



FIRST AMENDMENT

Freedom's

Lesson 3: Your Right to Know

A free press provides information that allows the public to make informed democratic decisions and personal choices. There are differing interests between the media, government and public that must be balanced, though.

- Members of the media investigate publicly funded institutions and other issues that affect people's everyday lives. Journalists can gather information like contracts and budgets from the government, and attend government meetings.
- Government officials are hired or elected to serve the public. Their constituents, like the media, may want to see documents to show they are acting responsibly. Some officials may, however, try to withhold information they think could jeopardize people's safety or security if it were made public.
- The public needs the type of information available to a free press – neighborhood crime records and politicians' votes on important issues, for instance – as well as the comfort of knowing that personal information like Social Security and bank account numbers will remain private.

These conflicts of interest between the right to know and the right or ethical responsibility to protect people's safety and privacy are enhanced on the Internet. On one hand, the Internet is the ultimate forum for freedom of expression. On the other hand, the government wants some control over online content in order to protect children from information that is not age appropriate, much the same way there are federal rules about what television stations may broadcast at certain times.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ *Think Freely!* ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Write an essay or discuss as a class whether a democracy can survive without a free press. Why or why not? What impact does the media have on government actions and civic involvement?

Sunshine Week is a national event started in 2005 to promote the importance of open government and freedom of information; it takes place each year over the week that includes March 15. Each story published in *The Oklahoman* during Sunshine Week that used information available thanks to media access laws has a sunshine icon. Visit *The Oklahoman* Archives or <http://newsok.com/sunshine-week> to look at editions from past Sunshine Weeks. Are you surprised by what stories couldn't be reported in Oklahoma if not for laws supporting a free press? How does seeing this change or strengthen your views on whether a democracy needs a free press?

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Newspapers for this educational program provided by:



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