

**Remarks by Ken Burns
Accepting The Media Institute's
2022 American Horizon Award
October 19, 2022**

Thank you, Pat.

Your friendship has been a tremendous gift. Your commitment to a free press – and your leadership in public media – an inspiration.

Good evening, everyone.

I'm honored to accept this extraordinary recognition.

Thank you to The Media Institute for the award and for the work you do. I am humbled. Free speech – a free media – is the foundation upon which this country was built and re-built, many times over.

Mark Twain said, "It is by the goodness of God that in our country we have those three unspeakably precious things: freedom of speech, freedom of conscience and the prudence never to practice either of them."

Fortunately, you prove him wrong.

I'd also like to thank The Media Institute Chair, Dick Wiley, and President, Rick Kaplar. And I'd like to acknowledge the company I keep tonight, the recipient of the Freedom of Speech Award, Lester Holt, and our keynote speaker, FCC Commissioner Nathan Simington.

I've been told that my colleagues and I are in the business of raising the dead. We have many tools that help us do that. But mostly we're able to bring them back to life through their words. They speak to us across time.

The greatest invention of all time is not the computer, or the cell phone or other devices we find it impossible to live without today.

It is the printing press – the machine that allowed our ancestors to share their words with increasingly more and more people. It is the newspaper, the magazine, the book.

It is our right to speak freely, without fear of censorship or attack, and to challenge those with power.

But words – and the freedom to articulate them – are not safe, even when constitutionally protected, when so many of us do not share a vocabulary anchored in facts.

We must be tireless in protecting the First Amendment – something you all do so well. But equally we must speak about what we share, forever reminding people, even those we disagree with – *especially* those we disagree with – that our heritage of reason, facts, research, reporting and science – is critical to our democracy.

Without a common vocabulary – a shared belief that facts matter, truth matters – even a free press will soon be on life-support.

As many of you know, I just completed a film, with my colleagues Lynn Novick and Sarah Botstein, on the United States and the Holocaust.

It was not easy for foreign correspondents to report what was really happening in Germany during this period. Sources were often too frightened to talk. Reporters were reluctant to quote witnesses by name for fear of betraying them to the secret police.

The Nazis controlled the German press and exhorted foreigners to “report on affairs in Germany without attempting to interpret them.” What that meant, the American journalist William L. Shirer wrote in his diary, “is that we should jump on the bandwagon of Nazi propaganda.”

But the best American journalists did write about what was going on, however much the Nazi government tried to hide it.

Given that, why didn't we respond sooner? The media, while not always front page, were certainly covering what was happening in Europe.

What we saw then – and what we see today – is that a free press alone – and don't get me wrong, it is hugely important – is severely hindered when there isn't a shared history, a civic language that recognizes that what we have in common as a people trumps what divides us.

We need to celebrate the First Amendment and free speech, and a free and independent media, but we also need to work harder to make sure that people engage with the press and can distinguish between fact and fiction.

I have long thought that history is something we can gather around together, no matter how contested it may be. The novelist Richard Powers reminded us, in his wonderful book *The Overstory*, that no argument, regardless of how good, can change someone's mind. Only a story can do that.

The battles we see today in communities around the country are not about the past. They are about the present and a largely nostalgic past.

We must come to the defense of our teachers across the country and make sure that they are free to do what they do best – teaching our kids about a very complicated country where the struggle to bring our values to life – including our First Amendment rights – is our shared heritage.

We need to become more vocal about the good that is America. But we can only do that if we also talk about the bad – and talk about it together.

I think the crisis of democracy we face today is as great as any crisis we've confronted in our country's history.

Every civic organization, every group that is dedicated to upholding the values we cherish, must come together to defend the right of a free press – and the right of free speech – but we must do it in a way that equally educates and engages so we have shared stories that allow us to do this together.

Thank you for your time tonight. Thank you for this wonderful honor.