



A Free Press

In a democracy the press should operate free from governmental control. Democratic governments do not have ministries of information to regulate content of newspapers or the activities of journalists; requirements that journalists be vetted by the state; or force journalists to join government-controlled unions.

✚ A free press informs the public, holds leaders accountable, and provides a forum for debate of local and national issues.

✚ Democracies foster the existence of a free press. An independent judiciary, civil society with rule of law, and free speech all support a free press. A free press must have legal protections.

✚ In democracies the government is accountable for its actions. Citizens therefore expect to be informed about decisions their governments make on their behalf. The press facilitates this “right to know,” by serving as a watchdog over the government, helping citizens to hold government accountable, and questioning its policies. Democratic governments grant journalists access to public meetings and public documents. They do not place prior restraints on what journalists may say or print.

✚ The press, itself, must act responsibly. Through professional associations, independent press councils, and “ombudsmen,” in-house critics who hear public complaints, the press responds to complaints of its own excesses and remains internally accountable.

✚ Democracy requires the public to make choices and decisions. In order for the public to trust the press, journalists must provide factual reporting based on credible sources and information. Plagiarism and false reporting are counterproductive to a free press.

✚ Press outlets should establish their own editorial boards, independent of government control, in order to separate information gathering and dissemination from editorial processes.

✚ Journalists should not be swayed by public opinion, only by the pursuit of truth, as close as they can get to it. A democracy allows the press to go about its business of collecting and reporting the news without fear or favor from the government.

✚ Democracies foster a never-ending struggle between two rights: The government’s obligation to protect national security; and the people’s right to know, based on journalists’ ability to access information.

Governments sometimes need to limit access to information considered too sensitive for general distribution. But journalists in democracies are fully justified in pursuing such information.