



October 1, 2020

John Sarcone, County Attorney
Polk County Justice Center
222 Fifth Avenue
Des Moines, Iowa 50309
Email: ctyatty@polkcountyiowa.gov

Dear Attorney Sarcone:

We are faculty, staff, alumni and current students of Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism. We write to urge you to drop the unjustified charges of "failure to disperse" and "interference with official acts" that remain pending against Des Moines Register reporter Andrea Sahouri, who is a graduate of our school.

On the evening of May 31 Sahouri was reporting near Merle Hay Mall on a demonstration protesting the May 25 killing of George Floyd. A little before 8 p.m. Sahouri reported on her Twitter account that police had used tear gas to disperse the protestors. As Sahouri moved with the protestors to escape the gas, she was confronted by police, who pepper sprayed her. KCCI 8 News footage shows her in custody, seated on a street curb with her hands behind her back in a zip tie.

In a video she recorded while in a police transport vehicle, Sahouri says that she told police "I'm press, I'm press," before they pepper sprayed her. In the video, posted to her Twitter account, Sahouri says, "I'm doing my job as a journalist. I'm just out here reporting as I see." She says she asked police why she had been arrested and was told "something about failing to disperse." Sahouri was in police custody, including time in the Polk County jail, for about three and a half hours before her release, according to an account in the Register.

Research by the US Press Freedom Tracker, which has documented the arrests of Sahouri and 56 other journalists covering Black Lives Matter protests in US cities since the end of May, shows that no more than seven of those journalists – including Sahouri – still face pending charges. In many cases, charges were dropped or dismissed after the journalists were identified as working members of the press.

In addition to her own statements to police, identifying herself as a journalist, Sahouri's professional status was confirmed on the scene by other journalists from her newspaper and a local TV station, according to a July 14 letter to you from the Iowa Freedom of Information Council. Her supervisors at The Des Moines Register also confirmed to police and prosecutors that she was on

assignment to cover the protests, the Council noted in its letter. After that, said the Council, “[T]here was no legitimate reason for the Polk County Attorney’s Office to proceed with these criminal charges.”

However, your office has continued its prosecution of Sahouri, who has pled not guilty to the charges. Requests by her attorney Nick Klinefeldt for police evidence have drawn negative responses. In July, for example, your office wrote that supplying body-camera footage in the case was too expensive and time-consuming, according to a Register story. The defense request, pursued in court, resulted in a September 11 court order to the state to provide “video, reports, audio recordings, and statements of the Defendant” by September 30. A court appearance in the case is scheduled in Iowa District Court for Polk County on October 9.

Sahouri was present at the May 31 protest as a working journalist, not a protestor. She was doing work clearly protected by the First Amendment, she identified herself as a journalist, others confirmed that information to police, and yet she remains charged with criminal misconduct – just for doing her job of newsgathering. We agree with the Iowa Freedom of Information Council, that there is no legitimate reason to proceed with these charges, and we ask that you immediately dismiss all charges against Andrea Sahouri.

Sincerely,

Kabiru Ahmad
Judith Aita
Eliseo Javier Alarcon
Brandon Alexander
Jon Allsop
Mirna Alsharif
Ohimai Amaize
Katie Anastas
Augusta Anthony
Brett Aresco
Niroja Arulananthan
Kwasi Gyamfi Asiedu
Mathias Ask
Tristan Ahtone
Gwen Aviles
Julia Barajas
Caterina E Barbera
Amir Bar-on
Gabriel Baumgaertner
Macy Bayern
Emily Bell
Sarah Bellingham
Helen Benedict
Amelia Bennenbroek
Mathilde Berg Utzon
Jerry Berger
Frederick Bernas
Cynthia Betubiza

Stephan Bisaha
Jackie Bischof
Nadia Batool Bokhari
Isabel Bonnet
Gina Boubion
Eleanor Boudreau
TeShima Brennen
Daarel Burnette
Nusha Balyan
Gabriella Canal
Athena Cao
Kristy Cappiello
Kirk Carapezza
Anastasiia Carrier
Zak Cassel
Dita Cavdarbasha
Rachel Chou
Edward Chun
Jane Chun
Lynsey Chutel
Lisa R. Cohen
Sarah Collins
Ann Cooper
Sheila Coronel
Marisa Coulton
Hannah Critchfield
Portia Crowe
LeeAnn Dance
Melissa Dassori
Paul de Villepin
Carole Dell
Radha Dhar
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Leyla Doss
Matthew Durot
Eromo Egbejule
Jane Eisner
Jonas Ekblom
Rozanne Els
Matthew Engel
Sabrina Escobar
Joanne Faryon
Leah Feiger
Samantha Fields
Giovana Fleck
Brett Forrest
Claire Fox
Samuel Freedman
Harold W. Fuson Jr.
Caleb Galaraga
Amel Ghani
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Margaret Gillerman
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Eileen Grench
Bill Grueskin
Martina Guzman
Haleluya Hadero
LynNell Hancock
Mark Hansen
Lauren Hard
Lauren Harris
Ilma Hasan
Lila Hassan
Linda Hayes
Jake Heller
Thomas Selwyn Ripley Heaton
Cynthia Helton
Sally Herships
Stevie Hertz
Gabrielle Holliday
Marguerite Holloway
Katherine Jacobsen
Savannah Jacobson
Khushbu Jagwani
Pam Janis
Jennifer Janisch
Will Jarrett
Sofia Jeremias
Hannah Jiang
Coleen Jose
Taylor Jung
Joscelyn Jurich
Nyasha Kadandara
Mo Kamaly
Anup Kaphle
Adiel Kaplan
Brent Katz
Arooba Kazmi
Michael Keller
Shanna Kelly
Fazil Khan
Owen Kibenge
Caroline Kimeu
Dawn Kissi
Isabella P Kulkarni
Téa Kvetenadze
Max Kwok
Josh Lash
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Mel Laytner
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Nicholas Lemann
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Nusmila Tabassum Lohani
Ciara Long
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Wendy Lu
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Lauren Mack
Theresa Maggio
Max Maldonado
Somayeh Malekian
Shannon Manley
Suzanne Marmion
Nathanael Massey
Jill Max
Dave Mayers
Lauren McCarthy
Erin Siegal McIntyre
Gabby Miller
Romnie Mills
Sarah Moawad
Sarah Molnar
Jovita Moore
Shandukani Mulaudzi
Patrick Mulligan
Andrea Mustain
Jonathan Ng
Alex Nicoll
Annie Njanja
Jevans Nyabiage
Winnie O'Kelley
Owen Odigie
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Joasia E. Popowicz
Bellamy Pailthorp
Pam Parker
Samir Patel
Alexandra Pattillo
Sonia Paul
Trevor Pearson
Robinson Perez
Alexander Peskind
Maquita Peters
Camille Petersen
Sherisse Pham

Joyce Philippe
Allie Pitchon
Shrai Papat
Carla Power
Julie Pozo-Cepeda
Elias Primoff
Wendy Rhodes
Darius Rafieyan
Erica Meyer Rauzin
Blake Ralling
Rose Reeb
Michael Regan
Madeline Renbarger
Matthew Samuel E. Reysio-Cruz
Keya Rice
Marvin Richards
Chris Riotta
Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez
Lia Russell
Tamara Saade
Drew Saunders
Jess Schram
Marie Schulte-Bockum
Kristin Schwab
Christina Shaman
Bruce Shapiro
Mazin Sidahmed
Max Siegelbaum
Pat Sims
Danielle Sinay
Divya Singaravelu
Amy Singer
Anisha Sircar
Anade Situma
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Catharine Smith
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