

The background of the journal cover features a top-down view of a desk. On the left, a pair of black leather brogue shoes is partially visible. In the center, an open notebook with lined pages and a silver pen lies on a light-colored wooden surface. To the right, a black leather bag with a zipper is partially shown, and a black leather watch with a silver dial is resting on the desk. A large, semi-transparent white rectangular box is centered over the image, containing the journal's title and ISSN information.

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# **FREEDOM OF THE PRESS AND ITS IMPACT ON DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF CHINA AND THE UNITED STATES**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Freedom of the press is really important for a democracy to work well. When people can get information that's true and not controlled they can make good choices about the people who lead them and their country. This paper looks at how the press works in the United States and China which're two very different countries. The United States has a press system that's very free and this is because of the First Amendment<sup>1</sup>, which keeps the government from controlling what journalists can say or punishing them. China is different it has one party, in charge and the government controls all the media outlets it also controls what people can see on the internet with the Great Firewall<sup>2</sup> and it puts journalists in jail when they say things the government does not like. By comparing these two countries we can see how having a press or not having one affects how the government works how much leaders listen to the people and how much people know about what is going on around them. When the press is free people can hold their leaders accountable it helps to stop corruption. It allows people to have open discussions, all of which are necessary for a democracy to work. When the press is controlled the government can do what it wants without any consequences. People do not have the information they need to make good choices. This paper uses real life examples, things that have happened in the past and research to explain these differences in a way that's easy to understand. The main point is simple: a free press is not something that a society can do without. The United States and China are examples of this a free press is a need for a democracy to be real.

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Const. amend. I.

<sup>2</sup> Reporters Without Borders, *World Press Freedom Index 2024* (2024).

Keywords: Freedom of the Press, Democracy, Media Freedom, Government Censorship, First Amendment, Journalism, Government Accountability, Freedom of Speech, Independent Media, Great Firewall of China

## 1. Introduction

Imagine waking up every morning in a country where you're never really sure if the news you read is true or not. The television channels, newspapers and online platforms all say the things they praise the government and they do not talk about things that might be uncomfortable. Journalists who try to find out about corruption criticize the people in charge. Tell uncomfortable truths may lose their jobs get arrested or just disappear from public life. People living in this system usually only get the information that the government wants them to know. As a result it is hard for people to question the people in charge challenge the decisions they make or really understand what is going on in their country. Now imagine a different situation. In another country newspapers openly criticize the president television debates question the governments policies every day. Journalists investigate scandals involving powerful people and companies. People can get viewpoints from thousands of media sources including independent newspapers, television channels, websites, podcasts and social media platforms. Even though some reports might be biased or controversial people are generally free to express their opinions and talk about issues openly without being afraid of punishment from the government. This environment allows people to compare information form their opinions and participate actively in political life. These two situations show the difference between China and the United States when it comes to press freedom. The United States is known for having laws that protect freedom of speech and freedom of the press. The First Amendment to the United States Constitution protects journalists and media organizations from government censorship and interference. American journalists are generally free to report on scandals criticize leaders investigate corruption and publish information that might embarrass those in power. This freedom is important for democracy because it allows people to stay informed and hold leaders accountable for what they do.

China is very different. The Chinese government believes that the media should support the country keep society stable and help the government achieve its goals. Because of this the government has a lot of control over newspapers, television channels, online platforms and social media. If something criticizes the Communist Party challenges the government or talks

about topics it is often removed or censored. China also uses a system called the "Great Firewall"<sup>3</sup> to block websites and limit the information that comes in from outside. Journalists, bloggers and activists who publish things that the government does not like can face punishment including going to prison. Press freedom means that journalists and media organizations can gather information publish news and express opinions without being afraid of censorship, punishment or government interference<sup>4</sup>. It is a part of a democratic society because democracy needs informed citizens. If people do not have access to independent information they cannot properly judge what their leaders do understand public issues or make informed decisions when they vote. A free press acts like a watchdog by exposing corruption<sup>5</sup>, abuse of power and government failures. It also gives people a platform to express their concerns and participate in discussions. At the time the issue of press freedom is not always simple. Some people argue that if the press is not controlled it can cause unrest spread false information encourage political instability or weaken the country. Governments like China say that they need to control the media to keep order help the economy grow and keep society harmonious. On the hand people who support democratic countries argue that even if some speech is imperfect or controversial it is better than censorship because open discussion allows society to correct mistakes and find the truth over time. The relationship between press freedom and democracy is more important in the digital age<sup>6</sup>. Today information spreads fast through television, smartphones, social media and online news. Governments have tools to spread information and to control it. Some countries use technology to encourage expression and access to information while others use surveillance, censorship and monitoring to control public opinion. As a result the debate about press freedom is not about newspapers and television anymore; it is also about internet regulation, digital privacy, online censorship and the power of social media companies. The comparison between China and the United States helps us understand how different political systems affect the media. The United States represents a model where press freedom is a constitutional right. China represents a system where the media is closely tied to the government and national policy. Both countries are powers that influence politics, economics and technology around the world. Their approaches to media freedom affect not their own citizens but also international discussions, about human rights, governance and freedom of expression. This paper looks at what press freedom means.

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<sup>3</sup> Chen, G., *Media Control in China: The Party, the Press, and the Public* (Oxford University Press, 2021).

<sup>4</sup> Freedom House, *Freedom of the Press 2023 Annual Report* (2023).

<sup>5</sup> McChesney, R. W., *The Problem of the Media: U.S. Communication Politics in the 21st Century* (Monthly Review Press, 2004).

<sup>6</sup> Shirky, C., "The Political Power of Social Media," (2011) 90(1) *Foreign Affairs* 28.

Why it is important. It compares how press freedom works in China and the United States. It explores the laws, politics and history that have shaped media freedom in both countries. It also talks about how these different approaches affect democracy, public awareness, government accountability, political participation and everyday life. The paper uses real-life examples, historical events and research to explain these differences in a way. The purpose of this paper is not to say that one country is right and the other is wrong. Instead it aims to examine two approaches to controlling and distributing information and to understand the consequences of each system. Through this comparison the paper tries to answer a question: can democracy really work without a free and independent press?

## 2. What is Freedom of the Press?

The freedom of the press is an important thing. It means that newspapers, television stations, radio, online news sites and journalists can report on things that are happening without the government stopping them or punishing them. The freedom of the press allows the media to keep an eye on people and institutions and tell the public what is going on.

The freedom of the press is closely linked to democracy<sup>7</sup>. In a system the government is supposed to work for the people. For that to happen people need to know what the government is doing. A free press makes it possible for people to know what is going on<sup>8</sup> by:

- \* Reporting on what the government's doing so citizens can stay informed about the government.
- \* Telling people about corruption, dishonesty or failures in the government.
- \* Giving groups of people a chance to share their opinions and thoughts.
- \* Helping citizens hold politicians accountable during elections and, in their life.

When the press is not free the government controls what people get to know. People only get to hear what the government wants them to hear about the government. This makes it very hard to have a democracy, where people can truly choose their leaders and keep an eye on them. The freedom of the press is essential for a democratic system to work properly. It is crucial for the freedom of the press to be protected.

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<sup>7</sup> The Economist Intelligence Unit, *Democracy Index 2023* (2023).

<sup>8</sup> Freedom House, *Freedom of the Press 2023 Annual Report* (2023).

### **3. Press Freedom in the United States**

#### **3.1 The First Amendment: The Legal Foundation**

The United States has strong rules to protect the press. The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution<sup>9</sup>, which was passed in 1791 says the government cannot make laws that take away our freedom of speech or the freedom of the press. So journalists in the United States can write about anything, including bad things the government does, wars, social problems and even personal scandals of politicians. This protection is a reason why American media is so diverse<sup>10</sup>. There are thousands of newspapers, television channels, radio stations, magazines and websites that report on the news from different viewpoints. Some of these like CNN or The New York Times lean a little to the left. Others, like Fox News or The Wall Street Journal lean a little to the right. The fact that we have many different voices is a good sign that our press is really free.

#### **3.2 The Role of Media in U.S. Democracy**

In the United States the press has been very important in making sure the government is fair. The Watergate scandal is an example of this<sup>11</sup>. It happened in the 1970s when journalists from The Washington Post looked into and wrote about the things that President Richard Nixon's administration was doing. This writing eventually made President Richard Nixon leave his job. It showed that the press can make sure even the President of the United States is accountable for what he does<sup>12</sup>.

The press also tells people about things that companies do like hurting the environment or when the police do something wrong. Journalists, in the United States often write about people and companies and they publish stories that might make those people uncomfortable. The law helps keep journalists safe so they can do this kind of writing about the press and the important work that the press does.

#### **3.3 Challenges to Press Freedom in the United States**

The United States is not perfect when it comes to press freedom. The United States has some challenges when it comes to press freedom.

Here are some of the challenges that the United States is facing:

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<sup>9</sup> U.S. Const. amend. I.

<sup>10</sup> McChesney, R. W., *The Problem of the Media* (Monthly Review Press, 2004).

<sup>11</sup> Bernstein, C. & Woodward, B., *All the President's Men* (Simon & Schuster, 1974).

<sup>12</sup> Schudson, M., *The Power of News* (Harvard University Press, 1995).

\* Media ownership is a problem in the United States<sup>13</sup>. Many major news companies in the United States are owned by companies or rich people in the United States. This can affect the type of stories that the news companies in the United States cover.

\* Political polarization is another issue in the United States. Many people in the United States do not trust the media in the United States. Different news outlets in the United States report the events in very different ways, which creates confusion and division among people in the United States.

\* Threats to journalists in the United States are a concern. Some journalists in the United States have been attacked or threatened for the work they do in the United States. This does not happen often in the United States. It still happens in the United States.

\* Misinformation is a problem in the United States<sup>14</sup>. The internet in the United States has made it easy for false information to spread in the United States. Fake news and propaganda in the United States can confuse people in the United States. Make them not trust real journalism in the United States.

Despite these problems in the United States the United States always ranks high in the world for press freedom in the United States. Organizations like Reporters Without Borders<sup>15</sup> give the United States a score for press freedom in the United States compared to other countries, in the world.

## **4. Press Freedom in China**

### **4.1 The Government's Control over Media**

China is a country that has one party in charge which is the Chinese Communist Party<sup>16</sup>. The people in charge of China think that the media should do what the state and the party want not make their decisions. So the government keeps an eye on what journalists can write and what news organizations can put out. All the big media outlets in China like newspapers, television networks and websites are owned by the government. Controlled by them. There are two government groups, the National Radio and Television Administration and the Cyberspace Administration of China that decide what can and cannot be said in the media.

The Chinese Communist Party and the government of China are very strict about what journalists can say. Journalists in China who try to write about the government of China and

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<sup>13</sup> McChesney, R. W., *Rich Media, Poor Democracy* (University of Illinois Press, 1999).

<sup>14</sup> Sunstein, C. R., *#Republic: Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media* (Princeton University Press, 2017).

<sup>15</sup> Reporters Without Borders, *World Press Freedom Index 2024* (2024).

<sup>16</sup> Zhao, Y., *Media, Market, and Democracy in China* (University of Illinois Press, 1998).

the Chinese Communist Party might lose their jobs get arrested or even go to jail. China is usually one of the countries when it comes to letting the press be free. The Chinese Communist Party and the government of China do not like it when journalists report things about them. Reporters Without Borders says that China is always near the bottom of the list usually around 170th, out of 180 countries because the Chinese Communist Party and the government of China do not give the media a lot of freedom.

#### **4.2 The Great Firewall and Internet Censorship**

The Great Firewall is one of the famous tools that the Chinese government uses to control what people can see on the internet<sup>17</sup>. The Great Firewall is a system that stops people in China from going to websites from other countries like Google and Facebook and YouTube and Twitter and a lot of other news sites from around the world. So people in China use websites that the government says are okay like Baidu of Google and WeChat instead of WhatsApp.

The Great Firewall also watches what people are saying when they are online. If someone writes something on media that the government does not like it gets deleted really fast. Sometimes the police might even come to that person house. They might get arrested.

The Great Firewall and the government are very strict about what people can say especially during big events. For example when the COVID-19 pandemic started in 2020 the government did not want people to know what was really going on. Doctors and journalists in Wuhan who tried to tell people about the Great Firewall and the COVID-19 pandemic were told to be quiet by the authorities. There was a doctor named Dr. Li Wenliang<sup>18</sup> who tried to warn people about the COVID-19 pandemic and the Great Firewall. The police made Dr. Li Wenliang sign a paper saying he was spreading information about the COVID-19 pandemic and the Great Firewall. Dr. Li Wenliang got sick, with the COVID-19 pandemic. Died and now he is a symbol of what happens when the government controls the Great Firewall and what people can say online.

#### **4.3 The Government's Justification**

The Chinese government says it controls<sup>19</sup> the media to keep society stable stop countries from interfering and make sure the country stays together. They think that if they let the media be free like in countries it will cause chaos, divide people politically and spread fake news that hurts society.

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<sup>17</sup> Reporters Without Borders, *World Press Freedom Index 2024* (2024).

<sup>18</sup> Human Rights Watch, *China Events of 2020* (2020).

<sup>19</sup> Zhao, Y., *Media, Market, and Democracy in China* (University of Illinois Press, 1998).

The government also uses the media to make people feel proud to be Chinese and to tell everyone about the things the Communist Party has done. Media outlets that are run by the government like Xinhua News Agency and China Central Television (CCTV) often report on news such, as the economy growing new buildings being built and people getting out of poverty to show that Chinas leaders are doing a good job.

#### **4.4 Journalism in China: Risks and Reality**

Despite all the restrictions some brave journalists in China do try to report the truth. They use ways like publishing through secret accounts. They also use internet tools like VPNs to get around the Great Firewall. Some even use messaging apps to communicate. Doing this can put them in big trouble. China has journalists in jail than almost any other country. Many are charged with crimes.

Examples include spreading rumors causing trouble or threatening security.

These brave journalists, in China take risks to report the truth. The Chinese government jails journalists. They often use charges against them. The journalists face personal risks for their work. Chinas journalists are often held in prison for a time. The government claims they are a threat. Many think they are just telling the truth.

### **5. A Direct Comparison: United States vs. China**

Now that we have looked at both countries separately, let us compare them side by side across a few important areas.

#### **5.1 Legal Protection**

In the United States the First Amendment provides journalists with legal protection. This protection means the government cannot easily punish a journalist for reporting on things that're sensitive.

The First Amendment is very important for journalists in the United States.

In China things are different for journalists. China does not have a law like the First Amendment to protect journalists. The law in China is often used to punish journalists who report on things the government does not like. The government in China uses the law to punish journalists who step out of line and report on topics. Journalists in China do not have the protection as journalists in the United States because China does not have a law, like the First Amendment.

## 5.2 Government Accountability

In the United States people know that the media is free to report on what the politicians are doing. This means that politicians are aware they are being watched by the media. The media in the United States regularly finds out about corruption<sup>20</sup>. Tells everyone about it. This helps to keep the leaders of the United States honest. The situation is very different in China. The media in China is controlled by the state. This means the media in China does not have the freedom to report on government corruption unless the party in China wants them to. The party in China only lets the media report on corruption when they want to hurt a rival. The media in China does not have the power to hold the leaders of China accountable on its own. The leaders of China are not always held accountable by the media because the media, in China is controlled by the state.

## 5.3 Public Awareness and Information

American citizens can get news from different places and hear what different people think about things. Chinese citizens are different. They usually only get to hear what the government says is okay<sup>21</sup>. The government decides what they know about. So Chinese citizens might not even hear about things that happen like people protesting, really bad things happening to the environment or when the government makes mistakes unless the government wants them to know about it. American citizens and Chinese citizens have different experiences when it comes to the news. The news is a part of what American citizens use to stay informed. Chinese citizens do not have that freedom when it comes to the news.

## 5.4 Impact on Democracy

The United States is a country where people can vote and say what they think. It is not perfect. Has a lot of issues. People in the United States can vote for who they want to and different parties can say what they think. The media in the United States also helps people know what is going on.

China is different from the United States. China is not a place where people can vote for their leaders. If someone in China disagrees with the people in charge they can get in trouble. The people in charge of China use the media to stay in power. They control what people can see and hear. This helps them maintain their power over China. The media, in China is controlled

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<sup>20</sup> Schudson, M., *The Power of News* (Harvard University Press, 1995)

<sup>21</sup> Freedom House, *Freedom on the Net 2023: China* (2023).

by the ruling party. This is one way they stay in charge of China.

## **6. Why Press Freedom Matters for Democracy**

Based on our comparison we can see that press freedom and democracy are closely linked. Here is why:

- \* **Informed voters:** Democracy needs citizens to make choices. For those choices to count people need to know the facts. A free press gives people the information they need.
- \* **Accountability:** When leaders know that journalists can report<sup>22</sup> on their mistakes or corruption they are more careful about governing. This keeps governments honest and responsible.
- \* **Debate:** In a democracy different opinions need to be heard. A free press provides a platform, for debates and different viewpoints leading to policies.
- \* **Protection of rights:** When governments break rights or ignore laws a free press can expose it and push for change.

In contrast when press freedom is limited governments can do what they want without consequences. Citizens are not informed, making it easier for leaders to misuse power hide mistakes and stay in control without serving the public. Press freedom and democracy rely on each other to work A free press makes sure that power is used for the people, not just a few. Without it leaders can do whatever they want<sup>23</sup>.

## **7. Global Implications**

The difference between China and the United States is not about China and the United States. It affects the world. China is using the money and power it has to spread its influence through media around the world. China pays for media channels in Africa and Asia and Latin America that show news that's good for China. This is what people call power, where a country like China tries to influence<sup>24</sup> other countries through things like music and movies and news instead of using its army. The United States does things differently.

The United States helps make sure people can say what they think through organizations like Radio Free Asia and Voice of America which give people in countries with media the news

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<sup>22</sup> McChesney, R. W., *The Problem of the Media* (Monthly Review Press, 2004).

<sup>23</sup> Freedom House, *Freedom of the Press 2023 Annual Report* (2023).

<sup>24</sup> Brady, A. M., *Marketing Dictatorship: Propaganda and Thought Work in Contemporary China* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2008).

that is really happening. As China becomes more powerful it is very important to think about which way the world will go. Countries that do things like China does may start to censor things. Countries that do things like the United States does may become more democratic. China and the United States have two different ideas about media. China wants to control what people see and hear. The United States wants people to be free to say what they think. This is a decision, for the world. China and the United States are two countries that're very different<sup>25</sup>.

## **8. Conclusion**

Freedom of the press is really important for people. It is not about the people who work for newspapers or television channels. It is about the kind of life people live and how control they have over their own government. When people can get information easily question the people in charge. Say what they think it is a very different place from where the government controls what people can see and hear. The United States and China are two examples of how different countries can be when it comes to freedom of the press. In the United States people who work for newspapers and television channels can say what they want because the countries laws protect them. They can look into what the government's doing talk about problems and criticize the people in charge without being punished. This helps people make choices when they vote and it helps the government be transparent. Even though there are problems with the media in the United States like people having opinions and some information being wrong it is still very important for democracy. It helps keep the people in power accountable<sup>26</sup>.

China is very different. The government there thinks the media should help keep the country stable and united. So the government controls what people can see and hear. It censors information that goes against the government or talks about topics. People who work for newspapers and television channels or who speak out against the government can get in trouble. This shows that when a country has a press the people have more freedom. A free press helps people hold the government accountable and makes sure they can get the information they need. When people do not have access to information it is hard for them to understand what is going on or to demand change. Nowadays with the internet and social media, freedom of the press is more important. The internet has made it easier for people to get information. Governments are also finding new ways to control what people can see and hear online. So the

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<sup>25</sup> Voice of America, *About VOA*, available at: <https://www.voanews.com>

<sup>26</sup> Freedom House, *Freedom of the Press 2023 Annual Report* (2023).

fight for freedom of the press is not about newspapers and television channels it is also about what people can say online. This paper shows that freedom of the press is not a legal issue it is also a social and political one. For a country to be democratic people need to have access to information and journalists need to be able to tell the truth. A free press helps people hear opinions and debate important issues. It also helps prevent corruption and abuse of power. Freedom of the press also comes with responsibilities<sup>27</sup>. Journalists need to make sure they are telling the truth and being fair. They should not use their freedom to spread information or hate. A healthy democracy needs a press but it also needs responsible journalists and citizens who think critically. The comparison between the United States and China teaches us a lesson. A free press is not something countries can choose to have or not have. It is essential for liberty, accountability and democracy. Without a press governments can do what they want without being questioned corruption can grow and people can lose their ability to participate in public life. In the end freedom of the press is about protecting the rights and dignity of people. A society that values truth and democracy needs to value and protect a press. Freedom of the press is really about the people, not the journalists or the media. It is about making sure people have the information they need to make choices and to hold the government accountable. The United States and China are two examples of how freedom of the press can be different in countries. In the United States freedom of the press is protected by laws. Journalists can investigate the government expose problems and criticize the people in charge. This helps people make decisions and it helps the government be transparent. In China the government controls the media. It censors information that goes against the government or talks about topics. This limits the ability of people to get the information they need and to participate in life. So freedom of the press is very important. It helps people have freedom and it helps keep the government accountable. A free press is essential for democracy. It is essential for protecting the rights and dignity of ordinary people. The United States and China show us that freedom of the press can be very different in countries.. No matter where we live we need to value and protect a free press. It is one of the important things we can do to make sure our societies are fair, transparent and democratic. Freedom of the press is really about the kind of life we want to live. Do we want to live in a society where we can get the information we need and participate in life?. Do we want to live in a society where the government controls what we can see and hear? The answer is clear. We need a press to have a democratic society.

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<sup>27</sup> Sunstein, C. R., *#Republic: Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media* (Princeton University Press, 2017).

The comparison between the United States and China is clear. Freedom of the press is not a luxury it is a necessity. It is essential for liberty, accountability and democracy. Without a press we risk losing the things that are most important to us: our rights, our dignity<sup>28</sup> and our ability to participate in public life. So let us value and protect a press. Let us make sure that journalists can tell the truth without fear of punishment. Let us make sure that people have access, to the information they need to make choices. Let us create a society that's fair, transparent and democratic. A society that values truth, openness and democracy must also. Protect a free press.

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<sup>28</sup> The Economist Intelligence Unit, *Democracy Index 2023* (2023).