

**Remarks by Frederick J. Ryan, Jr.  
Accepting The Media Institute's  
2019 Freedom of Speech Award  
October 7, 2019**

Thank you very much, Pam. It's a pleasure to be introduced by such a respected and accomplished journalist – especially one who is a long-time friend.

Pam and I have known each other since her first job in broadcast journalism. It makes me think about something legendary businessman Lee Iacocca used to say when talking about the secrets of his success: "I hire people brighter than me, and then I get out of their way." Well, Pam, I think your career has shown that to be good advice.

On behalf of The Washington Post, it is an honor to receive this award, especially in the presence of so many champions of a free press.

As you well know, we are living in challenging times for those who depend on the work of a free press. Every day, journalists across the globe encounter censorship, harassment, and violence. In every part of the world, authoritarian rulers are increasing their grip on the press, trying to prevent reporters from holding the powerful to account.

The Washington Post is sadly familiar with these attacks. Our reporter Jason Rezaian was arrested and held inside Tehran's notorious Evin Prison for 544 days, even though he had committed no crime.

We are grateful that he is now free and back at The Washington Post, where his writing often focuses on the importance of press freedom. And, I'm delighted and honored that Jason is with us tonight.

For the last seven years, Austin Tice, a freelance journalist whose work was published in The Washington Post, has been held captive in Syria. We will not rest until he is released and returned safely to the United States.

And last week, I was in Istanbul to attend a memorial service for Jamal Khashoggi, the Washington Post columnist who was brutally murdered one year ago by an attack squad dispatched by the crown prince of Saudi Arabia.

Authoritarians in the Middle East are not the only threat to independent journalism. As we are now witnessing, technology presents another. Digital innovations have opened up incredible opportunities for journalists. But, they are also being used to undermine public trust in legitimate news by sowing confusion about what is real and what is not.

The speed at which information now races across the Internet enables “fake news” to be “weaponized” – strategically targeted to achieve a desired effect – be it to move financial markets, damage reputations, inflame regional tensions, or influence political campaigns.

An MIT study found that fictitious stories spread faster and more widely on Twitter than the truth.

Some have suggested that we have now moved into a world devoid of facts, or where there are “alternative facts.” But we must be insistent: Facts matter. The truth matters.

Historically, those dedicated to factual, independent journalism – those committed to telling the truth, no matter where it leads – could count on support from the government of the United States. America has always set the standard for press freedom around the world. Sadly, that is no longer the case.

Today we are witnessing purposeful, calculated attacks meant to discredit the very integrity of journalism. The attacks are conducted by people who would prefer to wield power free from accountability and out of the public eye.

Threats to take away reporters’ credentials, or intentionally spreading misinformation, are part of a deliberate effort to undermine an independent press and other institutions essential to our democracy.

And fair and honest reporting by respected news organizations that contradicts a leader’s narrative and pokes holes in his claims gets dismissed as “fake news.” The goal is to challenge the veracity of true but unfavorable reporting so that the public will ignore it and tune out.

That truth may not always be what a leader wants to hear. But there is an enormous difference between “unfavorable news” and “fake news.” It is wrong to conflate them. Doing so is an attack on the truth – and it is corrosive to our democracy.

As long as there have been presidents and reporters covering them, there have been institutional and, at times, personal tensions between them.

You can believe me on this: I served in the Reagan White House, and I can remember a few stories we were particularly tense about. (In fact, I think some were in *The Washington Post*!) Throughout our history, though, these tensions have been a healthy and important part of our democracy.

But today’s environment is entirely different – in ways that should concern all of us, regardless of our political views. When the President of the United States publicly attacks the press as “enemies of the people,” it crosses a line.

After all, “enemy” is a word to describe those we use force against. For vulnerable and misguided individuals, these are more than just words – they can be a call to violence.

When the president uses these words, it is dangerous and reckless. He should stop labeling his fellow citizens as “enemies” immediately – before it leads to physical harm to innocent Americans.

He, and leaders across the globe, must understand that journalists are not “enemies of the people.” They are servants of the people – and of the democratic principles that empower the people.

These challenges, and the many others faced by journalists around the world, are daunting. The work journalists do has, perhaps, never been more difficult. But it has also never been more necessary.

Every day, journalists are courageously putting their lives at risk because of the conflict zones they cover, the powerful people they challenge, or the wrongdoing they reveal. They are refusing to be intimidated into silence. They are still asking that next question, digging into corruption, and demanding responsibility for crimes and abuses of power.

It is our duty to stand up for these men and women. Their safety must be protected. Their questions to the powerful must be answered. They must be supported and defended as they go about the work that safeguards our freedoms.

I would like to congratulate the Media Institute for your relentless defense of free speech and a free press. Your support for outstanding journalism, and your advocacy on behalf of First Amendment principles, play a vital role in preserving our freedoms.

On behalf of everyone at The Washington Post, let me express deep appreciation for the work you do.

And thank you for this award.