

Robert McCormick: Defining the Rights and Responsibilities of a Free Press

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Individual Website

Why I Chose My Topic

Ever since I can remember, I have been fascinated with the editorial section in *The Chicago Tribune*. I love reading opinions. In social studies class, I learned that the right to publish opinions freely was written into the Constitution, and I wanted to learn more about press rights and the First Amendment. This interest became the origin of my project. After a few weeks of research, I rewrote my topic question to focus on *Tribune* publisher Robert McCormick and the impact of his three landmark court cases on the rights and responsibilities of a free press. My project addresses the vision of McCormick, the results of the trials, and their impact.

How I Conducted My Research

I began my research with the United States Constitution and examined key figures in First Amendment rights. Eventually, I uncovered the McCormick court cases against Bill Thompson, Henry Ford, and the State of Minnesota. I found many online websites, such as the Robert R. McCormick Museum website and the First Division Museum website. I visited the Chicago History Museum Research Room to gather primary documents and sources. I also visited the Robert R. McCormick Museum to understand more about McCormick's influence on the First Amendment, and the First Division Museum to learn more about McCormick's military background. Additionally, I interviewed Mr. Shawn Healy, a First Amendment expert and the Civic Learning and Engagement Scholar at the McCormick Foundation.

How I Selected the Website Category and Created My Project

I have been participating in the History Fair since 6th grade, and each year, I have created a website. I like how this medium allows the viewer to interact with the project. Once I gathered all of the documents and media, I uploaded them onto the website, paying attention both to the visual appeal of the webpages and to the structure of my argument.

How My Project Relates to the NHD Theme

As the editor of *The Chicago Tribune*, Robert McCormick believed that a newspaper should be able to publish its opinions about individuals and about the government without being fined, sued, or censored. McCormick's legal victories against Henry Ford, Bill Thompson, and the State of Minnesota clarified and expanded the **rights of a free press** as originally conceived in the United States Constitution. Consequently, the press became free to write without consequence of libel from people, libel from the government, and risk of prior restraint. As a result, newspapers became **duty-bound** to serve as a "check upon government," through editorials and personalized journalism. It's true that the Founding Fathers of America wrote the idea of a free press into the Bill of Rights, but it was a brilliant newspaperman from Chicago that gave true meaning to the concept. Our democratic society reaps the benefits every day of the contributions of Robert McCormick, who ensured that America remains the "Land of the Free."