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Celebrate a free press by guarding your right to open government and accurate information

By Sally Lehrman

It’s “[Sunshine Week](https://sunshineweek.org/)”, a time when we celebrate one of the bedrocks of American democracy: Open government. It’s timed to coincide with the birthday of James Madison, known as the father of the U.S. Constitution and the Bill of Rights. Madison believed deeply in the importance of access to information in a free society, and in the press as an essential tool for self-governance.

In an age when many people get their news by consulting TikTok, WhatsApp, Instagram, chatbots and search engines, access to information may seem a no-brainer. The answers to everything are right at our fingertips. But we also know that an “answer” isn’t always truthful, and “information” from these sources, while often interesting and usually helpful, isn’t the same as accurate details drawn from original documents or interviews with primary actors and put into context.

Thanks to the [Freedom of Information Act](https://www.foia.gov/), passed in 1966, and its state counterparts, any of us can gain access to records of government activities. It may cost money and most certainly time, however, and sometimes only experts in the field can interpret policies and the procedures that led to them. That’s one reason why the news organizations are so important. Journalists have made it their duty support to the public’s right to know the workings of their government. They keep an eye on everything from policies about school lunches or road maintenance all the way up to actions taken by the Supreme Court, Congress and the U.S. President. They consult minutes, reports, policies and people involved in policy-making. They add context, including how things were decided and why the results matter. It’s not that they’re the experts themselves. They are expert in gathering information and seeking out multiple perspectives to ensure that their reporting truly informs those with a right to know – that is, everyone.

For example, just in the past couple of weeks, the [Current in Georgia](https://thecurrentga.org/2024/02/26/software-problem-sends-chatham-ambulances-to-google-maps-for-emergency-calls/%23:~:text=Yet%2520paramedics%2520are%2520resorting%2520to,Emergency%2520Services%2520CEO%2520Chuck%2520Kearns.) reported that thousands of addresses had been left out of ambulance mapping software, which meant that first responders were repeatedly being sent to the wrong place. CalMatters reviewed thousands of pages of documents and found that California parole procedures are so full of holes that [released prisoners routinely do not receive critical medical and mental health treatment](https://www.mercurynews.com/2024/03/12/three-months-after-leaving-the-state-hospital-she-was-supposed-to-be-free-instead-she-was-dead/), putting both former offenders and the public in danger.

It's journalists’ job to remain impartial, check the facts, know the history and consult outside experts – in other words, to get it right and let you decide the best outcome. Reliable news organizations that deserve our trust will explain their policies about protecting journalists and all newsroom processes from conflicts of interest, including from funders. They’ll give background on their owners and funding sources; they’ll explain whether their journalists are trained in professional reporting standards. They’ll create open avenues for listening to public concerns and responding to complaints. They’ll mark opinion and analysis clearly, and separate them both from news.

Without knowing that kind of commitment sits behind every word, it’s hard to navigate the flood of “information” coming at us from every direction. Freedom of information is a right that we all should guard, recognizing that we don’t mean any old kind of information. We must guard our access to truthful, impartial information that lets every individual contribute, armed with knowledge, to democracy in their own way. Let’s cherish the sunshine that keeps government healthy and accountable, and look for that same kind of sunshine from every news source we consult.

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*Sally Lehrman is founder and CEO of the Trust Project, which works to build a more trusted and trustworthy press through the* [8 Trust Indicators](https://thetrustproject.org/trust-indicators/)*®. Its* [#Checkthe8 campaign](https://thetrustproject.org/register-checkthe8/) *helps people recognize when they can trust the news. Lehrman is a Peabody and Columbia-DuPont Award-winning journalist who has covered science and related social issues.*

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