

Freedom of the Press

The first amendment to the U.S. Constitution essentially guarantees the American people's right to freedom of speech and to a free press. James Madison, who played a major role in writing the Constitution and getting it ratified, called a free press "one of the great bulwarks of liberty." To ensure and protect the freedom of the press has been a fundamental American value throughout our history.

The impact of the first amendment is that the American people have a right both to share information and opinions openly and freely and to have access to information and opinions that anyone else may express or publish in any form or by any means. While there are limits to this right, such as the need to protect national security and to prevent people from inflicting injury on others through slander and libel and incitements to violence, freedom of expression and of the press remain as rights in the absence of any compelling interest to the contrary.

The broad consensus among political thinkers is that free speech and a free press are essential conditions for a healthy, well-functioning democracy. If the will of the people is to serve as the ultimate reference point for the decisions and actions of government, the people must have access to all available information about what government is doing and how it should be operating. As voters, the people hold individual office holders and political parties accountable for their actions, but they can do this only if they are fully aware of those actions. So important is the freedom of the press to democracy that its presence or absence is generally considered a key indicator as to whether a particular system of government can be considered a true democracy.

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A free press and the free expression of individuals reveal the successes and failures not only of government, but also of private organizations and individuals whose actions have a significant impact on the well-being of others. The rise of the internet has provided the buying public with a wealth of information about the quality and cost of virtually every product and service available. This has brought enormous value to our society as a whole. The unhindered publication of information and opinion has also advanced every field of human knowledge, with benefits to all people throughout the world.

While freedom of expression provides numerous advantages to the public in any society, there is often tension between the press and individual government officials or even whole systems of government. As a rule, people don't like to be criticized or to have their failures or wrongdoing publicized. In the United States and other democracies, we mostly accept and live with this tension. But in non-democratic countries, the government often controls or punishes individuals or members of the press in order to prevent the disclosure of information that it wants to keep hidden. Typically such countries have state-run news organizations that only release information that the government wants the public to know or believe.

Several organizations, including Freedom House, Reporters Without Borders and the Committee to Protect Journalists, assess and report on the amount of free expression that exists in different countries. They track the existence of state media monopolies, the degree of state censorship, the level of media independence, as well as instances of and statistics on the imprisonment or murder of journalists. Reporters Without Borders has said that more than a third

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of the world's people live in countries where there is no press freedom. Countries that consistently rank worst in the world for restricting free expression or violence against journalists include China, Cuba, Egypt, Eritrea, Iran, Iraq, Myanmar, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Turkey, Turkmenistan and Vietnam.

For some time, surveys have shown a low level of trust by the public in the news media. However, the same surveys have found that most people value the media's role as watchdogs over the public's well-being. No doubt the trust issue reflects the high degree of political and cultural polarization in our country, with liberal and conservative media regularly criticizing one another's reporting or integrity. Furthermore, to prize freedom of expression cannot mean that we uncritically accept what any individual, journalist or news outlet says. Besides the bias that everyone has, there are many people and organizations who report news that is mistaken or even intentionally false. We must know or learn how to distinguish opinion from fact and truth from fiction. It will help to listen to opposing points of view and to weigh the pros and cons of each. But while we may ultimately doubt the value of some news sources, we can still recognize the value that freedom of expression and the press brings to every person and every nation lucky enough to have them.