



## LEGAL Issues

### Get to Know Your First Amendment

The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution is just 45 words, but they are important words. The First Amendment gives us the right to say what we want to say, write what we think, and publish it. We may criticize our government, gather to do so, and worship where we like.

Citizens in some countries can't do all that. In the United States, different opinions are valued, and the First Amendment allows for the exchange of thoughts and opinions. The media can create a marketplace of ideas. Whether the government likes the ideas doesn't matter. The ideas can't be repressed.

The First Amendment gives power to the people and the press. It recognizes that the people have a right to know what the government is up to. Most of us don't have time to keep tabs on all the movers and shakers in our government. We count on journalists to be the watchdogs, to tell us what's going on in our communities, from the local to international levels.

That doesn't mean everybody agrees on how much power the people and the press should have. Debate on the First Amendment has been robust since the ratification of the U.S. Constitution more than 200 years ago, and it keeps on going today. James Madison, who wrote the Amendment, and the other Founding Fathers agreed that the freedoms of speech, press, religion and assembly were necessary to have the open society they envisioned for America. However, like many Americans today, they did not agree on how the First Amendment should be applied.

Should reporters be allowed to give their sources anonymity for the sake of getting good information? Should the government be allowed to keep secret certain information it claims is sensitive? Those are just two of the questions still unsettled. More questions arise all the time as technology changes and expands our marketplace of ideas.

#### **THINK** *Critically*

1. Why are First Amendment freedoms important to our society?
2. Do you think press freedom should be unrestricted? Why or why not?