



Opening Remarks
by the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media Ambassador Jan Braathu at the
26th Central Asia Media Conference “Building shared reality: information integrity,
media ethics and trust in the digital age”
9-10 October, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan

Dear Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mr. Tursunkulov,

Dear Deputy Minister of Culture, Ms. Sarnogoeva,

Dear Ambassadors Volker Frobarth and Alexey Rogov,

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good morning, and welcome to the 26th Central Asia Media Conference.

It is a pleasure to see so many of you from across region and diverse sectors united by a common goal of promoting free, independent, and resilient media landscapes in Central Asia and beyond.

Let me begin by expressing my gratitude to the Kyrgyz authorities for warmly welcoming and hosting us here in Bishkek. Thank you as well to our colleagues at the OSCE Programme Office in Bishkek, and to all other Field Operations in Central Asia for their support and cooperation on our journey to making this important regional event a reality.

This year, our Conference is dedicated to a question that is fundamental to the functioning of open societies: how to promote information integrity, media ethics and trust in today's digital ecosystem.

Reliable, public-interest information is essential to citizens' ability to form their views, make informed decisions, and participate in public life. It provides a common basis for understanding matters of public concern and for engaging in democratic debate.

The responsibility for creating an environment in which healthy information spaces can thrive does not rest with journalists and media organisations alone. Public authorities have the obligation to create and uphold the conditions in which independent and pluralistic media can operate freely without undue interference – an obligation reflected in numerous OSCE commitments on media freedom and freedom of expression.

Ladies and Gentlemen, we are living today in an information environment that is changing rapidly, shaped by technological advancements and increasingly new ways of producing, accessing and sharing information.

News is no longer consumed primarily through traditional media outlets. Information travels through large technological and video sharing platforms, messaging applications, search engines, and increasingly through systems powered by artificial intelligence. According to the Digital News Report published earlier this year by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, less than a fifth of global audiences now turn directly to publisher homepages, while nearly 80% rely on digital networks, social platforms, and messaging applications.

The opportunities of these technological developments are wide-ranging. Digital technologies expand access to information, give journalists new tools, connect audiences across borders and make journalism more innovative. However, around 60% of those who access news through social media never actually click through to the original source website. They consume just the snippet, headline, an automated summary.

The speed at which information can be produced and distributed outpaces the mechanisms designed to verify it. Algorithms influence what audiences see with very little to no transparency.

At the same time journalists and media across the OSCE region continue facing coordinated harassment, surveillance, cyberattacks and other forms of pressure which are exacerbated with the use of advanced technologies. Such pressures undermine journalists' ability to work independently and to report freely, with consequences for the wider information environment. And when people become uncertain about what information they can trust, trust in journalism suffers as well and the space for evidence-based, meaningful public discussion becomes narrower.

This is why information integrity cannot be separated from media freedom.

A healthy information environment requires both: the freedom to produce and disseminate information, and professional, ethical and accountable practices that help audiences navigate that information.

Among other topics, our Conference will address trusted information landscapes and media self-regulation. Independent and effective self-regulatory mechanisms play an important role in strengthening professional standards and preserving editorial independence. Press councils, codes of ethics and other forms of accountability can help address disputes without placing journalism under political control.

The challenge is to also ensure that these mechanisms are genuinely independent, free of political and other forms of bias or pressure, as well as credible, capable and competent.

We will also have the opportunity to discuss the implementation of my Office's policy manual on Safeguarding media freedom in the age of Big Tech and AI.

The digital environment requires us to think carefully about the relationship between media freedom and the increasingly important role of technological platforms on media and information landscapes.

Platforms are not simply channels through which journalism travels. Their design, policies, recommendation systems and content governance practices affect the visibility and accessibility of journalistic content and public-interest information.

At the same time, responses to these challenges must remain firmly premised on fundamental rights, including freedom of expression and media freedom. Our objective should therefore be to identify practical approaches that enhance platform transparency, accountability and access to quality journalism without creating new obstacles to independent reporting or legitimate public debate.

Another thematic area we will discuss at the Conference is the safety of journalists. Safety today means more than protecting media professionals from physical violence which continues to pose a grave threat to journalists. It also includes online threats, harassment, intimidation, legal pressure, including so-called SLAPPs (Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation), digital surveillance and attacks on journalists' data and communications.

We must pay particular attention to the experiences of women journalists, who continue to face specific forms and disproportionate levels of online abuse and harassment.

The OSCE participating States have already recognised their responsibilities in this area through Ministerial Council Decision No. 3/18 on the Safety of Journalists. The task before us is to continue translating commitments into practice. It is a process, step by step, which takes time and political will.

That means prevention of attacks against media professionals, achieve effective investigation and accountability, appropriate protection mechanisms, and support for journalists who are at risk.

I am pleased to mention that Ministerial Council Decision 3/18 is now available also in the languages of the countries in Central Asia and Mongolia. Making this important OSCE commitment available in regional languages is a practical step towards strengthening awareness, accessibility and ownership of the standards it contains. I hope it will help public authorities, policy makers, media professionals and actors alike to engage more closely with the commitments undertaken by the participating States and consider how they should be reflected in national policies and practices. Ministerial Council Decision 3/18 is a consensual decision of the OSCE participating States, and this agreement should be put in practice.

This Conference also reminds us that the future of journalism depends on professional skills and modernisation of journalism education. Journalists today are expected to work across multiple platforms and formats, while maintaining the same fundamental standards of accuracy and independence. This places important demands on journalism education. Journalism schools and training institutions need to equip students not only with traditional reporting and writing skills, but also with the digital, technological and ethical competencies required by today's technological and media environment. At the same time, professional development cannot end when a student leaves university. Continuous learning and closer cooperation between journalism schools, newsrooms, professional associations and other stakeholders can help ensure that education keeps pace with the realities of the profession and the realities of our societies.

Beyond identifying the existing and emerging challenges, the conference will seek to outline pathways toward sustainable solutions. At the same time, it is important to recognize that the identification and implementation of these solutions extend well beyond the confines of this conference. Real progress requires continuous dialogue, cooperation, and commitment - guided by our shared OSCE principles and commitments and supported by collective efforts. Only

through such sustained and multi-stakeholder engagement can we ensure that our discussions here translate into lasting impact for media freedom and viability across the region. The topics discussed today are not specific to the Central Asian region, but are central through the OSCE region.

I look forward to an open, substantive and practical exchange over the coming sessions, and to hearing from all of you about the experiences, challenges and solutions emerging across Central Asia, Mongolia and beyond.

As always, my Office stands ready to provide assistance, expertise and support in addressing these challenges, in line with international media freedom standards and OSCE commitments.

Thank you for your attention.

I wish you all a productive Conference.