

# Our Right to Know Abused by Some

THE constitutional amendment is clear where it says that Congress shall make no law "abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press." Abridge means to shorten or to curtail.

Congress, so far as we know, has not done so but that has not kept others from trying to curtail our right to know.

Probably every American believes in such freedom, as long as the press agrees generally with his or her views or at least does not try to persuade readers or listeners to adopt other concepts.

Dictators also accept that notion of freedom of the press, using their power to see that nothing is printed that might threaten their regimes. For example, early this year the president of Poland signed a decree banning possession or use of typewriters by anybody who posed "a danger to public order or state of security."

It is not considered to be a violation of "freedom of the press" when U.S. government officials attempt to

manipulate press coverage of their activities for political advantage. The recent furor over delay in admitting representatives of the press into Grenada to cover the war (invasion or rescue) may or may not be a result of such management.

More likely, it is because newsmakers and news reporters don't trust each other. This is evident each time the president appears on TV in what is called a "press conference."

Military commanders by nature of their positions are not inclined to publicize in advance what they intend to do in action or to welcome critical coverage of their decision.

As in every profession, the "media" includes a wide variety of individuals and there is nothing to prevent anybody, including the unprincipled, from becoming a reporter or publisher.

Most publications profess to have ethical policies and most journalists have been taught to be fair and honest with the public as well as with news sources. Others may have been exposed to such teachings

without having their greed or ambition affected. Such shortcomings should be apparent to the public but subscriptions to publications and broadcasters' ratings often indicate otherwise.

Columnist George F. Will recently wrote: "Many journalists advocate an 'adversary' stance toward their government, denying any duty to weigh the consequences of what they print or broadcast. But incantation of the words 'the public's right to know' is no substitute for thinking."

"Someone must make judgments," Will continued. "Many journalists assert a moral as well as constitutional right to the status of — strictly speaking — irresponsibility."

The public has a real problem in exercising its right to know because it also must figure out which news sources, which writers, which broadcasters and which publications to trust.

Freedom of the press without responsibility can misinform and mislead.