‘Tribune of the People’
Keynote Remarks of Patrick Butler
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America’s Founders could not have been more clear:

“Congress shall make no law … abridging the freedom of speech or of the press.”

The Founders were rebelling against the notorious “licensing laws” and sedition acts by which Great Britain had sought to restrict press freedom in colonial America for more than a century.

And they knew that a well-informed electorate was essential to their experiment in self-government.

They enshrined this constitutional protection with no expectation that the news media of their day would be fair and balanced.

Indeed, the mission of most 18th century newspapers was to persuade their readers to embrace a particular point of view, freely mixing information with opinion.

James Madison himself, the author of the First Amendment, established his own newspaper – the *National Gazette* – for the express purpose of criticizing the Federalist policies of Alexander Hamilton and what Madison viewed as the “monarchical tendencies” of the Father of Our Country.

President Washington, though never bringing official action against the press, privately complained bitterly and often about the “scurrilous scribblers” covering his Administration.

His successor John Adams would take this criticism much further, with the passage of the Sedition Act of 1798.

This infamous Act, mirroring the very same British laws the First Amendment was intended to guard against, made it a crime to publish false, scandalous, or malicious writing against the federal government, the Congress or the President.

The arrest and prosecution of prominent journalists soon followed, and it took Adams’s defeat in the election of 1800 to nullify this noxious law.

Other attempts by other presidents to restrict the freedom of the press would punctuate the history of our country in every generation.

Abraham Lincoln would suspend publication of 300 newspapers and imprison their publishers for criticizing his prosecution of the Civil War.

Woodrow Wilson would champion the Sedition Act of 1918, which made it a crime to use "disloyal, profane, scurrilous, or abusive language" about the United States or cause anyone to view the American government with contempt.

Franklin D. Roosevelt proposed the Communications Act of 1934, asserting the government's power to regulate broadcasters' news content under a sweeping "public interest" standard that overshadows journalism to this day.

This is all a long way from "Congress shall make no law," but it is uncomfortably clear that official challenges to freedom of the press are almost as old as the Republic itself.

What is new, and more troubling, is that the American people now harbor serious doubts about the need to protect this freedom.

The Pew Research Center has recently found that:

- Public trust in national news organizations has fallen by 20 percentage points in the past 10 years, to just 56 percent.
- 57 percent of Americans now express low confidence in journalists to act in the public's best interests.
- 53 percent say it is more important to prevent inaccurate reporting than to protect the freedom of the press.
- 60 percent say the government should be able to take down a news story if it poses a risk to national security.
- 48 percent say most of the news they come across is not relevant to their lives.
- And fewer than 20 percent of Americans under 30 now follow the news regularly.

In short, we are losing the public's trust, losing the public's attention, and losing the public's support for the freedoms we hold dear.

Hundreds of millions of people now devote several hours a day to social media, but their exposure to real news is mostly through accidental encounters while they search for something else.

In the past 20 years, America has lost 3,500 newspapers, traditionally the best source of local news and information.

Nightly news programs have developed a curious fascination with cars crashing into stores, dogs being rescued from rivers, and other ephemera that seem better suited to YouTube than to a useful survey of the day's events.

Ted Turner's vision of a global journalistic enterprise where "the news is the star" has evolved into a forum for spirited commentary on the news, only occasionally interrupted by the news itself.

And so we face a communications conundrum:

We can literally hold the world's accumulated knowledge in the palm of our hands, yet reliable, useful, relatable information on the story of our lives seems increasingly out of reach.

But there are reasons for hope, and some are represented in this room. Here are four:

- Deep South Today is creating a new non-profit model of Pulitzer Prize-winning local journalism in a growing number of southern states.
- America's public television stations, the most trusted chroniclers of life in the heartland, have attracted more than a million new donors since losing their federal funding last year.
- The *New York Times*, celebrating its 175th anniversary this year and the very definition of legacy media, has reinvented itself to serve a worldwide audience of 13.5 million digital subscribers.
- And the most watched, most honored, most profitable news program in television history – "60 Minutes" – continues to demonstrate the power of good reporting in its 60th year on CBS.

Last year, "60 Minutes" reported on a pop-up clinic – staffed entirely by volunteer health professionals – caring for hundreds of working poor and uninsured people in my home state of Tennessee.

These desperate patients had driven hundreds of miles, slept in their cars, and waited in line for hours in freezing temperatures to receive the care they needed but could not afford.

The heroes of this story were the 887 volunteers from dozens of states who provided these services through a long, exhausting weekend.

The result of the story was a tremendous outpouring of contributions from people across the country to support this life-saving work.

And the unspoken but unmistakable moral of the story is that there must surely be a better way to provide health care to the citizens of the richest nation in the world.

This is journalism at its best: a story well told, a subject of intense human interest, a free press acting as the tribune of the people.

This is the news media intimately connected with the cares and concerns of those we serve.

This is the bond of humanity that artificial intelligence and the algorithms of social media can never replace.

This is the work of public service that America's founders thought it essential to protect.

Our watchdog role – holding those in power to account – remains the purpose of a free press that Americans value most.

And we must continue to play that role, whatever the challenge, whatever the risk.

But there is more to modern life that politics and punditry, crashing cars and dogs in peril.

The American people are telling us tonight that they have concerns and interests we are not addressing, that they expect more of us if we are to regain the trust and salience we've lost.

Forty years ago, when the Times Mirror Center for The People & The Press began gauging public opinion of the news media, 80 percent of Americans expressed approval of the work we do on their behalf.

The most trusted journalist of that time, perhaps of all time, Walter Cronkite, registered a believability rating of 92 percent.

Mr. Cronkite took his government watchdog role seriously, but as a son of middle America, he was always more interested in what we the people were trying to achieve as a nation of free citizens.

As Nick Clooney said at his memorial service in 2009, "It wasn't important that we trusted Walter. What was important was that Walter trusted us."

So did the Founders, which is why we have a First Amendment, why we have a country.

May we do our best to serve and protect them both.