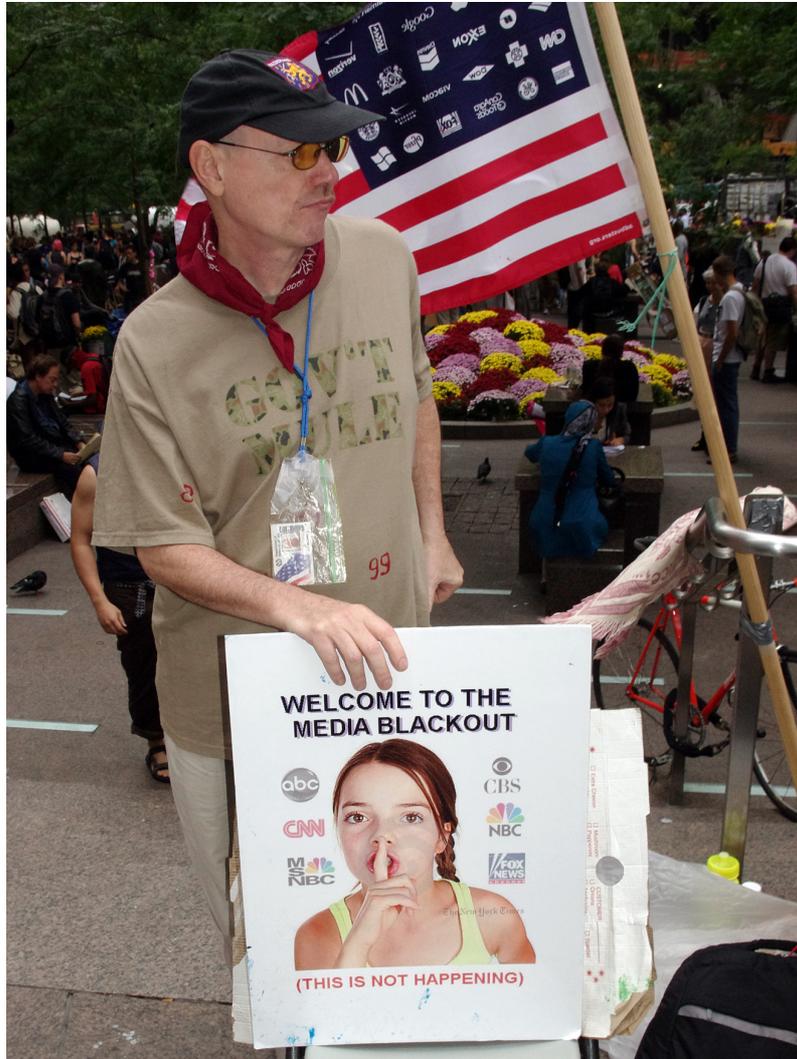


# The Media Blackout

## The censorship of news items by controlled media



When an overreaching state sees fit to curtail the press from disseminating news items into the public domain, it does so under a practice known as 'media blackout', thereby imposing restrictions on what may be published and what gets filtered out. In despotic regimes, like in North Korea, no such concept exists since the state exerts full control over the press. Media blackout refers to the censorship of news and may be voluntary, e.g. in cases where publishers refrain from publishing news about abducted journalists in order not to complicate ongoing negotiations and increase ransom demands, or may in some countries be enforced by the government or state. The latter is contentious as some deem such practice in peacetime tantamount to a breach of human rights and a repression of free speech. In the United States of America, the freedom of the press is protected by constitutional law. The 1<sup>st</sup> Amendment prohibits Congress to enact laws restraining speech and the press, as it reads: *“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.”*

As with other amendments, constitutional scholars consider the 1<sup>st</sup> Amendment's text sacrosanct; to be taken verbatim, in its entirety, irrespective of time, place or context. The wording explicitly inhibits Congress from passing laws abridging these freedoms. But, as with any discussion of the 1<sup>st</sup> Amendment, things are not as straightforward as they seem; and the freedom of the press, just as the freedom of speech, is not absolute. The 1<sup>st</sup> amendment was passed with the intention of preventing the government from censoring the press, and to let the press function as it sees fit, without fear of reprisals. Evidently, the 1<sup>st</sup> Amendment sought to place limitations of power on the legislature, just as much as it sought to protect a free society from encroachment. James Madison, the father of the constitution, said in 1800:

*“This security of the freedom of the press requires that it should be exempt, not only from previous restraint by the Executive, as in Great Britain, but from legislative restraint also; and this exemption, to be effectual, must be an exemption, not only from the previous inspection of licensers, but from the subsequent penalty of laws.”*  
~ James Madison

In times of war, media blackouts are regarded as necessary evils to keep intelligence on troop positions from the enemy. In times of peace, the case for media blackouts is deemed less defensible, in particular when the press withholds information to obviate notable people from embarrassment. To circumvent the 1<sup>st</sup> Amendment, media outlets acquiesce to demands by officials not to leak any undesirable items, on a technicality of voluntary compliance. Congress wields considerable clout over mass media as the regulator of commerce and arbiter on what constitutes breaches of trading standards. To illustrate this point, on 20 January, 2001, President Bill Clinton's final act in office was to grant presidential pardons to convicts incarcerated. Among the 140 issued by the President was one reserved for his half brother Roger Clinton who stood convicted on charges of conspiracy to distribute cocaine and distribution of cocaine. This act of nepotism generated scant media exposure. In October of 2008, the shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, was spotted on a yacht (the Queen K belonging to Russian oligarch Oleg Deripaska) off the Greek island of Corfu, along with the EU's trade Commissioner to the UK, Peter Mandelson. In the public eye, both of these men are political foes. Their private encounter made the headlines in the British press. But, what the mainstream press failed to report on was these gentlemen's participation to the 2008 Bilderberg meeting held in Chantilly, Virginia—an omission which bears all the hallmarks of a media blackout and ties the press to an agenda dictated from above. With this in mind, the euphemism of a 'free press' loses emphasis for a more befitting paradigm to reflect a more accurate representation of news media—'controlled media'.