Transcript (slightly edited)
J. Pearl presenting Maria Ressa the LA Press Club Daniel Pearl Award, June 28, 2026

Dear friends,

I am profoundly honored to stand before you tonight to present the 24th LA Press Club Daniel Pearl Award for Courage and Integrity in Journalism. This year, the award is presented to a truly remarkable guest who flew all the way from Manila, and whose name, Maria Ressa, has become synonymous with the very idea of courage, and with our tireless aspiration to protect press freedom.

In her Nobel Prize lecture, Maria warned us of a new danger. "Data is no longer just information," she said, "it has been weaponized like plutonium. By allowing algorithms to structurally alter human behavior for profit, society has granted geopolitical powers and authoritarian leaders an open window to destroy democratic institutions from the inside out."

As a computer scientist specializing in AI and machine learning, I feel partly responsible for creating this digital plutonium. Yet, as a philosopher of science, I also know that the very tools developed by AI can help us understand human behavior better, empowering us to resist becoming complicit in its spread.

On a more personal level, it shouldn't surprise you to know that over the past three years, my heart and mind have been deeply occupied with my country of birth, Israel—a nation clinging to life as she struggles to withstand not only physical threats, but a sustained, libelous assault on her moral standing, led by outlets like Al Jazeera and echoed even by our reputable Reuters and the Associated Press.

It is within this arena that Maria's warning about weaponized data takes on a broader meaning. This dangerous plutonium is now used not just by authoritarian leaders, like Duterte and Putin, but by ideological forces like Iran, Qatar, and China who aim to re-engineer our perception of reality. They manipulate journalists to erode public trust in journalism, ultimately undermining both our democratic institutions and our shared humanistic values.

Therefore, and urgently, we must seriously heed Maria's warning and watch our steps carefully whenever we feel the temptation to echo this plutonium of disinformation, especially when it lures us to dehumanize my brothers and sisters in Israel.

Thank you, Maria, for honoring our son Daniel by accepting this award, and for continuing to inspire us with your courage, wisdom, and character.