

News Record

ELIZABETH, N.J. — TUESDAY, MAY 3, 2011

World Press Freedom Day

The world can't be free without a free press

WAGNER COLLEGE NEWS SERVICE

In many countries — but certainly not all — World Press Freedom Day is observed on May 3.

The United States has long held the freedom of the press as one of its cardinal values, enshrining it in the very first amendment to our government's founding document, the Constitution: "Congress shall make no law ... abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press."

Our founding fathers believed that a vibrant free press was essential in curbing the tendency toward tyranny of a strong central government.

Time and time again, America's free press has rooted out corruption and malfeasance in our government — for instance, when two dogged investigative journalists at the Washington Post reported on how a corrupt president had conspired to cover up a break-in perpetrated by his campaign staff at his opponent's political headquarters. The Watergate investigation ultimately forced President Nixon to resign from office in disgrace.

Freedom of the press, so essential in maintaining a form of government that can be trusted by the people it serves, is by no means a universal value — making the observance of World Press Freedom Day even more important.

To get some perspective on press freedom, we talked to Claire Regan, a Wagner College professor who is uniquely qualified to teach journalism.

In addition to teaching, Professor Regan is a working journalist — the associate managing editor of the Staten Island Advance, current president of the New York State Associated Press Association, and a 2004 Ethics Fellow at the Poynter Institute, a professional school for journalists.

Regan teaches her students at Wagner that journalism is a noble calling that is essential for a free, self-governing society.

"Probably the most noble part of being a journalist is being able to raise awareness of critical issues," she said. "You need freedom in order to be able to do that."

To contrast the freedom American journalists have against the conditions many journalists in other countries face, Regan told us about one of her heroes, Russian reporter Anna Politkovskaya.

As a journalist for the newspaper Novaya Gazeta, Politkovskaya wrote about the brutal killing of civilians by pro-Moscow forces in the ongoing conflict between separatist Chechnya and the Russian Federation. She was once arrested and subjected to a mock execution by security forces in Chechnya, and came close to death on another occasion in an apparent poisoning attempt.

Yet Politkovskaya denied being particularly brave, saying in one interview, "The duty of doctors is to give health to their patients, the duty of the singer to sing, and the duty of the journalist is to write what this journalist sees in reality."

In October 2006, the 48-year-old Anna Politkovskaya was shot to death in her apartment building's elevator. Five years later her killers, widely believed to be associates of the Russian security agency, have still not been brought to justice.

"In the United States, we take for granted our freedom of the press," said Professor Regan. "We shouldn't. It's too precious — to reporters, and to society."

Wagner College is a U.S. News & World Report Top 25 regional university on Staten Island in New York City.