

Media: The Fourth Estate

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In democracies, where freedom of the press is an indispensable right, the media and press act as a bridge between politicians and the public. Thus, mass media acts as an extension of the democratic process; it encourages citizens to form opinions on the various actions of office-holders, which journalists will then publish, leading those office-holders to react accordingly. Without the media as a “bridge”, there is no true consent of the governed, and no way for citizens to be educated about the actions of their policymakers. This informed consent is vital not only for voting, but for citizens to decide whether or not they wish to protest, petition, lobby, or accept the legislative status quo. Due to the major involvement the media has in the relationship between the public and their government, it is essential that the government allow the media to freely publish all information deemed relevant to the public. To maintain the utmost transparency, the media should have safe and easy access to all information that is safe for the public to know, and it should be willingly handed over to them in the name of democracy.

Many democracies cherish freedom of speech and freedom of the press, the right to both of which are respected by dozens of countries across the globe (Herre, Rodés-Guirao, and Ortiz-Ospina 2024). Accordingly, in countries where freedom of expression is highly valued, the media “tend to be comparatively unrestrained” (Graber and Dunaway 2014, 17). Transparency of the government and tolerance of criticism is a hallmark of a prosperous,

healthy democracy, in which public opinion is valued. Likewise, the media is necessary for individuals to form their opinions, the collective of which will ultimately be published in the press for politicians to see and react to. This cyclical relationship of media and public sentiment is precisely why it is so crucial to the democratic process. Without the media, the vast majority of the population would be rendered politically immobilized, lacking the knowledge to exercise their democratic right of removing unwanted office-holders from government. As Graber and Dunaway put it, “[i]f media surveillance causes governments to fall and public officials to be ousted, democracy is well served” (Graber and Dunaway 2014, 19). Fundamentally, the media is what allows citizens to protest unfair policy and government actions, where journalists act as “guardians of the public welfare” and “foster political action when necessary by publicizing social evils” (Graber and Dunaway 2014, 20). These are not merely latent functions of the media, but imperative to uphold the principles of democracy. Without expansive access to information or an honest relationship with office-holders, citizens will not be able to exercise their fundamental rights.

The realm of media in which the government’s absolute candor is perhaps the most important is the field of investigative journalism. The media acts as our “eyes and ears,” bringing scandal and injustice to light that the average person does not have the means to investigate (Graber and Dunaway 2014, 19). Yet,

without access to the relevant files, tapes, and materials, the suspicious and potentially harmful activities of our government may never be uncovered.

As a result, unfit or corrupt politicians may remain in office, potentially enacting harmful legislation that could be calamitous for the country. In order for investigative journalism to thrive, full disclosure is needed from the government regarding records, political processes, and information.

Moreover, journalists and reporters should not be faced with undue violence or aggression from authorities when peacefully attempting to procure news. During protests and investigative endeavors, police officers have been known to exert unwarranted force against news people, threatening arrest or even engaging in alleged brutality (Phillip 2014). This is antithetical to the democratic principles of due process and freedom of the press; access to this information is their right, and the right of the public, and they should not be punished for pursuing its publicization. Reports of journalists being “detained, threatened or otherwise prevented” from covering stories should be cause for concern, and spark public outrage and legislative reform (Phillip 2014). Reporters should be guaranteed safe and comprehensive access to stories and information without fear of arrest or violence. Without this, the relationship between the government and the media will be fraught with fear, and political processes could be halted. It is the government’s job to ensure the safety of news people and their right to information, the enforcement of which democracy depends on.

Some may argue that maintaining such radical transparency between the media and the government could result in disaster or jeopardize the security of the country. However, with the exception of select intelligence¹, the past has proven that the concealment of government information can have detrimental national and global ramifications. The primary example of this is the infamous Report of the Office of the Secretary of Defense Vietnam Task Force, also known as “The Pentagon Papers”, where the U.S. government hid critical information regarding the Vietnam War from the public. Political activist Daniel Ellsberg leaked the classified intelligence, as he felt the actions of the government were so egregious that the masses had to be alerted (The Editors 2025). This confidential report revealed ruinous details about America’s involvement in the war, including unnecessary escalation of the conflict and continued drafting of soldiers despite anticipating defeat (Gross 2021). Eventually, in protest of what he felt to be an unjustifiable war, Ellsberg illegally² exposed portions of the Pentagon Papers to the public, but it was too late — the war had already been raging on for several years, and countless people had already died. Much of the public stopped trusting the government, and the relationship between the media and office-holders was severed.

¹ Such as information that would jeopardize national security or the safety of an individual or group of people.

² Ellsberg was later deemed innocent after the Supreme Court ruled that his release of the Papers was allowed, but was initially charged with a litany of criminal offenses (Harvard Law School 2021).

While the release of the report did not stop the war, it was a major turning point in the deescalation of the conflict, and applied pressure to the U.S. government to withdraw its troops from Vietnam. Had the Pentagon Papers not been “top-secret,” and had journalists had access to them to publicize their contents, proactive pressure from the public may have been enough to end the war earlier, saving countless lives. This is precisely why government transparency and media access are so important, because in extreme cases, it can save lives. Thankfully, since then, the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) has been amended to include a broader range of records and materials, but it remains profoundly flawed to this day³ (Martin 2025). Whatever dangers the release of this kind of information may present, it oftentimes does not outweigh the danger of concealing it.

Exhaustive transparency from the ruling body is a sign of a robust, thriving democracy, and an open and protective relationship between media and government officials is necessary to achieve this. The government exists to protect its citizens, and that includes journalists and reporters, whose rights must also be protected. Comprehensive access to records and guaranteed safety are paramount for the media to do its job correctly, and without it, chaos will surely ensue. Optimal media-government relationships

include veracity, safety, and overall good faith; without them, democracy simply cannot function.

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³Procuring government information available under the FOIA requires an application, paying a fee, and approval by a government agency. Furthermore, there are nine criteria of information that are exempt from release to the public, making the information even less accessible. This is a far cry from true transparency and accessibility (U.S. Department of Justice n.d.).