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### Importance of Free Press Amidst a Pandemic

Free press is a long standing American tradition, and a staple of functioning democracy. Throughout history, but particularly in times like these — riddled with political and economic uncertainty and deep-rooted pessimism about the future— we look to the press to see how our country is doing. Without free press we would get the over-glorified, propagandist media like that of countries such as Russia and China. We wouldn't know the staggering death toll. We wouldn't know how many have lost their jobs. We wouldn't know that the President often tells mistruths; that hydroxychloroquine often does more harm than good, that a vaccine will likely take two years, that reopening the economy could kill thousands more, that our hospitals are running low on supplies, that we may be heading towards another economic depression.

However, free press undoubtedly comes at a cost, aiding in the spread of misinformation. Fox News has facilitated the spread of false and potentially harmful information that has caused not only a sense of disunity, but death. After watching President Trump talk about the potential benefits of chloroquine, an Arizona couple consumed fish food in an attempt to ward off COVID-19. The husband died shortly after, and the wife was gravely ill. Even after the incident, Fox News continued to tout chloroquine as a potentially promising treatment. There were no clinical trials to substantiate these claims. By spreading such information, Fox News put lives at risk, but managed to stay within their constitutional rights.

Though we see these instances where free press has caused harm, for the most part it acts as a way to negate the effects of outlets spreading misinformation. By giving citizens access to a variety of sources through the First Amendment, they can make informed decisions concerning what they feel is best for their health and safety. Because we've had constant access to mostly reliable information about the novel coronavirus, we've been able to limit the amount of deaths by taking precautions even before local governments mandated stay-at-home orders.

Suggestions to begin social distancing and begin exercising precautions by news outlets came in early March. The first state to mandate social distancing was Rhode Island, at the end of March. Most states would follow in early April, but citizens were already taking precautions— thanks to media suggestions— which likely helped to slow the spread. Free press has saved thousands of lives by giving people access to information and op-ed pieces that would have otherwise been restricted by the government. Outlets such as the *New York Times* began suggesting social distancing and wearing protective face coverings in mid-March, now considered to be life-saving measures. Free press has ensured the public access to a plethora of potentially life-saving information, long before the government did, particularly vital in issues like these, where time is of the essence.

Free press is more necessary now than ever, helping save lives by giving citizens access to free and reliable information that may otherwise not be available.