

**Remarks by Norah O'Donnell  
Accepting The Media Institute's  
2021 Freedom of Speech Award  
October 20, 2021**

Thank you, Gayle, for that very kind introduction. As you know, I do believe that the quality of your life is determined by the quality of your relationships – and Gayle, having you in my life has been a joy and being able to sit at the table with you for so many years was such a privilege. So, thank you.

I also want to thank The Media Institute for awarding me the Freedom of Speech Award. I am so incredibly honored and I'm very humbled by this recognition. Journalism is a calling and a passion, and I feel very fortunate to call it my career. I also want to thank CBS News, including our president Neeraj Khemlani and our D.C. bureau chief Ingrid Ciprian-Matthews. They have given us the support to do the type of journalism that creates change in the world.

You know, my parents taught me at a very young age that information and knowledge are power. And I think that's the message behind these awards. Journalism is imperative to a healthy democracy. Walter Cronkite, who was in this seat for 20 years ... well, not literally this seat, but you know what I mean.... Cronkite was considered the most trusted man in America, and he famously said that journalism is what we need to make democracy work. I tell people that a lot because it's a motto I live by. And Cronkite was right.

But guess what? That idea originated with our country's founding. Our Founding Fathers enshrined the role of a free press within the Constitution. They believed it was so important that they made it the very First Amendment, not the Eleventh Amendment. They understood that the power of a free press and our role in holding leaders and the powerful accountable was so important.

In fact, it was Thomas Jefferson who wrote: "Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter."

Clearly, they didn't have some of the newspapers that we have today. But you understand, right? Jefferson felt so passionately about the importance of the press that he thought a government shouldn't exist without it. And I agree. Our country requires a knowledgeable electorate. And I believe it's journalism's job, a journalist's job, all of our jobs to help inform people by getting answers and information.

I've been lucky to sit across from decision makers and ask tough but fair questions for Americans. And as a journalist, it's my job to ask questions that further understanding. It's not about me, it's about the person I'm interviewing, about the audience, about the issue at hand, and trying to further understanding. Today, journalism is more important than ever, especially in the

era of the 24-hour news cycle where people can't even agree on the facts. So, it's vital that journalists provide information and not affirmation.

I don't think I'm going out on a limb when I say the past year and a half have been hard. We here have covered a pandemic. We've covered a social justice movement, a racial reckoning, an impeachment, an election – one we're still talking about a year later. And of course, an insurrection and an assault on the beacon of our democracy, the U.S. Capitol.

It's been exhausting, but we here at CBS and the "CBS Evening News" have not tired. This is when our work is most important and truly matters. I look forward to fighting for Americans every day for years to come. So, thank you from the bottom of my heart.