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Why Free Press is Essential to Democracy

“Fascism thrives in obscurity and darkness.”

— DaShanne Stokes

Being born the year after 9/11, and age 13 at Trump’s election, my coming-of-age has unfolded alongside American turmoil. This unconventional political climate created interesting circumstances for me to develop my own opinions, and in a search for my own beliefs, values, and truth, the press was my friend. Responsible journalism is the people’s check on the government, with a duty to give its readers the truth. Contrary to a popular narrative that there is bias and lying in the media today, a free press has always acted as a defense system for our democratic freedoms.

The First Amendment, which protects the press from government interference, was ratified in 1791. The Founding Fathers firmly thought it necessary that citizens should be free to publish their ideas and read the ideas of others in order for self-government to succeed. James Madison wrote, “Knowledge will forever govern ignorance; and a people who mean to be their own governors must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives.”

The press gives power to the people. Authoritarian leaders recognize this power, which is why repeatedly throughout history we have seen fascists publicly suppressing the press. Even today, authoritarian leaders around the world work to stifle the press in order to consolidate power. In some countries, journalists are killed or jailed for asking questions and reporting facts, and even in our own country, some leaders have attacked reporters personally, hoping to harm their public credibility. In Adolf Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*, Hitler writes, “It is the press, above all, which wages a positively fanatical and slanderous struggle, tearing down everything which can be regarded as a support of national independence, cultural elevation, and the economic independence of the nation.” In an attempt to consolidate power, Hitler antagonized and discredited the press by claiming them “hysteric” and working against the nation.

On April 4, 2019, President Trump tweeted that the press is “truly the enemy of the people. The press is doing everything within their power to fight the magnificence of the phrase, MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN.” Just like his authoritarian predecessors, Trump suppresses free press to consolidate his power. Corrupt leaders survive by controlling information. This modern example of the dangers of an authoritarian government repeats authoritarian regimes throughout history. In 2007, Hugo Chavez shut down the RCTV and then made a televised address, on all channels, in which he branded the media group Globovision his next “enemy of the state.” Consolidation of power has always begun by suppressing the press. Without a free press, the people are left powerless.

Suppressing the press puts our country's democracy in jeopardy. To repeat Thomas Jefferson's famous words, “were it left to [him] to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, [he] would not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter.”

Free press is an essential protection against corruption. Without a free press, democracy dies.