

Don Lemon – Journalist or Activist?

by

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A ChatGPT response to the question of Don Lemon being a journalist included the following key points:

- Don Lemon is a **trained broadcast journalist**.
- He worked as a **local TV news reporter/anchor** before CNN.
- At **CNN (2006–2023)**, he was an anchor and correspondent, most notably on *CNN Tonight*.
- His work blended **traditional journalism** (reporting, interviewing, breaking news) with **opinion and commentary**, especially later in his career.

Last Thursday Lemon was arrested by federal agents for conspiracy and violating the First Amendment. Lemon claims that he did nothing wrong and says that. . .

- “He was strictly performing journalistic work — observing, recording, livestreaming, and interviewing.
- His actions are protected by the First Amendment (freedom of the press).
- He did not plan or direct the protest.” [CBS News](#)

The [Associated Press](#) claims that “Lemon has framed the arrest as a *threat to press freedom*, arguing that journalists must be allowed to cover controversial events without fear of prosecution.”

Lemmon’s arrest and charges have aroused heated legal and political debate that, no doubt, will be the base for many discussions in academic, political and legal circles. However, what these discussions, along with current legal and political minds, fail to recognize is the existence of past and current law.

For far too many decades, journalists have relied on the “freedom of the press” in the US Constitution’s [First Amendment](#) to justify their actions. Since its passing in 1789, the amendment has undergone a lot of challenges, clarification of meanings, and the establishment of new laws, opinions, and rulings.

Unfortunately, journalism schools cherry pick that part of the First Amendment pertaining to freedom of the press and essentially ignore the rest of the amendment. Over the past century, the Supreme Court of the US (SCOTUS) has stood firm that the context of the Constitution and US law MUST be taken holistically and reject arguments that rely on selective clauses in a statute while ignoring clauses that are inconvenient to

either prosecution and/or defense. SCOTUS has cited this opinion in well over 100 cases. Lower courts have cited SCOTUS tens of thousands of times according to AI.

Although SCOTUS has dealt with several cases where freedom of religion and freedom of the press have intersected, it has not dealt with a situation where a so-called “journalist” has entered a church without invitation. This is exactly what Don Lemon and the protesters did last week when they entered the Cities Church in St. Paul..

There are many cases where SCOTUS has upheld the sanctity of the church. ChatGPT sums the various decisions as:

SCOTUS’s interpretation is:

- Churches are **private, nonpublic forums**
- Free Exercise protects worship from disruption
- Assembly and speech rights stop at the door
- Protest must remain **outside**, on public property
- Entry can be lawfully denied and enforced

In addition to US law, Minnesota has similar laws regarding the protest last week in a church and Lemmon’s involvement. Minnesota law can be specifically applied to Lemon’s presence in the church. Minnesota law maintains that:

1. A church is private property.
2. A person has no special legal status simply because of who they are, what they’re saying, or why they’re there.
3. Permission to enter can be conditional and revoked at any time
4. A person commits criminal trespass if they:
 - a. intentionally enter or remain on private property
 - b. without consent, or
 - c. after being told to leave
5. Enters a sanctuary to protest, disrupt, or demonstrate, or interferes with religious services

However, Lemon claims that he entered the church as a journalist, not a protester, and his actions are protected by the 1st Amendment of the Constitution. [LA Times](#)

If we look at Lemon’s actions strictly from the legal aspects listed above, it is obvious that he is guilty of violating both federal and state law. However the right of freedom of the press has been long standing in American history, but that is not to say that Lemon is protected by law.

In 1996, Lemon graduated from Brooklyn College with a degree in journalism. During his studies, one of the courses he took was “Communication Law and Policy.” This course included studying the First Amendment and US media law.

Upon graduation and until 2006, Lemon worked as a reporter, news correspondent, and news co-anchor with several different news affiliates.

In 2006, he joined CNN where, in time, his career morphed from being a reporter to becoming a commentator and a program host, voicing strong opinions about the African-American community, Trump’s first presidential term, and LGBTQ+ issues.

Although CNN overlooked Lemon’s divisiveness while interviewing guests on air, he came under scrutiny by CNN’s management in early 2023 over on-air remarks he made about women and aging. By April, CNN was fed up with the negative publicity over Lemmon’s misogynistic behavior and fired him; citing difficulty in booking guests willing to appear on-air with Lemon, and polls had shown his popularity among viewers had declined. [NY Times](#)

Following his firing from CNN, Lemon went on to eventually establish his own podcast. However, as CNN discovered, Lemon’s commentaries were taking on an activist persona. He was no longer just commenting on social and political issues, but also advocating for action. This became apparent when, on October 17, 2025, he directed “Black people, brown people of all stripes should legally get a gun in case their homes were visited” on the [Wajahat Ali](#) podcast. [Newsweek](#)

Although Lemon also stated in the podcast, that he was "not condoning or promoting violence," he blatantly crossed the line from commentator to activist. He further indicated his activist stance after the anti-ICE protests started in Minneapolis, stating that he had done some “reconnaissance” with activist groups. [X](#) [NY Post](#) [YouTube](#)

In his YouTube video, Lemon not only mentioned him doing reconnaissance, but also pointed to a group of anti-ICE activists, referring to them as preparing for a celandine operation. He also made several remarks referencing the operation and group as “We.”

Around 10 minutes into the video, the transcript states, “We got to go now and get there. Let's go.” (Nikima Armstrong). “All right. Thank you. Thank you. We'll see you there. Yeah.” (Lemon). This simple statement by Lemon demonstrates his knowledge of the operation and its objective, despite his claim of having no knowledge.

The only way this can be construed is that he considered himself as part of the operation. Thus, his role was not as a journalist as he claims but rather that of an activist.

Over his 30+ years of acting as a journalist, Lemon often spoke to various groups on the First Amendment. It should be noted that there are several federal laws addressing the right of the people to protest on public land and the denial of their rights to protest on private property. This is very significant since at 37:30 minutes into the video, Lemon directs one of his companions, "I guess you can stand on the just stand on the sidewalk. You can come over. Just don't go on the property." This statement acknowledges that Lemon is aware of the law relative to private property and religious freedom, and yet he chose to violate federal law.

Readers need to watch this [video](#). Better yet, read and study its transcript. Listen to Lemon's words and watch his actions. There should be no doubt in anyone's mind that Lemon was acting as an activist and cowardly claimed he was just a journalist.

His history before the City Church protest, his actions inside the church, and subsequent claims substantiate that he clearly crossed the line of being a reporter to that of instigator of violent activism.

Violent activism refers to actions taken by individuals or groups to achieve political or social change through direct, confrontational means.

Variety of sources

In legal usage (U.S.), *violent activism* isn't usually a single, standalone term defined in one statute. Instead, it's a descriptive label courts and law enforcement use for conduct that falls under existing criminal and national-security laws.

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