

## Sustaining a Sovereign Society

The easiest way to transform humans into puppets is to leave them uneducated and unaware of perspectives discordant with those of the puppeteer. Free speech and press terrify tyrants due to the possibility of citizens educating and empowering themselves. After all, books, newspapers, and other forms of media contain information written by those with opinions and information to share, and with information comes awareness.

Free speech and free press lay the foundation for a free society. Without these rights, a community risks descending into tyranny. America's founding fathers recognized that ensuring these rights was necessary for the success of an American democracy; ergo, they incorporated them in the Constitution. In fact, they found this principle so important that they included freedom of speech and freedom of press in the First Amendment of the Bill of Rights. The significance of free speech and free press in a free society becomes clear when examining Supreme Court cases and the impact of restricting these rights in societies around the world.

The Supreme Court has consistently upheld the ideals of freedom of speech and press throughout the years, specifying or adapting them when necessary. In 1969, the Court heard the case of *Tinker V. Des Moines* regarding freedom of speech. Students planned a peaceful protest, wearing black armbands to express their disapproval of the Vietnam War, but administrators sent three students home after they refused to remove the adornments. The Supreme Court ruled that students do not give up their First Amendment rights when entering school; therefore, those involved should not have been punished. By upholding students' right to free speech, the Court reinforced America's rejection of tyranny. School officials punishing students for a peaceful protest sounds eerily similar to a dictator suppressing the protests of opinionated citizens. Although it is imperative to preserve the rights of such citizens, the Supreme Court has also

enforced restrictions when necessary. The case of *Hazelwood V. Kuhlmeier* began with student journalists arguing for the right to publish an article, unrelated to education, in the school newspaper. The district insisted the school should have oversight on the information being published. The Court sided with the district, claiming the newspaper was not a forum for public expression and instead an academic source. Decisions such as this one can be necessary for the good of the people. However, restrictions evolve into worrisome circumstances when the actuality of rights is in question.

A frightening trend becomes apparent when examining the consequences of leaders suppressing free press. Citing the Freedom House 2012, Gary King explains that “China overall is tied for 187<sup>th</sup> of 197 countries on a scale of press freedom” (“How Censorship” 1). Examples of Chinese restrictions include “keyword blocking” and the more troubling matter of barring communications that suggest the mobilization of collective disagreements (King 3, 14). Although there is no argument about the looming presence of censorship in China’s media, some claim these policies are not the cause of the country’s current undemocratic rule. While bowdlerization may not be the sole reason behind a less-than-representative government, it is certainly a driving force. Moreover, the government gives citizens the illusion of control by using leniency in keyword censorship and instead focusing on eliminating discussions mentioning the possibility of acting on rebellious feelings (King 14). Countries that enforce strict censorship strangle the opinions of their citizens because leaders are afraid of falling from power. Burt Neuborne claims, “History teaches us that whenever government gets the power to control speech, it always abuses that power” (“The Development of Standards” 128). Conditions in China prove governments have not yet defied that archetype.

The significance of freedom of speech is palpable throughout history as well. The Holocaust is not an unfamiliar historical moment; it was one of the most immense abuses of power in the modern world and an extremely dark moment in history. However, Germany's contemporary government enacted a law that Americans may be unfamiliar with: one cannot deny the existence of the Holocaust. Although the German Constitution protects freedom of speech, this specification, known as the Auschwitz Lie Law, serves as a prime example of a beneficial restriction. Philosopher George Santayana made the observation that those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it. By passing such a law, Germany's government proves its commitment to ensuring an event as horrible as the Holocaust never happens in their country again. Government administrators are both acknowledging the power of speech and attempting to prevent it from being used destructively to revive tyranny once again.

Clearly, the rights to free speech and press are cornerstones for a truly free and representative government, such as the one America boasts. They protect a country from tyranny and dictatorship. In Elisabeth Zoller's article, "The United States Supreme Court and the Freedom of Expression," the author emphasizes the "social evolution" of the First Amendment changing as a direct result of the "myriad [of] groups that form American society" (916). By reflecting "the dominant thinking in the United States," the U.S. Government has continued to represent its citizens and avoid falling to despotism (916). Successful democracies rely on involvement of citizens, and the modern American government's success is partially due to the Constitution's protection of citizens' rights. Furthermore, these safeguards are being applied to new-age ideas such as the Internet in a way that upholds the original rights (O'Neil 96). Having adaptable legislature ensures the survival of constitutional rights in a representative government.

The U.S. Constitution guarantees freedom of speech and press in the First Amendment. Looking at Supreme Court cases and examples of countries lacking these basic rights throughout history aids in understanding the founding fathers' motives for including them early on in the document. When the United States of America became its own country, the founders pushed for a representative government and abhorred tyranny. If America is to continue to prosper as a sovereign society, the government must commit to protecting these basic freedoms, or potentially face the looming specter of tyranny.

## Works Cited

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