



**Keynote Speech by the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media
Ambassador Jan Braathu on the occasion of the OSCE Human Dimension
Committee Meeting on “Media Freedom, Trust and Accountability in an
Evolving Information Environment”**

Date and time: 14 July 2026 – 14:00; Location: Hofburg, Vienna

Dear Madame Chair, dear delegates, ladies and gentlemen,

Allow me first to thank the Albanian Chair of the Human Dimension Committee for convening this timely discussion, and to thank our distinguished panellists for joining us today.

Dear Ambassador Gjermani,

As this is your last Human Dimension Committee meeting, I would like to express my gratitude for your work as Chair. Thank you also for your steadfast engagement with the RFoM Institution, and for your valuable contribution to the organization of this year’s South East Europe Media Conference that took place in Tirana in May. I wish you all the best in your future endeavours.

I.

While we today strive to explain the importance of and defend the principle of freedom of the media, this was more clearly understood in times past. Contrary to what one might assume, given frequent statements in our time, freedom of information and freedom of the media are not recent, or dare I say, “modern” concepts. James Madison, the drafter of the American Bill of Rights in 1789 underscored that “Freedom of the Press is a “great bulwark of liberty” and that all other liberties depend on this. In Madison’s conception of government, it was vital for the public to be informed so as to observe and scrutinize political and

government leaders. In fact, it is the essence of participatory democratic governance.

During Madison's era, the press was the technological transmitter of information. The technology of information has evolved tremendously, from print to telegraph (Henry David Thoreau, *On Walden Pond*: "As if the main object were to talk fast and not to talk sensibly"), radio and television to today's internet-based social media networks. As the Canadian philosopher and media analyst Marshall McLuhan wrote in 1967, the medium is the message, in the sense that every medium conveys information in specific ways. In our age, social media algorithms and AI LLMs turbocharge the dissemination of information at speeds previously unheard of. The algorithms operationalise a business incentive structure that drives "engagement" and thus revenues.

More recently, but still a little more than a century ago, the American journalist and political thinker Walter Lippmann in his short book, *"Liberty and the News"* observed that *"There can be no liberty for a community which lacks the means by which to detect lies."* Although written in 1920, these words resonate just as strongly today. The question that the quotation begs, is how to distinguish truth from lies, or fact from fiction, or indeed, news -strictly defined - from opinion? One approach is to ensure a free, independent and ethical information environment, one that allows citizens to encounter and question diverse perspectives.

Today's technology and the algorithms deployed ensure that conflictual and controversial information spreads far more rapidly than less dramatic news. Take for example the WTOE 5 News story in July 2016 that "News outlets around the world are reporting that Pope Francis had endorsed Donald Trump for President." Although WTOE 5 News is a fake news site, the story was shared nearly 900,000 times. The fact-checked story debunking the claim, on the other hand, was shared only 33,000 times. There needs to be a stronger commitment by social media platforms to curate and edit content on their networks. This does not mean censorship of opinion, but some sites are bogus, as is the information they spread.

II.

When the Helsinki Final Act was adopted just over fifty years ago, one of its important commitments was to facilitate the freer and wider dissemination of information across frontiers. That commitment reflected a profound understanding: that the free flow of information is indispensable to peace, democracy and co-operation among States.

Today, information flows more freely and more abundantly than the authors of the Helsinki Final Act could ever have imagined. Citizens encounter an unprecedented volume of information from an ever-expanding range of sources: professional journalists, public institutions, content creators, influencers, artificial intelligence, and countless other actors, all competing for attention.

The commitment embodied in the Helsinki Final Act remains just as relevant today. But the challenge has evolved. It is no longer simply about ensuring the free flow of information. It is about ensuring that reliable, independent journalism serving the public interest continues to provide the trusted factual foundation upon which citizens can make informed decisions, democratic debate can flourish, and societies can respond collectively to the challenges they face.

When this function is weakened, democratic societies become more vulnerable. Not only to disinformation, foreign information manipulation and other threats affecting the information environment, but also to growing polarisation, declining public trust and a diminished capacity to address shared challenges through democratic means.

This is why questions of trust have become central to discussions about media freedom.

Trust is not about asking citizens to believe everything they read or hear. Nor is it about protecting the reputation of particular media organisations. Trust matters because independent journalism performs a unique democratic function. It enables citizens to distinguish verified information from speculation, evidence from opinion, and facts from falsehood. It equips people to participate meaningfully in public life and to hold those in power to account.

This is why trust in reliable, independent journalism is not simply a media issue. It is a democratic issue. It is an issue of good governance. And ultimately, it is an issue of comprehensive security.

Research increasingly points us in the same direction.

The Reuters Institute's Digital News Report, one of the world's leading studies of news consumption, continues to show that trust in news remains fragile across many countries. This year's report also points to growing news avoidance, increasingly fragmented audiences and a fundamental shift in how citizens engage with journalism. Increasingly, people encounter news through social media and video platforms rather than seeking it directly from news organisations.

These developments make the question of trust, not only in journalism itself, but in its ability to reach citizens, more important than ever.

It also reminds us that trust cannot be taken for granted. It must be earned, and re-earned, every day.

That brings us directly to the central theme of today's meeting.

How is trust earned?

Certainly not through regulation alone.

Certainly not through government decree.

Trustworthy journalism is built over time through professional integrity, editorial independence, transparency and accountability. These are not abstract principles. They are the qualities that enable journalism to fulfil its democratic responsibility and that distinguish it from the countless other forms of communication competing for our attention.

This is precisely why today's discussion focuses on media ethics and independent self-regulation.

Professional ethics are the embodiment of journalistic codes of conduct. They represent the profession of journalism's commitment to accuracy, fairness, verification, transparency and independence. They establish standards against which journalism holds itself accountable, and they provide citizens with confidence that journalism is guided not by political interests or commercial expediency, but by a responsibility to serve the public.

Equally important is independent self-regulation.

Independent press councils, media councils, ombudspersons and other self-regulatory mechanisms are among democracy's most valuable, yet often overlooked, institutions.

They demonstrate something profoundly important:

Accountability and editorial independence are not competing principles. They reinforce one another.

Independent self-regulation shows that journalism does not require political direction in order to act responsibly. Rather, it possesses its own professional standards and institutional mechanisms through which mistakes are corrected, ethical questions are examined, public concerns are addressed and trust is strengthened; all while preserving editorial freedom.

That is one of the great strengths of democratic societies; that responsibility is most durable when it is exercised independently, rather than imposed externally.

Of course, responsibility for a healthy information environment does not rest with journalists alone.

Citizens, educational institutions, technology companies and public authorities all have important roles to play. Building and sustaining trust requires a collective effort, with each stakeholder contributing according to its own responsibilities and respecting the roles of others.

For participating States, that responsibility is both significant and carefully defined.

States have a legitimate interest in protecting the integrity of the information environment and in responding to genuine threats, including foreign information manipulation and interference and other activities that seek to undermine democratic institutions and public confidence.

Many participating States are therefore investing considerable effort in strengthening their resilience to these challenges.

These efforts are both understandable and, in many respects, necessary.

For many years, my Office has worked with a wide range of experts to develop recommendations on addressing disinformation and other challenges affecting today's information environment in ways that strengthen, rather than undermine, media freedom. Building on this experience, we are now developing updated cross-sectoral guidance that seeks to bridge expertise across communities and support participating States in responding to these challenges while fully upholding OSCE commitments.

As we consider how best to protect the information environment, it is important that we do not lose sight of what ultimately makes democratic societies resilient in the first place.

The strongest response to manipulation is not simply the prevention or absence of harmful information, information that is misplaced, fragmented, superficial and misleading. It is the presence of reliable, independent journalism that citizens recognise as credible, professional and worthy of their trust.

As participating States rightly invest in protecting the information environment from manipulation and other threats, we must invest with equal determination in strengthening the institutions that make democratic societies resilient in the first place: independent, pluralistic and ethical media.

This means creating and safeguarding an enabling environment in which journalism can fulfil its democratic function.

It means protecting freedom of expression and media freedom.

Ensuring the safety of journalists.

Safeguarding media pluralism.

Guaranteeing access to information.

Supporting independent and impartial public service media.

Promoting transparency of media ownership.

Recognising and encouraging independent self-regulatory mechanisms.

And ensuring that responses to contemporary challenges remain consistent with international human rights standards and our OSCE commitments.

The role of governments is therefore not to determine what journalism should say.

Nor is it to decide what citizens should believe. It is not about exchanging one propaganda with another.

Rather, it is to protect the conditions in which independent journalism can continue to earn public trust through its own professionalism, ethics and accountability.

This distinction is fundamental.

Independent journalism cannot fulfil its democratic function without freedom.

But neither can it earn public trust without responsibility.

Media freedom and accountability are therefore not competing values.

They are mutually reinforcing.

Independent self-regulation demonstrates this perhaps better than any other institution.

It allows journalism to remain accountable to the public while preserving the editorial independence that is indispensable in democratic societies.

This is one of the reasons why today's discussion is so important.

The challenges before us cannot- and should not - be addressed by governments acting alone.

Nor can they be solved by journalists alone.

They require dialogue and cooperation between governments, media professional organisations, regulators, academia, civil society and many others; each respecting the independence and responsibilities of the others.

This is precisely what the OSCE and the RFoM institution has always sought to promote.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Every generation faces moments of uncertainty that test its democratic convictions. Periods of rapid change often create understandable pressure to act quickly and decisively. Our generation is no exception.

As participating States respond to today's information challenges, it is right that they seek to protect their societies against manipulation and other threats. Our response should be measured by how successfully we strengthen the institutions that enable citizens to distinguish reliable information from everything else.

Because ultimately, democratic resilience begins long before a society faces a crisis. It begins with whether citizens have access to reliable, independent journalism that informs rather than inflames, explains rather than exploits, and serves the public interest rather than particular interests.

The OSCE commitments rest on a simple but enduring conviction: that independent and pluralistic media are not obstacles to democracy, peace and security. They constitute their strongest foundations.

Thank you.