An Invincible Trust

By Charles "Stretch" Ledger

"A journalist has a front row seat at the circus. When he steps into the ring he’s just another clown."

I was a 10-year-old intern at The State in Columbia, SC, when I clipped those two sentences from the end of one of Sandy Grady’s Philadelphia Daily News columns. The clipping stayed in my wallet through the summer of 1959 and beyond, and while that little piece of newsprint has since been lost to the years, Grady’s words have never left me. They’re a pithy reminder of the ethical guidelines enumerated in the NPPA Code of Ethics, especially the charge against influencing the events we cover. Now and again Grady’s words come back to mind, most recently after I attended a symposium where a visual journalist discussed his work, and his relationship with the police, in violence prone areas of Chicago, IL.

A little background: I’ve built my career working in economically and socially marginalized communities like Miami’s Overtown neighborhood, the slums of Lagos, and Roma villages in Central Europe. I’ve spent a lot of time thinking about the relationship between journalists and our subjects, especially those at the fringes of society. Though it is almost always asymmetric and the journalist almost always wields disproportionate power (it’s not our most intimate moments that will be shared over the Internet), the relationship is symbiotic. It’s an unconscious bond of trust that’s built on and demands that we honest about our motives.

On the other hand, professional ethics demand that the relationship between journalists and governmental authorities, including law enforcement, is adversarial. Our goals as journalists as often as not are in opposition to those of civil officials, and in every case our methods and practices are independent from those of law enforcement. In both concept and practice, this adversarial relationship is foundational to the role of a free press in a democratic society. Whether the authority is the National Security Agency, the Justice Department, the city police, or the county sheriff, if law enforcement wants our help as they do their job they are free to access our published stories just like the rest of the public. If they want more from us—our notes, phone logs, or raw imagery—they have to convince a judge of a compelling need for such extraordinary access. Getting back to Sandy Grady’s metaphor, we’re in that front row seat, and if they want us in the ring with them they have to drag us there—possibly kicking and screaming, but definitely under court order.

In many places where I’ve worked, maintaining this distance from law enforcement is not only good ethics, it’s good public relations. Though my journalistic independence has landed me in police custody here in the States and in several foreign countries, it has also allowed me to retain the trust of many of my subjects. Word spread quickly when I was stopped and frisked on a street corner in Chicago, and as upbeat as the experience was it boosted my credibility in the neighborhood. I suspect the results would be similar in Overton, as unpopular as the experience was it boosted my credibility in the neighborhood. I suspect the results would be similar in Overton, as unpopular as the experience was it boosted my credibility in the neighborhood. I suspect the results would be similar in Overton, as unpopular as the experience was it boosted my credibility in the neighborhood. I suspect the results would be similar in Overton, as unpopular as the experience was it boosted my credibility in the neighborhood. I suspect the results would be similar in Overton, as unpopular as the experience was it boosted my credibility in the neighborhood. I suspect the results would be similar in Overton, as unpopular as the experience was it boosted my credibility in the neighborhood. I suspect the results would be similar in Overton, as unpopular as the experience was it boosted my credibility in the neighborhood. I suspect the results would be similar in Overton, as unpopular as the experience was it boosted my credibility in the neighborhood. I suspect the results would be similar in Overton, as unpopular as the experience was it boosted my credibility in the neighborhood. I suspect the results would be similar in Overton, as unpopular as the experience was it boosted my credibility in the neighborhood. I suspect the results would be similar in Overton, as unpopular as the experience 

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