

Tyranny is built upon the control of ideas. When the free flow of independent thoughts and beliefs ceases, so do the basic tenants of liberty, because when they go, so do the mechanisms for dissent, for protest, and ultimately, for rebellion if necessary. The ability of people to communicate through a free and unbiased media is the foundation of all civil liberties and of freedom itself.

There's a reason the Founding Fathers chose to make freedom of the press the First Amendment. There were many other rights just as important. Due process is critical to our justice system as we know it, as is the freedom from cruel and unusual punishment and the right to a trial by jury. Yet the Founders chose freedom of the press to address first. They had just experienced what happens when a people is oppressed and their voice suppressed. They knew that even when held back, the voice of the people was a valiant force for good, as Thomas Paine's "Common Sense" had proved. The Founding Fathers understood that the greatest safeguard against dictatorship was the people, and that the people's greatest tool against dictatorship was the freedom of the press.

Even 200 years later, the existence of unrestricted speech remains the best implement of liberty, and it's lack the easiest way to crush independence of the mind. Russia keeps its media in a tight clutch, controlling the airwaves and filling them with propaganda ranging from harmless, infectious campaign songs for the majority to blatant lies meant to crush and discredit any opposition. China blocks internet sites that could harm its repressive Communist Party.

Where freedom of the media can survive, however, hope for freedom and a better world remains. When news outlets turn their spotlights toward corruption and scandal, whether it is illegal actions on the part of the President of the United States or grave

errors at Arlington National Cemetery, change comes and nearly always for the better. When the people of the Middle East find their voices in social networking, voices they have been denied by tyrannical regimes, autocrats fall.

Freedom of the media remains so much more than the ability to say whatever, whenever. It is the ability to stand up, to defend, and to protect. The most powerful weapon ever created was the people's voice, and its greatest tool is a free and independent media.