

Testimony from John Mayer, Singer/Songwriter, at the July 31st Paparazzi Task Force Meeting:

I am one of the most media-friendly celebrities around, and my being here this morning is not in contrast with that; rather, it's in keeping with it. There is no doubt that the new frontier of entertainment is taking place informally on the street. Sound bites that used to be given on red carpets and in arranged interviews now take place beside a restaurant's valet stand, and there's no changing that. I don't want to beg the city of Los Angeles to give me 1987 back. I love being a famous musician in 2008. I embrace technology, but I also believe in thoughtfully adapting it to fit within a societal framework. And in the specific areas of both tracking and close-quarter engagement by the paparazzi, there are changes that must be made.

I'd like to define the scope of my argument by first defining what lies outside of it. I'm not here this morning to talk to you about the media at large, blogs, tabloid magazines, or entertainment news shows. I'm not even here to talk to you about photography itself. You don't have to ultimately be photographed to have been dangerously pursued in the attempt of getting a shot. The danger exists in methods and tactics having absolutely nothing to do with picture taking. In fact, removing the camera from the equation is a very effective way of looking at this situation candidly.

A scenario:

It's two o'clock in the morning and you're driving home from a friend's house. You notice there is a vehicle behind you that has no license plate and that has been following you for the last 15 minutes. The driver is so brazen that he or she has even taken to ignoring red lights just to stay behind you. As you begin to turn onto a small neighborhood street just blocks from where you live, you now realize this person has definite intentions of engaging you at your house.

The question I ask you is: Are you in danger?

The answer is YES. Not "depends if you're on TV."

It doesn't matter what you do for a living, and it doesn't matter that there might turn out to be a digital camera on the passenger seat. You are IN danger. Danger is defined as the possibility of suffering harm or injury. And without knowing who is following you, you do not know why you are being followed, which brings about a very real possibility for suffering harm or injury.

So what about that camera on the passenger seat? Recently, it's come to serve as all but an official license to encroach on someone's right to protect themselves from threats of danger, along with every traffic law ever devised. It's also the most socially acceptable way to come within inches from someone who you do not know and who does not know you. Sadly, if I were someone who wanted to do harm to a celebrity - of which there are many - my best bet in succeeding today would be to hold a camera.

Here's a true story.

Last month at Los Angeles International Airport, forty men, holding no tickets to fly and with nobody to pick up, swarmed an arriving female passenger inside the terminal, shouting at her, disorienting her and denying her a safe exit. Does that sound like something that should be allowed? Should the fact that the forty men were holding cameras change that answer?

Sadly, the very real and present risk associated with being pursued as a celebrity pales in comparison to the daily, imminent danger to the public at large. If you've ever raised an eyebrow at an especially bullish driver declaring him or herself the third in a line of cars making a left turn on a light that had just turned red, I ask you to imagine what your reaction would be to watching

eight cars do it. And it happens not just daily, but turn-for-turn. I don't need to look in my rear view mirror to know it's happening behind me. All I have to do is listen; listen to the dissonant array of car horns as unsuspecting drivers are taken by surprise while a pack of reckless paparazzi muscle through an aging red light.

The person being followed knows there is wanton carelessness behind them. The pedestrian crossing the street, or the car expecting to have the right of way does not. A severe accident occurring from this kind of vehicular pursuit is not a theoretical possibility, but a situational certainty.

What does any of this have to do with photography? Or with celebrity?

The answer is simply, nothing.

This is about safety. Defined as "being protected from danger, risk, or injury."

I don't sit before you today to ask that you ban the paparazzi. I'm asking you to regulate it. Officialize it. Tax it. Legitimize it. A big white P on a yellow license plate says the driver works for an accredited photo agency. Press credentials worn in plain sight do the same. A law governing an acceptable filming distance from an unwilling subject keeps everybody safe and misbehavior becomes accountable. Regulating the paparazzi won't bring an end to modern day media coverage, just as the newly enforced hands-free law hasn't stopped people from talking on cell phones while they drive. It's only an adaptive measure put in place to respond to some of the ways that living in a technological free-market can compromise personal safety.