

Ethical Journalism Safeguards Human Rights & Civil Liberties

By Mischa Geracoulis

Exposing corruption and harms to public welfare is a cornerstone practice of journalism, and serves the inalienable human right to know. Enshrined in [Article 19](#) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the right to know and to the free flow of information “regardless of frontiers” are rights fundamental to every other human right. Article 19’s protection depends not on law enforcement agencies but on an ethical press committed to [seeking out and reporting truth](#) and a duly informed public empowered to act on those rights through a combination of freedom of information and news literacy.

In addition, the [First Amendment](#) of the US Constitution protects freedoms of the press, speech, peaceful assembly, and to petition the government for redress of harms from government interference.

Any ideas of human and constitutional rights and personal or collective agency accorded by these documents, however, are moot without the free access to information and the plurality of perspectives that foster citizens’ understanding of issues, especially those that would fly under the radar if not for investigative reporting, and appraisal of government and corporate conduct. Even with unfettered, trustworthy news sources, citizens are still responsible for their own due diligence. Critical media literacy makes that easier.

For example, a critical media lens turned toward corporate news coverage of two prominent, controversial cases—that of Donald Trump and Julian Assange—reveals deep discrepancies in coverage, impacting the public’s right to know, the application of democratic norms, and the rule of law. In service to power, corporate news coverage of WikiLeaks villainized Assange, while normalizing Trump’s involvement in the January 6 insurrection at the US Capitol.

In June 2024, after 14 years of imprisonment, Assange pled guilty to one count of violating the Espionage Act in exchange for his freedom. Assange’s release was long overdue, but the consequences of the plea deal that facilitated it is [a likely chilling effect](#) on public interest journalism.

By contrast, Trump faces [charges](#) of conspiring to overturn the 2020 presidential election and is convicted of other felonies. He continues to skate scott free; his responsibility absolved in July 2024 when the Supreme Court’s far-right majority [ruled to endow former presidents](#) with criminal immunity.



photo: Business Insider

photo: The Daily Beast

An ethical press would have seized on the many opportunities to explain “how dangerous and unprecedented it would be for a president to be able to commit crimes without the possibility of future legal accountability,” [Elie Mystal](#) wrote in *The Nation* in the lead-up to the Court’s ruling. Instead, as Mystal emphasized, most of the establishment press reported “as if this were a normal and acceptable choice for the court and the country.”

At this stage in the neoliberal game, American democracy is already sufficiently warped by corporate lobbyists and dark money campaign donations. Rescue from this and the compounding damage done by the Supreme Court necessitates the kind of civic action and rights defense only made possible by a press that critiques and publicizes the consequences of government actions and prioritizes citizens’ right to know.

The Supreme Court and the corporate press have made their allegiance clear—it’s not to democracy or the American public. When presidents are exalted above the law, while journalists and publishers are criminalized for doing their job, cherished human rights, civil liberties, press freedom principles, and democratic institutions are jeopardized. But the story doesn’t have to end there. Informed by journalism that promotes freedom of information and public interests, the people still have the power to check imbalances that threaten basic rights and to stake their fundamental claim to democracy.

Hyperlinks for this article at <https://bit.ly/47cSMAO>

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