

Independent Media

In a constitutional democracy, the mass media-newspapers, magazines, radio and television stations, and websites-are for the most part privately owned, independent, and free of government control. They are among the nongovernmental organizations of civil society, and they are free to transmit information and ideas about government and public affairs to the people. Therefore, they can criticize government officials and offer alternative opinions about current events and issues. By contrast, nondemocratic governments restrict the mass media in order to communicate only information that is supportive of public officials. In communist regimes, such as the defunct Soviet Union, the government owned and operated all mass media in order to indoctrinate the people and maintain control over them.

One function of the mass media in a democracy is to inform people about current events and introduce them to a variety of opinions about public issues. They thus enable the people to participate intelligently and responsibly in civic and political affairs. A second function is to criticize the government and expose the performance of public officials to public scrutiny, making the government accountable to the people it represents. Mistakes by government officials are more likely to be corrected, and government is more likely to be a responsible servant of the people than in countries with state-controlled media.

The mass media in a constitutional democracy have the right to freedom of expression. The government cannot, for example, restrain in advance what a newspaper may print (prior restraint, which was decided by *Near v. Minnesota*, 1931). However, citizens may as consumers choose to reject or ignore particular newspapers or other media sources. Thus, there is a free market place of ideas in which citizens and communicators interact to exchange opinions about how to improve their democracy.

Answer the following questions on a separate piece of paper:

1. Why is Independent Media important to a democratic system of government.
2. Explain the concept of Prior Restraint (you might need to look up the court case *Near v. Minnesota* 1931)
3. Do you think the media in the United States is accurate in its reporting? Why or why not?