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2017 Constitution Day Essay Contest 3rd Place-- The Fine Line Between Criticism and Control: How the Trump Administration is Weakening Freedom of the Press

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Constitution Day, created in 2004 by an act of Congress, mandates that all publicly funded schools provide educational programming on the history of the U.S. Constitution, which was adopted by delegates to the Constitutional Convention on Sept. 17, 1787. This year's Constitution Day at UK is Monday, September 18th (see <http://www.uky.edu/studentacademicsupport/constitution-day>). Under direction from the Office of the President and the Provost, the Office of Academic Excellence partnered with the College of Arts & Sciences to lead a cross-campus gathering of support for offering Constitution Day activities at the University of Kentucky. Staff and faculty work with many different student organizations and units on campus to develop a campus-wide approach to the celebration of our rights and responsibilities as citizens of the U.S. and to develop habits of citizenship in a new generation of Americans. The general thematic topic this year is focusing on "I Am Kentucky: The Commonwealth and Our Common Future."

An essay contest for undergraduates is sponsored by the UK Scripps Howard First Amendment Center, the Office of the President and the Provost's Office of Academic Excellence. The essays are blind-judged by former UK journalism students who are lawyers, UK professors and media law professors at other universities. The entries are scored on the following criteria: historical and legal accuracy of the content, the strength and logic of the argument, the original ideas presented, the organization of the argument, including the thesis, and the quality of the writing. The winners are announced the First Amendment Celebration, 6:00 p.m. Thursday, Sept. 28, in the Auditorium of the W.T. Young Library.

The essay, which cannot exceed 750 words, addressed this writing prompt:

Donald J. Trump is not the first U.S. president to confront the news media over its reporting on him, his policies, and his administration. (Jefferson, Jackson, Lincoln, Grant, Truman, Nixon, and George W. Bush, among others, were subjected to often harsh press coverage). While the First Amendment to the Constitution guarantees journalists the right to publish information without government interference -- except in special cases, particularly those involving national security -- it also ensures that the president and other government officials are free to criticize the news media.

Essays must address this question: When President Trump disparages the news media by talking about "fake news," "the failing @nytimes," the press as the "enemy of the American people," does he strengthen the First Amendment by engaging in a lively debate about an important subject, or does he weaken freedom of the press by attempting to persuade people that most journalists cannot be trusted?

Third Place – Michael Di Girolamo

The Fine Line Between Criticism and Control: How the Trump Administration is Weakening Freedom of the Press

Throughout United States history, the relationship between the media and the federal government has been highly complex, at times ranging from mostly cooperative to outright adversarial. In contemporary America, this relationship has increasingly drawn closer to the latter, with the media and government often being at odds as each pushes its own unique agenda. The 1st Amendment of the US Constitution allows the media to freely publish information except under exceptional circumstances, giving it the ability to factcheck the government and influence the national agenda. On the other hand, the federal government is free to criticize the media, ensuring a healthy relationship that discourages corruption and a lack of touch with the general population on both sides. However, this relationship has taken an increasingly negative turn under the administration of President Donald Trump, who often criticizes the mainstream media on Twitter and refers to it as “fake news” which cannot be trusted. While a healthy criticism of the media strengthens the 1st Amendment by promoting debate and dialogue, President Trump’s attacks threaten to greatly weaken freedom of the press by encouraging the American people to only listen to the federal government and completely ignore external news sources.

Ever since the national media rose to prominence as a government watchdog in the early 20th century through its extensive use of muckraking, it has strengthened American democracy by helping put a stop to government corruption and bringing diverse issues to the national agenda. As it criticized certain government actions the national government likewise grew to be at odds with it, ensuring that healthy debate between public and private sectors would become a quintessential part of American politics. However, criticism of the media does not equate to encouraging American citizens to ignore it and only trust government-approved sources, and Trump’s recent embracing of this poses a grave threat to freedom of the press. When the media released polls showing that he had a low approval rating, Trump tweeted that they were false, encouraging people to “[not] believe the Fake News Suppression Polls!” On July 2, 2017, he even tweeted a video clip depicting a train running over a man with a CNN logo on his face. Both examples highlight that Trump’s criticisms of the media have overstepped their bounds, shifting government policy from debating the media to outright denying its credibility and promoting hostility towards a fundamental watchdog for American democracy.

While Trump’s relationship with the media has proven itself a threat to the freedom of the press, many of his supporters argue that he is keeping the media itself in check by preventing it from influencing the public with its own agenda. Though it is true that we live in a world where media corruption is often ubiquitous with totalitarianism (according to 2017 World Press Freedom Index, North Korea has the world’s most corrupt media) and fearing media corruption in the US is completely natural, the truth is that Trump is only harming American press freedom by encouraging Americans to only listen to certain news sources, keeping them from being informed on issues from a variety of perspectives that allow them to understand the world around them in a fuller, better rounded way. By doing this he does not just keep the media from overstepping its bounds; he delegitimizes it in the face of his supporters and actively works to discredit media he does not approve of.

There is a fine line between healthy criticism and outright attacks on the media from the federal government. Throughout history, a variety of forces have defended the freedom of the press and ensured that the media can always keep the government in check. From public outrage over legislation such as the Alien and Sedition Acts to landmark Supreme Court cases such as *New York Times v. United States*, support for a free media has always been prominent. While the government has every right to criticize the media when it feels the need to, President Trump's active campaign to delegitimize it poses a threat to the 1st Amendment. Disliking an adversarial media is one thing, but saying "it is the enemy of the American people" is another. To ensure the media and the government can maintain a healthy relationship based off mutual dialogue and debate, Trump must recognize that a healthy press does not have to be tailor-made to follow the government's own agenda, but rather it should remain independent to ensure a diversity of opinions and the preservation of the right to a free media.

