

Journalism, Free Speech and Media Bias in a Rapidly Changing World

*Remarks for the International Media Association for Peace
October 28, 2025*

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Good afternoon everybody. It's quite a challenge you're taking on, with this topic.

I truly applaud the high-minded intent of this webinar. There are not many venues dedicated to talking about the ethics of the mass communication media regarding the need for it to be a champion for human rights and freedom of religion, and to speak freely.

The free press also has a healing function that usually gets ignored. It has the capacity to encourage intercultural, interracial, international, inter-everything communication and cooperation in the topics a society communicates about – politics, the social order, ethical values, and... sports and entertainment news.

Of all these things, it's our core values – spiritual and community – that are central and foundational for how we view everything else.

I guess the first question has to be, do the mass communication media even have a responsibility to uphold healthy values?

It's a legitimate question.

Aren't journalists just supposed to say what happened, report the news "without fear or favor," as we say? We tell it like we see it, let the pieces fall where they may, and leave it to you good people sort it out?

That's what they taught me in journalism school... back at the dawn of time.

Impartial news pages and a vigorously opinionated commentary section is the ideal ethic for our profession.

However, even if we report in a fair and balanced way, just the act of an editor selecting some stories to print and not selecting other stories, determines what issues will end up as talking points on the national agenda. In our media-driven culture, if a tree falls in the forest and NBC, ABC, CBS, FOX or CNN and the Internet isn't there to cover it, it never happened.

A newspaper or television station is a fixed container of information that's pre-selected for you. You choose CNN or ABC or FOX or you read The New York Times or The Washington Times because you're watching, and reading content you find agreeable at some level.

The internet, however, is the wild west. It's got everything. And people come to the internet with personal standards that are all over the map.

After a while the internet turns you into a container. With all its little algorithms that keep track of where you land and they give you more of that, instead of other things. So instead of you watching the internet, the internet is watching you. It pre-selects what to offer you first.

Do you own it, or does it own you? The answers in my mind are very disturbing.

Just as when the photocopier made every person a publisher in the 1960s, the internet today makes every person a broadcaster. With audiences in the millions. And there are no governing ethics.

A great myth is that entertainment is just entertainment. Sometimes a citizen advocacy group will criticize a movie studio or record company for glorifying sex among 15-year-olds or violence in music.

People who make violent video games and violent music insist, "We don't influence anybody. This is nothing more than entertainment. You have an on/off switch and 500 channels. If you're offended, watch something else." That's a complete cop-out in my opinion.

I think the debate is pretty much finished about whether television, movies and the internet shape our values. There have been too

many instances of copycat crimes, including killings, taken from the media.

FOR EXAMPLE: Do you know what a 30-second Super Bowl commercial is going to cost in February 2026? It was \$7 million. It recently went up to \$8 million. \$8 million bucks for 30 seconds. THAT'S BECAUSE... Advertisers know about influence and they are happy to spend money to have it.

We in the news and entertainment media have used the freedom of speech protection in the U.S. Constitution to steadily push back the envelope of acceptability in the public media – year by year, decade by decade since the 1950's when even married couples on TV had to be depicted in twin beds. Which was a bit much.

We have been so successful at this erosion, that we are now at the point where the period of innocence traditionally associated with childhood has been almost completely erased.

There are some parents who have been super diligent about protecting this window of innocence for their children. Reducing screen time to an hour a day, for example, and monitoring it. They are heroes.

Here's an example of the erosion of values caused by our culture. The movie, ET, came out in 1982. Steven Spielberg's movie based on an adorable extraterrestrial guy who gets left behind on Earth. One morning, the kids are arguing at breakfast about what to do, and the character Elliott, age 10, says to his slightly older brother, "It was nothing like that, penis breath!"

To some of us, it hit like a sudden sucker punch to the gut.

The reviewers in the mainstream media praised this for its honesty and realism.

Every child in America, age 7 to 10 was sitting in the theater watching that movie. And it was NOT okay out in Lincoln, Nebraska. But this movie released it, put into the culture. The media called it honesty. Who can be against honesty? Abe Lincoln was honest.

The blame for this erosion is shared by everyone of us. The media isn't evil. The men and women of the communication media are the people next door. They are us. Their ethical values are our ethical values. The media helped erode our values, but it was we who let that happen, by our lack of attention to what is sacred in family. So let's not get all finger-pointy.

Anyway, that's where we are today. Now my question posed at the beginning is, does the media have a responsibility to support and encourage the full set of human and religious freedoms and healthy life VALUES?

I think we do. In fact I know we do. In a speech to the World Media Conference in the late 1980s, Rev. Sun Myung Moon reminded us that, before you are an editor or broadcaster, you are first a human being, with a human being's God-given responsibility to society.

We know that a great deal of the world's popular culture originates in the U.S., and it gets exported.

A general lack of critical thinking

A huge, enormous gap in our culture today is a general lack of critical thought and respectful discourse. Old time editors with ice water in their veins, who raised me in this business, used to tell me our job is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.

“Editors don’t have friends,” the late Wes Pruden, editor of The Washington Times, told me that.

If journalists go against the grain of the prevailing media trends of political thought, they can run into trouble in the friends department. Do this: get a job at the New York Times... MAGA

However, if your moral rudder is an inviolable set of principles, like say, the Ten Commandments, or John Locke’s political philosophy of God-given rights, then the temporary values of collegial friendship have to take a back seat to that.

In the American Constitutional framework there are three Estates: Executive, Legislative and Judicial. The press is commonly called the “Fourth Estate,” because its influence is *that* pivotal, *that* critical to the very survival of a free society. The Founding Fathers intended for the media to be a watchdog on the government. And if it gets corrupted by a lack of ethical imperative, and personal backbone, we’re sunk.

President Biden’s dementia for example, was well-known to the press corps before it started being widely written about. There are things you can’t not see when someone as high-profile as a

President is slipping that badly. Biden's debate with Trump was the only thing that finally forced the issue out into the open.

I do have hope for the up and coming generation of men and women in America. They are young, which is good. However, the young tend to have big gaps in their knowledge of history, which makes them targets for tragic repeats of history. They want "likes."

In New York, election day is in one week, Zohran Mamdani is the pre-election leader.

So take the issue of government-run grocery stores, one of Mamdani's promises. With subsidized lower prices, they would pose a threat to regular grocery stores.

There are legitimate pro and con thoughts on this idea, but it's an issue that needs a very, very prolonged discussion – BEFORE YOU VOTE. It needs investigative journalists with boring spreadsheets. This issue is fundamental to the quality of life of people living in New York.

I'm happy to be proven wrong, but I don't think the required intensity of debate is happening in the mainstream press in New York.

We'll see how the election goes. Personally, I hope Mamdani wins.

On the international front. And I'll close with this – the United States' two best allies in Asia – Japan and Korea have always been strongly influenced by the U.S.

Korea recently elected a President who calls himself a “democratic communist.” That’s like someone calling themselves a “MAGA Democrat.” But young Koreans are listening, and many are nodding in approval.

As soon as he took office, the newly elected President Lee began arresting everyone who played a role in opposing him. Especially mainstream Christian ministers. Korea’s a very Christian country. He raided the churches. He also raided the opposition party’s headquarters for the crime of being the opposition party. In a democracy, you’re allowed, in fact you’re supposed to have an opposition party. He seized their membership rolls, so he can take names.

He also arrested Dr. Hak Ja Han Moon, who founded Universal Peace Federation and this International Media Association for Peace, and who works tirelessly for peace and reconciliation, and is often referred to as the Mother of Peace.

They threw her into a detention cell without even convicting her of anything. She’s an 82-year-old great-grandmother who is legally blind and crippled. She has diabetes, congestive heart failure and thyroid disease. Only a couple weeks ago she was hospitalized for a heart procedure, and the likelihood of her having a stroke is high.

They put her in a detention cell with no bed. Just some blankets on the concrete floor. The entire cell is the size of a compact car. It's unheated and it's getting cold over there. Being crippled, she has to crawl around the cell on her hands and knees.

It's utterly inhumane and cruel. It's religious persecution and elder abuse. It's now blatantly obvious, the South Korean government's goal is to completely break her, or kill her, before her trial comes up.

This is horrifying to everyone who knows Hak Ja Han Moon, because as I said, she is known globally and very affectionately, as the Mother of Peace.

Religious leaders, the kind of people who tend to oppose "democratic communists," are increasingly being hauled off to prison.

President Trump has just finished making the rounds in Asia, and he is aware of what's going on in Korea. We'll see how that goes.

So those are my comments. Thank you.