

2025 ANNUAL UPDATE

# FREE SPEECH CENTER



# Defend Free Speech with Information and Education



As my colleague John Carpenter details elsewhere in this annual report, 2025 was an eventful and, at times, startling year for the First Amendment.

We've seen extensive government efforts to limit and sometimes punish speech, along with efforts to demean and undercut American journalism. There have been widespread efforts to remove

books from libraries and ongoing attacks on the principles of diversity, equity, and inclusion, leading to the elimination of information about civil rights from government websites and, in some cases, classrooms.

All of this runs counter to the **Free Speech Center's** mission to help build public support for the five freedoms of the First Amendment through education and information.

That means more free expression, not less. It's our hope that the more Americans know about the First Amendment, the more proactive they will be in protecting it.

In 2025, the center's work included:

- The publication of **Teaching the First Amendment**, a book provided free of charge to educators across the U.S.
- Timely updates on First Amendment developments via our **Free Speech Center newsletter**. Sign up via the subscription option at the bottom of the Free Speech Center homepage
- Timely additions to the **First Amendment Encyclopedia** ([firstamendment.mtsu.edu/encyclopedia](http://firstamendment.mtsu.edu/encyclopedia)) in

partnership with the John Seigenthaler Chair of Excellence in First Amendment Studies at Middle Tennessee State University

- Responding to dozens of queries from journalists calling our **News Media Hotline** (615-898-5829)
- **Radio and television appearances** regarding breaking First Amendment news
- Partnerships with press and broadcast organizations to promote journalism on First Amendment topics

A significant change in how we share the center's news and information comes as Americans embrace artificial intelligence (AI) on an unprecedented scale. In the past, when a high school student looking for information about the right of assembly would type that topic into a search engine, our center would frequently pop up as one of the prime sources.

In the age of AI, users more frequently ask a specific question, and the result is a hybrid reflecting a consensus of what several trusted sites say. Our task is to ensure that our content is so trusted and authoritative that AI search routinely will incorporate content from our site and our First Amendment Encyclopedia.

Credibility is at a premium when so much of the online world is corrupted by hoaxes, deepfakes, and outright lies. It's a bit ironic that our First Amendment guarantees protect both truthful and false free speech, but it's the former that is critical to keeping our democracy alive and well.

[freespeech.center](http://freespeech.center)

—Ken Paulson  
Director, Free Speech Center

## Top Media

The Free Speech Center serves as a trusted resource for news organizations reporting on First Amendment issues, focusing on the United States while also fielding inquiries spanning four continents. Among news media tapping the center's expertise in recent months:

*The New York Times*  
*USA Today*  
*Los Angeles Times*  
*ABC News*  
*ABC Australia*  
*NBC Washington*  
*ProPublica*  
*Reuters*

*Scripps News*  
*Houston Public Media (NPR)*  
*ABA Journal*  
*Global News*  
*WPLN Nashville (NPR)*  
*Columbia Journalism Review*  
*Courthouse News*  
*Latvian Public Radio*

*The Tennessean*  
*Austin American-Statesman*  
*Indianapolis Star*  
*Orlando Sentinel*  
*Post and Courier (S.C.)*  
*Alabama Media Group*  
*Times-Picayune (La.)*

## Teaching the First Amendment

Lessons in Liberty



[firstamendment.mtsu.edu/  
post/new-free-first-amendment-  
e-book-for-educators](https://firstamendment.mtsu.edu/post/new-free-first-amendment-e-book-for-educators)

## Teaching the First Amendment

*“We know that many teachers would like to ensure that their students understand the First Amendment but have little space in their curricula. Teaching the First Amendment is intended to offer approaches that complement existing teaching, particularly in history and civics classes. It’s all about teaching what you can when you can.”*

—Ken Paulson

**Teaching the First Amendment**, a new guide to sharing the core principles of free expression with students, has been published by the Free Speech Center as part of its educational outreach.

The electronic book offers a highly accessible guide to incorporating First Amendment education into existing courses or in stand-alone lessons. Each of the five First Amendment freedoms is explained and explored with an emphasis on conveying these key principles to the next generation of citizens.

The book, which was written by Ken Paulson, director of the Free Speech Center; John Vile, dean of the MTSU Honors College; and Deborah Fisher, director of the John Seigenthaler Center for Excellence in First Amendment Studies, is being made available to educators, students, and the public through a **free download on the Free Speech Center’s site**. ([freespeech.center](https://freespeech.center))

The book was released in November at the annual journalism conference of the National Scholastic Press Association and the Associated Collegiate Press.

*Forty-five words changed our country. The First Amendment is the foundation of American democracy and the heartbeat of a free society. It stands as one of the most powerful and elegant statements of freedom ever written.*

*In just 45 words, it defines the very foundation of American democracy—protecting our rights to speak, publish, assemble, worship, and petition our government.*

—Laura Widmer, Executive Director  
National Scholastic Press Association  
Associated Collegiate Press  
Quill and Scroll

*Ultimately, teaching the First Amendment and the role of a free press is an investment in an informed and engaged citizenry. It encourages more speech, not enforced silence, is necessary to resolve differences in a diverse society and ensures that the fundamental link between knowledge and freedom endures.*

—Laura Widmer, Executive Director  
National Scholastic Press Association  
Associated Collegiate Press  
Quill and Scroll



# A User's Guide to the FIRST AMENDMENT ENCYCLOPEDIA



By Deborah Fisher, director of the Seigenthaler Chair for Excellence in First Amendment Studies

When those of us who work on the First Amendment Encyclopedia share our enthusiasm for this project, we often describe it as the most comprehensive, accessible, and timely resource on First Amendment freedoms in the world.

The original encyclopedia became a go-to reference for academics, First Amendment scholars, lawyers, and educators. In time, however, the encyclopedia went out of print.

In 2016, the Seigenthaler Chair for Excellence in First Amendment Studies at Middle Tennessee State University negotiated for the rights to the original publication and then began the multiyear updating of the content while preparing it to be posted online, all at no cost to users.

In partnership with the Free Speech Center at MTSU, we have spent the past two years refining our content and presentation so we can best serve both students and teachers.

Today, the First Amendment Encyclopedia is a continuously updated website with more than 1,800 articles about the First Amendment. It includes summaries of court cases, including the most recent ones, as well as topical entries that examine issues as broad as "free speech during wartime" and as specific as the "regulation of billboards."

When a controversy arises related to a First Amendment freedom—whether it's free speech, freedom of the press, freedom of religion, freedom of assembly, or freedom of petition—you can use the encyclopedia to locate easy-to-read articles such as those on landmark

court rulings, major historical moments, and the people involved. This can help students place the news in deeper context and within a larger historical framework.

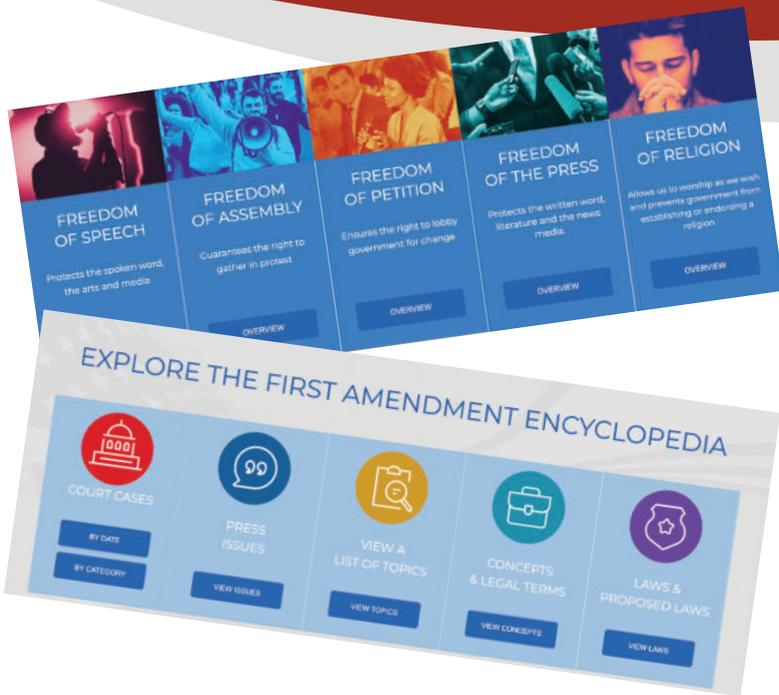
The encyclopedia has overviews on each of the five freedoms. It also has special collections that include a timeline, essays on each of the U.S. presidents and their involvement with First Amendment issues, and book excerpts, such as one collection on censorship in the 20th century, *From the Palmer Raids to the Patriot Act*.

In addition to providing accurate and historical information related to the development of First Amendment freedoms, the encyclopedia explores contemporary issues, such as a new crop of disputes related to social media, which the Supreme Court has likened to "the modern public square."

Reading the First Amendment Encyclopedia is like reading a history of the United States. **The freedom to think and write and believe without government interference is fundamental to Americans' conception of themselves.** Controversies testing those rights have arisen in every major period of American history, a study of which can provoke thought and classroom discussion about the importance of these fundamental freedoms.

## How the encyclopedia is organized

Articles for use in your classroom can be found through a simple search on the encyclopedia's main webpage. Each article includes links to other related articles in the encyclopedia as well as external reading material, allowing you to find and compile additional material about your subject of interest.



## ASNE

For more than a century, the American Society of News Excellence (ASNE) has been a trusted and influential name in American journalism. This coalition of journalists has a new home with the Free Speech Center and Middle Tennessee State University.

ASNE, a driving force in American journalism throughout its history, is committed to the protection, preservation, and promotion of a free press. Much has changed since the organization—originally the American Society of Newspaper Editors—was founded in 1923. It now embraces journalists well beyond newspapers, reflecting the growing diversification of journalism in a digital age.

Today's ASNE strives to build awareness of the importance of a free press in partnership with news media organizations across the U.S. That work is embodied in public service ads, opinion pieces, and the recognition of great journalism that helps protect First Amendment freedoms.

You may also connect with ASNE on Bluesky, through signing up for the ASNE digital newsletter, by viewing a video series on YouTube, and by joining the ASNE Facebook page.

**[firstamendment.mtsu.edu/american-society-for-news-excellence](https://firstamendment.mtsu.edu/american-society-for-news-excellence)**

But you also might find it useful to explore our categories of content. For example, you can explore Supreme Court cases by category.

You can also search by topic, such as Controversial Works; Issues Related to Religion; Dress and Hair Regulations; Internet and Social Media; Movies, Video Games, and Comics; or even Zoning, among many others. The largest topic category is Issues Related to Speech, Press, Assembly, or Petition. It contains some of our most popular resources.

Inside each of these topics are articles that delve into particular issues, drawing upon history and court rulings to help a person understand the constitutional issues in play.

### Newer areas of interest

Each year, we add dozens of new articles, and we welcome new ideas from our users. In 2024, for example, we added or updated 144 articles, with new information often touching on emerging topics such as political deepfakes created by artificial intelligence. In 2025, scholars wrote new articles on antisemitism and Zionism, executive orders and the First Amendment, DEI, and Voice of America, among others.

**[firstamendment.mtsu.edu/encyclopedia](https://firstamendment.mtsu.edu/encyclopedia)**



# FIRST AMENDMENT 2025: THE YEAR IN REVIEW

By John Carpenter

By any measure, 2025 was a stressful year for those who worry about the First Amendment and its status as the bedrock of American liberty. Below is a recap of some recent events in the news.

## Reaction to Charlie Kirk's murder

Turning Point USA founder Charlie Kirk was killed in September, shot in the neck while speaking to students in Utah. While his death was widely condemned from both sides of the political divide, some on the left celebrated the murder, while others referred to Kirk's statements and positions they disagreed with. Political commentators on the right also called such criticism "celebration," and vehemently condemned it.

A Tennessee man was jailed for 37 days over a meme he posted about Kirk's death, which the local sheriff said amounted to a threat of violence. Charges against him were dropped, and he was released. But the man, a former law enforcement officer, is now suing the county.

Late-night host Jimmy Kimmel was suspended by ABC for on-air comments about Kirk's murder after Federal Communications Commission Chairman Brendan Carr urged the network to take action against him. Kimmel was back on the air days later.

## Colbert canceled

In July, the top-rated *Late Show With Stephen Colbert* was canceled after Colbert criticized CBS' parent company, Paramount Global, for paying a \$16 million legal settlement with President Trump. The settlement involved claims by Trump that *60 Minutes* had treated him unfairly. Paramount was working at the time to wrap up a multibillion-dollar merger with Skydance Media, which required FCC approval. Skydance Media is also controlled by David Ellison, son of Oracle founder Larry Ellison, a self-described friend and supporter of Trump.

CBS denied that the cancellation was about anything other than business, and said the show was losing money.

## Video aimed at military members draws presidential rebuke

In November, a group of six Democratic lawmakers, all military or national-security veterans, released a video in which they reminded U.S. service members that they have an obligation, under the Constitution and the Uniform Code of Military Justice, to refuse illegal orders.

President Trump reacted with a social media post that called their actions "SEDITIONARY BEHAVIOR, punishable by DEATH!" He also labeled them "traitors" and "enemies from within," and boosted other posts that called for them to be hanged.

The Pentagon opened an investigation into U.S. Sen. Mark Kelly, one of the lawmakers in the video and a retired Navy captain. Retired service members remain under the jurisdiction of some aspects of military law.

Trump denied threatening the lawmakers, who reported receiving death threats after his posts.

## New Pentagon rules empty press room

The Pentagon was also at the heart of another First Amendment showdown. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth issued new rules for Pentagon reporters, including that they publish no information without Department of Defense approval. Almost all military-affairs journalists—including those from Fox News—refused to sign the new agreement and are now covering the Pentagon from outside the building.

*The New York Times* is suing over the rules, calling them a direct violation of the First Amendment, which mentions "the press" specifically.

Free-press advocates argue that the U.S. military is too large and too important to require reporters to report only government-approved stories.

## Religious freedom

The Supreme Court cited the First Amendment's protection of religious expression in siding with Maryland parents wanting to opt out of reading assignments that included LGBT content. The high





court, in overturning a lower-court injunction in the case, said school officials were interfering with the right of parents to instill the religious values and beliefs of their choice for their children.

Various members of the Trump administration were criticized by First Amendment advocates for social media Christmas posts that referred to Jesus Christ as “our savior,” with some saying it violated the Constitution’s ban on government establishment of an official religion.

### **Journalists detained at ICE protests**

A press watchdog group noted that 2025 saw 32 journalists detained or arrested while covering news events, from protests to public meetings.

The U.S. Press Freedom Tracker noted that, while the number was down from 50 journalists detained in 2024, **“something fundamental is shifting in how authorities police information and those who gather it.”**

All of the arrests this year took place at protests involving immigration enforcement. Although none of the journalists was charged, press advocates say such aggressive tactics discourage coverage of protests.

### **Supreme Court upholds TikTok ban**

Early in the year, the Supreme Court upheld a federal law that will require TikTok to shut down in the United States unless its Chinese parent can sell off the U.S. company. President Trump, meanwhile, is backing a deal that would spin off U.S. operations of the site to a group that includes Larry Ellison.

### **Public broadcasting defunded**

The Corporation for Public Broadcasting began winding down its operations in August, after President Trump signed a law clawing back more than \$1 billion in funding through 2027.

The CPB has been a conduit for federal funds that supported National Public Radio and the Public Broadcasting Service, which Republicans have long accused of bias. Supporters say the public broadcasters, especially the wide network of NPR-affiliated radio stations, are often the only reliable sources of news in rural areas.

### **AP still banned from some White House events**

After President Trump unilaterally renamed the Gulf of Mexico as the Gulf of America, The Associated Press refused to fully adopt the new name. The news cooperative, whose stylebook is widely used by news organizations, noted that Trump’s order carries authority only in the United States, and the gulf is an international body of water. AP editors said they would “refer to it by its original name, while acknowledging the new name Trump has chosen.”

That was not good enough for Trump, who restricted AP access to news events in smaller spaces, including the Oval Office and Air Force One. AP sued, and initially won. But a U.S. appeals court prevented the ruling from taking effect. That panel heard arguments on the case in November, and a ruling is pending.

Because AP is widely used by smaller outlets that cannot afford to staff reporters at the White House, it has traditionally had extensive press access.

### **Trump vs. universities**

President Trump continued his attacks on universities, which he says are havens for left-leaning indoctrination and anti-semitism. Starting with some of the top schools in the country, he pulled billions in research funding. Several schools paid settlements to the administration. But Harvard University is suing.

Meanwhile, a Columbia University graduate student and Palestinian activist who had been detained by ICE agents and held for more than 100 days was ordered released in June. He is appealing a deportation order.

### **CBS News**

Weeks after she was installed as editor-in-chief of CBS News, right-leaning former web publisher Bari Weiss pulled a *60 Minutes* story hours before it was set to air. She acknowledged the segment was critical of President Trump’s immigrant-deportation policy, and said it needed comment from the administration, even though the administration previously had been asked for and did not provide comment.

continued on next page

## Stressed-out First Amendment, cont.

### Epstein files

Partial release of the files detailing the investigation into Jeffrey Epstein, the late billionaire pedophile, is seen by some as a victory for the First Amendment right to petition the government. As President Trump publicly tried to downplay the files, calling them a “hoax,” public pressure pushed Congress to pass a law requiring the release of the files. Trump later decided to support the measure.

—John Carpenter, a former reporter for the *Chicago Tribune* and *Sun-Times*, has been a full-time beat reporter in a number of areas, from crime and courts to city halls and school boards.



## SUPPORT THE CENTER . . . SUPPORT FREE SPEECH!

The Free Speech Center is dependent upon financial support from those who share our belief that education about our most fundamental freedoms is critical to American democracy. Independent funding allows the center to develop classroom programs, teaching guides, educational videos, and grade-specific books. It also allows the center to maintain and expand its First Amendment Encyclopedia and daily First Amendment news reports.

To support the Free Speech Center, please click on the Donate button at [freespeech.center](https://freespeech.center).

The Free Speech Center newsletter offers a digest of First Amendment and news-media news every other week. Subscribe for free: [bit.ly/3kG9uiJ](https://bit.ly/3kG9uiJ).

Drop us a message at [freespeechcenter@mtsu.edu](mailto:freespeechcenter@mtsu.edu).

## A Quick Tour of the Free Speech Center's Resources



- Daily news reports and analyses on First Amendment issues
- The First Amendment Encyclopedia, with more than 1,800 authoritative articles, all written in a highly accessible way
- Free Speech Center on YouTube, a compilation of videos of Free Speech Center events and interviews, along with “explainers” of emerging issues
- First Amendment teaching tools, a guide to the best free lessons for First Amendment education
- News Media Hotline, supplying journalists with the background they need to report on First Amendment issues

I AM *true* **BLUE**

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