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What's the point of media credentials?

Written by [Robert Niles](#)

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Is getting a credential really worth it any longer?

I had to wonder that, following the New York Police Department's [appalling treatment of reporters](#) covering Occupy Wall Street protests.

Of course, the NYPD's not busting up just reporters, which is part of my point. While credentialing helps make reporting easier, it brings with it a risk of compromise that can put us out of position to capture the full picture of a story. That's worth thinking about as the NYPD's actions draw fresh attention to media credentialing.

The whole point of media credentialing is a trade-off. We submit to a background check and approval from the police or some other agency or organization and it provides access in return. I don't recall ever talking in journalism school about credentialing, and I haven't had a police credential since I was reporting for the local newspaper while in graduate school, *cough**cough* years ago.

But when I had that police credential, that got me behind (some) police lines at crime scenes and demonstrations and behind the desk at the county jail, where I could do my work without getting busted by the cops, the way I would if I were a "normal" citizen in such places, without a credential card hanging around my neck.

What's the point of having that credential, though, if it's not going to keep you from getting hit, gassed or hauled off to jail with the rest of the crowd at a protest you're covering?

I'm glad that so many news organizations are expressing their outrage to the NYPD, and making the NYPD's attempt to enforce a news blackout of police response to the protests part of their news coverage. But it shouldn't take an attempted news blackout to provoke outrage from journalists when police start busting heads and pepper-spraying unarmed, non-violent civilians for the ~~crime~~ violation of sitting on a public sidewalk or trespassing in a privately-owned vacant lot.

I wrote earlier this year [about paying my own way](#) when I review hotels, theme parks and other venues. And in that piece I wondered what sports reporting would look like if the journalists covering teams had to pay for their own tickets, sit in the stands and buy the meals at the concession stands, with everyone else. Even if they still got credentialed access into the locker room or media center after the game, for quotes, I'd bet that we'd see radically different coverage in many sports sections, with new focus on consumer and fan-experience issues, such as parking, safety and value, that too rarely make it onto the sports pages.

I understand that there are only a limited number of spots on the photographers' stand at a press event. And that some businesses don't have the space to welcome everyone who wants to be there for a new product launch. (I always suspected a Steve Jobs Apple product announcement could have sold more tickets than an average NFL game.) Last summer I paid my way into a conference I needed to cover, but left wishing I'd taken a press credential instead, simply to have gotten the free WiFi available the event made available for invited reporters. So I get why a credential process can work for both sides - meaning that credentialing won't soon go away.

But special treatment can distort a reporter's perception of the story, whether that be in a theme park, an NFL stadium or on the street during a protest when the police turn violent. The NYT story mentions that most reporters work without police credentials. And on the whole, I think the New York and national press have done a good job in covering the police response to the Occupy movement.

Perhaps it's time to start disclosing more often when reporters are using credentials to do their jobs. If bloggers are suppose to disclose when they get a free product to review or get free access to an industry conference, perhaps the "mainstream" press ought to be doing a better job of letting our readers and viewers know when we used some special, non-public access to get a story, too.

It's always bugged me when news publishers talk about the First Amendment protecting our industry. Freedom of the press doesn't belong to one industry. It belongs to everyone. Public records aren't just "press" records, they are what their name implies - they're public. They should be available to everyone, officially credentialed or not.

When we're getting access that's not available to the public, that should be part of the story we tell. But access to the streets for protest isn't something that should be available to a select few. If authorities are restricting First Amendment rights (which include the right to assemble peaceably), it's our duty to get mad and speak up in defense of those rights - whether we're credentialed or not, or those credentials are honored or not.

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From 96.224.64.24 on November 30, 2011 at 4:01 PM

The worst credentialing committees are usually those run by the press, the Senate Press Gallery being the worst example. Its only purpose seems to be keeping new media out of the hallowed halls of Congress. Thanks, AP, NYT, Reuters and all the other mutual back-scratchers who keep this abomination going.

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