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Reading Article G1

Article #7: The Free Press: The Freedom of Information

By J. Edward Evans

Of all the rights that United States citizens enjoy, which are the most important to a free society? Freedom of speech? Freedom of religion? Freedom to vote for the candidate of your choice?

Freedom of the press might not rank first on many people's lists. It may seem as though this freedom directly affects only the small group of people who publish newspapers. Viewed that way, the freedom of the press clause in the Constitution is little more than an insurance policy to make the business of journalism less troublesome.

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Without a free press, a democratic form of government would be unlikely. Only ideas approved by those in power would be published. Without a free press, government officials could violate other rights, such as freedom of speech, religion, and assembly, with little fear of being stopped.

A free press is the watchdog that guards all of our individual freedoms. That is one of the reasons why freedom of the press is among the rights protected by the First Amendment to the Constitution. The First Amendment states that: *Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.*

Thomas Jefferson, third president of the United States, felt strongly about the importance of a free press: *The people are the only censors of their governors. . . . The basis of our government being the opinion of the people, the very first object should be to keep that right (full information of government affairs) and were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter!*

Support for an entirely free press has never been unanimous in the United States, however. At times the media seem to cross the bounds of fairness or decency. Should a magazine be allowed to print lies? Should a book be allowed to ruin someone's reputation? Should television, which exerts a powerful influence over young people, be allowed to show any program it chooses? Must the government sit back idly when a newspaper spills secrets that are vital to the national security?

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The answers to questions concerning a free press are not always simple. The Constitution and the Bill of Rights were adopted to ensure freedom for the people from abuses of government. But exactly what did the writers of the Constitution mean by freedom of the press? Does the Constitution give us freedom to print anything, no matter how irresponsible, or does it simply mean freedom from censorship? (Censorship refers to the act of withholding, confiscating, or deleting material so that it cannot be printed, broadcast, or distributed.)

Even if everyone agreed on what the writers of those documents meant, many questions would remain unanswered. The founders could not have predicted all the situations or

cultural changes in later centuries. The issues concerning freedom of the press must be continually studied and debated to prevent important rights from being taken for granted.

Each generation must struggle with the questions of freedom, responsibility, and security. The lessons of the past must be studied; the influences of the present must be identified. Only by understanding the lessons of the past and being aware of the problems of the present can we make sure that the flow of information in the United States remains free.

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