



FIRST AMENDMENT UNDERSTANDING LACKING

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Nearly three-fourths of high school students do not know about the First Amendment-- the part of the Constitution that makes it OK to sing a song protesting a war or write an article criticizing school policies.

A new survey of more than 100,000 students found that three-fourths of students incorrectly believed that burning the U.S. flag was illegal and nearly half wrongly thought the U.S. government had the authority to censor the Internet for indecent materials.

The Supreme Court in 1989 ruled that burning the flag as a means of political protest was protected as free speech under the First Amendment-- 45 words written 200 years ago in the U.S. Constitution. The First Amendment also protects individuals' rights to post material on the Internet, even if it is offensive to others.

"Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof, or abridging the freedom of speech or of the press, or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances," the amendment reads.

The study

The study, funded by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, which also provides funding to Online NewsHour Extra, based its conclusions from a survey of more than 100,000 students, nearly 8,000 teachers and more than 500 principals and administrators at 544 high schools across the country.

"These results (of the study) are not only disturbing, they are dangerous," said the Knight Foundation's president, Hodding Carter III. "Ignorance about the basics of this free society is a danger to our nation's future."

In a nation without similar rights, people can be fined and even imprisoned for posting articles on the Internet deemed subversive. In China, for example, people can be thrown in jail for daring to post news online about forbidden topics such as repression in Tibet, according to Reporters Without Borders, an international journalism rights group.

The importance of education

The survey illustrated that high school students were not learning enough about First Amendment issues and importance of a free press in their classes.

For instance, 36 percent of students said newspapers should receive government approval before publishing stories and another 32 percent thought the press had "too much freedom to do what it wants."

At the same time, a large majority of students said musicians should be allowed to sing songs even with offensive lyrics and that people should be free to express unpopular opinions.

Daniel, a 17-year-old high school student from New York City, said the press should not require government approval. He stressed that the news media needed to be absolutely certain in the accuracy of their reporting, but added that it was not the government's job to tell the press what news was "correct" and what they could publish.

When asked why some students thought the press should be restricted while musicians should be free to sing whatever they wanted, Daniel pointed out: "Music is more of a recreation, not a news source. And people have their own music preferences to avoid what offends them. But, with newspapers, they tell people what's going on."

Daniel said he learned about the importance of a free press through Global Kids Newz Crew, an online program by and for students at NewsHour Extra.

The survey blamed the lack of awareness on incomplete social studies classes and a lack of high school journalism programs.

More than half of the high schools surveyed described their student media opportunities as low, but 85 percent of school administrators said they would expand media programs if they had the financial resources.

--By Elizabeth Harper, Online NewsHour

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