On Campus

First Amendment Institute Established at Columbia

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Jameel Jaffer (Shaul Schwartz)

This spring, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation and Columbia University announced a $60 million initiative to promote freedom of speech and of the press in the digital age. The Knight First Amendment Institute at Columbia University, an independent nonprofit funded equally by the foundation and Columbia, seeks to preserve and advance First Amendment rights through research and education and by supporting litigation that news organizations may find too costly to pursue alone.

“The First Amendment is not self-executing; only people can make it what it has become, through our attitudes, actions, and, more pointedly, through the courts,” said President Lee C. Bollinger in announcing the creation of the Knight Institute. “In

the past, news organizations pursued and won key court cases defining free expression. But such cases can be enormously expensive, and many media — both established and new — are increasingly hard-pressed in the current economic environment to support First Amendment legal action.”

The Knight Institute will be directed by Jameel Jaffer, previously the deputy legal director of the American Civil Liberties Union. Jaffer, who was at the ACLU for fifteen years, has litigated some of the most significant post-9/11 cases relating to national security and civil liberties. These include constitutional challenges to gag orders imposed under the USA Patriot Act, surveillance conducted by the National Security Agency, the denial of visas to foreign scholars based on their political views, and the sealing of judicial opinions issued by the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court.

The institute will also fund research, fellowships, publications, and lectures aimed at educating the legal community about how First Amendment principles ought to apply to new technologies. “I am excited about this opportunity to build an organization dedicated to a mission that’s so essential in a free society,” says Jaffer. “Columbia and the Knight Foundation have made an extraordinary commitment to protecting and expanding freedom of expression and of the press in a constantly changing digital environment.”

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