

**Opening remarks by the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media
For the expert meeting on “Disinformation and Media Self-Regulation”**

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OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media
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Dear colleagues, ladies and gentlemen,

It is with great pleasure that I welcome you to our second expert meeting in the series of roundtables on disinformation, with today’s session dedicated to disinformation and media self-regulation.

At our previous meeting just over a month ago, we examined how to tackle the issue of disinformation through the implementation of effective intergovernmental policies and international standards in line with media freedom commitments. This included discussions on defining disinformation, as well as examining the efforts of other international organizations on this issue.

I have gathered you here today to build on these discussions by looking in some detail at one aspect in particular: that of media self-regulation mechanisms. This is especially important when it comes to addressing modern-day disinformation, as it remains a difficult phenomenon to tackle. In particular, we will look at practical efforts by journalists’ associations and self-regulation bodies, in the hope of producing concrete recommendations for the OSCE participating States and media entities. While there are many facets and layers to self-regulation, the one we are concerned with and will look at today is on the level of truthfulness of information in the media.

Perhaps a key question that will guide us today is: How and in what ways should the media be self-regulated to keep the trust of the audience that seeks factual and fair information?

With the speed at which disinformation can spread in the internet ecosystem, deciding if and how to regulate it can pose serious challenges – both to media companies and governments alike. In this regard, the digital era has not only changed the way people communicate and receive and impart information, rather it has fundamentally and irreversibly transformed the nature of journalism. If it has also transformed media ethics itself, this remains to be seen.

At one end of the spectrum, governments have resorted to adopting regulations that enable them to directly interfere with, and have control over, content offline and increasingly online, removing and blocking content that they deem actual or potentially “illegal” or “false news”, and punishing social media companies with exorbitant fines if they fail to comply. However, in my view, media self-regulation cannot succeed in a repressive environment. On the contrary, it has been shown that, where media freedom and pluralism are guaranteed, self-regulation can help preserve the integrity of the media and protect it from government interference. Also important in this regard is to ensure the protection of human rights, namely our right to freedom of expression and opinion as well as other rights.

At the other end of the spectrum, governments delegate the responsibility and processes entirely or in part to media companies themselves. Voluntary self-regulation mechanisms are several, from press councils, or to use their modern name – media councils – to media ombudsmen and codes of practice. However, we must not forget the risks associated with handing over *all power* to media companies or social media companies. After all, at the end of the day, they are still private entities whose priority is rather to make profits and stay in business, not necessarily to protect human rights such as freedom of expression. As a result, they do and will often err. As such, transparency of their content labelling and removal decisions, and access to appeals mechanisms are critical to enable concerned users to challenge any decision that affects content online.

As we will probably see from the forthcoming discussion, self-regulatory initiatives are underway across the OSCE region, our attention to them is therefore more important now than ever, and I will continue to seek your views, as well as policy ideas, closely with other international organizations, academia and media NGOs working on this issue, to develop good practices and recommendations that can be implemented by participating States.

Alongside self-regulation, fact-checking by journalists and media literacy also play an important factor in challenging disinformation threats, namely through the use of critical thinking. By providing everyone with the tools to question and evaluate the information they receive and, increasingly crucially, the sources of that information, we can help make societies more enlightened and resilient to the effects of disinformation. One could call it a form of “rational censorship” or media self-regulation at the individual level. That is why the promotion of media and internet literacy must be a key priority in countering the harms of disinformation, and as such should be promoted at all levels of society, from the education system through to journalists’ organizations.

I cannot but mention in this regard the emergence of artificial intelligence (AI) and the impact it has on online content removal, which also poses new challenges that we cannot ignore. That is why my Office continues to address this issue through the #SAIFE project to put a spotlight on AI and freedom of expression.

This roundtable will examine all these issues in greater detail and I am pleased that we are joined today by renowned international experts on the topic. As with the previous meeting, my Office has developed another Policy Brief, which can be found on our event webpage. The paper examines professional codes as well as approaches

of regional bodies to media accountability, along with the practice of media councils and the importance of media literacy. As the largest security-oriented intergovernmental organization with a comprehensive approach to security, the OSCE is well placed to tackle this issue, by working with journalists, media organizations, civil society, NGOs, governments, and other international organizations.

I hope our discussions today will provide some useful food-for-thought as we move forward and continue to explore the topic, as well as examples and lessons learned with regard to current media self-regulation efforts.

Thank you for your attention.