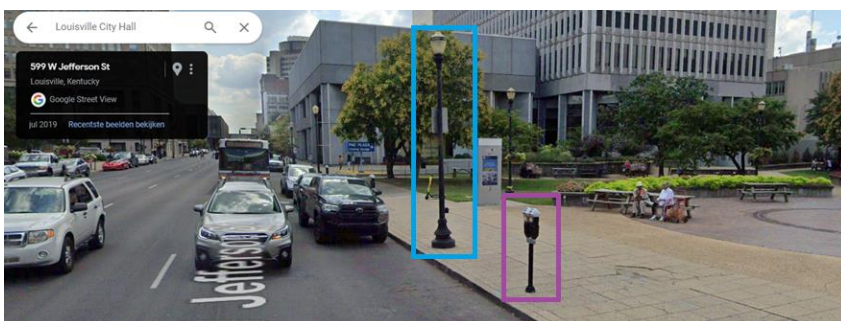


Image: Google Maps screenshot [38.151487, 85.453645](#)

Additionally, the images below show that the distance between the road markings and the statue on Google Street View is the same as in the original video, once again corroborating the geolocation.

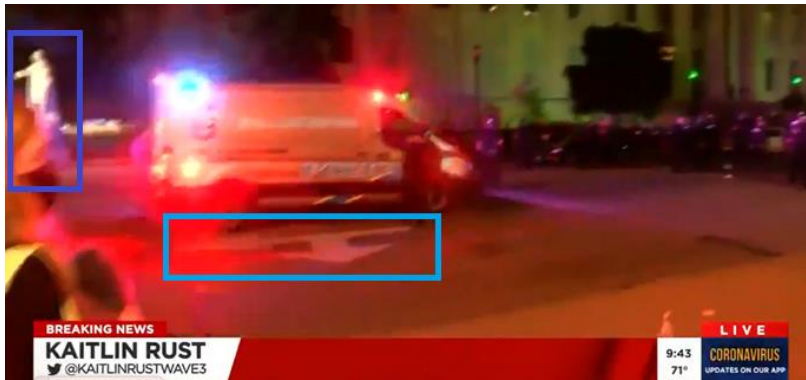


Image: Screenshot from [video](#)



Image: Google Maps screenshot [38.151491, 85.453674](#)

With the news report and live feed making the chronolocation straightforward and many features on the street confirming the location we were looking for, we were able to both geolocate and chronolocate this clear and flagrant use of force.

### **Evaluation of potentially illegitimate use of force**

Amnesty International has documented and analysed similar occurrences of use of force, e.g. in [Turkey](#), where police have used kinetic impact projectiles (e.g. guns with rubber bullets). Pepper ball guns are less lethal weapons whose use must be strictly limited to situations of violent disorder posing a risk of harm to persons. The main reason for using such guns is to allow police to intervene at a distance.

At the 0:19 mark, we can see a police officer using a pepper ball projectile aiming straight into the camera of the journalist.

The legitimate use of projectiles is [limited](#) to:

- usage against a person engaged in violence against another person likely to cause considerable injury;
- usage when other methods are not an option because they require close proximity – such as empty hand techniques (using only the hands) or batons – or because they would not be necessary or proportionate (projectile electric-shock weapons or firearms); or
- police issuing a clear verbal warning seeking to calm down the situation before shooting with ample time given to comply.

Considering that the journalist did not engage in any kind of violent behaviour, no warning seemed to have been issued, and there was no clear and pressing need to use a pepper ball gun instead of less harmful methods of controlling the crowd, the use of force in this case was likely illegitimate.

## **5. Conclusion and Recommendation**

The widespread use of excessive violence by law enforcement agents against journalists and media workers covering protests worldwide has led to an alarming number of violations of the right to freedom of press. Under the framework of Article 19 of the [Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#), indeed, journalists have the right to express themselves, and shall therefore be allowed to gather information and cover protests. Nevertheless, this right has been undermined in the last few years by the recurrent use of non-lethal weapons by police forces, which is not only aimed at protestors but also against other media workers, even when they are clearly identifiable in the crowd. In particular, the use of chemical irritants or pepper balls, among other weapons, has been used unnecessarily and disproportionately.

The two cases of potential violations described above, in Brazil and the USA, provide examples of probable disproportionate use of non-lethal weapons by police forces. During Black Lives Matter protests, [many journalists](#) have been subject to use of force by law enforcement, including being shot by pepper balls, as in the video verified by our team. In the footage from Brazil, law enforcement officers pepper sprayed the journalist from a very close proximity and threw what was most likely a flash bang grenade directly at them. These were only two of a very extensive list of verified incidents of police violence against media workers covering protests, but they represent the potential risks that journalists are increasingly facing.

In light of the increasing violence perpetrated against journalists, it is necessary that law enforcement agencies adhere to established rules on the use of non-lethal weapons and force during protests. International regulations should be enforced in order to guarantee protection of journalists from being targeted by police forces while covering the ground. More importantly, law enforcement agents should comply with international human rights law with regard to the use of force, by respecting the principles of necessity and proportionality, while acting on the basis of a specific legitimate aim. Non-lethal weapons, such as pepper spray or grenades, should only be used for self-defence purposes or to counter violent resistance. They are not allowed in confined spaces and shall not be fired directly at journalists, in order to comply with the last resort and proportionality principles.

Additionally, police forces around the world should be required to follow specific training on the use of force during protests and on providing medical assistance when employing these types of weapons. Law enforcement agencies should acknowledge the importance of granting protection to journalists covering protests, by ensuring that they are not the target of any type of violence and by holding accountable any officer who infringes upon their freedom of press.

Lastly, the international community should recognise the special status of journalists on the ground, by granting them additional protection in specific legal instruments. Media workers should be allowed to report information freely, without any illegitimate interference from law enforcement officers. Their special status as journalists and, in general, media workers should be enshrined in regional and international human rights treaties, in order to guarantee as well a higher degree of protection and respect of their right to free press and freedom of expression.