

ACCESS AMERICA

Press Freedom: An American Tradition

A free press has played a crucial role in America's history.



Defense Secretary Gates holds a press conference at the Pentagon, where reporters are free to roam, unescorted.

Protecting freedom of the press is an American ideal older than the United States itself.

The Peter Zenger case of 1735 set the precedent for American press freedom as a watchdog against oppressive government. In that case, a Colonial jury decided that Zenger, a printer, could not be guilty of sedition because his newspaper's criticism of the British government was, in fact, true.

The American Revolutionary War was triggered in no small part by the Stamp Act of 1765, intended to tax independent newspapers out of existence. In an era when news traveled no faster than horses could run, when opinions could be broadcast only as loud as a man could shout, newspapers were the primary way for revolutionaries and royalists to get their messages to a wider audience.

"Congress shall make no law ... abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press." The First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution (1791), elegant in its simplicity, enshrines one of the most basic beliefs of the nation: the importance of the press in nurturing democratic government by allowing a forum for free speech.

The First Amendment was the result of a lengthy political debate conducted through news-

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papers, and its authors knew exactly what kind of freedom they were letting loose. The press of their day was highly opinionated, partisan, and filled with vicious personal attacks. For example, the *Gazette of the United States*, backing the government of the first president, George Washington (1789-97), pro-claimed that its mission was to oppose the

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From the Ambassador

Freedom of expression and freedom of press are basic human rights according to the United Nations. These rights, also protected under the United States Constitution, are essential to an open, participatory political system. A frank discussion of issues, differences and opinions among citizens results in well considered and broadly understood government policies. A respectful questioning of authority should be welcomed as an opportunity to explain and increase support for policies and programs. In a society that upholds the right of free expression, this freedom must be balanced against the right of the individual to privacy and the responsibility of journalists to adhere to the truth. Media professionals and individuals should consider the facts carefully, present different points of view honestly and refrain from spreading false information or inciting violence. We will all live in a safer, better world if we discuss issues freely, openly and fairly.

—Robert F. Godec

IRC Tips

In light of this month's topic, here are some selected resources from Information Resource Center:

- American Press Institute
<http://www.americanpressinstitute.org>
- Electronic Frontier Foundation
www.eff.org
- FedNet
www.fednet.net
- New American Media
news.newamericamedia.org
- NewsLab
www.newslab.org/
- Poynter Online: 11 Layers of Citizen Journalism
www.poynter.org/
- Youth Radio
www.youthradio.org
- *Ethique et Qualité de l'Information*. 174.9 ETH
- *Guide de la Rédaction* by Michel Voirol. 808.06607 VOI
- *Internet Pour les Journalists* by Courier, Serge. 004.678 COU

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“raging madness” of those who criticized administration policies. Opposition papers accused Washington, a war hero, of “incompetent soldiering.”

Thomas Jefferson, author of the Declaration of Independence, strongly supported press freedom even though he had few kind words for the newspapers themselves. “Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government,” Jefferson once wrote, “I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter.” Yet, he also said, “I deplore...the putrid state into which our newspapers have passed and the malignity, the vulgarity, and mendacious spirit of those who write for them.”

Decades later, political polarization during the Civil War resulted in a barrage of press criticism against President Abraham Lincoln. In 1863, an editorial in a Chicago newspaper said Union soldiers were “indignant at the imbecility that has devoted them to slaughter for purposes with which they have no sympathy.” When an angry Union general closed down the newspaper, Lincoln ordered it reopened.

More than a century later, the U.S. government in 1971 obtained a federal court order to halt the *New York Times* from its ongoing publication of the

Pentagon Papers, citing a risk to national security. These documents, prepared by the Department of Defense, analyzed the history of U.S. involvement in Vietnam and had been classified as top secret. Within days the case reached the Supreme Court, which ruled in favor of the *Times*. Following in footsteps of the Zenger case, the court ruled that freedom of the press from “prior restraint,” is nearly absolute. The court ruled that the government had not

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.

proved that publication would inflict “direct, immediate, and irreparable harm to the national interest.”

Today, even though U.S. government officials sometimes seek to prevent sensitive information from being discovered by the press, American journalists and editors for the most part use their own ethical guidelines to determine whether a story would harm national security. Foreign visitors often are surprised to discover that more than 100 accredited journalists freely roam the corridors of the Pentagon in search of news, unescorted even in time of war.

Adapted from “World Press Freedom Builds on Tradition of Independent Media” by Vince Crowley, USINFO

May 3: World Press Freedom Day

Every year, May 3rd is a date which celebrates the fundamental principles of press freedom; to evaluate press freedom around the world, to defend the media from attacks on their independence and to pay tribute to journalists who have lost their lives in the exercise of their profession. World Press Freedom Day, established in 1993 by the United Nations General Assembly, serves as an occasion to inform citizens of violations of press freedom. It is a day of support for media which are targets for the restraint, or abolition, of press freedom and a day of remembrance for journalists who lost their lives in the exercise of their profession.



Alumni Spotlight

Name: Essia Atrous (front row at left in photo)

Program: International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP) in 2004, USAID Grant in 1998

Home in Tunisia: Sousse

U.S. exchange location: Washington, D.C., New York City, San Francisco, Tennessee, Detroit, Michigan, Florida

Fondest memory of the U.S.: Many personal and professional memories, especially the guided tours in Washington and the visits to some prominent newspapers in different cities.

Most important lesson learned: While in the U.S.A., you never feel that you are a stranger for one simple reason, which is that you will meet different people with different colors, languages and ideas, so when you look to yourself, you just think that you are not different from all these people.

Advice for other potential participants: Those who make politics do not necessarily reflect the image of the American people. So try to learn English before going there. It is the best way to discover the country, to talk to people and to exchange ideas.

What I miss about the U.S.: The opportunities the American people have to raise their children in a free and responsible society. I still bear in mind a special event while in Michigan. It was a demonstration held by American Arabs against the war in Iraq. There were men in traditional clothes and women in their veils standing with their children holding slogans against the Bush administration. I still have some photos of the demonstration on which one can read in Arabic, "Where is the freedom Mr. Bush?" I took this example just to illustrate that it was not possible to demonstrate in many Arab streets in this way. I really love my country but I also hope one day my children can have the opportunity to study in the U.S.A.

My U.S. experience: It is really a pleasure for me to go back to those experiences and to look back to what is left in mind through all the people and the things I discovered and I learned and also shared with others. During my visits to the States I had the opportunity to meet with some politicians, professors, and experts in politics, some of whom I am still keeping in touch with through emails. Some also did contribute with their comments in special reports we published about the September 11 attacks or the Iraq War. Of course we had some bad moments when the discussions we had were very hard, but most of the time it was a rather wonderful experience that no Tunisian can afford on their own. Unfortunately the experience we had to get in touch with some newspapers and magazines was not long enough to allow you to better your English.

One of the things I still have in mind is that I had the opportunity to meet with some Arab journalists with whom I kept in touch for years now. Sometimes when we exchange greetings we tell ourselves it is strange, but we should recognize it is thanks to those programs that we met and became friends. We still have hope that we will meet again some day.

[VISIT ALUMNI.STATE.GOV!](http://ALUMNI.STATE.GOV)

The global web-based community by and for alumni of U.S. Government exchange programs

Fulbright Programs

The following programs are seeking applicants for 2008-2009.

The Hubert H. Humphrey Fellowship Program

This program invites mid-career professionals (at least five years experience) for ten months of study at a U.S. university and a professional internship. Excellent English skills are required (525 or better on the TOEFL examination).

To learn more about this exciting opportunity, please contact the U.S Embassy exchanges team using the contact details below.

Fulbright Master's Degree/One-Year Ph. D. Research

This program provides Tunisian university students the opportunity to study for a Masters Degree or conduct research for a Ph.D. at U.S. institutions of higher education.

Students must have completed an undergraduate degree (to pursue a Masters Degree) or be currently enrolled in a doctoral program (for the Ph. D. Research Grant), have an excellent academic record and demonstrate fluency in English via a TOEFL score of at least 550 (ITP score accepted).

An open information session on this program will be held at the following time and place:

- Wednesday, May 16, 2007 at 2:00 PM
AMIDEAST (Tunis)

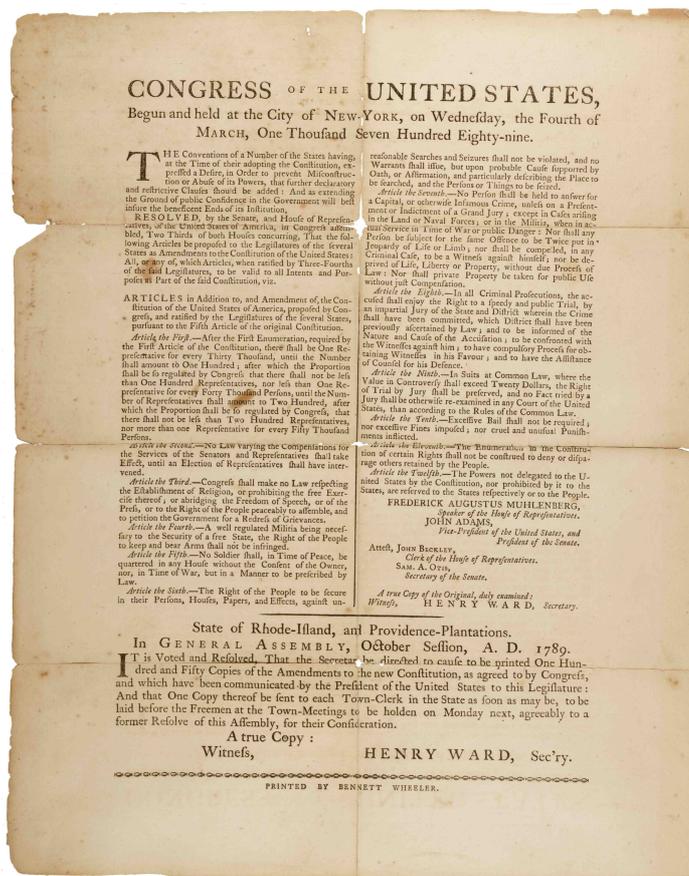
Contacts

For information on all Fulbright programs, please contact Ms. Faouzia Ben Khedher at benkhedherf@state.gov or 71-107-438.

For Fulbright Master's Degree/One-Year Ph. D. Research information and application forms, please contact Ms. Leila Zahmoul at lzahmoul@amideast.org or 71-790-563.

For information on the TOEFL, ITP, GRE or GMAT examinations, please contact Ms. Nabila Lamouchi at nlamouchi@amideast.org or 71-790-563.

A Page of History



Of twelve additional articles proposed for the Constitution of the United States, the ten adopted are known collectively as the Bill of Rights. This short, simple document is the foundation of U.S. human rights protection, including freedom of the press.



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