

To what extent should
freedom of speech be
allowed on the media



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To what extent should freedom of speech be allowed in the media Liberal democracies such as Britain or the US are based on the principle of popular sovereignty - the government does what the people want them to do.

The US Constitution does, after all, begin with the words " We the People of the United States ...

do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America."

The media in these countries, especially since the advent of radio, television and the internet, has been the most powerful voice of the people, bending the government to the will of the people and ensuring that they never stray too far from the sovereignty of " We the People." The media must never be trodden on and forced to write what the government wants, because it is believed that such a phenomenon means you have (or are nearing) a dictatorship, and very bad things are likely to follow shortly after.

The media is really the only way to know what is going on (and wrong, although they always make it seem worse than it is) with the world. On the other hand, though the freedom of speech in Singapore has been improved a bit in recent times, it is still far from that of the abovementioned countries. In Singapore, freedom of speech has never been encouraged openly, though not the extent of the authoritative hand reminiscent of the communist North Korea. Though the Singapore jurisdiction provides formal legal guarantee of freedom of speech to the citizens, it is not well implemented. Singapore government never encouraged the freedom of speech.

People are not allowed to discuss political matters freely or lightly and even the media faces this repression, due to the implementation of the Internal

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Security Act and the Official Secrets Act. However, since the invention of the internet, suppression of the media has become all but impossible in most of the world. Unfortunately Google China was forced to censor material recently, but nevertheless there is no way it can manage to prevent all traffic from getting through - if the Chinese really want to know the truth, they will find it. As the stated aim of The Economist, a self-styled "authoritative weekly newspaper", puts it, they were formed to take part in "a severe contest between intelligence, which presses forward, and an unworthy, timid ignorance obstructing our progress."

"This is the importance of the media, and without freedom of speech they cannot achieve it. However, the media should have a responsibility to provide us with the truth, and the whole truth as well. The media has massive power - it is (apart from Kim Jong-Il) just about the only thing that governments fear, in most countries. Liberal democratic governments worldwide spend all their time battling the media - the British Prime Minister has an entire office devoted to dealing with them. Unfortunately, not all newspapers are responsible. When the media lies to sell newspapers, things can get dangerous. In 2004 The Daily Mirror (a charming British tabloid newspaper edited by the equally charming Piers Morgan) printed pictures of British soldiers supposedly abusing Iraqi prisoners.

They were a hoax, but caused a serious uproar against troops in Iraq that deserved no such treatment. Newspapers given the freedom of speech have the power to bring down governments, ignite racial hatred and turn people against each other. And yet they also keep the government on track, point out corruption and show us what is going wrong with the world.

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Giving anyone this power is dangerous - there is an awful lot of room for abuse. But the loss of free speech, indeed any infringement on free speech other than to prevent such outrages as the lies propagated by irresponsible publications, is far, far more serious than trusting the newspapers with the power that they hold. If people would take the newspapers a bit less seriously, or read reliable newspapers rather than sensational tabloids, then the possible danger posed by freedom of speech would be considerably lessened. Unfortunately that day has yet to arrive, and so for now we will have to put up with the occasional outrage from ignorant newspapers read by ignorant people, so that we may preserve free speech and the powerful check on governmental power that it provides.