



Posted on Fri, Sep. 16, 2011

A digital boost for free speech

By Eric Newton

Each year on Constitution Day, students and teachers celebrate the most fundamental laws of our republic. On this Constitution Day, they should also celebrate Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr, and other social media.

Why? Because it turns out that social media are good for the Constitution. Specifically, they're good for the First Amendment.

"The Future of the First Amendment," a new study being released today by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, reaches that conclusion. As researcher Ken Dautrich puts it, "There is a clear, positive relationship between student usage of social media to get news and information and greater support for free expression rights."

Dautrich, of the University of Connecticut, has done four major national surveys of high school students on First Amendment issues. He surveyed 12,090 high school students and 900 high school teachers for the latest.

The findings are exciting. Fully 91 percent of students who use social networking to get news and information daily believe people should be allowed to express unpopular opinions, compared with 77 percent of those who never use social networks to get news.

Do social media make you a First Amendment lover, or do First Amendment lovers just use more social media? I think both are true. Students using cellphones to text, tweet, blog, and Google are finding out more about the world and the connection between social media and freedom.

The survey also shows students' use of digital media for news and information is growing. Since 2006, it has doubled, with three-quarters of those surveyed getting news from social media several times a week.

Appreciation for freedom is improving along with that. The proportion of students who say the First Amendment "goes too far" has fallen from 45 percent in 2006 to just 24 percent.

Scholars say court decisions reflect long-term changes in public attitudes. As Judge Learned Hand put it in 1944, "Liberty lies in the hearts and minds of men and women; when it dies there, no constitution, no law, no court can save it." Since young people represent the future of American public opinion, they are the real overseers of the future of the First Amendment. That's why we survey their attitudes.

Not all the news is good this year. While more students understand that government can't censor the media in this country, nearly 40 percent still don't. While more students say they think about the First Amendment, most still don't.

Even so, when the numbers start to move in the right direction, it's cause for celebration.

Do we have teachers to thank for recent improvements in First Amendment attitudes? Not really. Fewer students say they get First Amendment instruction in school than in our last survey. And only 30 percent of teachers say they are teaching the subject.

I'm afraid many teachers are a drag on First Amendment learning. The survey says most don't support free expression rights in a school context. They don't think school papers should print controversial articles. They don't think students should post about school on Facebook. And they mostly think social media hurt teaching.

To their credit, though, teachers say there should be more digital media literacy education in schools. I agree.

The dawn of a digital age has dramatically changed the way we consume news and information. Students are adapting to these new tools faster than adults, using them for networking, news, and to better appreciate freedom. Maybe we can learn something from them.

Eric Newton, senior adviser to the president of the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, collaborated with Ken Dautrich on four First Amendment surveys.

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