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“Why a Free Press Matters in a Democracy”

“If the freedom of [press] is taken away, then dumb and silent we may be led, like sheep to the slaughter.” George Washington

1788, the Constitution was ratified and America became a democracy. Two important principles of a democracy are government accountability and the protection of peoples' rights. These principles are included in the Constitution. The First Amendment guarantees the right to freedom of speech, including the freedom of press. Freedom of press ensures the expression of ideas through printed and electronic media without government restrictions.

A democracy ceases to exist without honoring the First Amendment.. Without a free press, a *democracy* would resemble a monarchy or a dictatorship. Burma, North Korea, and Turkmenistan have little to no free press. These countries are communist, unitary parliamentary republic, and Presidential republic. No freedom, no democracy. A free press matters in a democracy because it helps citizens to make informed decisions and it gives citizens access to information, and ensures government accountability.

A free press helps a democracy by helping citizens make informed decisions. The press may share information that either supports or challenges the views of the citizens. The press helps with decisions regarding elected officials, increasing taxes, and determining which medications should be purchased. For example, a citizen may plan to purchase a certain medication, but after journalists publish an article or reports of the deadly side effects, the citizen might reconsider their purchase. The citizen can now make an informed decision before buying the medicine. The absence of a free press, along with

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limited information (coming from only one newspaper or news station) encourages citizens to make uninformed and sometimes disastrous decisions.

Finally, a free press gives access to information that citizens of a democracy have a right to know. Sometimes governments want to hide information and keep secrets, but citizens must hold the government accountable. For example, in 1971 an American, activist, Daniel Ellsberg, released information about the Vietnam War called the Pentagon Papers to the New York Times newspaper. The government tried to stop it but the Supreme Court decided that the publication of the papers was justified under the First Amendment's freedom of the press.

Do we really want to be "led to the slaughter" or "dumb and silent" like George Washington warned? We will not be either because the First Amendment protects our rights of speech and expression, including a free press. A free press, and the protection of the First Amendment matters to a democracy. Without the first amendment we wouldn't have a democracy. And without a democracy, the government would have complete control and we would be "led to the slaughter."

Essayist Information:

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Local newspaper: Alvin Sun / Houston Chronicle