

HEALTHY ONLINE INFORMATION SPACES: FROM POLICY GUIDANCE TO PATHWAYS FORWARD

Conference Report

Executive Summary

On 22 October 2025, the Office of the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media (RFoM) organized the high-level conference “**Healthy Online Information Spaces: From Policy Guidance to Pathways Forward**” at the Hofburg in Vienna. The event brought together more than 140 participants from across the OSCE region, including representatives of participating States, civil society, and academia, legal and media experts, as well as OSCE executive structures and field missions.

The conference marked the launch of the [Policy Manual on “Safeguarding Media Freedom in the Age of Big Tech Platforms and AI”](#) and served as a timely platform to discuss how **digital technologies are reshaping media freedom** and access to public interest information. Through a combination of plenary discussions and **interactive workshops**, participants explored what constitutes a ‘healthy’ online information ecosystem, how identified challenges can be addressed and emerging opportunities leveraged, and how policy guidance can be translated into practical pathways forward.

Specifically, participants were engaged in **multi-stakeholder conversations** on human rights-based digital rules, digital authoritarianism, PeaceTech, digital humanism and the role of public interest media, human autonomy and generative AI, and public interest infrastructure for media freedom. Each of these exchanges generated forward-looking guidance for the RFoM’s future engagement. Cross-cutting recommendations emphasized the need for strengthened co-operation and co-ordination, closer links between media freedom, digital technologies, and the peace and security agenda, and continued investment in solution-oriented dialogue and partnership-building.

The conference concluded with a **reception** linked to the World Congress of the International Press Institute (IPI), held in Vienna on the following days, and featured thematic exhibitions as well as a preview of the **Joint Declaration on AI, Freedom of Expression & Media Freedom**, which was formally launched two days later by the free expression mandate holders of the UN, OSCE, AU and OAS.

The conference information package and **recording** of the launch of the Policy Manual are available at: [Healthy Online Information Spaces: From Policy Guidance to Pathways Forward | OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media](#).

Conference Overview

The RFoM conference “**Healthy Online Information Spaces: From Policy Guidance to Pathways Forward**” took place in the framework of the project “*Towards Healthy Online Information Spaces*”. It provided an interactive forum for **in-depth exchanges** on the **pressing challenges and emerging opportunities** that digital technologies present for freedom of expression and media freedom.

With more than 140 participants, the conference ensured **broad and diverse representation** across geographies, backgrounds, and lived experiences, underscoring the relevance and urgency of the conference theme. Participant feedback and results from a post-conference survey highlighted the practical value of the discussions, with a strong majority indicating that they are likely to use the conference learnings. Notably, 40% reported being *very likely* to apply the conference insights directly in their daily work.

The event pursued a **twofold objective**: first, to identify risks and viable policy pathways in a rapidly evolving information environment; and second, to launch a new Policy Manual as milestone moment for the RFoM.

I. Policy Manual on Safeguarding Media Freedom in the Age of Big Tech Platforms and AI

The conference marked the **official launch of the [Policy Manual on “Safeguarding Media Freedom in the Age of Big Tech Platforms and AI”](#)**. The Manual is the culmination of a **two-year Media & Big Tech initiative** that included a comprehensive analysis of existing policy approaches to media visibility, viability and vigilance. Developed through in-depth research and several expert roundtables, interviews, and broad consultations, it consolidates the expertise of more than 150 leading scholars and practitioners in media freedom, technology, and human rights from across the OSCE region and beyond.

The Policy Manual was developed in co-operation with the **Forum on Information and Democracy** (FID) as implementing partner, and with the support of an international steering committee consisting of renowned experts from across the OSCE region (*Amy Brouillette, Begaim Usenova, Damian Tambini, Hanna Möllers, Helle Sjøvaag, and Mira Milosevic*), most of whom also participated in the conference. The steering committee was chaired by Prof. **Natali Helberger** (University of Amsterdam) and **Anya Schiffrin** (Columbia University) who presented and discussed the Manual’s key findings and recommendations alongside **Katharina Zügel** (FID) and the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media (RFoM), Ambassador **Jan Braathu**, moderated by **Julia Haas**, project lead and Adviser to the OSCE RFoM.

The session examined the **complex relationship between journalism and Big Tech**, characterized by growing media dependencies for audience reach, revenue models, and news content dissemination. Speakers highlighted that Big Tech platforms and AI increasingly shape how information is produced, distributed, accessed and monetized. They illustrated how this concentration of economic, technological, and political power, combined with limited transparency, accountability, and human rights due diligence, profoundly undermines news visibility, media’s economic sustainability, and journalists’ safety. As emphasized during the session, **when journalism becomes invisible, unsafe,**

or financially unsustainable, media freedom and the integrity of public discourse are at risk. Anya Schiffrin and Natali Helberger concluded that Big Tech’s current control over large parts of the information infrastructure constitutes a **threat to democracy**.

To address these challenges, the Policy Manual offers **concrete recommendations** for states, grounded in international human rights standards, OSCE commitments, and lessons learned from existing policy initiatives. Speakers underlined that states must not only refrain from undue control or interference, but must **create enabling conditions for pluralism, independence, and public interest journalism**. Designed to support states in ensuring the availability and accessibility of public interest journalism and reliable information, the Manual offers a set of practical mitigation measures to strengthen media visibility and viability as well as the safety of journalists online. These measures include promoting independent journalism through interoperable recommender systems, content prioritization or must-carry requirements, ensuring fair remuneration through media bargaining codes and digital levies, and adjusting platform designs to limit online violence. In addition, the Manual calls for longer-term **structural reforms** aimed at building resilient digital information spaces conducive to freedoms, peace, and security.

The RFoM Amb. Braathu stressed that for states to foster an environment that enables democratic debate, they need to ensure Big Tech practices do not restrict access to journalistic content. Acknowledging the diversity of legal systems and societal contexts across the OSCE, he underlined that the Policy Manual does not prescribe a one-size-fits-all solution. Instead, as **both a practical tool and a call to action**, it offers analyses, policy options, and principled guidance.

Speakers emphasized the **shared responsibility to shape healthy, sustainable, and pluralistic online information spaces**. As noted by Natali Helberger, “the future of media is not yet written”, which highlights the opportunity, and responsibility, for collective action. Anya Schiffrin presented the Manual as a “flexible menu” of responses as it suggests a variety of policy tools for different contexts to curb power concentration and the prioritization of profit over the public interest – while outlining each policy tool’s pros, cons, and trade-offs. The Manual combines proposals for immediate, pragmatic action with a vision to confront the structural “design flaws” embedded in today’s Big Tech platforms and AI systems that impairs media freedom. Participants welcomed this flexible approach of guidance and **policy options adaptable to different contexts**. In this regard, the representative of the UK regulator Ofcom suggested treating the Manual as a visionary guiding document, encouraging states to “pick at least one policy recommendation for implementation”. Throughout the discussions, **several OSCE participating States and stakeholders expressed readiness to move from analysis to action**, while underscoring the importance of multi-stakeholder co-ordination, shared learnings, and collective implementation.

The launch of the Policy Manual also formally initiated the next phase focused on **implementation support**. **Regional contextualization** was identified as a critical next step in this regard: 86% of conference survey respondents indicated the importance of support for regional and national engagement on implementation. The RFoM stands ready to assist OSCE participating States in translating its recommendations into policies and practices. In this sense, the Policy Manual serves not as an endpoint, but **starting**

point for context-specific analysis, evidence-based policymaking and long-term strategies for online information spaces that uphold freedom of expression, media pluralism, and democratic resilience across the OSCE.

II. Interactive Workshops and Participatory Sessions

Next to the launch of the Policy Manual, the conference included a **series of workshops and participatory sessions**, offering participants the opportunity to engage in an interactive, interdisciplinary, and multi-stakeholder setting on issues shaping media freedom in the digital age. The conference explored six emerging topics related to healthy online information spaces to **foster exchange, share learnings, and inspire future RFoM work on these issues**. The session descriptions and guiding questions can be found in the [annotated agenda](#), and the key conclusions and recommendations as provided by session experts are presented below.

SESSION I – Digital Authoritarianism and Media Freedom

*Rapporteur: **Bojana Kostic**, Human Rights Expert (Rapporteur, OSCE Media & Big Tech Initiative)*

This session examined how international, regional, and local actors can collectively respond to the rise of digital authoritarianism (the use of digital tools for censorship, surveillance, and repression), which increasingly shapes the global landscape and poses serious threats to media freedom. Featuring expert contributions from a journalist in exile, as well as representatives of international and local NGOs active in policy advocacy and thinktanks, the discussion highlighted key challenges and explored possible areas for action. The session concluded with a set of recommendations from panellists and participants to help inform the OSCE RFoM's future work on this rapidly evolving issue.

Key take-aways:

- Digital authoritarianism is a model of governance that systematically suspends democratic principles and, in many ways, undermines the rule of law.
- Digital authoritarianism increasingly relies on a wide range of technologies – including AI systems and spyware – to repress media freedom and the safety of journalists.
- Digital authoritarianism is not confined to any particular geographical region or political system. Authoritarian means using digital tools manifest in multiple forms and contexts, including some that appear democratic on the surface.

Main recommendations for the RFoM and OSCE participating States (pS):

- Ensure the safety of journalists, especially those in exile;
- Address the colliding powers of state and technology structurally;
- Respond to the increasing 'securitization' of the OSCE region and beyond;
- Co-operate and create spaces for multistakeholder engagement.

SESSION II – Digital Humanism: The Role of Public Interest Media

*Rapporteur: **Erich Prem**, Philosopher of Technology, Computer Scientist and International Technology Consultant*

The session introduced the concept of digital humanism and the potentials it can bring for an improved digital space putting human beings and democratic societies at the centre of the development and management of digital technologies. Contributing experts specifically discussed the role of public service media (PSM) to overcome platform dominance and to provide a shared information space that supports diverse opinions, connects societies and creates cohesion. Experts and participants discussed the particular importance of pluralistic, public interest journalism in times of vast amounts of rapid and ephemeral social media content.

Key take-aways:

- Digital humanism can be seen as a core framework for a digital space that puts humans and democratic society at the centre of the development and management of digital technologies.
- PSM has a unique role in fostering social cohesion and pluralism and serving as a counterbalance to highly personalized content feeds online.
- The dominance of global platforms who act as central distributors of information and media dependence on platforms need to be addressed.

Main recommendations for the RFoM and OSCE pS:

- Explore regulatory interventions that compel platforms to expose users to a plurality of opinions while guaranteeing freedom of expression;
- Encourage the creation of a Digital Public Space, a shared space leveraging the existing strength of public service media to provide a platform for exchange with pluralism-oriented content recommendation systems;
- Strengthen critical thinkings of users, and explore tools such as informative labels and trainings to help individuals make informed decisions about the information they consume.

SESSION III – Human Rights-Based Digital Rules

Rapporteur: Maksym Dvorovyi, Senior Legal Counsel, Digital Security Lab Ukraine

This session enabled contributing experts and participants to discuss and to share their experiences and best practices in engaging various stakeholders to design and implement local legislation on platform regulation. Representatives of international NGOs presented the coalitions they have created and/or coordinated, as well as advocacy tools and instruments used to push platforms into making their online space more human-rights-compliant, including by the OSCE or UNESCO Guidelines.

Key take-aways:

- Various OSCE pS are closely following existing policy and legislative initiatives in platform regulation.
- In the Western Balkans, for example, draft bills are being negotiated that mainly aim at implementing the EU Digital Services Act (DSA). International NGOs are working on coordinating the DSA implementation approaches for EU candidate countries, engaging with the European Commission.
- Shrinking civic space is becoming a serious issue across the OSCE region and could undermine civil society engagement in platform regulation.

Main recommendations for the RFoM and OSCE pS:

- Incorporate a human-rights-by-design approach in any local efforts to establish platform regulation;
- Support the development of tools enabling researchers to access relevant data;
- Contribute to the enhancement of civil society organizations' capacities to inform global platform policies (e.g. via funding and institutional support);
- Prioritize voices of local experts when designing policy or legal frameworks that may have spillover effects.

SESSION IV – Think for Yourself: Human Autonomy and AI

Rapporteur: Patricia Shaw, CEO and Founder Beyond Reach

This session addressed the urgent challenge of protecting human autonomy, freedom of opinion and freedom of thought in the age of AI. Participants examined how AI-driven technologies employ power asymmetries and manipulative business models that prioritize profit over information pluralism and truth. The discussion highlighted the gap between rapid technological development and inadequate legal protections and emphasized the need for global regulatory frameworks rooted in human rights to safeguard cognitive autonomy, freedom of opinion, freedom of thought, and mental integrity.

Key take-aways:

- AI (including generative AI) is a tool increasingly designed to undermine human expression, driven by concentrated corporate power and business models prioritizing profit over public interest and information pluralism.
- Current legal protections for freedom of thought and opinion are inadequate in the face of emerging technologies. Human rights need to not just be enforceable but also enforced to ensure better protections.
- Mental integrity and cognitive autonomy require protection as absolute rights.

Main recommendations for the RFoM and OSCE pS:

- Facilitate co-operation and co-ordination of multi-stakeholder perspectives on the protections needed to safeguard human rights especially freedom of opinion and of thought, and mental integrity;
- Support the establishment of a global multi-stakeholder regulatory framework grounded in human rights law to ensure the enforceability of protections for freedom of opinion, thought and mental integrity akin to that of what we have seen in the nuclear technology space;
- Prohibit the design and development of technologies intentionally violating human rights redlines, particularly those undermining mental integrity.

SESSION V – PeaceTech: What It Means for Media Freedom

Rapporteur: Nathan Coyle, Co-founder and Coordinator of the PeaceTech Alliance and Astrid Holzinger, Senior Project Manager, Austrian Center for Peace

This session explored how PeaceTech, the use of technology to support peacebuilding and conflict transformation, can strengthen media freedom and information integrity. It examined how technology can both enable and endanger pluralistic, and democratic

information spaces, with particular attention to issues of trust, access to information, and power concentration. Experts and participants discussed practical ways in which PeaceTech could enhance the protection for journalists, counter disinformation, and foster networks of digital resilience in fragile contexts.

Key take-aways:

- PeaceTech can strengthen information integrity and protect journalists when grounded in people-centred and context-specific approaches.
- Collaboration among civil society, media actors, and technology platforms remains uneven; balancing freedom of expression with responsible moderation remains a central challenge.
- Trust and transparency are essential for using technology in conflict-sensitive environments, especially when addressing AI-generated disinformation and deepfakes.

Main recommendations for the RFoM and OSCE pS:

- Develop partnerships between media organizations, CSOs, and PeaceTech practitioners to co-design tools for protection, verification, and trust-building;
- Support digital resilience initiatives and inclusive dialogues with major tech platforms;
- Integrate PeaceTech principles such as “do no harm” and needs-driven innovation into media development and online safety policies.

SESSION VI – Platforms, Networks, and Freedom: Securing Public Interest Infrastructure for Media Freedom

Rapporteur: Max van Drunen, Institute for Information Law, University of Amsterdam (Rapporteur, OSCE Media & Big Tech Initiative)

The session explored the complex infrastructures on which media ecosystems increasingly rely and which extend beyond traditional platforms to also include, among others, cables, satellites, cloud systems, software tools and networks among journalists. Contributing experts underlined how Big Tech has come to control the different layers of infrastructure needed for communication and how the current design of infrastructure contravenes media freedom. Experts stressed the role of states in supporting the development and adoption of infrastructure, which however should not be under a centralized control to avoid risks of abuse.

Key take-aways:

- Current infrastructure is in many ways at odds with media freedom, as it’s opaque, subject to centralized control, unaccountable, and outside regulatory reach.
- States should ensure alternative public interest infrastructures designed to facilitate media freedom. This is likely to require different solutions depending on the specific nature of the layer of infrastructure that is addressed.
- The need for scale in infrastructure is contested. Aiming for large European counterparts to Big Tech may be necessary for competition, but also risks replicating the centralized control of existing infrastructures. A decentralized infrastructure that allows for the emergence of many different players may be a better path to scale.

Main recommendations for the RFoM and OSCE pS:

- Support the creation of alternative infrastructure (e.g. through state funding, public procurement, stimulating collaboration between private parties, and/or integrating public infrastructure with government functions);
- Counteract Big Tech privatisation of knowledge on infrastructures, including by investing in rebuilding expertise in government to regulate, in academia to understand it, and in private (media) organizations to build alternatives;
- Support public infrastructure to be open and prevent (the abuse of) centralized power, tools such as competition and antitrust law, interoperability, and open protocols are crucial in this regard.

III. Conclusion

The conference successfully fulfilled its twofold objective: it provided for **in-depth interactive exchange** on emerging issues related to AI, digital technologies, and media freedom, while firmly **anchoring these discussions in OSCE commitments and concrete policy guidance**. Throughout the conference, participants identified emerging risk, shared challenges, and gaps in knowledge, policy, and practice – while also highlighting areas of convergence and opportunities for learning and knowledge exchange. The conference and thematic workshops generated forward-looking insights that will **inform future RFoM engagement in the area of digital technologies**.

The conference benefited from meaningful interlinkages with related events and processes, amplifying its impact beyond a single forum. By creating a bridge to the IPI World Congress, the conference highlighted a broader historical and institutional context, the convergence of the 50th anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act and the 75th anniversary of IPI – both reaffirming **media freedom as a cornerstone of democratic societies and peace**. The conference reception provided a preview of the **Joint Declaration on AI, Freedom of Expression and Media Freedom** by the free expression mandate holders of the UN, OSCE, AU, and OAS, introduced by **Pedro Vaca Villarreal**, IACHR Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression. It also presented **exhibitions** showcasing role models in the technology field and key milestones in the global defence of media freedom.

Overall, the conference discussions underscored the **urgency of addressing power asymmetries** and the **need for human rights-based, public interest-driven approaches** to build healthy online information spaces. It created a strong momentum for fostering human rights in the global tech and AI conversation. At the same time, it reinforced the value of sustained multi-stakeholder engagement, enabling collective learning, and the development of practical, context-sensitive pathways forward. By **fostering dialogue, commitments, and shared ownership**, it laid a strong foundation for continued efforts to build healthy online information spaces. The RFoM welcomes the commitments expressed by **participating States and others to implement elements of the Policy Manual** and to **deepen co-operation**, and is committed to build on this **momentum**.