First Amendment opens door to justice, change

Mike Luckovich

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By Lisa N. Capid

Georgia’s new hate crimes law is welcome and long-overdue. But as the hearings that marked this historic moment last week left me, I kept thinking about the state’s capital city of Atlanta. The shooting death of Ahmaud Arbery and the subsequent delay of justice were just too hard to ignore. That injustice was also brought to light and the souls of Arbery and others were changed when because we are unprepared by First Amendment rights.

The shameful case of an unarmed Black man shot by white racists in neighboring Brookhaven was a reminder that we are far from the equality that a robust democracy can provide. Despite civil rights gains of the past 60 years, we still are not protected, respected and affirmed for all of our citizens with the same diligence. Arbery’s killing laid that bare.

But the Arbery case—and the case of George Floyd’s death in Minneapolis and Breonna Taylor’s death in Louisville, Kentucky—also remind us that democracy, despite its flaws, comes with checks and balances. Democracy is designed to be tricky. The checks and balances are supposed to protect the government for a reason of prudence. The last two weeks have undeniably demonstrated the power of our right to protest. The First Amendment also protects the right to speak in public spaces, whether that’s being captured on video in police activity, as happened with Floyd’s killing, or the actions of public officials in public buildings, a right reinforced by a recent ruling in the U.S. District Court in Manhattan. And here’s another way the First Amendment and copyright law are intertwined, too: The ability to make sure that from this, the public and the press have a legally protected right to know what elected officials are doing with the power granted to them by the public. And the checks and balances that first brought scrutiny in the Arbery case involved the public’s access to government records.

Ahmaud Arbery’s father, Marcus Arbery Sr., is embraced as he leaves the courtroom during a break in the proceedings in Brunswick last month. Access to public records brought the case to light.

New York Times journalist Richard Fausset in April filed an open records request that revealed a memo from the then-prosecutor on the case. In the memo, the prosecutor detailed why he believed there was not sufficient probable cause for arrest warrants. The story got national attention and led to the release of a video of Arbery being shot spatially intact. The Georgia Bureau of Investigation ultimately arrested three men, all of whom were indicted, murder charges on June 24. As an elected official on the Cobb County Commission, I believe that government transparency created by open records and open meetings adds accountability that is both needed by both the people who pay our salaries and also to the institutions to which we are unprepared to file freedom-of-information requests.

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READERS WRITE

Feeding those in need made easier by digital tools

Every year, 12.5 billion pounds of food are wasted, all the while, millions of Americans suffer from food insecurity. A team of researchers at Harvard University, led by Peter Kurlen, have developed a system that allows those who want to help feed hungry families, can help our team, is helping with the amount of food delivered to people who use the food bank. And now that we are facing a global pandemic, excess food has become an essential resource to many who have never before needed food assistance.

More than ever, we must ensure that excess food can go to the need. Food waste is a digital tool allows us to do that. Digital technology and data from programs like Google Analytics can help us connect local health care providers, like food banks, to those most in need. And when people are facing a local pandemic, excess food has become an essential resource to many who have never before needed food assistance.

Letters to the editor must be no longer than 150 words and must include a writer’s name, address, and phone number. Letters will be edited for clarity and may be published in both print and digital formats. Email submissions are preferred and should be sent to letters@ajc.com. To submit a letter by mail, Volume of submissions prevents us from acknowledging receipt of letters.

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