

You know, we journalists can be a cynical lot.

We spend our lives rooting around in the dark side of things, exposing wrongdoing, cutting through spin, bringing bad guys to heel.

I knew one editor years ago whose staff privately claimed that her motto was: Everything Sucks. Another scorned the people who were paid enormous sums to tell us that car sales were going up when they were going down and that car prices were going down when they were going up. He called them -- with apologies to all the fine, ethical PR people in the room -- "lying cheating sacks of -- manure." I knew one reporter who covered financial crimes so thoroughly that his editor said his ideal story would read: "The world is full of bad people. Here are their names"

But we're also powerfully driven by idealism. That's what this award is about, after all. Just look at the names of those who have won it in the past -- I mean Walter Cronkite? Jim Lehrer? Gwen Ifill?

Men and women of our generation grew up in Vietnam's shadow. We saw class fighting class as cops and students clashed. Blacks fighting white, whites fighting blacks. Whole cities burned to the ground. Our country's National Guard turned against our own citizens. Our government riven with corruption and brought to its knees by lies, suspicion and malice. A pointless war that cost so many lives.

How many of us were practically driven into this business by idealism?

We were kids. What did we know? But we built our lives and careers on exposing wrongdoing. And by doing that, we played a big role in helping to keep our democracy astonishingly honest. Astonishingly free. Astonishingly dedicated to the concept that government should NOT be corrupt. That companies should make things that do what they say they will do and not hurt people. That businessmen and women and government officials in whom we place our trust should be held to account. That we are a country and a people ruled by laws and principles.

So now at a time that seems almost overwhelmed by cynicism and despair, I find myself wanting more and more to burrow back into my past -- our shared past -- to rediscover old values. To unearth the childish, naive, impossible -- yes ridiculous-- idealism that drove me -- drove us -- into this business in the first place.

Because you see these days, I find myself in an extraordinary place. Here at a job I never expected to hold. At an organization I had almost forgotten existed. Doing work I didn't know needed to be done.

Yet, today I feel a little bit like George Bailey. Because every day I get to see something I wouldn't ordinarily have ever been able to see: I can see what our country would be like -- what the world would be like -- if we didn't have the First Amendment. If we didn't have the Fourth Estate. If we didn't have you, my friends -- all of you out there in the audience and all of our counterparts all across the country.

The world that I see from this perch is a world that is less fair. Less caring of its citizens' rights -- often brutally so. In our country, we rightly care about the gap between

rich and poor -- yet in a world without a free press, there is outright cruelty as despots seize a country's assets as their own.

And just think what it is like to live in a world where the press isn't just messy, unruly and increasingly polarized. Think of a world where you can believe nothing -- nothing!! -- of what you read, hear, see in your country's media. Where every word is carefully calibrated to make you believe that up is down, right is left, bad is good, good is bad and --as they say -- resistance is futile.

How do I know? Because a world without a free press is where my colleagues and I here at VOA live every day. You know those lists that Freedom House puts out every year -- of unfree countries? Well count up roughly 50 or 60 countries from the bottom and there you have it: Our audience. China. Russia. Iran. Turkey. North Korea.

Now I know some of you secretly have doubts about VOA. I've heard them from you myself. And why wouldn't you -- I mean, after all, we journalists can be cynical. And Lord knows there is little in this town these days to suggest we ought to be less so. Yet facing down such skepticism is why I have a little mantra I use when I meet new people:

Hi there, I say. I work for VOA. Yes, we still exist. No, we don't wear felt hats and only broadcast by shortwave radio. And -- No. We don't do propaganda.

And it's true. We don't do propaganda.

And god willing, we never will.

Here's what we do do: We broadcast all around the world the uncensored version of speeches. The unheard views of opposition parties. The stories of disappeared teachers, politicians, journalists -- sometimes even whole populations. And we also show the world America in all its -- yes, greatness -- and also its flaws and faults. We are as independent as all of you are and -- again -- god willing -- we stay that way. As we say, we broadcast the First Amendment.

We do news. Current events. Talk shows. Women's programs. Health programs. Tech programs. In Chinese, Bambara, Russian. Farsi. Lingala. Hausa. Ukrainian. Tibetan. And 39 other languages, many of which I'll bet you've never heard of. I know I hadn't.

In a huge part of the world -- a bigger part than we can all bear to imagine -- we ARE the free press. Not just that, we are also the very idea that a free press can even exist.

For a free press is nothing more than an idea.

Every day here at VOA we ask people to put aside their fears and prejudices and do the best they can to honestly broadcast both the official line of dictatorships and that of those who oppose it. We ask them to report fairly about people who may have been their family's enemies for years -- like asking journalists from Myanmar to ignore anger and taunts from relatives and friends back home to give the Rohingya a fair

shake. Or to brave government displeasure all around the world by writing dispassionately about the opposition.

We ask them to do this even when it means a mysterious car parked outside their homes in China, or they are hit by rubber bullets in Hong Kong. When even getting food and water is a hassle as it is in Venezuela. Even when they are pushed, shoved, detained, arrested as our Tibetan reporters were last week in India. Even when a car bomb narrowly misses them in the Kurdish area of Syria and yes.... sometimes ... as in Somalia ... even when it doesn't.

This evening is all about celebrating idealistic, courageous journalism. But for me, there was no courage at all. It was all privilege. It was a privilege for me to be able to spend my entire life squarely within the values I know we all cherish.

And the biggest privilege of all?

It wasn't a privilege at all.

It was a right.

We who had that privilege of living our values owe it to those who come next to help ensure that they can too. And that means not just here in the U.S., but all over the world.

I'm asking you to celebrate courageous journalism by protecting those who do this hard work -- right here in our own back yard. Take your colleagues here at VOA

under your wing. The forces that threaten a free press both abroad AND at home threaten them too. If people continue to believe that VOA is already just spouting propaganda, then no one will be there to care if some day it is forced to do so.

Please pay attention.

Not just for them.

For you.

And for all of us.