Remarks by Jack Abernethy
Accepting The Media Institute's
2026 American Horizon Award
October 27, 2026

Thank you so much to The Media Institute for this award, and for the essential work you do on such a crucial issue.

And thank you, Mo, for those kind remarks, and for your commitment to free speech and civility at Georgetown.

Whatever success I've had in this business comes down to a simple, two-part formula:

First: Surround yourself with the best people.

Second – and this is crucial: Take credit for their successes, and blame them for your failures. I know it's hard to believe by looking at me, but I have been doing this for a long time.

In the summer of 1987, I worked as a young cameraman at the NBC station right here in Washington, D.C., learning the streets and covering whatever story the assignment desk threw at me.

On one shoulder was a heavy camera, and on the other shoulder was an even heavier VCR-type box. Washington in the late '80s was an intense, fascinating place to learn local news.

I covered the AIDS crisis when people were frightened and searching for answers.

I covered the crack cocaine epidemic, walking neighborhoods directly impacted by the devastation.

I staked out Mayor Marion Barry.

And I covered the Washington Redskins during the NFL players' strike. Back when they had a different name – and actually won Super Bowls.

Yes, that was a long time ago. Those four very different stories taught me something fundamental:

Local news is where the great issues of our time become personal.

A national health crisis becomes a story about your neighbor.

A national drug crisis becomes a story about your neighborhood block.

Government accountability means asking tough questions of the mayor who runs your city.

And a football team brings an entire community together.

Local journalism connects people to the place they live, to the institutions that serve them, and to one another.

Nearly 40 years later, that mission has not changed.

When natural disasters strike, like the recent devastating fires in Los Angeles, our stations covered it continuously for over a week – often without commercials.

That commitment is why I accept this award on behalf of the thousands of dedicated people working at our stations today.

Now, having a long career gives you perspective.

I've lived through one technological revolution after another. Every new technology arrives with fear, institutional resistance, and a sentimental attachment to the way we have always operated.

Attachment to old workflows... old business models... regulatory structures designed for a world that no longer exists… or an emotional attachment to hardware or devices.

For example, I really, really miss my BlackBerry. I hate typing on glass – unless I've glued on my acrylic nails.

But here's what I've learned: The way we do our jobs changes, but the fundamental need for what we do does not change. And more often than not, technological innovation has given us new and better ways to do those things.

Streaming allows us to transcend legacy broadcast limits. When the main channel is locked up with sports or network programming, we now stay live on every major streaming platform.

Right here in D.C., Fox 5 is approaching 24/7 live news across broadcast and streaming. They produce more live news than any station in the country, and more than double their nearest local competitor. What does all that live capacity actually deliver?

Obviously, we are all over breaking news. But it also breaks the tyranny of the clock.

When a massive school redistricting battle hit Montgomery County, traditional TV reduced those concerned parents to an eight-second soundbite.

Instead, Fox 5 gave those parents 20 uninterrupted minutes and a powerful platform to explain how the policy affected their kids, and to have their voices heard.

Entrenched bureaucracies often rely on local reporters moving on to the next story. With Fox 5 giving those families an unfiltered forum and a large audience, they were able to form coalitions and pack large hearings by the hundreds.

That is what modern journalism does: It gives citizens the platform and the power to answer back.

Today we are confronting AI. In an era of automated content creation, trust becomes our single most valuable asset.

Distant algorithms cannot replace human editorial judgment... a real local presence... or the credibility earned every single day in our communities.

Trusted local news is the vital counterweight to algorithmic noise.

That brings me to something else I believe strongly:

Free speech and free enterprise are deeply interconnected. Independent journalism requires financially healthy news organizations.

That means recognizing scale as a strength, not a threat.

For years, regulatory policy relied on "diversity of voices" – the idea that simply multiplying the raw number of outlets in a market automatically guarantees a healthier public square.

Well, look at social media today. It gave us millions of "voices." But it didn't give us more local reporting or emergency coverage. It gave us noise... outrage... and distrust.

A crowd of fragmented voices cannot replace two or three financially strong, trusted news organizations with the resources to investigate, verify, and serve a community. Marginally profitable ones often cannot take on powerful interests, and will not.

Scale isn't the enemy of free speech – it's the engine that pays for it.

I remain deeply optimistic about local journalism. I've seen this business adapt before, and the need for what our people do – and the trust they hold – is as great today as ever.

Because at the end of the day, a nation doesn't stay informed from the top down – it stays informed from the ground up.

Thank you again for this wonderful honor.