

**Remarks by David L. Cohen
Accepting The Media Institute's
2020 American Horizon Award
October 14, 2020**

Thank you for your kind words, Cesar.

And my thanks and appreciation to The Media Institute for honoring me with the American Horizon Award. Although I wish we could all be together in person, I stand before you as a “virtual” honoree – and feel very humbled.

This recognition is made all the more special knowing that past recipients include the late Ralph Roberts, the much-admired founder of Comcast who I was fortunate to know as a friend, a mentor, and a leader. I’m also honored to be in the company of Cathy Hughes, Founder of Urban One, and a foundational media leader and inspiration to me personally, and Decker Anstrom, former President & CEO of The Weather Channel, and former President of NCTA as well as a former Comcast director, and one of my mentors and role models.

In the 40 years since The Media Institute began, I don’t think this annual Free Speech America Gala has ever been held in a national environment quite like the one we’re in today.

Basic principles of free speech are being challenged – in multiple ways – and by multiple forces – by foreign governments distorting the “truth” through social media and by wildly disparate views of the “news” by varying outlets. Divisiveness and contention are at an all-time high in our politics and our national discourse.

Now, you might say that was predictable. After all, incivility and intolerance have been on the rise for at least 20 years. Especially in our national politics – as we stand only three weeks away from the 2020 presidential election.

Beyond politics, we’re also feeling the effects of two viruses that weren’t on the national radar screen when the year began.

There’s the Coronavirus, the likes of which we haven’t seen in a hundred years, with over 200,000 American lives lost due to this pandemic.

And there’s the virus of racial inequity – which has been with us for 400 years. But it’s been brought into sharp focus in 2020, opening the door for a difficult but deeply needed national conversation.

A lot of that conversation so far has come in the form of public protest. Most of that protest has been in keeping with what the First Amendment calls “the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.”

But what we've seen in some cities is anathema to free speech. It reminds me of the classic law school hypothetical about yelling "fire" in a crowded movie theater. That's not protected speech. Nor is nor is the unlawful destruction of property in the guise of protest. And, I'm sure the peaceful majority of protesters feel the same way.

Of course, while racial equity is a compelling issue, it's far from the only one that feeds passionate disagreements.

But all the divisiveness in our society sends one very clear message to me personally, and to Comcast NBCUniversal.

(pause)

Preserving the First Amendment and the responsible exercise of freedom of speech has never been more important.

At Comcast NBCUniversal, we think of ourselves as a First Amendment company.

Virtually everything we do is rooted in First Amendment values. Especially the value reflected in the theme of tonight's event – "A Voice for Everyone."

For our company:

- Those values are reflected in the way we cover the news.
- In our efforts to build a society where all people feel empowered to share their thoughts and opinions.
- And in our desire to make our company a place where our commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion assures a diverse set of voices guiding us into the future.

Of course, the journalists in our news division are the front-line players in the Free Speech arena. They practice and preserve the principle of free speech 24 hours a day.

And every day, they navigate a minefield of sensitivities to offer a balanced and accurate picture. It's not easy. By introducing our audiences to people with different views, the news people are extending our free speech franchise.

But what good is freedom of speech if you don't have access to the multiplicity of voices or a voice to speak with?

In today's tech-driven world, people without high-speed Internet connections are left essentially voiceless. They don't have the digital tools or literacy needed to hear the diversity of voices expressing opinions or to express themselves in today's modern world.

Contending with life in America without benefit of the Internet is guaranteed marginalization.

You not only lack a voice, but you also lack access to education, employment, and social services that most people take for granted.

Yet, hard as it is to believe, today in America, the world's richest and most technologically advanced nation, millions of people still live on the wrong side of the digital divide. The unfairness and pain of this has been laid bare by the Coronavirus pandemic.

At a time when the pandemic is forcing many schools into online learning, 17 million American children live in households without high-speed Internet connections.

And the families lacking these connections are overwhelmingly low-income people of color. This only exacerbates America's problem with galloping inequality.

The inequity of the digital divide is what drove Comcast to launch Internet Essentials, our leading Internet adoption program for low-income families that Cesar mentioned earlier.

We were frankly outraged by the unfairness of disparate access to the Internet in America. And we felt a responsibility to take action.

In the years since then, we have worked with local non-profit partners across the country to provide more than 8 million low-income people with high-speed Internet service in their homes. Equally important is the digital literacy training we initiated to help make them knowledgeable and responsible Internet users.

But obviously, as the pandemic has exposed, there remain too many families left without a digital voice. We have taken steps to expand Internet access targeted to families who do not have access to remote learning opportunities being offered by their schools. And we look forward to working with the rest of the industry and government at all levels to continue to meet this critical need.

In the interest of assuring a voice for all Americans, we're also an enthusiastic participant in encouraging a full count for the 2020 Census and full voter participation in the 2020 election.

Of course, as a First Amendment company, we'll continue to encourage free speech in every way we can, consistent with The Media Institute's mission and values. Because, as Martin Luther King Jr. warned many years ago:

“Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.”

Thank you all very much.