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Acceptance Speech

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As prepared for delivery

Thank you, Norm. Thank you, Dan. Thank you, Scott. Thanks, Sandy and all my other former colleagues on the CPJ Board. And thank you all.

In recent days, I thought a lot about the 16 previous recipients of the Burton Benjamin Award, and re-read the words from this platform of some of them.

Their words are inspiring. Their deeds are awesome. I am humbled and deeply honored to be among them.

The first honoree, in 1997, was Ted Koppel of ABC, who for a significant time brought serious reporting to late-night TV with sustained high quality. The most recent, last year, was Alan Rusbridger of *The Guardian*, who has the vision to be a leader in reinventing journalism for the digital age and the courage to challenge both his government and ours on the extent to which they spy on us. Together, and with those in between, they inhabit an arc of profound change that I want to reflect on briefly tonight.

The arc actually goes back to 1981, when Michael Massing and other young writers with overseas experience founded CPJ. American journalists were still basking in the reflected glow of *All the President's Men*, the Robert Redford/Dustin Hoffman movie that five years earlier had won three Academy Awards and anointed Bob Woodward, Carl Bernstein, and, by implication, all reporters as rock stars with typewriters.

Yes, typewriters. Woodward and Bernstein's reporting in *The Washington Post*, based partly on tips from anonymous sources, helped drive President Richard Nixon from office. This came only a few years after the Pentagon Papers case, in which the Supreme Court denied Nixon's motion to bar *The New York Times* and the *Post* from publishing leaks of the Papers, which detailed abuses during the Vietnam War.

U.S. journalists, in other words, were riding high. What Michael and his young colleagues saw was that journalists in America had it far better than those abroad, particularly in repressive

states. Americans had the protection of the First Amendment and the backing of wealthy, committed, and lawyer-stocked news organizations. In vast parts of Asia, Africa, and Latin America, reporters, editors, and broadcasters could be bankrupted, beaten, thrown into jail, or killed by powerful people offended by what they wrote or aired.

As the experience of our incredibly courageous honorees tonight demonstrates, in many places around the world the life of a journalist who is determined to find and report the truth is no better today than it was 32 years ago. Reporters, editors, photographers, and publishers are still threatened, beaten, and murdered, often with impunity. The core mission of CPJ is just as critical as it ever was—in many respects, more so.

What has changed is the position of us, American journalists. We are still far better off than our beleaguered cousins in danger zones abroad, of course. But financially, I don't need to tell this group of the hammering our industry has taken in the last decade: publications shrinking or even closing, journalists bought out or laid off, beats shrunk or eliminated.

And now, more recently, we are facing new barriers to our ability to do our jobs—denial of access and silencing of sources. For the starkest comparison, I urge any of you who haven't already done so to read last month's report, commissioned by CPJ and written by Len Downie, former editor of *The Washington Post*. It lays out in chilling detail how an administration that took office promising to be the most transparent in history instead has initiated more than double the number of prosecutions for leaks of classified information than all previous administrations combined and the most concentrated effort at least since the Plumbers and the enemies lists of the Nixon Administration to intimidate officials in Washington from ever talking to a reporter—even to confirm the time of the middle school carpool.

As we now know from the Snowden documents, investigators seeking to trace the source of a leak can go back and discover anyone in government who phoned or emailed the reporter who broke the story. Match that against the list of all who had access to the leaked info and *voila!* It's time for the subpoenas and indictments to start rolling out. In my days editing *The Wall Street Journal*, I used to joke that no one in the Washington Bureau ever had an on-the-record conversation. Now I would have to wonder whether anyone was having any kind of conversation at all that wasn't a White House-sanctioned briefing.

It isn't just words. The White House has been barring news photographers from all sorts of opportunities to ply their craft. Routine meetings and activities of the president, of which they used to be able to shoot still and video images under certain constraints, now are often—not always, but often—off limits, according to the American Society of News Editors, which is protesting the action, along with other groups. The administration has invited news organizations to pick up images handed out by the press office or from the White House website—sort of like saying “Just print the press release,” as some corporate PR people used to say to me years ago when I asked for an interview with the CEO.

Sandy Rowe noted in announcing the Downie Report last month that the founders of CPJ “did not anticipate the need to fight for the rights of U.S. journalists who work with the protection of the First Amendment.” Limited resources, she said, had to be directed at countries with the

greatest need. Even with declining revenues at U.S. news organizations, the principal need is still abroad. But, she added, the time has come for CPJ to speak out against excessive government secrecy here at home.

As just one supporter of CPJ, I agree. If we are going to be credible admonishing abusers of journalists abroad, we can't stand silent when it is going on at home.

One last thing. I don't want to leave the impression that I'm in despair. I'm definitely not. A couple of new billionaires, Jeff Bezos and Pierre Omidyar, have put up several hundred millions of dollars in funding to rebuild one great old platform and erect an entirely new one. The greatest investor of the last half century, Warren Buffett, has been buying local newspapers. And new forms of Web-based reporting like BuzzFeed are both attracting young audiences and sliding toward profitability.

I was at first cranky the other day when BuzzFeed stole one of our brilliant senior editors at ProPublica. But then I realized his new job is to recruit half a dozen reporters and start an investigations team. For society and for journalism, we are seeing some progress.

We can't rest. We need to fight hard whenever the First Amendment is challenged at home. We need to speak out, even more vigorously than before, when journalists are abused around the world. We need to keep finding more inventive ways to fund and carry out serious reporting. And, of course, we need to keep supporting CPJ.