

Senators, thank you for having me. It is an honor to be here at this forum with you.

My name is Oliver Darcy. I've spent a decade reporting on media and the information environment—at Business Insider, then at CNN, where I spent the bulk of my career, and now as the founder of Status, an independent outlet that publishes a nightly newsletter focused on the urgent issues facing the media industry.

In all my years reporting on this beat, I have never free speech and a free press come under such brazen assault. Ironically, the attacks today are coming directly from the President of the United States and his MAGA allies, the same people who campaigned on promises to end “censorship,” “legalize comedy,” and “bring back free speech.”

Instead, nine months into this administration, fact-based reporting and even late-night jokes have become targets of an aggrieved president, with Trump wielding his office to bully critics into submission and chill their speech. The message he has sent is clear: cross me and pay the price.

One weapon he has turned to has been the lawsuit. The general consensus of the legal community is that Trump's cases against the press lack merit. But merit isn't the point. These suits are designed to intimidate those who would dare ask tough questions and seek to hold his administration accountable.

This can be especially problematic for companies that have business before the federal government and do not wish to be the subject of Trump's ire, as was evident when Paramount settled Trump's “60 Minutes” lawsuit for \$16 million, despite the company having referred to it as “meritless.” Unfortunately, that settlement, in addition to Disney's ABC News settlement, has emboldened Trump. More recently, he's filed lawsuits against The Wall Street Journal and The New York Times.

The issue impacts media companies as large as Paramount, but it also touches smaller, independent publishers. At Status, for example, we are now spending tens of thousands of dollars annually on defamation insurance simply to shield ourselves from threats of litigation—not only from the White House, but from other figures who might take a chapter out of Trump's autocratic playbook in an attempt to silence our voices. That protection is expensive and difficult to secure. But it is a necessity to survive in a hostile press climate that has taken hold in America today.

Over the last nine months, as I've reported on the media in this turbulent moment, I've spoken with countless journalists and media executives across the country. The common theme I hear is fear. Reporters on the ground worry about whether the interests of billionaire or corporate owners will compromise the mission of their newsrooms. Executives, meanwhile, fear retaliation from a Trump administration. Everyone fears that

the worst might be yet to come as Trump and his administration push the envelope further and further.

The country just witnessed a striking example demonstrating that Trump and his allies are willing to openly use their governmental powers against voices they seek to muzzle. Only two weeks ago, FCC Commissioner Brendan Carr wielded his authority in an attempt to punish late-night comedian Jimmy Kimmel, who Trump has long targeted for being critical of him. Carr's Kimmel threats were not an anomaly. Since Trump tapped him to head the FCC, he has revived and launched a number of dubious investigations into media companies, all of which have alarmed former FCC commissioners I've spoken to, both Republicans and Democrats.

Meanwhile, at the Pentagon, Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth is trying to force news organizations to sign an agreement that would prohibit reporters from publishing even unclassified information that they obtain without explicit government approval. And Trump's White House has seized control of the press pool, while also punishing the Associated Press for refusing to call the Gulf of Mexico the "Gulf of America."

These are not only media issues; they are democracy issues. The chilling of speech is one of the first signs that a democracy is beginning to decay. That is not hyperbole. Strongmen thrive when speech is stifled—and that is precisely the environment Trump and his allies are working to create.

Thank you for having me here today, and I look forward to your questions.