The Road to Nowhere (Near the Border)

Sep 26, 2013

Summary Transcript

Transcript

BROOKE GLADSTONE: Our producer Sarah Abdurrahman’s incident happened at the border, but it seems a checkpoint can be just about anywhere. Terry Bressi regularly travels between the University of Arizona, Tucson, where he is staff engineer at its Lunar and Planetary Lab, and Kitt Peak National Observatory, 56 miles away. He takes State Route 86, which runs east-west and neither intersects with the border or any road coming from the border. And yet, since 2008, he estimates he’s been stopped over 300 times at immigration checkpoints. Each time Bressi is stopped, he’s asked if he is a US citizen. In fact, he is. But each time, he refuses to answer. For his own protection, he began videotaping his interactions with border agents, and those videos have become something of an internet sensation.

[VIDEOTAPE CLIPS]:

MALE AGENT: Are you a US citizen?

BRESSI: What’s the purpose of the stop, sir?

MALE AGENT: Are you a US citizen, sir?

BRESSI: Who’s authorized this checkpoint?


BRESSI: What’s the name of the...

FEMALE AGENT: I’m asking you a question. You need to answer my question.

BRESSI: Am I being detained?
FEMALE AGENT: You need to answer my question, sir.

BRESSI: Am I being detained?

MALE AGENT: You are free to go once you state your citizenship.

BRESSI: So I'm being detained.

MALE AGENT: No sir, you need to say what country you are a citizen.

MALE AGENT: - he wants to play the game.

MALE AGENT: It's simple.

[END CLIPS]

BROOKE GLADSTONE: I asked him about bumping up against Border Control on his commute.

TERRY BRESSI: Well, you know, I'm just trying to get back and forth to work on, on a regular basis there. It's the Border Patrol that keeps on bumping up against me.

[BROOKE LAUGHS]

This was an east-west highway that is over 40 miles north of the international border with Mexico, and it never intersects the border at any point. It's not considered a nexus point for border traffic, either, which means basically that the vast majority of traffic along that highway is domestic traffic, not border traffic. Nonetheless, the Department of Homeland Security, which Customs and Border Protection is part of, has diverted those border patrol agents away from the actual border to instead stop, seize, interrogate and search domestic travelers inside the country at this checkpoint that's located near mile marker 147. So that means that people that live and commute in the area have to go through this checkpoint and are seized by armed Federal agents on a regular basis.

BROOKE GLADSTONE: So when did it hit you that you could say no, no, like Bartleby, I prefer not to?

TERRY BRESSI: My very first experience at any sort of checkpoint occurred in December 20th of 2002. And it wasn't at an immigration checkpoint, it was actually a tribal lease sobriety checkpoint. It was basically within a mile of the current location of the Border Patrol's checkpoint. And coming back from work, I noticed [LAUGHS] that there were US Customs agents and Border Patrol agents, and when I stopped, I asked the officer, I said, well, what's the purpose of this checkpoint and he said it was a sobriety checkpoint. [LAUGHS] And I asked him, well, why are those Federal Customs and Border Patrol agents working the frontline with you, because Federal agents don't have any jurisdiction over local sobriety laws.
In short order, I found myself being dragged out of my vehicle, handcuffed, charged with two criminal misdemeanors for not kowtowing to all their demands in a timely fashion. And what I learned during that experience was that police officers will lie with regards to what actually transpires during these types of encounters.

BROOKE GLADSTONE: Mm-hmm.

TERRY BRESSI: I wasn't carrying any video cameras with me at the time. I took it on faith that a law enforcement officer would conduct him or herself reasonably within the boundaries of the law, would answer reasonable questions with reasonable responses and would conduct themselves in a [LAUGHS] reasonable fashion. And that was not my experience, at all.

BROOKE GLADSTONE: So you decided then that you would mount a camera on your car.

TERRY BRESSI: Yes, so it's just not my word against an officer's word or an agent's word. It can be independently reviewed by other people to determine what actually happened. BROOKE GLADSTONE: When you get in your car and you go down the road and you know you're going to be stopped, I've seen enough videos to see that you follow a particular script. You're making a challenge.

TERRY BRESSI: I'm trying to exercise my rights. You know, I'm not seeking out these checkpoints. In fact, if, [LAUGHS] if you know me at all, I go out of my way to avoid scenarios where I have to interact at this level with government agents. I don't like it at all. It's not comfortable for me. It's stressful because, frankly, you never know how they're going to turn out, and they can get violent. So I don't, I don't look forward to these.

BROOKE GLADSTONE: Have you done a tally of how many hits you've had on your videos?

TERRY BRESSI: Oh jeez, I think I've - I'm coming up on 2 million.

BROOKE GLADSTONE: Did you anticipate that you were going to become a poster child for this kind of thing? Do you, do you embrace the role?

TERRY BRESSI: No, I - I didn't and no, I don't. By nature, I'm kind of a, a private individual. But I find myself in this role because I feel it's an important issue that needs to be addressed. You know, there seems to be this creeping authoritarianism that's taking over this country. The Federal government, while they demand transparency from us at every level of our lives, is increasingly hunkering down and refusing to be transparent in its operations. And that to me is unacceptable. It's unacceptable that people can be stopped and seized randomly by government agents while just trying to go to work.
Some of the principles this country was allegedly founded on was, you know, the right to be left alone, unless you're doing something to either harm somebody else or to harm somebody else's property. And that seems to be something that's harder and harder to find, where you're just left alone to live your life and without having to explain yourself to some random person with a gun and a badge.

BROOKE GLADSTONE: Thank you very much.

TERRY BRESSI: Sure. Thank you for showing interest.

BROOKE GLADSTONE: Terry Bressi's website is checkpointusa.org.

Courtney from Lawrence, Kan.

@Ironclad

Terry looks to be a middle aged white dude. Your point is?

@Dave Copeland

You're right that journalists tend to report about themselves at times, but I think you're wrong about this not being in the bailiwick of OTM. The issue of journalists being stopped and held during border crossings, and their electronic devices accessed, is a very real problem. See the cases of Laura Poitras and Glenn Greenwald's partner. While Sarah's story did not appear related to her being a journalist, it does show how easily private (and protected) information can be taken by governments through these questionable stop and seizures. Journalists phones and electronics being seized, for any reason, strikes me as being an important subject for a group focused on media reporting to cover.

As for Terry, he is documenting and posting his experiences with the border patrol through video, pictures and written accounts. He is either a citizen journalist, a citizen activist, or something in between. No matter what, he is producing media related to a particular subject. And this is On The Media.

Oct 2, 2013, 3:24 PM

Rafael from Baltimore, MD

I would add if I were Mr. Bressi a textual quotes of the Fourth and Sixth Amendments. The Border Agent, by asking...