

Margaret Chase Smith Library 2018 Essay Contest

Each year the Margaret Chase Smith Library sponsors an essay contest for high school seniors. The essay prompt for 2018 concerned the importance of a free press. The essay has been edited for length.

FIRST-PLACE ESSAY

Democracy Needs a Free Press

by Cassidy Lessner

Our liberty depends on the freedom of the press, and that cannot be limited without being lost.

—Thomas Jefferson (1786)

Thomas Jefferson understood that a free press is critical to sustaining liberty. Along with free speech, a free press is indispensable for people to be informed and to participate in democracy. The transparency that journalism brings to events makes government work better, decreases the risk of corruption, and ultimately makes America safer. Information uncovered by journalists leads to prosecuting wrongdoings, holding officials accountable, and rectifying injustices.

The media robustly protects First Amendment freedoms, which have served America since its beginning. But changing technology and an evolution in the way people consume news have brought challenges. Among these challenges are fabricated news stories shared on social media sites and a tendency of readers to consider only news stories that adhere to their political ideology. Both challenges have eroded trust in the media.

The erosion of trust in institutions weakens the foundation of America's

democratic system. In a 2017 Gallup poll on honesty and ethics by profession, only 23 percent of respondents ranked journalists as very high or high. Attacks by government officials on the press is also damaging. Calling the media “dishonest” or “the enemy of the American people” works to destroy public trust. Trying to bully the press with threats or insults weakens American democracy.

But this is not a new phenomenon. Many presidential administrations have fought requests under the Freedom of Information Act; they have prosecuted whistle-blowers and journalists, and criticized news outlets they did not like. Richard Nixon railed against the *Washington Post* for its reporting on the Watergate scandal. During World War I, Woodrow Wilson signed Espionage and Sedition Acts of 1917 and 1918, which made it a crime to “utter, print, write, or publish any disloyal, profane, scurrilous, or abusive language” about the federal government. Under this act, Jacob Frohwerk was convicted and sentenced to 10 years in prison for publishing articles that claimed the United States got involved in the war to benefit Wall Street bankers. His case went to the Supreme Court where he lost a unanimous decision. Since then, however, the courts have been kinder to the press.

In *Near v. Minnesota*, the Supreme Court in 1931 established the principle of prior restraint, saying the government cannot censor or prohibit a publication in advance. In 1964, the Supreme Court ruled in *New York Times v. Sullivan* that the First Amendment protects the publication of even false statements about public officials unless made with malice or knowledge of falsehood.

America still enjoys press freedoms that many parts of the world lack. Journalists are rarely threatened with physical harm or death for doing their jobs. But still, the degree of freedom is cause for concern. The group Reporters Without Borders ranks press freedoms in 180 countries. The United States ranked 41st in 2017, right behind Slovenia. The group cited the government's war on whistle-blowers as well as surveillance activities against journalists as the main factors in America's rating.

Freedom of the press is important not just to protect reporters and the news media, but also to protect citizens' rights to have access to information we need to make decisions about our government.

The absence of a free press has serious consequences. As Senator John McCain said, “If you want to preserve democracy as we know it, you have to have a free and many times adversarial press. And without it, I am afraid that we would lose so much of our individual liberties over time. That is how dictators get started.”

However, today, consumers of the news can be forgiven for feeling overwhelmed by the many choices they face. They can watch any number of channels at any time of day to get the latest news. But what are their sources, and are they trustworthy? How can today's consumers learn to distinguish between opinion journalism and objective reporting?

Can they tell the difference between paid sponsorships and independent journalism? How can society help them to read a variety of news and opinions, not just what their friends recommend or what a Facebook algorithm determines is best? At a time when marketing, media, and news are slowly converging and readers are absorbed into this trend as consumer and product, how can essential news-reading skills be taught? What are the core competencies of news literacy—the skills needed to understand the news?

Americans, students and adults, need to have the tools to distinguish fact from fiction, understand the First Amendment and the standards of journalistic integrity, and exercise civility while engaging in public debates. Students must master print, radio, television, and electronic media, so they can use them as tools for intellectual development and critical thinking.

The obstacles to news literacy are many. They spring partly from the digital culture, which has brought a variety of challenges along with many obvious benefits. Seventy-five percent of adults in the United States get news from Facebook, which is selected and distributed not by editors, but by a mathematical formula that predicts what users might want to read. Social media companies seek to attract and hold an increasing share of their users' time. They promise diverse viewpoints, but filter out what they do not agree with. Unfortunately, this narrows the vision required for understanding the news.

So students before they become adults must be taught to read widely and discuss articles from many leading newspapers, magazines, and books. They must follow television newscasts with distinct leanings and compare a whole

range of websites. Also, they must cultivate analytical skills. For example, a basic lesson is to not believe a report that has no source and to be skeptical about a report with only one source.

However, to increase information literacy, straightforward, responsible journalism must continue as an indispensable public asset, a cornerstone of democratic life. Sadly, today, there is an urge to chase viewership at the expense of solid fact-based reporting. Unfortunately, in the media world today, since opinion too often serves as the chief currency, politicians face less examination of their statements and less accountability. They are succeeding at manipulating the media by using Twitter, refusing to hold press conferences, restricting questions and cameras, employing set speeches, and refusing to conduct a discussion of their opinion in front of the press.

But all is not lost. America is fortunate to still have a number of high-quality news organizations with first-rate reporters who continue to dig deep and uphold high journalistic standards. These elements are crucial because we live in a time when solid reporting rooted in high standards of accuracy is a vital, democratic necessity. As consumers of news, we need to encourage the media to pursue the truth and hold its members to account when they stray. We need to shoulder our responsibility to encourage news organizations to improve. After all, too often Americans turn to fluff rather than substance and consume only stories that reflect their own perspective. We need to step up our game, too. 🐟



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