

“Why Innovation Needs the First Amendment”
Remarks by Gary Shapiro
Accepting The Media Institute’s
2025 Freedom of Speech Award
October 29, 2025

Thank you, Sam, and thank you to Dick Wiley, Rick Kaplar, and The Media Institute for your leadership and commitment to keeping the First Amendment the backbone of our democracy!

I am so deeply honored by this recognition. And it’s especially meaningful to receive it from an organization that has fought for decades to preserve our First Amendment freedom.

And thank you, Sam, for your generous introduction. Your leadership – from heading the Washington Bureau at CNN to now leading C-SPAN – reflects your lifelong dedication to transparency and helping Americans understand what’s happening in our Nation’s Capital.

What happens in Washington matters not only to us but to the world. Our democracy and our freedoms have long been models for others. For some 250 years, our ability to argue, debate, clash, and ultimately come together has not been a weakness – it’s been our superpower!

The First Amendment was the *first* improvement to our Constitution for a reason. It ensures not only that we speak, but that we can *hear* one another.

Free speech is America’s secret sauce. It has fueled our economy, expanded opportunity, and made us the most innovative nation in history.

It’s no coincidence that the world’s greatest breakthroughs in technology, from the microchip to AI to the internet, happen here. Why? Because it’s nearly impossible to build technologies that answer questions in societies where asking questions can get you punished, silenced, or even jailed.

Both parties have at times flirted with censorship – trying to control what Americans can see, say, and share.

Our First Amendment stands as a shield against that impulse, protecting not just comfortable or polite speech, but speech that unsettles the powerful. That’s the point.

Franklin Roosevelt, while leading the nation through the Great Depression and World War II, famously said, “To announce there must be no criticism of the President is not only unpatriotic and servile, it is morally treasonous to the American public.”

The right to criticize our leaders isn’t optional, it’s the beating heart of American self-government.

At CTA, we've lived by that principle. We fought back against the Stop Online Piracy Act (SOPA) and the Protect IP Act (PIPA) when they threatened to break the open internet. Thank you, Congressman Issa, for leading that supposedly unwinnable battle.

We've challenged efforts to tear down Section 230, the law that protects free expression online. And we continue to stand up against regulatory overreach that risks freezing innovation and handing the future to our global competitors.

These fights share a common thread: incumbents versus innovators.

Entrenched interests try to weaponize government to block the future – and innovators, startups, and consumers push back to build it.

Dissent keeps us honest. Debate keeps us strong.

Before I go further, I want to pause to recognize our other honored guests – Hans Vestberg and FCC Commissioner Olivia Trusty, both thoughtful leaders and genuinely great humans who have been CES speakers in good and tough times.

I also want to thank some special friends and allies here tonight – people who share this conviction that progress depends on open dialogue and the courage to speak truth:

First, thank you Congressman Darrell Issa, our former Chairman and a champion of innovation, and longtime defender of free markets and free expression;

Mary Brady, President and CEO of The Economic Club of Washington, who convenes conversations that bridge policy and business.

I want to thank our board members:

Dr. Ximena Gates of BuildWithin, whose work as an immigrant has created jobs and is opening doors for the next generation of innovators;

Pat Lavelle, a lifelong champion of American manufacturing and free enterprise and CTA standing up for important principles even if they disagree with government;

Debbie Taylor Moore of Stealth Mode, pushing new frontiers in cybersecurity;

John Taylor, a Media Institute supporter and great CTA volunteer who diplomatically bridges the gap between broadcasters and tech companies.

I also want to thank:

Joel Poznansky of Columbia Books and Information Services, whose leadership demonstrates how values and innovation can coexist;

Bob Schwartz of Constantine Cannon and Gary Slaiman of Slaiman Consulting, two voices who understand that strong advocacy and open discourse strengthen democracy, even if it's by those with different views and new ideas;

Gigi Sohn of Georgetown Law, founder of Public Citizen and a tireless defender of a robust internet and informed public;

Jennifer Taylor of NVTC and Jay Timmons of NAM, both leading voices for innovation, industry, and the workers who make progress possible;

Jeff Joseph of Starlight Public Affairs, a double CTA alumnus, respected tech policy strategist, and communications leader;

And, the Honorable Don Upson of GBEF – an early mentor and visionary who invited me to serve on the world's first Internet Commission, whose work transformed the internet into a global platform for business and allowed anyone with a device and broadband to share ideas and create businesses.

I'm grateful to each of you for your partnership, your friendship, and your courage in standing for open dialogue and opportunity. You remind me daily that defending free speech isn't a solitary act – it's a shared responsibility.

Our nation's greatness doesn't come from uniformity – it comes from diversity: of people, of immigrants, of ideas, and of perspectives. We are not a nation bound by one history, religion, or culture.

But we share the belief that individual rights matter, government must be limited, and free enterprise and free expression are inseparable.

The First Amendment is our infrastructure – our invisible highway of ideas. It allows us to speak, to hear, and to listen. To challenge, but also to learn.

And as we confront rapid change – AI, global conflict, tariffs, economic change – it will be tested again and again.

Our challenge is to defend it not only in law but in spirit – with kindness, courage, and curiosity.

We can – and must! – disagree without dehumanizing. Argue without silencing.

If we do that, America will continue to shine as President Reagan's "shining city on a hill" – its light fueled by the enduring flame of free speech.

In closing, I want to thank The Media Institute for its unwavering principled defense of the First Amendment. You are the guardians of the most powerful technology ever invented – the free exchange of ideas.

You remind us that speech – even uncomfortable, controversial, inconvenient speech – is the foundation of all innovation, discovery, and freedom.

As long as we protect the freedom to speak, we protect the freedom to think, to build, and to dream.

And that means America's best days are still ahead.

Thank you.