

Why Free News Media Are Important



Katie Roberts

Age 14, 9th grade
Homeschooled

8053 US Highway 160
Walnut Shade, MO 65771

1-417-561-2074

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A free press is indicative of a free nation. Wherever free news media exist, liberty is also found. Historically, the press has started the fires and fanned the flames of liberty. The media have played an important role in helping to make nations free, including the United States. On the other hand, when there are no free news media, it is a sign of a society of repression. In the 2004 survey conducted by Reporters Without Borders, Cuba and North Korea were considered the countries with the least freedom of the press. China, Iran, Turkmenistan, and Myanmar – countries whose governments are known to be oppressive – also ranked near the bottom. Clearly, there is a close relationship between freedom of the press and the general freedom of a country.

But just *how* closely tied are free news media and liberty? Iraq provides one example. From 1994 to 2003, Iraq never scored less than 95 (on a scale of 1-100, 100 being worst) in the annual press freedom surveys conducted by Freedom House. However, things changed dramatically after Saddam Hussein was ousted. In the survey at the beginning of 2004, Iraq received a rating of 66.

The first amendment to the United States Constitution states, “Congress shall make no law...abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press...” Free news media are especially important to Americans. The media have been a major force in some of the most important events of America’s history. For example, Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense* challenged the authority of the British government and advocated independence from Great Britain. One scholar says, “*Common Sense*... is a classic example of the sort of political expression that the founders meant to protect” (Kennedy 19). *Common Sense* was widely read by commoners and leaders alike. The pamphlet united Americans in their fight against the British. Six months after *Common Sense* was published, the Declaration of Independence was signed.

America's free press has been instrumental during other periods of American history, as well. In an 1835 newspaper article, Horace Greeley's proclamation that the future was in the west opened the floodgates of westward migration. The press reported on civil rights abuses in the 1960s and alerted the public to the illegal activities of the Nixon White House. Throughout America's wars, Americans have depended on the press for news of those wars. And even on September 11, 2001, the press was there, reporting on the devastating attack on America.

In closing, then, free news media are one of the most important ingredients in a free nation. US Senator William Borah, in a 1917 speech before the Senate, stated, "If the press is not free... it makes no difference under what form of government you live, you are a subject and not a citizen" (qtd. in Platt, #671). His words ring true even today, nearly 100 years later. Freedom of the press is of timeless importance. It has always been, and will continue to be, a cornerstone of freedom.

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