

VIEWPOINT

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Free World Press

The Christian Science Monitor
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Freedom-loving people everywhere have received a fresh reminder of the importance of vigilantly guarding their freedoms. It comes in the form of a report by the International Press Institute that free speech and the freedom of the news media were curtailed once again—in some cases, sharply—in many parts of the world during the year now ending.

Implicit in the report is a parallel reminder to the news media not only to guard press freedom zealously, but also to hold itself to the highest of journalistic standards, so as to deserve and to attain public trust.

The report went so far as to call free speech "a dying right." It noted that several governments, particularly in Eastern Europe, control the media's activities, and that numerous others, especially in the third world, severely restrict it.

Even in nations with a long tradition of press freedom, such as the United States and Britain, the report said, government efforts were made to impede press freedom. The institute, made up of nearly 2,000 editors and publishers in 60 nations, said the restrictive efforts in the US, which it notes were repulsed by the American media and Congress, consisted of attempts by the administration to change the Freedom of Information Act in ways that would diminish the media's access to information.

The founders of the United States recognized that the roles of freedom of speech and of the press are vital in a democracy by providing for them in the First Amendment. It reads in part: "Congress shall make no law... abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press..."

Press freedom exists not as an end in itself, but to enable the media to provide the public with information about world, national, and local activities which are important to people's professional decisions, or to the conduct of their personal lives.

Defending that freedom against government interference in part is the media's responsibility; the institute's report

criticized the media for not having exposed with sufficient vigor the efforts of many governments to restrict press freedom.

Yet freedom carries with it responsibilities, in the case of the media the requirements that the effort always be made to attain the highest standards of journalistic accuracy, integrity, and responsibility. As the institute's report pointed out, some of the media are deficient in one or more category.

In language that may be a bit excessive, the introduction of the report notes that "today, journalism is looked upon by many as a dirty word. Most newspapers tend to sensationalize and trivialize. Many more invade privacy to scoop up scandal and boost circulation. In short, the press appears to be losing not only a grip on its freedoms, but the trust of its readers."

The challenges are considerable. It is up to those who want to retain their freedoms—governments, media, and individuals alike—to meet them.

Village Advertiser Commentary

Accusing the press of revealing information that could threaten national security can achieve several goals for the administration. First, it can frighten some of us who believe the press has breached security and make us angry with the media. Second, it can alert other nations to a possible tightening of security in the United States. Third, it can widen political divisions between liberals and conservatives in America. Finally, should the administration be considering imposition of restrictions upon press freedoms, such accusations test the public reaction.

Accusing the press of violating security can backfire, too. President Nixon and Vice President Agnew ran headlong into a buzzsaw of negative response when they criticized the media for disclosing their personal indiscretions.

Accusing the press of being indiscreet didn't work then. Given educated, informed, and alert citizenry, it will never work in this country.