



THINKER IN BOXES

THOMAS JEFFERSON

Team: American Eagles

Position: Spin bowler

Status: Buried

It would be negligent to the point of criminal to write a chapter on the press and politics without highlighting the contribution of Stephen Colbert. Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826) was also kind of important.

Thomas Jefferson was so passionate about the essential nature of a free press in a democratic society that he said, “Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter.”^a His logic was quite simple: “The force of public opinion cannot be resisted when permitted freely to be expressed.”^b His passionate support for freedom of the press and freedom of expression is evident in the sheer volume of quotes attributed to him on the subject, but he also believed that these freedoms should be limited to the expression of truth. He made several statements that clearly show his opinion that libel, slander, and other damaging falsehoods should not be protected as free speech.

Also, if you look through the larger pattern of his statements on the subject, it becomes clear that Jefferson viewed the freedom of the press as more functional than ideological. The unhindered press is meant to serve certain social and political functions, such as exposing truths that selfish politicians might wish to keep secret, informing citizens, allowing discontent to be expressed, and enabling political debate. Someone searching for a more philosophical or artistic idea of the freedom of expression, as it might apply to fiction, literature, and free Internet pornography for all, won’t find much from Jefferson on the subject.

^a Letter from Thomas Jefferson to Edward Carrington, 1787.

^b Letter from Thomas Jefferson to Lafayette, 1823.