

Why is it important that we have news media that are independent of the government?

“I could lose my job.”

The ten of us stared at each other blankly, not knowing what else to say, knowing that we've been defeated, silenced by a simple sentence. As the editors of the school newspaper, we were attempting to push through a sensitive story. The principal had taken the liberty to change the grades of several students in a math class where the teacher had been repeatedly absent in the past year. Although the local newspaper had already covered the incident, we wanted to add our perspective to the story and conduct our own investigation. The only hindrance standing in our way was our journalism adviser's fear of getting fired. She was a new teacher just hired recently, and was therefore extremely cautious to remain in the principal's good graces.

“It's okay then. We won't cover the story.”

The resigned voice of our editor-in-chief finally broke the uneasy silence, though tension still swarmed thick within the room as we all turned away and retreated to our computers. My eyes wandered to the poster fixated next to the teacher's desk, laughing inaudibly at the irony of the message it contained: the words of the First Amendment, guaranteeing our right to free speech and protecting the freedom of the press.

Running a student publication can oftentimes be frustrating as we are not granted the same rights and freedoms that professional journalists enjoy. A too critical editorial or a compromising photo, and we could easily end up in deep trouble simply because the

administration finds it offensive. As student journalists, we have to be especially careful about maintaining a good relationship with the school's front office. Such limitations and restrictions upon our exercise of free speech endanger our responsibility and duty, as journalists, to objectively report the facts of every occurrence that is relevant to the students at our school.

Our voice is being silenced in a country where freedom is heralded from every little nook and crevice. I am not discouraged, however, because I know that all around me exist independent news media that are free from government control and censorship. In this way, our country is vastly different from many others in the world, such as China or North Korea, where the government stifles all media that condemns or criticizes its leaders and policies. In fact, that is the true importance of independent news media: to keep the country's citizens informed about all events spiraling around them and to ensure that the people do not remain ignorant of government corruption and threats to their freedom. In order for a free, democratic people to thrive, news media must never become a tool of the government for independent news media represent the very backbone of the freedom of speech and expression, which define the very identity of a free nation. And hopefully, one day soon, this same freedom will be extended to schools, so that no student journalist will ever have to hear the excuse, "I could lose my job."