

Opening remarks for the Expert Meeting on The role of public service media in countering disinformation

20 June 2022, 14:00 Vienna time



OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media
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Distinguished delegates of the OSCE participating States,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Dear colleagues,

It is a pleasure to welcome you today to our sixth roundtable dedicated to the topic of disinformation.

As we have seen in our previous roundtables, the danger of disinformation has grown substantially with the onset of the internet and the speed at which words and images can travel across borders and territories. It is therefore more important than ever that we look at ways to counter harmful disinformation. One of them, which we will discuss today, is the role of public service media.

As a public good, public service media is an important platform for promoting citizens' democratic rights. The PSM have been especially relied upon in tackling disinformation and keeping citizens informed of the dangers, that disinformation may pose, providing quality, trustworthy information.

The BBC in the UK, as one of the largest broadcasters in the world, serves as a prime example of a successful public service broadcaster, having been established in 1922 with its core mission to "inform, educate and entertain." I couldn't sum up the role of public service media any better myself.

With that in mind, I recently returned from an official visit to Romania, where I met with representatives of the public service broadcaster, TVR, which is committed to strengthen its relevance as a public interest defender. During my visit, I reiterated the

importance of ensuring the broadcaster's independence in order to safeguard quality journalism in the country.

Before that, in April this year, I also visited Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the public service broadcaster, BHRT, is facing numerous challenges. Over 800 journalists and staff working for the broadcaster are at risk of losing their jobs due to a lack of funding and exorbitant debt. This situation must be rectified.

Alongside my visits, the RFoM also provides legal expertise on the topic. Earlier this year, for example, my Office prepared a legal review on amendments to Moldova's Code of Audiovisual Media Services, underlining risks of ceding control over the public service broadcaster, TRM, to the parliamentary majority.

Today, we will also hear about the experience in Armenia and Belgium, from our expert speakers, who will provide an insight into the challenges that the public service broadcasters face in relation to disinformation.

As one of our speakers, will probably attest to today, a recent report from his organization has shown that, among 546 state-administered media companies in 151 countries, 80 per cent lack editorial independence. This is a shocking and deeply concerning figure and stresses the urgent need for governments across the OSCE region to do more to ensure the financial sustainability and independence of public service media.

Public service media experience continued and increasing pressure throughout the OSCE region. This comes not just from governments' interference and threats to cut sustainable funding, but also from alternative sources of information cutting their shares of the general viewership of the PSM and facilitating, through disinformation, the spread of biased bubbles in societies.

We have nevertheless come a long way in establishing rules, standards and expectations when it comes to public service media, which underpins their importance and why we must preserve them. I would like to take a moment to enumerate some of the key values that make them invaluable:

- First, they are accountable to the public that funds them;
- They are accessible to all sections of the population;
- They are independent, both in terms of ownership and editorial values;
- They signify a more pluralistic and diverse media landscape;
- They provide quality, trustworthy information;

Lastly, they are universal and representative of the societies they serve, particularly of women, minorities and marginalized communities.

These values, as the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly decreed in a set of recommendations in 2019, show that public service media have, I quote, “an indispensable mission to fulfil in democratic societies,” providing a forum for pluralistic debate and a means of countering disinformation.

With the onset of the internet, citizens are increasingly turning away from traditional, legacy media to alternative channels of information, particularly online. This has made them especially vulnerable to the dangers of disinformation. Faced with these modern challenges, ladies and gentlemen, the role of public service media has become more relevant than before.

Just five years ago, in 2017, the RFoM, together with the special rapporteurs on freedom of expression of the UN, the organization of American States, and African Commission on Human and People’s Rights, issued key recommendations in a joint declaration on “fake news”, disinformation and propaganda.

In particular, we urged States to ensure the presence of strong, independent and adequately resourced public service media, which operate under a clear mandate to serve the overall public interest and to set and maintain high standards of journalism, to ensure an enabling environment for freedom of expression and as a means of tackling disinformation.

I am confident that the OSCE participating States should therefore continue to allow independent, public service media to flourish. They should refrain from cutting funding or pursuing censorship to prevent PSM from playing their important watchdog role.

Governments should also guarantee the editorial independence of public service media to ensure they are able to continue producing accurate, reliable news and information as well as quality journalism, as an antidote to the scourge of disinformation, and not allow them to fall prey to private business interests or party-affiliated influence.

In this regard, I hope that our speakers will be able to provide us with an overview of the checks and balances needed to prevent broadcasters from turning into government mouthpieces.

Public service media on their part also have responsibilities. Those in Europe should work together to implement the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) guidelines and editorial principles. Today, we will be able to discuss in more detail on what this entails.

The key responsibility, in the context of today's roundtable topic, is for public service media to make countering harmful disinformation one of their main priorities and engage with social media platforms, civil society, governments and other stakeholders to develop a multi-stakeholder approach to tackling it.

I cannot stress enough the need to adopt a comprehensive approach to the problem of disinformation. The OSCE and my institution, as the world's only intergovernmental media freedom watchdog, are needed now more than ever, whereby there cannot be security without media freedom.

As we can see, ladies and gentlemen, with disinformation posing an ever-greater threat to the security of the OSCE region, to the very democratic foundation of societies and to citizens' right to be informed, we must and can do more.

The best antidote to disinformation is to demonstrate our commitment to quality journalism, to public service media, and to democratic values.

On that note, there is a lot of work that remains to be done and for us to unpack. I hope that we will cover some of that ground today, with the goal of producing clear, practical recommendations for the OSCE participating States to act upon, in order to make our societies stronger and more resilient to the dangers posed by disinformation.

Thank you for listening and I look forward to our discussions.