

The Post — A Reflection on the Meaning of Media Freedom

Not long ago, I came across a surprising phenomenon on Zhihu: a question asking “Why would China open up media freedom?” was marked as a violation. Coincidentally, this semester I’m enrolled in two courses taught by Professor Chao—*Brand Column Appreciation* and *Film and Television Criticism*. Media freedom is a core theme in both classes, which reminded me of a film I saw years ago: *The Post*. This movie offers a powerful case for why press freedom is vital to journalism and society.

Directed by Steven Spielberg and starring Tom Hanks and Meryl Streep, *The Post* recounts the real-life story of the Pentagon Papers leak—one of the most significant government leaks in history. At the time, the United States was deeply entangled in the Vietnam War. Several presidents had already realized the war could not be won, yet continued to send soldiers into combat for three reasons: to support South Vietnam, to fight communism, and—most importantly—because none of them wanted to be the one to “lose” the war during their term.

In the film, Daniel Ellsberg, a military analyst, discovers the truth in a classified report titled *United States–Vietnam Relations* and leaks it to *The New York Times*, which publishes it on the front page. The public is outraged. Meanwhile, Kay Graham has just taken over leadership of *The Washington Post* and is faced with both internal turmoil and pressure. *The Times* had scooped them, and now the paper’s editor-in-chief, Ben Bradlee, is determined to publish the documents as well. But Kay has deep ties to the government and publishing the papers would mean directly defying the White House.

As the Nixon administration sues *The Times* and tries to block further publication, executives at *The Post* grow fearful. Bradlee, however, is unwavering in his resolve: “This is a war. Nixon is trying to shut down *The New York Times*. If they lose, we lose. And if we lose, the country loses.” Eventually, Kay makes the courageous decision to publish. In just a few hours, they achieve what took *The Times* months to do. Some may think *The Post* simply took advantage of *The Times* being silenced, but in reality, there were hundreds of papers in similar positions. Only *The Washington Post* had the courage, determination, and journalistic spirit to step forward. The decision transformed it from a local newspaper into a national pillar of journalism—and set the stage for its later coverage of the Watergate scandal.

The film also raises broader questions about journalism. For instance, what if *The Washington Post* hadn’t been a family-run newspaper, but a publicly traded company? Without Kay’s final authority, corporate risk aversion may have led the paper to retreat. This case shows how media ownership can shape editorial choices. Moreover, while media outlets compete, in moments of crisis they must act as a unified front. If only *The Post* had followed up on *The Times* story, it would have faced enormous pressure. But when dozens of papers joined in, the risks were diffused and their collective voice grew stronger. A touching scene shows Ben Bradlee placing each supporting newspaper on Kay’s desk—a quiet tribute to solidarity.

In the end, it was the First Amendment and the U.S. Supreme Court that safeguarded the press. A restraining order had not only barred *The Times* from publishing but also prevented other outlets from using *The Times’* material or even their sources. The case reached the Supreme Court,

where the justices ruled 6–3 in favor of the press. As one justice wrote: “The press was to serve the governed, not the governors.” I believe that same idea answers the question I began with.

Of course, *The Post* isn’t a perfect film. Spielberg’s polish makes it feel too neat at times, as if every scene is cued by an invisible alarm. He doesn’t clearly explore whether change begins with the person or with the idea. “Responsibility” becomes a catch-all for character motivation. Additionally, the frequent use of old-school zoom and tracking shots distances the audience emotionally, making it harder to truly enter the story—something *Spotlight* did much better.

As Professor Chao said in class, truly meaningful films unify truth and goodness, depth and clarity, timeliness and timelessness. When we reflect on social events, we often find that people aren’t unaware of injustice—they’ve simply grown used to it, rationalized it, or silently looked away. Journalism exists to expose those hidden layers. It must peel back the glossy surface of society and confront what lies beneath, preventing others from simply reapplying the same illusion.

Though imperfect, *The Post* succeeds in reminding us of journalism’s purpose. It deepened my respect and longing for the profession. While today’s media landscape can feel bleak, it hasn’t shaken my desire to be part of it—to report honestly, to question power, and to uncover what others would rather stay hidden. That is why journalism matters. And that is what this film reaffirms.