

Free Expression and the Future of Film: ACLU Panel at Sundance 2026

Description

Partner Event â?? Sundance Film Festival 2026

PARK CITY, UT â?? On Thursday afternoon inside *The Box*, a smaller event space housed within *The Ray* theatre in Park City, the ACLU hosted one of the festivalâ??s most urgent conversations: â??**Free Expression and the Future of Film.**â?• Moderated by Carrie Lozano, President & CEO of ITVS, the panel brought together filmmaker-advocates Sharon Liese, Julie Christeas, Carlos LÃ³pez Estrada, and ACLU of Utah attorney Abby Cook for a discussion that began as a constitutional grounding and quickly widened into a sweeping indictment of the political moment unfolding around us.

The question at the center:

What happens to artâ??and to democracyâ??when truth-telling becomes dangerous?

Setting the Frame: What the First Amendment Actually Protects

Speaker: Abby Cook, ACLU of Utah

Lozano opened by grounding the room in the national crisisâ??media defunding, book bans, censorship settlements, and the violent suppression of protests in Minnesota, where videos of ICE raids and police killings were still surfacing online.

Cook then brought the audience back to constitutional bedrock.

â??Most people say â??First Amendmentâ?? without really knowing what it protects,â?• she said.
â??Or who can violate it.â?•

She laid out the basics with startling clarity:

- **â??Speech, press, religion, assembly, petitionâ??those are your core protections.â?•**
- **â??Only the government can violate themâ??federal, state, local.â?•**

- **â??Artistic expression is protected speech. Full stop.â?•**
- **â??If the government restricts protected speech, it must prove real harm and use the narrowest possible tools.â?•**

Her warning landed hard:

â??If the government can silence one disfavored voiceâ??whether a newspaper, a queer filmmaker, or a student activistâ??what stops them from silencing you tomorrow?â?•

The panel then moved from legal principle to lived consequencesâ??nowhere more vividly than in the story Sharon Liese brought to the stage.

An older gentleman sitting in a barber's chair, reading a newspaper titled 'Marion County Record' with **â??Seizedâ?•**

â??Seizedâ?•: When Police Raid a Newspaper

Speaker: Sharon Liese, Director/Producer of *Seized*

To understand how abstract constitutional ideals become real-world violence, look no further than *Seized*, Lieseâ??s documentary about the 2023 police raid on the *Marion County Record* in Kansas.

During the raid, officers seized computers, searched the home of the paperâ??s publisher, and triggered the death of 98-year-old co-publisher Joan Meyer. The incident shocked the nation. But Liese recognized deeper implications.

â??It felt like a canary in the coal mine,â?• she said.

â??A preview of what happens when local officials feel empowered to silence the press.â?•

She drove to Marion immediately. What she found was not a simple â??press vs. policeâ?• narrative. The town itself was fracturing:

- Residents who championed a free press balked when coverage touched their own lives.
- Long-standing grudges against the paper erupted.
- Rumors circulated that Liese had been hired to glorify editor Eric Meyer.

â??People were afraid of being on camera,â?• she said.

â??There was this enormous distrust.â?•

Liese summed it up:

â??Everyone said they believed in the First Amendmentâ??except when the story had to do with them.â?•

Seized reveals a community with a fractured democratic identity—mirroring the national climate more closely than anyone wanted to admit.

Then came the twist: defense attorneys in the resulting legal case asked the judge to delay proceedings until they could watch the documentary.

“The film became part of the legal process,” Liese noted. “That’s when I realized how deeply this story cuts.”

Cook, listening, offered her starker line of the afternoon:

“If police targeted the *Record* because they didn’t like its editorial line—that is the worst kind of free-speech discrimination. It keeps me up at night.”

What happened in Marion, she warned, is not an anomaly. It is a blueprint.

A group of students walking through a school hallway, with one girl in the foreground wearing glasses. A teenage girl stages an elaborate musical about the one day her high school wishes it could forget.

Queer Narratives, Funding Threats, and the Self-Censorship Spiral

Speaker: Julie Christea, Founder/CEO of Tandem Pictures; Producer of *Run Amok*

If *Seized* showed the danger of government overreach, *Run Amok* exposed the more insidious threat of institutional self-censorship. (*Run Amok* follows a teenage girl who stages an elaborate musical about the one day her high school wishes it could forget.) After finishing the film, Christea traveled to Ohio for her next project. A university had agreed to host the production—until administrators abruptly reversed course.

The reason?

“They told us the protagonist was queer,” Christea said. “And that their funding was being threatened.”

Administrators described direct pressure from lawmakers:

- “True American history” courses—especially those addressing slavery—were being scrutinized.
- Women’s leadership programs were being flagged.
- Hosting a queer film, they feared, could jeopardize their funding.

Christea and her partner pushed back:

“We said, ‘You have the chance right now to stand up to fascism.’”

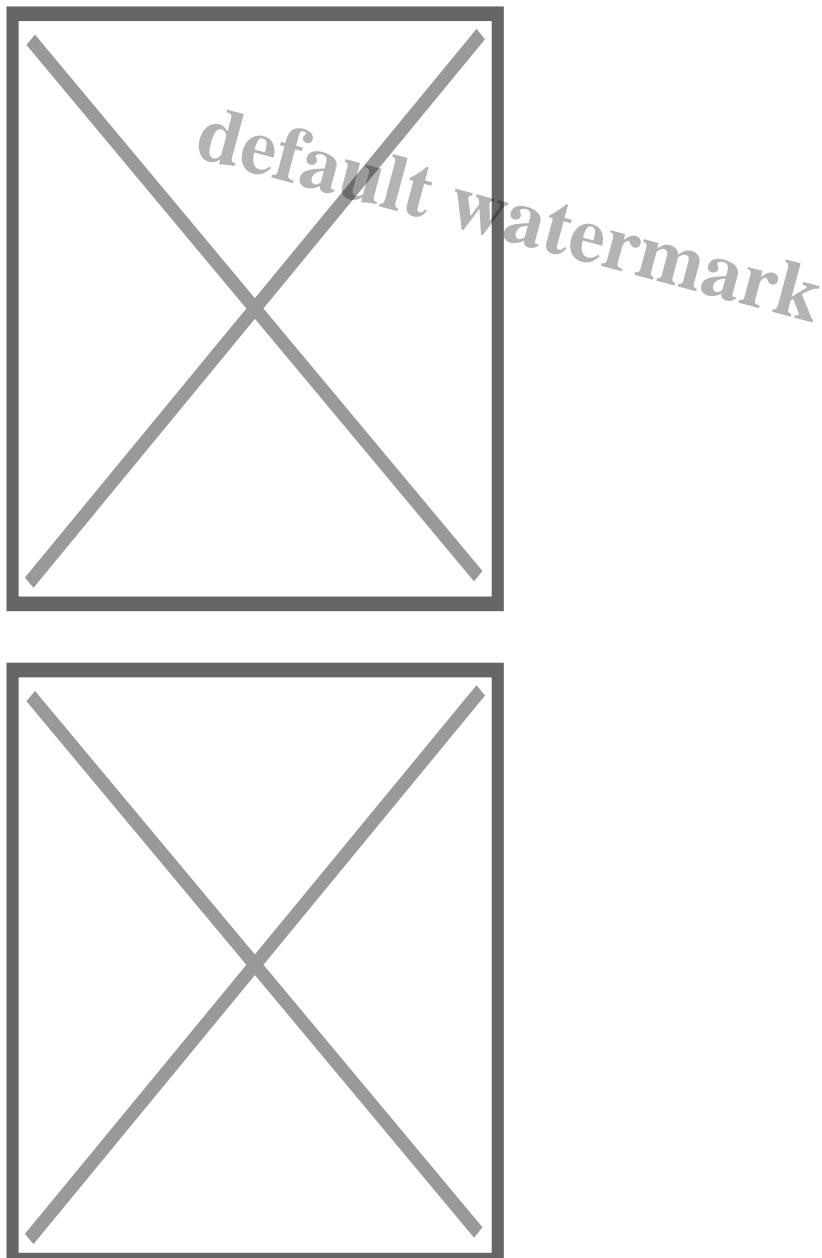
The answer was devastating:

â??We canâ??t.â?•

For Christeas, the moment crystallized how censorship metastasizes:

- authoritarian pressure from above
- institutional fear in the middle
- self-censorship below

â??All these layers work together to shrink the space for artistic courage.â?•



Artists as Infrastructure: Antigravity Academy and the Power of Early-Career Filmmakers

Speaker: Carlos LÃ³pez Estrada

LÃ³pez Estradaâ??s director of *Blindspotting*, *Raya and the Last Dragon*, and multiple Sundance shortsâ??shifted the conversation from constraint to possibility.

Three years ago, he founded [**Antigravity Academy**](#), which supports early-career filmmakers with talent but limited access due to class, geography, or structural barriers. This year, two Antigravity-produced shorts premiered at Sundance.

What inspires him most is community:

â??Theyâ??re so intentional. So fierce. So determined to tell stories no one has heard before.â?•

He described what happens when artists receive even modest support:

â??Give a young filmmaker a little beliefâ??just a bit of backingâ??and something miraculous happens.â?•

He also cautioned against tying value to institutional validation:

â??Not every film will change a law. Not every short will premiere at Sundance. But empowering someoneâ??s resistance.â?•

Book Bans, Youth Plaintiffs, and Utahâ??s Sensitive Materials Law

Speaker: Abby Cook

Cook then explained the ACLU of Utahâ??s lawsuit challenging the stateâ??s **â??Sensitive Materialsâ?•** statute, which allows just three districts to ban a book statewide.

Among the targeted titles:

- *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison
- *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou
- *Milk and Honey* by Rupi Kaur

The plaintiffs include four authors and two students who relied on the books for representation, connection, and survival.

Cook made clear:

â??Young people today are sharper, more self-aware, and more justice-driven than many adults. They know censorship when they see it.â?•

During the audience Q&A, a woman from Minneapolis took the micâ??her voice tremblingâ??as she shared that she lived within a mile of both Renee Good, killed during an ICE raid, and Alex Pretti, an ICU nurse murdered that morning.

Her question cut through the room:

â??How do we stay safe? And how do we keep telling the truth?â?•

Lozano directed her to [WITNESS.org](#), which trains citizens to safely film police and document abuses.

Cook added:

â??You canâ??t exercise your rights if youâ??re not alive to use them.
Care for yourself. Care for your community.
There are many ways to resist.â?•

LÃ³pez Estrada offered another form of resistance:

â??Support the artists in your city. Share their work. Connect them.
Thatâ??s protest too.â?•

Nihilism, Tone, and Sincerity in a Fractured World

By the final stretch, the panel had moved from external threatsâ??book bans, police raids, funding intimidationâ??to the internal crisis facing artists today:

How do you create meaning in a culture exhausted by irony, cynicism, and doomscrolling?

An audience member asked the question directly.

LÃ³pez Estrada answered first.

â??Iâ??ve seen this fear of sincerity,â?• he said.
â??Especially in early-career artists. Everyone wants to be clever, or subversive, or sophisticated. But sincerity? People are scared of that.â?•

He described watching filmmakers hesitate to make personal workâ??even when those stories are the ones the world needs.

Then he delivered a line that shifted the room:

â??If the picture doesnâ??t mean anything to you, then why paint it?â?•

In his work with Antigravity Academy, he sees something â??almost miraculousâ?• happen when artists allow themselves to make work that is heartfelt, raw, or imperfect.

â??People think sincerity is naïve,â?• he said.

â??But honestly, with the world how it is? Sincerity feels radical.â?•

Christeas picked up the thread, pointing to misinformation and deepfakes:

â??Weâ??re being told everything is fake. Everything is manipulated.

So when you choose to be sincere, youâ??re choosing to be defiant.â?•

For her, sincerity pairs with an equally vital artistic principle:

â??Curiosity is the way forward.

Not agreement. Not certainty. Curiosity.â?•

Lozano framed it succinctly: sincerity becomes a strategy for survivalâ??emotionally, politically, and artistically.

López Estrada added one final note:

â??You donâ??t have to change the whole world with one film.

Sometimes just showing someone a little belief is enough.

Empowering someone to tell their storyâ??thatâ??s resistance.â?•

In a culture fatigued by cynicism, sincerity becomes its own form of defiance.

Closing: â??Independents Are Unstoppableâ?•

Lozano closed with a rallying cry Sundance was built for:

â??We donâ??t know the future of film.

We just know we canâ??t stop.

If we do, they win.â?•

Cook reaffirmed her faith in artists and young people.

López Estrada praised the importance of showing upâ??â??breathing the same air.â?•

Christeas pointed out the most obvious truth of the hour: the room was full.

And that matters.

Because in a time of newsroom raids, defunded public media, book bans, anti-queer legislation, and violent crackdowns on protestors, the most radical act might simply be this:

We are still telling stories.

We are still gathering.

We are still refusing to be quiet.

Independent film, for all its precarity, remains a living rehearsal of the First Amendment.

Andâ??as one panelist reminded usâ??**independents are unstoppable.**

[Congress: Protect Our Free Press](#)

A panel of four experts with headshots and names, including Carrie Lozano (Moderator), Julie Christ

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