The New York Times v. Sullivan case was a very significant case that paved the way for freedom of the press, actual malice standard and allowing reporting of civil rights campaigns. The Supreme Court’s decision on this case empowered and protected journalists and gave them the confidence for reporting in the future. The NYT v. Sullivan case empowered and protected a free press. As this decision was made fifty years ago, the question is where does Sullivan stand today? Looking at the New York Times Co. vs. United States, Chandler vs. Florida, Food Lion and Gertz vs. Robert Welch Inc., journalists are protected under the First Amendment thanks to the New York Times v. Sullivan case.

In 1971, the New York Times got a hold of a document that discussed government decisions about the Vietnam War. These papers are known as the Pentagon Papers. The US government requested that the New York Times would not publish the documents because the papers could endanger the US national security. However, the New York Times appealed and said that preventing publication violated the First Amendment. The Supreme Court ruled 6-3 in favor of the New York Times. This case is very important for journalists and their right to a free press. However, the court’s decision also encouraged journalists to report wisely and responsibly. This case related to Sullivan because the Supreme Court voted in favor of journalism. This case happened seven years after Sullivan and goes to show that the Sullivan case paved way for journalists to be able to report scandalous stories and be protected by our government.

When the supermarket, Food Lion, was rumored to be selling bad meat and fish, Primetime Live sent reporters to go undercover as employees as a Food Lion store and secretly film what goes on behind the scenes. The reporters got video evidence that Food Lion was redating fish, grinding expired meat with new meat and covering expired chicken with barbeque sauce to mask the smell. In the Food Lion case, Food Lion appealed publication damages but they had to prove libel. However, Food Lion could not bypass the New York Times standard if it wanted publication damages. Food Lion would also have to prove actual malice but since the footage and the statements that ABC made were all true, Food Lion had no way of proving this to the court. Over all, the court decided that there would be no publication damages because everything that was reported was true and that the damages were done by the story and not the fraud, breach of the duty of loyalty, trespass or unfair trade of practices.

Robert Welch, Inc. was the publisher of a magazine that spread views of the John Birch Society. The magazine is called American Opinion. The article stated that Communist sympathizers were trying to frame police officers and started a libel for private individual’s case. A Chicago police officer was convicted of murder and the local attorney, Elmer Gertz, represented the victim’s family in court. The magazine’s article had multiple misstatements about Gertz who was said to had framed the police officer. Gertz sued for defamation and had to prove to the court that the magazine acted with actual malice. Gertz said that he was a private person and not a public figure so he only needed to prove negligence or fault in his case. However, the Supreme Court reasoned that public officials and public figures have more access to the media which means that they can better counteract false statements than private individuals. This case is in favor of journalists because the court set a standard for private individuals. The court said that an individual state could define an appropriate standard of liability for a journalist who makes false statements in a story about a private individual. This is an important case for journalists after the Sullivan case because a journalist can be protected under their state laws when publishing a story about a private individual rather than a public official or public figure.

Chandler v. Florida was a case that took place in 1981. Two Miami Beach police officers were convicted of committing burglary, grand larceny and possession of burglary tools after breaking into a local restaurant. The trial court had agreed to allow cameras in the courtroom but the two officers objected to the media presence, stating that the media attention would make for an unfair trial. The Supreme Court sided with the trial court’s decision of keeping the cameras in the courtroom and decided that the defendants did have a fair trial under the sixth and fourteenth amendment. Today, cameras are still allowed in the courtroom (in Rhode Island, the decision is left to the trial judge) and has allowed journalists to capture famous footage such as the O.J. Simpson and Rodney King Trials. I think that this decision was influenced by the Sullivan case because journalists were able to record the trial and have it for reporting purposes for the public.

In conclusion, the New York Times v. Sullivan case has been a huge influence for multiple cases dealing with freedom of press and a journalist’s right. Justice Robinson said that the New York Times vs. Sullivan case was the most significant Supreme Court decision in his lifetime and I believe it was because it opened a whole new world for journalism and allowed reporters to publish stories that are riskier than ever before. Sullivan allowed journalists to be protected under the first amendment and allowed journalists to be confident in their stories and source gathering. By looking at the Food Lion case, Chandler v. Florida, Robert Welch, Inc. v. Gertz and New York Times v. United States, today Sullivan still has a great impact on press stories that go to the Supreme Court.  For the future, I believe that Sullivan will still be brought up in decisions for court cases and I also believe that as the face of journalism evolves, court decisions will start to evolve as well.