Remarks by Jan Neuharth
Accepting The Media Institute's
2026 Freedom of Speech Award
October 27, 2026

Thank you so much, Barbara.

Congratulations, Jack and Patrick.

Thank you to Mike and everyone at The Media Institute. I'm deeply grateful for this honor.

Being with you in this room, I can't help but think about my father, Al Neuharth, and his unwavering devotion to a free press. He started delivering newspapers at age 11 – and would be a journalist for the rest of his life.

He kept a newspaper box in his office. On it were inscribed the words he had written in a letter to readers in the first edition of USA TODAY, declaring that the paper hoped "to serve as a forum for better understanding and unity."

That was the mission behind the full-color images and user-friendly style: to unite people through news that everyone could access.

The busy parent making breakfast, the business traveler far from home, the teacher waiting for class to start: They were beneficiaries of the reporting – but not just that. My father believed they were beneficiaries of the press freedom that underlies it. He wanted readers to *see themselves* in that freedom.

So, in 1991, he founded Freedom Forum with a vision similar to USA TODAY's: Take something that may seem distant or abstract – in this case, our First Amendment – and make it personal.

You may associate Freedom Forum with the Newseum or know us for our press freedom work, but, in fact, we are committed to all five freedoms in the First Amendment. For the very reason that the framers put them together: because they go hand in hand. One cannot endure without the others.

And press freedom plays an essential role in sustaining them all.

Your freedom as members of the press – *everyone's* freedom to benefit from your reporting – depends upon everyday Americans recognizing these five freedoms as a package deal and appreciating how that plays out in their daily lives.

But we have work to do on that front. This year in our annual "The First Amendment: Where America Stands" survey, 91percent of Americans said the First Amendment is vital. But that appreciation starts to break down the deeper you go.

Nearly one in four said the First Amendment goes too far in the rights it guarantees. That's the highest level we've recorded since we started the survey almost 30 years ago.

Only 11 percent of those surveyed could name all five freedoms.

A quarter could not name a single one.

That contradiction is striking. Americans overwhelmingly say they believe the First Amendment is vital, yet many don't understand what it protects.

That's the central problem Freedom Forum is trying to solve. And that's why we feel it is essential that our work begin with meeting people where they are.

Let's take a hypothetical young person today.

They begin with a belief.

Let's say they are passionate about human rights, but they don't much care for organized religion. When they hear "freedom of religion," it may sound old fashioned. Like something that exists to protect others. We want them to see that freedom of religion protects *them* every bit as much – what they believe, and what they don't.

This young person has freedom of speech to voice their beliefs, the best known of the five First Amendment freedoms. But we want them to appreciate how that right applies not just to them but to the person who disagrees with them. Because if free speech doesn't exist for others, it won't survive for them.

Thanks to First Amendment protections for a free press, this young person has the freedom to access information and share their views. Without freedom of the press, they can have beliefs, but they can't be fully informed. They can speak their beliefs, but they can't freely publish them.

A free press enables speech, belief, and understanding to take on *scale*. And scale is essential to the final two First Amendment freedoms.

Freedom of assembly allows this young person to gather with others who see the world the same way they do. It allows them to build common cause with thousands – or millions.

And they can take that common cause and urge their government to act. Freedom of petition is the least-known of the five First Amendment freedoms according to our survey but considered vital by the framers.

Taken together, these five freedoms are *the enduring promise of democracy*. They allow us to move from personal belief to society-wide impact. Because the promise of the First Amendment is not that these freedoms belong to some of us, some of the time. It's that all five freedoms belong to all of us.

That's why, regardless of what a person believes, what they say, or how they vote, Freedom Forum aims to raise First Amendment awareness by connecting with people through what matters to them.

Such as at Freely Fest, our annual music festival celebrating the power of music and the freedoms protected by the First Amendment.

This year, it produced an unforgettable moment. Brandon Flowers of The Killers choked back tears as he spoke on stage of the role of free speech in his career.

He asked everyone to hold up their phone lights to represent this sacred right. And he told the fans in that packed arena that it is up to all of us not to let the light go out.

We didn't script it; it just happened. And it felt true. Because in that arena, thousands of people weren't being taught about the First Amendment; they were experiencing why it matters.

My father understood that a freedom has a future when someone sees a future in using it.

On that newspaper box in his office, he could have kept a reminder of circulation numbers or the skeptics he had overcome. Instead, he kept a reminder of purpose. Of his vision that freedom of the press isn't just a right belonging to journalists. It is a freedom belonging to every American. And the best way to protect that freedom is to help people recognize what it makes possible in their own lives. That belief continues to guide Freedom Forum's work.

Today, I keep these words of my father framed in my office:

"When the voices of democracy are silenced, freedom becomes a hollow concept. No man or woman should be sentenced to the shadows of silence for something he or she has said or written."

The First Amendment stands between us and those shadows of silence.

I thank each of you for exercising and defending our First Amendment freedoms and helping safeguard the enduring promise of democracy.