

**Remarks of Tony Snow
Upon Receiving Freedom of Speech Award
From The Media Institute
Friends & Benefactors Awards Banquet
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Thank you for this award. I am not quite sure why I have received it, but I'm not inclined to ask or complain. Instead, I'll express my gratitude by giving the First Amendment a good workout for the next few minutes.

First, a confession: I love the news business. I spent 28 years in newspapers, television and radio, and no doubt will return in some fashion to all three.

Few professions are as stimulating, unpredictable or fun. At its best, journalism serves as an unending graduate school – a place where one constantly must learn new things, meet new people, encounter everything from garden-variety evil to shimmering new advances on the intellectual and cultural scene, and stand on history's sidelines, while someone pays you for the adventure. That's a great deal by any standard.

The First Amendment, as others have noted, serves as the foundation for the enterprise, and supports reporters in their quest for truth – or at least for serviceable facts that in time might lead them toward some reasonable facsimile of truth.

We also hear that the First Amendment is under siege. I think that's true. I don't believe anyone here would disagree with the proposition that the quality of public discourse isn't what it once was or that it presently achieves levels of excellence and depth that it desperately needs to reach.

Yet, while it may be tempting to blame the usual suspects – the government, interest groups, angry factionalists – those forces frequently have always tried to restrict the free flow of ideas, and they always have failed.

They're not the culprits here. Instead, there's a new and unexpected menace on the block: The media.

Let me explain. American journalism finds itself in a highly unusual predicament. In the early days of this nation, the press was wild, untamed, and omnipresent. Papers sprouted everywhere, and not even Ben Franklin could resist the temptation to turn his printing presses

into devices for spreading gossip, maligning political enemies, and entertaining readers with items ranging from the important to the grandly weird.

Then came a period of consolidation and gentrification. Moguls controlled major media outlets and a handful of elite institutions – the New York Times, The Washington Post, The Wall Street Journal and the three television networks – shaped and defined not merely what counted as news, but what counted as acceptable opinion. The press lost its Wild West flavor and became what Tom Wolfe described as “a Victorian gent.”

Lately, we have returned to the Wild West, thanks to the advent of new media, and nobody knows quite how to handle it. Ideas and controversies are erupting from every pore of American society – from blogs, talk radio, internet news and chat sites, and online video forums. The rich no longer have a monopoly on distributing ideas and views; everyone can do it, and millions are.

Technology has democratized the media. You can get whatever you want somewhere on the net, including a lot of attention-seeking rage. In fact, hysteria seems to have become something of a driver in certain quarters of the blogosphere.

Political rhetoric has turned nasty, childish, and very personal, especially on Capitol Hill, and Americans are sick of it. Hotheads seem to be enjoying a false spring of fame. And members of the mainstream press are scratching their heads and asking, “What’s going on here?” Why are the nation’s newspapers hemorrhaging readers? Why are the television networks losing viewers? Why has cable news suddenly hit still water? What is going on? Don’t Americans care about the news?

Well, of course they do: The problem is, they don’t think they’re getting news – and they’re right. Three factors explain the sudden crisis facing once-mighty keepers of the First Amendment flame.

The first is sheer smugness. Reporters and editors for three decades have sneered at accusations of bias, as if the claim were novel – it is not – unthinkable – it is not – or false – which it also is not.

The major media organs in this country have become purveyors of conventional wisdom – generally, conventional liberal wisdom.

The Roper Organization conducted a poll after the 1992 election and discovered that 93 percent of Washington political reporters voted for Bill Clinton. Only 2 percent identified themselves as “conservative.”

Subsequent surveys have indicated a similar spread in party affiliation, which makes the Washington Press Corps the most reliable Democratic voting bloc in the nation.

This is not a smear or a criticism. It is a fact, and it’s worth examining. My theory is that liberal – Democratic – sympathies flourish among reporters for very practical reasons. Democrats ran every major institution in Washington for 62 years – between 1932 and 1994. That’s the longest string of effective one-party rule in the history of democracy. Reporters knew that to get news, they needed to cultivate the people who made the news – who shaped legislation, who passed the laws, who peopled government departments and agencies – in other words, the people who really pull the levers in Washington. They needed to know elected officials, staffers, bureaucratic gnomes – the vast bulk of whom were Democrats.

Year in, year out, reporters and sources worked together. Over time, many became friendly, if not friends. They attended the same parties. Their kids went to the same schools. They shared stories of their ambitions and fears. They developed empathy for one another.

Reporters knew liberal arguments inside and out, because they heard them all the time from their sources. Meanwhile, they remained strangers to conservative viewpoints, even (or especially) during the heyday of the Reagan Revolution.

I will never forget receiving several calls the day after the surprising Republican landslide in 1994. Political reporters called me, a known conservative in the journalism fraternity, seeking introductions to the exotic breed known as Republicans.

The scribes harbored no personal animosity toward conservatives. They just weren’t used to dealing with them. They felt the need to approach them cautiously, with the blend of suspicion and fear you might feel if someone asked you to stroke a Gila monster.

That presumption of strangeness lingers today – again, not out of malice toward the right, but as a product of blank incomprehension. Reporters as a whole understand one side far better than the other – and thus have slid out of touch with a nation that still sees itself pretty evenly divided on political matters.

The ideological sameness of major news organizations is bad journalism, bad business and bad for the First Amendment, which was designed to foment ferocious debate – not orthodoxy.

In response to this neo-orthodoxy, competing media have arisen to fill the void. These include talk radio, conservative blogs and internet sites, and the like. It is telling that Fox News – which from experience I can tell you stresses the importance of telling both sides – gets hammered just for giving conservatives equal time and equal respect.

Some of these new media and their practitioners are every bit as blinkered as the old media – often by design. There's a pretty vigorous market these days for over-the-top hate-mongering on both sides of the ideological spectrum. Predictably, however, that sort of stuff is beginning to wear thin, and really shrill combatants are beginning to lose market share. The growing national discontent over the tone of political debate ought to make it clear that it's silly to ignore competing ideas. To do so is to lose a chance to learn.

A free press is supposed to relish and weigh ideas, not discard some simply on the basis of polite fashion. It's a good thing to walk in someone else's shoes, to try to see the world as they do. The quest permits one to look at issues and events from different angles and perspectives, to encounter new ways of thinking, and to add to one's mental toolkit. It makes an already interesting job even more stimulating, and can make smart reporters even sharper when it comes to understanding national stories and trends.

But smugness isn't the only threat to the First Amendment. Political correctness also stands in the way. It routinely imposes the kind of censorship journalists ought to hate most – prior restraint. It forbids the mere contemplation or acknowledgment of views that ruffle the feathers of self-appointed arbiters of the acceptable. These grandees usually find some kindly explanation for their banning of forbidden topics and thoughts – the communications in question hurt people's feelings, invoke stereotypes, that sort of thing. But let's be clear: the First Amendment didn't create allowances for censors.

The Constitution's authors would have grasped the utter frivolity of political correctness. It isn't necessary. American society has a wonderful record of rejecting demagogues and verbal exhibitionists, without prodding or intervention from self-appointed scolds. The votaries of hatred and division occasionally have their day, but never for long. Americans have little

patience for tub-thumping maniacs, and they reject demagogues with regular and ruthless efficiency.

In fact, the average Joe is far less susceptible to shabby fads than the PC police, who have become so ubiquitous and whose ministrations have become so absurd that even my elementary-school children are making fun of them – and not because Daddy has prompted them to do so.

Unfortunately, some in the press have adopted PC etiquette and practice without coercion from a Grand Inquisitor. There are questions some media organizations simply don't ask. For instance, is racism as bad as it was two decades ago? The answer is no. If you doubt it, check out your kids. They're refreshingly devoid of the bigotry and self-consciousness that characterized our youth. This is an immensely positive development, but nobody dares acknowledge it. It's forbidden. And so race-baiters generate headlines, while healers and innovators toil unnoticed.

And what about conventional wisdom? For months, the media avoided asking about progress in Iraq. Despite repeated reports from the field that Iraqis had turned against al Qaeda, the news seldom made it into newspapers, and almost never on front pages. Last week, the military reported that civilian deaths in Iraq had hit their lowest point since 2003. U.S. and Iraqi deaths and casualties similarly had declined. So what led the paper the next morning? Stories about Blackwater. The statistics that put the war in perspective were relegated to the back pages of the Washington Post and in some publications, to oblivion.

A vigorous press must be one in which reporters challenge their own sympathies and assumptions as aggressively as they challenge the sympathies and assumptions of others. Unfortunately, that too seldom happens, with the consequence that opinion-mongering has driven out straight news.

Let me turn to an entirely different threat to the First Amendment: The endless news cycle. Americans love news. We can't get enough news, and we now can slake our thirsts at any time by jumping on the internet or watching cable news.

These new media specialize in speed – instant reportage, instant analysis, instant controversy. Unfortunately, the print media haven't adjusted very effectively to the new competition. Rather than trying to develop a market for deeper analysis of the rich debates swirling in this nation, newspapers have decided to play copycat. Reporters who once had the luxury of trying to drill into stories now have to file hurried one-paragraph updates for the online editions of the papers.

The business has become a full-time sprint, with air time and top-of-the-fold placement at a premium. These competitive pressures have pushed news organizations toward three kinds of easy stories that always can be updated, and can be counted upon to generate interest.

First are process stories. These pieces let journalists share tiny shards of information about the inside operations of the government: “Today, the president had orange marmalade with his toast. In a dramatic departure from past practice, the toast was white.”

“Speaker Pelosi will meet at 3 pm with a delegation from Iraq.”

Or: “We have a rumor about the next departure from the White House!”

These are all quaintly interesting, but largely trivial. Reporters nevertheless find themselves under constant pressure to accumulate and disgorge factoids, so they can be the first to recite them on camera, publish them online – and, of course, leak to Drudge.

Conflict stories provide a second source of low-hanging fatal fruit. Example: Harry Reid calls the president a liar. Reporters get word of the insult on their blackberries. They demand an immediate response from the White House press secretary.

This is not a hypothetical scenario. It happens all the time. I have stood at the White House podium, watching reporters unholstering their blackberries and looking at urgent communications from the home office. Within moments, the questions come like hurled fruit: Everyone wants to know about some utterance or event that took place or were reported after the briefing itself began – things about which I knew nothing, including the larger context. The point of such questions isn’t to get content and context right: It’s to play gotcha – to make public officials respond to insults and insinuations rather than ideas and facts.

Now, far be it from me to derogate the heat-seeking one-liner. Insults have a long and proud place in American politics. One of my favorites took place years ago, when drug testing was all the rage. A pretender to Fritz Hollings’s seat demanded that the old boy take a drug test. This prompted Hollings to reply: “I’ll take a drug test just as soon as my opponent takes an I.Q. test.”

That, my friends, is a wonderful insult. It’s also a lousy surrogate for analysis or information.

In one of those horrid quandaries that now form the bane of editors’ existence, consumers claim to despise such stories. They’re lying, of course – as ratings and web hits demonstrate.

People love juicy, titillating, humiliating, crass, gross and slimy tales – always have. Millions will stare slack-jawed at car ambling down the 5 in Los Angeles, or gobble up the latest about Brittny and her babies. Sensational stories are incredibly tough to avoid – but they shouldn't form the bulk of Washington reportage.

The third news-cycle pox: Polls. Polls provide a ripe source for conflict because pollsters regularly reduce complex questions to queries of mind-numbing simplicity: Do you want America out of the war? Would you like it if the government guaranteed health care? Should the government guarantee full employment? Should we spend more on education? Should we cut your taxes?

The answer to each of the above is, “Well, sure!” But note that the questions are asked in a vacuum, as if the object of a respondent's desire could be had for free, without consequences. Pollsters routinely ask if people would like something unobtainable – guaranteed employment, for example – and politicians take the wistful answers as holy writ.

Someone opposed to a guaranteed employment scheme can expect to be accused of supporting joblessness or hating the poor, at which point the mud would fly on both sides – all because of a poll question based on an idiotic assumption. Dumb questions beget dumb debate.

In short, media organizations have been seduced by process, conflict and polling stories, and along the way have sacrificed the tradition of looking for creative ways to understand and explain the world. They have become hostages to the easy and shallow stuff and strangers to stories that touch people's hearts and characterize their actual lives.

Indeed, journalists seem to have developed an elitist contempt for the daily concerns of viewers, listeners and readers – and the public has noticed. This explains the across-the-board slippage in newspaper circulation, and viewership of broadcast and cable news.

This brings me to the final dangerous factor – a cramped view of the First Amendment itself. News organizations gleefully embrace the First Amendment's protection of a free press, but what about the two other freedoms – of religion and assembly? The three are linked indissolubly. The assail one is to weaken the other two.

But the journalistic establishment doesn't seem to appreciate this fact. Religion in this country – Christianity especially – has been redefined as a menace, rather than a bulwark of our social order. Schools no longer acknowledge Christmas, for instance, but they celebrate Kwanzaa.

The onslaught against traditional religion is palpable and real. Despite this, religion flourishes – revealing a profound and growing disconnect between the journalistic establishment and the public, not to mention the political elites who have put many of the strictures in place.

The press does a horrible job of discussing religion – reporters are less likely to attend worship service than the public generally, and are less likely to take a skeptical view of those who want to constrain religious expression. In some cases, one can almost hear a muffled cheer when a court or organization puts a muzzle on those who merely want to express their religious beliefs.

Similarly, we spend too little time defending the rights of people to assemble freely, including those determined to make perfect fools of themselves by expressing outré views.

Campaign-finance reform is an abomination to the First Amendment. It limits the ability of citizens to express political views during political campaigns, thus taking the attack on free assembly into realm of electronic communications. The McCain-Feingold law has restricted the right of people to express themselves in the most basic public forum of all – the political town square.

Predictably, campaign-finance reform did what it always does: It reduced the power of average citizens to affect political campaigns, and strengthened the hands of the wealthiest among us. McCain-Feingold destroyed political parties and educational and organizational institutions, drove out moderating voices, lifted the lid on spending – there's talk of a billion-dollar presidential race next year – and seems only to have enhanced the standing of cranky billionaires.

I've raced through a lot of issues here, but you get the point: The media have embraced practices and policies that actually erode First Amendment freedoms and weaken the practice of journalism itself.

Now, I'll conclude with good news and bad news.

First, the bad: The public hates politics and the press. People don't trust either institution, even though they sustain our system of free intellectual enterprise. Those of us involved in either profession – or in my case, both – shouldn't complain. We need to ask how things reached this state, and how we can fix the problem.

Now the good news: I don't think any of the weaknesses I have cited are inherent or irreversible. I have spent nearly 30 years of my life in the business of journalism, and with luck, I'll get 30 more. I love the business and the people who work in it.

My experience as White House press secretary confirmed what I always have known: Reporters are curious, aggressive, eager to learn, and interested in ideas. They share many of the frustrations I have mentioned this evening. They want to range wider, dig deeper and explore more broadly than they can today. They hate censorship. They love what they do. They see it as a noble calling. They want to get better at their jobs, and they want to grind their competitors into dust.

They know the public has become sick of vicious political discourse and the media who pass it on. They know the country teems with new kinds of stories, incredible innovations, novel ways of attacking the problems we all confront.

But everyone needs to realize that the days of the old-fashioned newsroom are over. It's a different world out there – wilder, more competitive, and much less predictable than even a decade ago.

Rather than cursing innovation, journalists need to embrace it. They need to get out of their cubicles and plunge into the task that drew most of us into the business in the first place – the challenge of engaging a chaotic world filled with willful fellow human beings; a world of joy and agony; of triumph and crushing failure; a world united by love and atomized by hatreds and aggression,

The democratic media provide new tools for examining our world, new competitors for reporting about that world, and new reminders to the press establishment that markets really do work – and people want better than they're getting.

I come not to bury journalism, but to celebrate and challenge it. It's a cliché that every crisis presents an opportunity, but it's true: The democratization of the media is a good thing. We now face competition from all quarters – including from people who have specialized expertise that journalists lack. We ought to welcome the new participants in the game and learn from them. They should do the same with us.

There's an old boast in the business – that the job of a journalist is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. The thing is, we never realized that we were becoming The Comfortable – with good pay, job security, and access to movers and shakers all around the

world. We need to cast off our coziness -- venture away from safe stories and presumptions and into the wilderness of new topics, new ideas and new sources of information.

In that quest lies the possibility of fulfillment and joy – and the hope of keeping alive the text and the spirit of the First Amendment.