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Capstone: Op-Ed

Whose Park, Whose Voice? Media, Policing, and the Battle Over Washington Square Park

By Ian M. Torres

Kanami Kusajima, known as "Let Hair Down," performs an improvised dance and live painting in Washington Square Park on March 7, 2025. Her performances blend movement and ink painting, creating unique artworks that reflect the energy of the moment. Kusajima was part of the NYC government's "No Stopping New York" campaign promoting recovery after the COVID-19 pandemic. / Photo by Ian M. Torres

In Washington Square Park — a rare pocket of New York City's chaotic beauty — art collides with enforcement, protest meets policy, and the unhoused are policed more often than supported. But in this ongoing public struggle, one group remains notably inconsistent: the media.

Over the past five years, the park has become a symbolic stage — not just for performers like dancer Kanami Kusajima, but for an unresolved conflict between creativity, public order, and who gets to exist freely in shared space. And yet, coverage from mainstream media often plays like a loop of reactive soundbites: *"drug use up," "police restore order," "performer arrested."* No harmony, context, or deeper story.

In September 2020, as the pandemic immobilized New York's cultural heartbeat, Kusajima turned Washington Square Park into her open-air studio. Her expressive, ethereal dancing attracted not just crowds, but the attention of City Hall. In summer 2021, she became the face of NYC's No Stopping New York recovery campaign — her image plastered across bus stops, celebrated as a symbol of resilience.

But even as the city celebrated her on billboards, its agents ticketed her for unauthorized performances. As reported by Curbed, Kusajima received her first citation that same year. By late 2023, the city's tolerance for unpermitted expression had evaporated and enforcement by Parks Enforcement Patrol and the NYPD had escalated significantly. Artists, activists, and unhoused residents pushed back — the press, for the most part, didn't show up.

Instead, public narratives focused on "safety" and "order," rarely interrogating what — or who — those words were really protecting.

The media often plays an active role in shaping harmful narratives. Rather than remaining truly impartial, many outlets reduce nuanced situations to simplistic stories, present state actions in a sanitized way, and contribute to the marginalization of displaced communities. This goes beyond negligence—it undermines the very integrity of responsible journalism.

Reporting should be grounded in *truth*, serve the *public interest*, and uphold *justice and empathy*. In Washington Square Park, few stories do all three.

As newsrooms shrink and deadlines tighten, journalists must make ethical decisions about what *deserves* space. In the case of Washington Square Park, they've consistently chosen spectacle over substance.

There is a deeper pattern here. Whether its dancers, muralists, or pianists, the media's portrayal of street performers veers dangerously close to propaganda when it reinforces the notion that public art is only tolerable if it fits into a tidy, city-sanctioned frame.

When the NYPD cracks down on artists under the banner of "public safety," too many headlines run unquestioned statements from police press releases, rarely asking what prompted the change or at what cost. In a city that both funds and fines its artists, shouldn't that contradiction be newsworthy?

Then, they're nuisances. When NYPD officers crack down under the banner of "public safety," too many outlets simply echo police talking points, rarely asking what prompted the change or at what cost. In a city that both funds and fines its artists, shouldn't that contradiction be newsworthy?

It's not just about art. As enforcement increases, so does the criminalization of poverty. Rather than exploring why people sleep in parks — from the housing crisis to inadequate mental health support — media coverage often falls back on easy cliché: danger, disorder, disruption.

Neutrality is not the same as fairness. Choosing to quote a police spokesperson instead of a protester, or filming a passed-out person rather than speaking to them — those are editorial decisions with ethical weight. They shape public opinion.

Ethical journalism doesn't strive for false balance. It means contextualizing actions and policies within the systems they operate in. It asks: Why did police start ticketing more heavily in fall 2023? What new directives came from the Mayor's office? Why did media outlets not cover the artist protests that followed?

There is community safety work being done in Washington Square Park — but it's not all coming from uniformed officers. Harm reduction advocates, social workers, and volunteers hand out supplies, de-escalate conflicts, and care for the vulnerable — all without recognition. Why are they invisible in most coverage?

Here's a profound suggestion: what if media stories didn't just highlight conflict, but looked for solutions? Instead of inciting fear about unhoused people or turning artists into nuisances, imagine coverage that followed the money, the policy shifts, and the people impacted. Journalism that asked: *What is the city trying to achieve with these policies? Who is benefiting? Who is paying the price?*

This kind of *solution-focused journalism* might not drive the same traffic as a video of someone being arrested in the park, but it would serve the public interest far better.

Washington Square Park is not just a patch of grass surrounded by an archway and NYU students. It's a frontline in the battle over who gets to belong in public space. Artists like Kusajima, street performers, and unhoused individuals are not marginal characters — they are New Yorkers, cultural contributors, and human beings.

The role of the press isn't just to report what happened, but to ask *why* it happened, *who* it happened to, and *what comes next*.

In this city, in this park, at this moment — the media has a choice. It can continue to turn complexity into acceptable fear, or it can tell the full story: messy, empathetic, and boldly true.

This isn't just about journalistic ethics. It's about whether journalism still matters.