

**Roundtable on  
“The rise of disinformation: impact on media landscape and effective  
policy responses”**

**26.04.2022**

**Venue: ADA University, Baku**

Opening Remarks by the Representative on Freedom of the Media

**Ladies and Gentlemen,**

Let me start by wishing you all a very good afternoon.

I am very pleased to have this opportunity to address you today at the Round Table dedicated to the impact of disinformation on the media landscape and effective policy responses. The topic could not have been more appropriate in this very difficult time for our region, our organization and our common security.

Disinformation and misinformation threaten the public order and undermine trust in democratic institutions. Moreover, it can even decrease confidence in the relations between states. Only recently, we have witnessed how disinformation spread during a global health pandemic. We saw the devastating impact this can have on health and on economies. That is why I have made countering disinformation a priority of my office.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today communication technology allows us to receive information from a boundless variety of sources. Professional media that should serve as gatekeepers, cannot filter all this information for us. The same technological revolution that makes it so easy to access information about the world through a smartphone, poses a threat to democracies in the OSCE area. This threat comes not from occasional errors or misunderstandings, but from deliberate creation and spreading of disinformation. These intentional actions can be politically and financially rewarding. Their effect is that disinformation crowds out information. People start believing lies they pick up on the internet, because they give them simple, if wrong, answers to complex problems. And then, they spread these lies to other people, their friends and relatives, who trust

them. This increases the number of those affected by disinformation. The demand for disinformation increases, rewarding its creators. A vicious cycle emerges.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

A prime example of disinformation destroying the public order is the destruction of trust in professional journalism.

Especially in social media, disinformation that mimics journalism have become a profitable business for some less scrupulous actors. Audiences' trust in media, both traditional and online, rests on the accurate fact-based reporting by professional journalists. By blurring the lines between fact and fiction, disinformation undermines public trust in professional quality journalism, and when you destroy this trust, you destroy the bonds that hold society together. Lies and disinformation fuel anger and hatred against journalists, who rapidly become the object of first verbal and then, often enough, physical attacks. We observe this phenomenon across the OSCE space.

As professional media become weak or simply disappear, other pillars of social order weaken as well. The accountability of office holders decreases: studies<sup>1</sup> show that corruption rises when journalists are not there to hold politicians and civil servants accountable. And as technology makes it easier to create and spread "deep fakes" — false video or audio clips showing politicians or others saying or doing things they did not in fact say or do — citizens will increasingly come to distrust everything they see and hear on the media.

Unfortunately, across the OSCE region, we clearly see that the challenges the media and journalists face are becoming ever more complex and more interconnected. In order to address the impact of disinformation on the media we therefore need to apply a multi-layered and comprehensive approach.

So what is the solution?

Ladies and Gentlemen,

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.aeaweb.org/articles?id=10.1257/aer.104.8.2456>;  
<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0304405X19301606?via=ihub>

“There is no security without free media”. This is the slogan we selected for the 25 year anniversary of the RFOM Mandate. Independent, diverse quality journalism is the best antidote to disinformation.

In fact, the times of unprecedented challenges have highlighted once again the importance of professional, independent, public interest journalism. Studies and audience ratings <sup>2</sup>show that the need for impartial and fair news that people can trust is growing.

We rely on quality journalism that tells us what is going on in the world, and helps us become informed and engaged citizens. And we have to recognise the bravery, commitment and professionalism of journalists finding things out in hostile environments and telling people about them;

For quality journalism to develop, however, there is a vital need to maintain a legal environment enabling pluralistic and independent media. Among other things, this requires the laws and safeguard mechanisms that will foster media freedom and safety of journalists, transparent competition on the market, equal access to advertisement sources, free flow of information, and unhindered use of the Internet.

A strong public service news media, independent of political and commercial interests, can also contribute to delivering high-quality journalism by focusing on matters of public concern and providing the public with reliable information and a diversity of opinions.

Media self-regulation, including media ombudsmen, media councils and codes of practice, is an effective way to protect quality of media and thereby tackle disinformation. My Office promotes this approach by supporting such an enabling environment for media self-regulation.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

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<sup>2</sup><https://www.forbes.com/sites/markjoyella/2022/03/08/ukraine-coverage-drives-ratings-gains-for-cable-news-but-broadcast-networks-draw-largest-audience/>  
<https://www.mi-3.com.au/28-11-2019/ipsos-names-bbc-news-1-international-online-news-brand-amongst-affluent-australia;>  
[https://www.hirondelle.org/media/k2/attachments/MEDIATIONZ5ZENGZJournalismZinZtimesZofZcrisis.pdf;](https://www.hirondelle.org/media/k2/attachments/MEDIATIONZ5ZENGZJournalismZinZtimesZofZcrisis.pdf)

Let us have a look at another approach to disinformation. One can simply engage in wholesale banning and blocking sources of alleged disinformation. This is not an approach that I generally favour. It can have a chilling effect on public discussion and lower the level of public engagement. And the current technologies often allow for circumventing such measures. The OSCE principles and established international practice allow for blocking and banning in exceptional circumstances, which are spelled out in international law, namely Art. 19 and 20 of the ICCPR. It is paramount that we strike the right balance and that, when fighting disinformation, we foster the free flow of and access to information.

Censorship does not protect democracies, peace and security. Censorship rather strengthens mistrust in media as well as in public institutions.

This is why, in my view, tackling disinformation by restricting human rights is not the way forward. We must ensure respect for international legal frameworks to protect our freedom of expression and opinion, which guarantee the right to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers and through any media of one's choice. In 2017, my office, together with the Special Rapporteurs on Freedom of Expression and Opinion of the UN, the Organization of American States, and the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, published a Joint Declaration on freedom of expression and "fake news", disinformation and propaganda. Among the general principles contained therein, the Declaration especially emphasises that States may only impose restrictions on the right to freedom of expression in accordance with the tests set out in international law, namely that such restrictions be provided for by law, serve a legitimate interest as recognised by international law, and be necessary and proportionate to protect that interest.

Finally, media literacy is an excellent tool for making the public resilient against the disinformation. If people think critically, one does not need to prohibit and restrict: the consumers of news can perfectly filter out fake news themselves. In reaction to the many requests that I have received, I have just launched a project, which will assist participating States with concrete guidance and recommendations on the development of media literacy strategies.

Let me be clear, media literacy is an important tool, but it needs to be combined with a healthy legal and functional environment for media in line with OSCE commitments and international standards. Legal frameworks need to provide journalists with a safe and free working environment, including unhindered access to information. On my part, I have launched a series of roundtables on disinformation that address the various aspects and attempt to determine best practices and provide recommendations.

I am sure that we will reestablish public trust in journalism, although of course, this will require a lot of efforts. The most important steps to counter disinformation are the hardest to take, namely to maintain a vibrant, pluralistic and independent media landscape.

In Azerbaijan we enjoy constructive co-operation with the authorities and during my visit, we will have an opportunity to discuss the areas pertinent to freedom of expression and media freedom.

Only through joint and constructive efforts, we will be able to protect the public from disinformation in Azerbaijan and in the whole OSCE region. My Office stands ready to support Azerbaijan and provide policy recommendations, as well as to facilitate the participation of experts in any related discussions and initiatives.

Thank you all for your attention and let me wish you fruitful discussions.