



FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

Principle (1)(d): A free press is essential to ensuring governmental transparency and accountability. Government officials have a special duty to respect the independence of journalistic organizations.

Luke 12:2-3

>>>> GOAL

Determine why having a free press is important to you.

>>>> SCRIPTURE STUDY

“For there is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed; neither hid, that shall not be known. Therefore whatsoever ye have spoken in darkness shall be heard in the light; and that which ye have spoken in the ear in closets shall be proclaimed upon the housetops.”

Luke 12:2-3

Heavenly Father has urged us to seek light and knowledge to help us do good in the world (Moroni 7:19, see also Moroni 7 generally). But to gain a broad knowledge of local, national, and world events, we have to rely on the press to witness, research, and sift through information on our behalf. This reporting is best accomplished when members of the press are free to gather and report news with limited constraints from government.

Freedom of the press was so important to the United States founding fathers that they codified it in the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution (see page 2). And Americans often refer to the press as the “fourth estate,” or a fourth entity, independent of the other three branches of government, which keeps those other branches in check. Thomas Jefferson famously said, “Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter.” He and others recognized that to govern ourselves and adequately protect the rights of all, we must have free forums to

gain information and discuss issues in the public sphere.

As independent watchdogs, the press can bring to light wrongdoings and corruption, naturally creating an adversarial relationship between the press and those in power. As a result, throughout history, local and world leaders have often complained about the press and sought to control it. Press freedom is currently under threat around the world, with countries like Russia and China blocking websites, sponsoring their own state-run media outlets, and imprisoning — and at times killing — journalists. Sadly, even in the U.S. freedom of the press is at risk. Derogatory comments made by government leaders about the press can jeopardize journalist safety as well as call into question the concept of verifiable facts. For these and other reasons, the U.S. ranked only 48 out of 180 countries on the World Press Freedom Index for 2019.

Although having a free press is crucial for protecting democracy, we still need to remember that journalism quality differs greatly from source to source. We must learn to be informed consumers, striving to find information from a variety of sources and recognizing media bias. You can learn more about media literacy by studying principle (3)(a) of the MWEG Principles of Ethical Government.

>>>> FURTHER STUDY

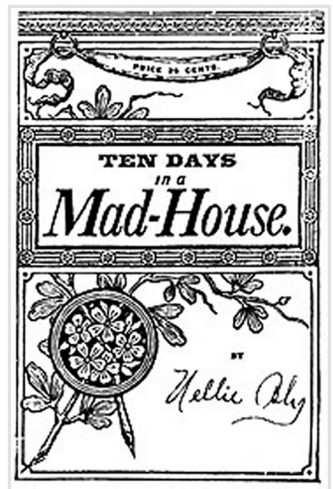
“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”

First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution

“The First Amendment is the safety valve of our democracy,” said Trevor Timm, a lawyer and executive director of the Freedom of the Press Foundation. “It has always been the bulwark against secret government, against authoritarianism and against tyranny.” Without freedom of speech or press, it would be difficult to find reliable information about and act upon important domestic and international civil and human rights issues.

The Story of Nellie Bly

Nellie Bly (the pen name of Elizabeth Cochran Seaman) is known for exposing abuses in a New York mental institution through her investigative journalism. In 1887 at age 23, she pretended to be mentally ill and was admitted to an insane asylum on Blackwell’s Island for ten days. Her subsequent series, “Ten Days in a Mad-House,” outlined the overcrowding, under-staffing, and psychological and physical abuse suffered by the patients staying there. For example, some patients suffered illness from being put in ice-cold water baths and left wet for hours. Others were forced to sit on benches without moving or speaking for up to 12 hours at a time. Bly also discovered that many of the patients were not mentally ill at all: some were simply immigrants who had been committed to the asylum for being poor.



After her series was released, a grand jury panel investigated the site. Tipped off in advance, the asylum hurriedly tried to clean up the facility and release some patients before the panel arrived, but panel members still recognized things were amiss. As a result, the panel decided to increase funding for the facility, dismiss abusive and unqualified staff members, and change policies to prevent people who were not mentally ill from being committed there. By exposing hidden information to the public, Nelly Bly’s journalism and commitment to freedom of the press sparked important reform that impacted hundreds of people.



>>>> LEARN MORE

Articles:
Why Local?

The Pulitzer Prizes
Rebuilding Local Journalism as an Essential Democratic Force

NPR
The Importance of Local Journalism

Poynter
Why Does Local Matter?

Additional
Free Press Resources

The United States Bill of Rights

Reporters Without Borders
World Press Freedom Index 2019

Committee to Protect Journalists

National Review
James Madison's Lesson on Free Speech

Historic Press Victories

Food Industry Conditions
Upton Sinclair's book, "The Jungle," exposed unsanitary, nauseating conditions in the food industry, which led to the creation of the FDA.

Murder of Emmett Till
By publishing images of Emmett Till's open casket, newspapers created a national movement over a horrific event that could have just as easily been forgotten.

U.S. Immigration Policy
Reporting on the grim conditions along the US-Mexico border, the press has publicized the effects of recent US immigration policy, resulting in greater public awareness and outcry.

War in Yemen
In 2019, three AP journalists won the Pulitzer Prize for International Reporting for their efforts to highlight the severe human rights abuses that took place during the war in Yemen.

Rohingya Muslims
Reuters won the 2018 Pulitzer Prize for International Reporting for exposing the parties responsible for the expulsion and murder of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar. At the time of the award, two of the reporters were in prison in Myanmar for their work.

Look for this banner on other MWEГ materials to learn more about the importance of freedom of the press.





>>>> IDEAS FOR TEACHING CHILDREN

- **Discuss fairness.** Think of a time when you said, "That's not fair!" Did you say it to a friend, a teacher, a parent, or someone else? Why did you want to tell someone about the unfairness rather than keep it to yourself? Take flashlights into a dark room and show how we, or the press, can shine a light on unfairness to bring it out of the dark for others.
- **Read a recent news story together about a controversial event that happened in your community.** Discuss who might not want that story to be published and why. Who benefits when information is shared freely? Find and read a scripture story that shows a person in power doing something bad (e.g., King Herod or King Noah), and ask the same questions. What does the scripture story teach, and what would we miss out on if it was never published?
- **Pretend to be reporters from around the world.** Assign each person to research press freedoms in their assigned country (use the World Press Freedom Index listed on page 3). Compare and contrast press freedom in the United States with countries such as China, Eritrea, Iran, Saudi Arabia, etc. Talk about how the freedom of the press correlates with and supports other freedoms, like the freedom of religion.

>>>> THOUGHT QUESTIONS

- What is an appropriate relationship between the government and the press?
- What are the drawbacks to having a free press? Can we always depend on the press to tell the truth?
- What can the press do to become more transparent and trustworthy?
- Are there any circumstances in which you feel freedom of the press should be restricted?
- What do you know about the process of creating the news? About which aspects would you like to learn more?
- What are the dangers of the disappearing and consolidating local and national news outlets?
- How has a free press impacted your life?

>>>> TAKE ACTION

- Discuss this principle with MWEG's Facebook discussion group or host or attend an MWEG chapter meeting on freedom of the press.
- Plan a "Family Home Evening" with your family or friends using some of the ideas suggested here.
- Host an MWEG Neighborhood Informational Meeting (NIM) to discuss these ideas with neighbors and friends.
- The very first way to support democracy on the **Democracy 76 Checklist** is to "read and subscribe to local, regional, or national newspapers." As appropriate, commit to support a newspaper!

MORMON WOMEN FOR ETHICAL GOVERNMENT

MWEG is an organization dedicated to inspiring women of faith to be ambassadors of peace who transcend partisanship and courageously advocate for ethical government.