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United States Mission to the OSCE

Intervention on the Role of the Media in Conveying and Countering Prejudice

Delivered by Lieutenant Governor Michael S. Steele
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Thank you, Mr. Chairman

Your Excellencies, Ladies & Gentlemen, a free and open press is one of the core values of any democracy. Without it, the very legitimacy of democratic institutions would be questionable.

And yet, the pressures of competition, elusive advertising dollars and being relevant have often placed the media, both print and television, in the position of choosing between covering the news and making the news. Even without such pressures, the media can have a tremendous impact on public opinion. We are all familiar with the media's power to determine, to an extent, the importance of issues by the order in which events are covered in the news and the amount of coverage allotted to each event; as well as a reporter's power to put a certain "spin" on each story.

This "power" to determine what our citizens think and feel about an issue or a person—or a group of people—becomes a particular concern when the issue touches race relations, discrimination and xenophobia. The advent of new technologies such as the Internet poses additional concerns, as they have become platforms for bigotry, hate-speech and racist material. The challenge for OSCE Participating States is discerning effective measures by which OSCE and its member institutions can uphold the principle of freedom of speech while making sure media of all types adhere to particular standards which do more to enlighten communities on matters of race, discrimination and xenophobia than exacerbate their fears of such matters.

The United States recognizes that the media have an important contribution to make to the strengthening of tolerance and cultural understanding and in countering prejudice. Mass media, by disseminating information on the aims, aspirations, cultures and needs of all people, can contribute toward the elimination of ignorance and misunderstanding that so often divides one community from another. By exposing the needs and desires of a diverse population without distinction of race, sex, language, religion or nationality, by ensuring the respect of the rights and dignity of all nations and individuals, and

by drawing attention to conditions such as poverty, malnutrition and disease, the media can encourage the formulation of policies best able to reduce international tension and promote the peaceful and equitable settlement of international and local disputes, without prejudice to the parties involved.

The U.S. urges OSCE Participating States to engage the media in policies and programs that aim to discourage discrimination and racism but do not impinge upon the fundamental principles of a free press.

We encourage member States to use media outlets to conduct educational campaigns on cultural awareness, history, diversity, and the repercussions of prejudice and discrimination. These campaigns can be launched in the form of documentaries, televised or radio programs, or short anti-discrimination advertisements or public service announcements.

While the United States believes that the media can be an effective educational tool to combat discrimination and xenophobia, we strongly discourage government control or management of private media.

The dissemination of Information, and efforts to raise awareness of activities and developments that counter racism and xenophobia is a major part of every government's public campaign to educate and inform its populace. Likewise, the commitment of print and electronic media to objectively report on diverse societies and the issues which inextricably link them to the rest of the world will have a powerful and important impact in transforming our neighborhoods and cities from battlefields of fear, racism and intolerance into communities that embrace mutual respect, equality of rights and understanding. Now that's a story worth reporting.