

HASAN CEMAL ACCEPTANCE SPEECH

Nieman Fellows in the class of 2015 presented Turkish journalist Hasan Cemal with the Louis M. Lyons Award for Conscience and Integrity in Journalism on March 12, 2015. This is his acceptance speech, delivered at the Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard University. Please note that these comments were prepared in advance and may vary slightly from the speech presented in real time.

I know you've all seen those Oscar ceremonies where the award winner weeps and struggles to find the right words.

Let's face it; a journalist lost for words wouldn't be much of a journalist. The real danger is that by the time I've finished my speech, you might be wishing I were lost for words.

So I will try to be brief.

I said "try."

I make no promises.

And even though my eyes are dry, I won't begin to conceal that this is an emotional moment for me.

As journalists, we all share a secret. We are motivated by the impact we make, not the size of our monthly pay slip. And there is no greater recognition than the respect of our own peers. And which peers command more respect than the Nieman Fellows?

So let me begin by thanking you all so very much for this award. It means a great deal. When I look at the list of people who have received this award in previous years, when I consider that I may be thought worthy to sit among such towering talents as Edward R. Murrow, I think maybe I have done something with my life after all.

This award means much to me but I believe it means a great deal to the journalistic community in Turkey whom I represent – or at least those members of that community who are still prepared to listen to their conscience, who are still prepared to try to hold power accountable and who are still prepared to put their jobs, and even on occasion their own liberty on the line.

It was George Orwell who defined freedom as the right to tell people what they do not want to hear.

Please be assured. In Turkey there are still members of our profession who cherish that right and who are still prepared to defend that notion of freedom. Let me tell you a little about them and about Turkey, the country where I have made my career.

I come from a country where a journalist was arrested and her mobile phone and computer seized because of a single tweet; a country where, for that single tweet, she faces five years in prison.

I come from a country where a prime minister has declared social media to be a social menace.

I come from a country where Twitter and YouTube were banned by government fiat.

I come from a country where all a prime minister has to do is pick up the phone for a news item to be spiked, or a journalist fired. This is a land where the prime minister can even decide who will or will not appear on a talk show.

I come from a country where a prime minister can scold a newspaper owner down the phone about an article he published to such an extent that he reduced the man to actual tears.

I know this because the boss was my boss – a man who made his fortune not through newsprint but through his business dealings with the government. So when the prime minister scolded he was in no position to answer back.

And the reason the prime minister was angry enough to make the man cry was because of something I wrote.

Allow me the luxury of quoting from myself:

“Producing a newspaper is one thing; running a country is another. Nobody should confuse the two, nor feel entitled to cross the line.

I know the line is a thin one, which is why in democracies all hell sometimes breaks loose.

Look at the outcry caused in America by the Bay of Pigs Invasion, the Vietnam War, the Pentagon Papers and the Watergate Scandal, and look at how many times valued members of the journalist profession in America were accused of treason by presidents and those who govern.

But history has always been on the side of those newspapers and journalists who, through news and editorials, stood up for peace, democracy and freedom of the press.”

I continue to quote:

It was back in the early 1990s. I was editor in chief of a newspaper called Cumhuriyet. One of the big names of the Turkish business community asked for my advice as he intended to launch a newspaper.

I asked him:

“Why launch a newspaper? Do you want to have a ‘successful newspaper’ alongside a successful fridge and a TV factory and a successful bank? Or do you want to launch a newspaper to leverage political influence that will be greater than your rivals and competitors? Do you want to get into the newspaper business or use the newspaper to protect your real business?”

That question is more than valid today.

It is at the heart of the corrupt and unwholesome relationship between those in power and those whose business it is to make power accountable.

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But not only that.

It explains why a journalist elite in Turkey fail to do their jobs. Editors and leading columnists fail to defend journalism against those in power because they are unable to protect journalism from their bosses. The profession is divided and weak.

In order for the relationship between media and government to acquire public legitimacy, in order for the relationship between journalism and owners to obey ground rules built on respect, it goes without saying that journalists themselves must recover their own sense of integrity.

We cannot sit back as if our hands were tied. Our inaction marks the death knell of democracy and an end to the rule of law.

The column was never published in the newspaper where I had worked for 15 years. It was enough to get me fired. But of course I had it published on the same day, at the online newspaper T24, where I have been writing for the last two years.

Let me tell you a few other things about the country where I come from. It is a place where, during an election rally, the prime minister provokes the crowd to jeer at journalists -- threatening women journalists in particular.

I come from a country where a prime minister declares those who hold different opinions from his own to be traitors.

In Turkey the prime minister appointed as Minister of the Interior his own undersecretary, a man who gave the order to a local governor to, [and I quote] "Break down that journalist's door and throw him in jail... If the prosecutor complains, throw him in jail too..."

I come from a country where a prime minister's undersecretary can say, "Shut down that journalist's website! So what if there's no court order? We're the ones who make the laws, my friend.. I'm talking about the will of a party that received 50 percent of the vote. Don't worry about it; excuse my language but screw the lot of them..."

I come from a country where the prime minister has ensured that the profits from the large government tenders he controls, are used to create media empires under his influence; where he has the final say on the appointment of editors-in-chief and columnists, and on basic editorial issues.

Not surprisingly this has resulted in a one-sided media totally under his control.

I wish I could stop here.

I know I promised to try to be brief.

But there's more.

I live in a country where there is an abuse of power and a media that is too intimidated to write about those abuses.

The result is no great secret-- it is the degradation of rule of law.

We have seen the prime minister can get his own Minister of Justice to use his influence in the Supreme Court to overturn the acquittal of an important media tycoon;

...where he can withdraw a large government tender from a group he dislikes and award it to a group that he favours...

Where a prime minister can, at a moment's notice, remove judges and police officers from their posts in order to cover-up claims of corruption and theft that reach as far as his own family...

Instead of 'rule of law' we have a 'police state'. We have come to understand that a police state is one where the police do not obey the orders of the public prosecutor.

It is one where those who defend the rule of law – including the head of the Constitutional Court are attacked for opposing the rule of the majority – even when that means shutting down Twitter and YouTube.

In Turkey, the head of the country's largest business organisation is labelled a traitor for defending the rule of law as essential to business confidence.

The prime minister has even accused the Central Bank governor of treason for not lowering interest rates.

We have witnessed a prime minister become so insensitive that he encourages his supporters to boo the mourning mother of a 15-year-old boy who killed by police during a protest...

...a prime minister that meddles in people's private lives, who pronounces on everything from the length of girls' skirts, to the number of children a family should have.

I know this is beginning to sound personal. So let me name names. I am talking about Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, prime minister for over a decade and since August, the Turkish president.

He is moving Turkey towards what he calls a presidential system but which is tantamount to one man-rule.

He has no respect for the rule of law.

He has no concern for the independence of the judiciary.

He does not recognise the separation of powers.

He believes that democracy simply means a majority at the ballot box.

He has not learned that getting the most votes is not a licence to violate democratic values, nor to force the surrender of the judiciary, nor to ignore the separation of powers, to trample on freedom of expression, to destroy free and independent media, nor to subjugate civil society.

If he hasn't learned this by now, the chances are he never will.

He is a man who could have led Turkey into the family of democracies, but who is now leading it back to the wilderness. We are moving from a system of 'military bureaucratic tutelage' to a system of 'civilian despotism.' And all this is called by his partisans, the new Turkey and even a 'people's revolution.'

Today, the choice Turkey faces is whether it can still embrace fundamental values that turn the illusion of democracy into real democracy.

In Turkey I am known for having coined the expression “gazeteci milleti” or the “journalist nation.”

The main qualification for citizenship of this nation is the ability to ask questions.

Questioning is a way of life for us. And for this reason we are not particularly popular.

And those who require not just 99 per cent but 100 percent submission, don't really like the “journalist nation.”

For example, in Turkey, President Erdoğan refuses to meet with journalists who may ask him any uncomfortable questions.

It has been years since he held a real press conference.

He can only be in the presence of journalists whom he knows will play by his rules. If, by chance, someone finds the opportunity to rear their head and ask a real question, they will find themselves on the receiving end of a severe dressing-down.

But journalists will continue to ask questions.

No dictator can divest journalists of this democratic right.

There will always be those who, for the right reason not just the wrong, want to leave the Journalist Nation. There always have been and there always will.

But there will always be those who have no choice. We are creatures of the Journalist Nation. It is the only place we can still breathe.

The following words by the Peruvian novelist Vargas Llosa stick in my mind:

“The situation of the writer is one of constant rebellion, the role of devil’s advocate.”

He continues:

“... just as we did today and yesterday, we must continue to move forward in society, saying “no,” rebelling, demanding the recognition of our right to think differently...

... showing that dogma, censorship and arbitrary rule are the mortal enemies of progress and human dignity...

Yes, we must continue moving forward.

But for how long?

I am 71 years old.

I have been an active journalist for 46 years. I have never worked in any other job.

During the 2006 World Cup in Germany, I spent a month writing about that leather ball. I remember one particular day very clearly. I was taking a train to Berlin for a match. While browsing the Daily Telegraph, I read an interview with a journalist who was celebrating his 75th year in the job.

Next to the article was a black-and-white photograph of the journalist sitting by the window of a train, writing. During the celebratory dinner someone asked him:

“Why, at the age of 93, do you still switch on your computer every day?”

He answered by quoting the famous Housman poem:

“Up, lad; when the journey's over, there'll be time enough to sleep.”

I hope not all of you are asleep. I really am nearly done.

I have told you about the country I come from. But I know full well there are many countries whose journalists could stand here and make a similar speech. And it is not only journalists who suffer oppression.

There are many others who live under the pressure of dictatorship.

So if you ask me, what journalists do that makes them different, it is that we are the voice of those who have no voice. We cry out where others cannot. And we make the whole world hear the cry that would otherwise remain lodged in the people's throat.

What I am describing is not just true of underdeveloped countries. As a profession, we must find ways to make ourselves heard – to shout with an ever firmer voice.

I have devoted my life to this profession, and there have been times when I have asked myself whether it was worth it; and frankly sometimes I had to answer “no.”

When that happens, “Hasan Cemal,” I tell myself, “you never had a choice. What other job could you do?”

That was before I got fired. But when I did get fired I did what any member of the Journalist Nation would do.

I started all over again.

In my case it was T24, one of Turkey's new and brave online newspapers.

A few days after I was told to put down my pen, I walked up a mountain on the Turkish-Iraqi border with retreating Kurdish guerrillas. I went into the field to report and to write.

And when I got home, I began devoting time to founding an organisation called P24, a civil society organisation which encourages editorial independence and quality journalism.

How do we do that?

The first step is not to give up.

That too is not always easy.

But on a day like today, standing before an audience of distinguished colleagues, witnessing solidarity and friendship, I realise that my modest struggle is shared. So ask me on a day like today whether devoting an entire life to journalism was worth it.

This award is the answer.

Yes, it was worth it.

Thank you all for this day, for this prize and for your attention.