

Media Institute Free Speech Award
Remarks by Senator Christopher Dodd
November 18th, 2014
Washington, D.C.

Thank you, Carl, for that very kind and generous introduction.

Had I not spent 30 years as a United States Senator practicing my filibuster technique, I would simply say thank you and sit back down. But unfortunately for all of you, we Senators have never learned to turn down an opportunity to give some remarks.

There is no better way for me to begin these words than by saying thank you to the Media Institute.

There are few things more precious to us Americans than freedom of speech. It has been said, that it is this right upon which all other rights rest.

Free speech is what guarantees that each of us has the opportunity to truly pursue the life, the liberty, and the happiness, Thomas Jefferson so eloquently and artfully declared in the Declaration of Independence.

Freedom of speech is what ignites American individualism and what makes us willing, both as individuals and as a nation, to speak out and protest when wronged; to stand up and fight when facing injustice. It is a fundamental right vital to an engaged and passionate society – and yet one that is far too rare throughout much of the world.

Throughout my thirty six years in elected public office – first as a member of the House of Representatives then as a United States Senator – I committed myself to protecting this fundamental American right. What I discovered, however, was that while the principle and concept of free speech was universally supported in the abstract that same support declined when confronted with fear.

That was the case in 2004 when I introduced the Free Speech Protection Act which would have created a federal shield law protecting journalists from facing the choice of either revealing their confidential sources or going to jail. Fear that the criminal and the corrupt would escape, overweighed the passion of free speech.

That is why the following year when I worked with the U.S. embassy in the Sudan, as well as a local Sudanese attorney to free one of my constituents – a photojournalist documenting the plight of refugees who was detained, interrogated, and tortured as a spy – we encountered a society that completely rejected the right of free speech.

And in 2010, working with my Democratic House colleague Adam Schiff and my Republican colleague Mike Pence of Indiana, we passed legislation signed into law by President Obama - the “Daniel Pearl Freedom of the Press Act” which sought to protect reporters around the world from not only freedom of speech violations, but the violence they are too often confronted with when seeking out the truth.

Today, I am no longer in public life, yet my passion for and dedication to freedom of speech remains as strong as ever. I am proud to serve as Chairman and CEO of the Motion Picture Association of America and to be part of an industry which is not only a beneficiary of, but a steadfast champion for freedom of speech.

For over a century, American filmmakers and the stories they tell have not only been sources of entertainment, but also educators and instigators of social change. That change comes because we have been free to tell unvarnished stories without fear of government reprisal or penalty.

Stories that have challenged institutions, both public and private; stories that have criticized and questioned society's norms and long-held beliefs; stories that provoke us to question long established practices and traditions – first in film then in television.

The audio-visual art form has produced some of the most provocative and stimulating challenges to our country since our conception, and I might add that in most cases we are the better for it.

Imagine what thoughts must have passed through the minds of audience members in the 1940's when Gregory Peck exposed the bigotry and hatred of anti-Semitism in "A Gentleman's Agreement;" or the first time that audience watched Sidney Poitier and Katherine Houghton together as a couple in "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner."

And at a time when our nation was still gripped with fear and uncertainty by the AIDS epidemic, Denzel Washington and Tom Hanks bravely tackled misconceptions about those living with the disease, as well as homophobia, head on in the award-winning film "Philadelphia."

The film "To Kill a Mockingbird," the television mini-series "Roots," and with last year's Oscar-winning Best Picture "12 Years a Slave," exposed Americans to the irredeemable sins of bigotry and slavery we have all read about in school textbooks, in a powerful, visceral way.

But these powerful stories, and countless others like them, have helped us to confront ourselves, challenge ourselves, and, in the end – in most cases – bring us closer to that more perfect union, outlined by our forebears.

None of this would have occurred had it not been for our reverence for free speech. Without free speech, the American film industry would be a shadow of itself and America would be a far different country.

Because films that have been brave enough to tackle important social and moral issues are often the ones that endure. They may not always depict our nation or its institutions in the most flattering light, but because they have been honest, authentic stories, they have contributed to the betterment of our nation.

I think it is fair to say that no other nation on earth provides artists more freedom to express controversial – and sometimes even offensive – subjects.

This is not the only reason American films enjoy such global loyalty, but it is a major contributing factor. And I am proud to add that for the past 90 years the MPAA has enjoyed a very long and proud tradition of championing free speech. For almost a century, filmmakers have worked unfettered by government censorship. Our audiences – not the government – decide what movies they can see.

The same cannot be said everywhere in the world. In far too many places, creativity and free speech are outlawed. In none of these places would you see a film telling the story of government corruption as Hollywood did in “All the President’s Men.”

No lasting or consequential creative community can survive where its practitioners are not free to actually create and tell the stories they believe need to be told.

I wholeheartedly believe that respecting and defending the speech of people whose views you do not share, is the best test of whether a society truly embraces free speech.

To what length would you go to defend and protect the speech of someone or some group with whom you disagree entirely? This belief underscored a significant amount of my work as a United States Senator, and it has been the single most significant factor in the success of the American film industry.

The American film industry exists because of free speech – and free speech has never had a stronger ally than the American film industry.

Thank you for giving me a moment to express these thoughts – and to re-affirm our continued determination that on this, our generational watch, the clear light of free speech will not dim.