

**Remarks by Lester Holt
Accepting The Media Institute's
2022 Freedom of Speech Award
October 19, 2022**

Harry, I don't even know where to start after an introduction like that. To say I am touched and honored is an understatement. Folks, you should know that those nice things that Harry just said about me could easily apply to himself as well. Minus the part about the bass playing and "The Fugitive" – those are mine. Harry, though, is a gentleman and friend and I am proud to know him.

What makes this job so special is working with people I consider Hall of Famers like Harry who bring it every day and elevate our profession. It's my privilege to lead this amazing team.

I want to acknowledge and congratulate my fellow honoree Ken Burns. Ken, you have done so much to bring to life this country's history and its journey, and it's a privilege to share the stage, or in this case, digital space, with you. I would also like to recognize FCC Commissioner Nathan Simington for taking the time to speak this evening.

Let me of course also thank The Media Institute for this high honor.

It's important that we recognize the foundations of a free, democratic society. And certainly, a free and independent press is a vital pillar, grounded in our freedom of speech. And so I am grateful for what you do and your commitment to this basic right.

But of course we go about our business in a world where freedom of speech is bandied about in ways we might not once have imagined. Where the question is not just over whether we can yell "fire" in a crowded theater, but now, what you can scream from a social media post or a TV pundit's chair.

But I'm not going to spend these few minutes on "woe is us" – but rather on what we can do to stimulate civility and helpful dialogue. We all by now know that truth is under assault, and gaslighting has become a convenient shield against facts and reality, capable of undermining what we in the free and independent media stand for.

But if we are going to examine threats to free speech, we need to examine those self-inflicted threats. How often do we self-censor, because the cost of sticking one's head up can be social decapitation?

And that puts at risk our ability to have debate. I'm not talking about shouting matches or Twitter shaming or gaslighting arguments. I'm talking about informed debate – about issues, expressions and exchanges of ideas and policies, a willingness to listen, all of which I believe, and some might say naively, we are still capable of having even in these divided times. There are still those who just want to know more. People not of the extreme but of the curious. Where

the seeds of responsible dialogue can find fertile ground outside the verbal killing fields of conspiracy theories and threats.

But it means we must find a way past the fear of expression, the fear of being honest, fear of public shaming, and the fear of saying sometimes, “I don’t know.”

There are intelligent conversations to be had, and as a network evening news program, appointment television for so many, we are in a unique position to foster those conversations and inform. When I’m anchoring the broadcast, I often think to myself, guessing which story will be the one that folks are talking about around the kitchen table during the commercial break or after the show.

For the record, I don’t consider myself naïve. I understand emotions are the x-factor in our national dialogue. We can’t underestimate emotion’s power to stifle broader reasoning. But as journalists we have to believe there is another side to this national chasm. And aspire to be part of rebuilding the bridge.

Freedom of speech can be more than freedom to be the loudest voice on the soap box. It can also be freedom to listen. Freedom to be critical thinkers. That is why I am a big advocate of news literacy efforts that are aimed at helping, especially younger viewers, to process what they are hearing and seeing and recognizing mis- and disinformation for what it is. Promoting critical thinking skills can be the safety net of a free and independent press.

Part of our mission each day as a broadcast is to elevate the national dialogue. Of course, centered on facts, but also on stories that take you there and offer perspective. Stories, that, if we can lower our shields just a bit, might make people think hard about their world view, or at least understand the complexity of issues, and why others may think differently.

That’s why, as Harry noted in the introduction, I spent a few days in a Louisiana maximum security prison at Angola – not as a stunt, but to expand the understanding of what mass incarceration looks like and its impact. I didn’t want to tell people what to think, but what to consider, in this case as we weigh crime and punishment.

Journalists are granted a unique platform to inform and enlighten. Sure, we can report on those food fights or live in the eye candy of the viral spat of the day, but the issue we face today, the issues, are really hard. War in Ukraine. Nuclear threats. Immigration reform. COVID policies. Challenges to democracy. They deserve, no, they demand our attention. We have to be part of the solution.

Thank you again to The Media Institute for this award. And thanks to all of you for logging in and listening. I hope it will spark a conversation. Goodnight.