

# Defending Media Freedom in a Changing World

Dunja Mijatovic

Dunja Mijatović is an international human rights expert on human rights and democratic governance. She served as the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights (2018–2024) and previously as the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media (2010–2017).

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## Media Freedom as a Pillar of Security

Fifty years ago, the Helsinki Final Act set out a new vision for Europe – one where peace depended on openness. The Helsinki Final Act did more than address geopolitical tensions, —it pledged support for fundamental freedoms, including open information exchange and cultural interaction. For the first time, countries from both the Western and Eastern blocs committed to enabling the free flow of information and removing barriers to journalism. This was a landmark acknowledgment that free media is essential to peace, security and democracy.

Among its landmark commitments, the 1975 Helsinki Accords explicitly enshrined the “essential and influential role of the press and media” and pledged to facilitate “the freer and wider dissemination of information of all kinds”. At its core, the 1975 Helsinki Final Act was about more than ending military threats: it committed states to respect human rights and fundamental freedoms. In the “Third Basket” on cooperation in economics, science and environment, the Final Act placed special emphasis on information exchange and cultural contacts. Crucially, it noted that “the essential and influential role of the press, radio, television, cinema and news agencies... is to be emphasized”, and that states should “facilitate the freer and wider dissemination of information of all kinds”. In other words, governments agreed to remove barriers so that journalists could work across borders and citizens could access a diversity of news.

This promise was revolutionary during the Cold War: East and West agreed that independent media and access to information were not just ideals but security goals. Today, on the Golden Jubilee of the OSCE, we look back at that original media-freedom bargain and ask: have 50 years of OSCE history honoured the Helsinki promise – or has it been left behind?

The commitments made in Helsinki were visionary, anticipating a Europe where open discourse would serve as the bedrock of democracy, and where independent journalism would act as a bulwark against authoritarianism. Yet in 2025, these ideals face profound and expanding challenges, and the answer is mixed. On one hand, the OSCE has built a unique international watchdog – the Representative on Freedom of the Media (RFoM) – and achieved concrete advances, such as safer conditions for some journalists and reforms of abusive laws. These commitments were a breakthrough. For the first time, in the Helsinki Final Act 35 countries from Europe, North America and the Soviet bloc jointly declared that media freedom was a cornerstone of security. They pledged to “improve the conditions under which journalists from one participating State exercise their profession in another”. In practical terms this meant allowing foreign newspapers and radio broadcasts and easing restrictions on travel by journalists.

On the other hand, the media environment now faces new challenges such as rampant disinformation, digital-age censorship and AI-powered controls that were unimaginable in 1975. Above all, the gap between rhetoric and reality remains wide. In too many OSCE states, political leaders pay lip-service to media freedom in public, even as they throttle independent outlets at home. As the OSCE’s 50th anniversary unfolds, the crucial question is not just what commitments were made in 1975, but whether participating States today have the political will to fulfil them in practice – ensuring that media freedom is more than a Cold War-era promise.

## From Typewriters to Algorithms: Shifting Foundations of Media Freedom

In the decades since the Helsinki Final Act, the media landscape has undergone profound change. Journalism

in 1975 was largely the domain of newspapers, radio, and state-controlled broadcasters. Information travelled slowly. Editors and journalists acted as the primary gatekeepers, shaping public agendas through ethical standards and professional judgment.

The media environment has undergone dramatic change since 1975. Traditional journalism—once centered on newspapers and broadcasters—has been replaced by a complex digital ecosystem. The internet democratized content creation and access, empowering individuals to share information globally. It democratized access to information, enabling anyone with a smartphone and an internet connection to broadcast globally. Initially, this seemed a triumph for free expression: marginalized voices found platforms, and public discourse expanded beyond traditional elites.

But the promise of democratization came with unexpected costs. Information became abundant, but its quality, accuracy, and trustworthiness declined. Algorithms—not human editors—became the arbiters of what billions of people see and share. These algorithms prioritize engagement over enlightenment, profit over public good. Sensationalism outpaces substance, outrage eclipses reason. Today’s media freedom is thus defined not merely by the absence of state censorship, but by the ability—or inability—to reach audiences through systems designed for commercial, not civic, purposes.

Disinformation now spreads at unprecedented speed, weaponized by both state and non-state actors. Artificial intelligence (AI) amplifies the reach and sophistication of propaganda and censorship. Trust in public institutions—and in the media itself—has eroded under a deluge of falsehoods. The velocity and scale of harmful content expose fragile vulnerabilities, posing direct threats to peace, security, and democracy.

### **The OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media: A Pillar of International Human Rights**

The OSCE’s dedicated mechanism for media freedom – the Representative on Freedom of the Media (RFoM) – was established in 1997. This was the world’s first inter-governmental media watchdog.

In an age of profound geopolitical tension and rapid technological upheaval, the defence of fundamental rights demands bold, principled leadership. Within the global architecture of human rights protection, the RFoM stands as a vital and irreplaceable institution—an early-warning mechanism, a steadfast advocate, and a tireless guardian of one of democracy’s most essential pillars: freedom of expression. Since its establishment, the RFoM has embodied the spirit of the Helsinki Final Act: the understanding that security, democracy, and human rights are inseparable. In a world where information can be both a shield and a weapon, the Representative’s mandate—to observe, report, and intervene on behalf of free and independent media—has only grown more vital.

Freedom of the media is not merely a national concern; it is a transnational imperative that underpins peace, security, and human dignity across borders. The OSCE RFoM occupies a unique position within international human rights mechanisms: it acts swiftly and proactively, issuing urgent interventions when journalists are threatened; it holds governments accountable, reminding States of their commitments to protect journalists and the free flow of information; and it serves as a bridge between governments, civil society, and media actors, fostering dialogue in times of tension and crisis.

The RFoM’s strength lies not in coercive power, but in moral authority, impartiality, and an unyielding

commitment to truth. Where others may hesitate, the Representative raises their voice. Where censorship grows, the RFoM shines a light. Where journalists are silenced, the RFoM speaks in their defense—ensuring that abuses are neither hidden nor normalized.

This remarkable legacy is the result not only of the vision embedded in its mandate, but of the dedication, professionalism, and courage of the individuals who have built and sustained the office over decades. Every Representative—past and present—has contributed uniquely to shaping the RFoM’s authority and credibility. Their leadership has been complemented and made possible by the tireless work of the teams who, often behind the scenes, monitor threats, document abuses, foster dialogue, and defend the principles of media freedom with integrity and persistence. It is thanks to the collective efforts of these devoted professionals—across generations—that the RFoM has become a cornerstone of the international human rights architecture. Their commitment ensures that media freedom remains not just an aspiration, but a living standard against which democracies must be measured.

In the broader system, the RFoM complements and reinforces global frameworks such as those of the United Nations, the Council of Europe, and regional courts. It fills a critical niche: focusing specifically on media freedom as an early indicator of democratic decline and as a foundation of resilient societies. Today, as disinformation campaigns, digital repression, and violence against journalists threaten the very foundations of open societies, the RFoM’s mission is more essential than ever. Defending media freedom is not a secondary concern—it is a frontline defense of human rights, the rule of law, and international peace.

The RFoM reminds us that freedom of expression is not an abstract ideal, but a lived, daily struggle requiring vigilance, solidarity, and courage. It embodies the conviction that where media freedom thrives, democracy flourishes—and where it falters, injustice gains ground. The OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media is not merely a monitor of commitments. It is a beacon for truth-seekers, a shield for those who speak truth to power, and a living testament to the belief that without free media, no society can truly be free.

## **Media Freedom in Transformation**

During my tenure as OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media between 2010 and 2017, I witnessed firsthand the courage of journalists operating under extreme pressure. Across the OSCE region, independent journalists and outlets continue to work despite political intimidation, economic strangulation, and physical threats.

New threats transcend traditional censorship. Disinformation campaigns—often orchestrated across borders—flood public discourse with falsehoods. Opaque algorithms and AI-driven content curation manipulate public perception invisibly. Journalists now face harassment not only from hostile governments but also from coordinated online mobs and anonymous automated accounts.

Social media has transformed how people communicate, access information, and engage with the world. Platforms like Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram have disrupted traditional media ecosystems, giving rise to new forms of journalism, activism, and public discourse. While these developments have expanded media freedom in some ways, they have also introduced new threats. The impact is complex: social media is both a tool for empowerment and a platform for control.

The rise of social media has enabled ordinary citizens to document and report events in real-time, bypassing traditional gatekeepers. From conflict zones to protest movements, social media platforms have allowed marginalized voices to reach global audiences. Smartphones with cameras and internet access allow ordinary people to document and share events in real time. From protests to natural disasters, users can bypass traditional gatekeepers and report what they see directly to a global audience. Such citizen journalism has been transformative, especially in environments where state-controlled media dominate. It exposes injustice, disrupts censorship, and holds power to account.

Social media enables individuals, organizations, and independent creators to reach audiences without needing approval from editors, publishers, or networks. This shift can protect media freedom from corporate or political influence, allowing dissenting opinions and niche perspectives to flourish.

For independent journalists and marginalized groups, this is powerful. They can publish their work, build followings, and create alternative narratives. Whistleblowers can leak information anonymously. Activists can organize online and rally support. In this sense, social media helps counterbalance monopolies on information.

However, the same platforms that expand access to information also control what users see. Social media feeds are curated by algorithms designed to maximize engagement, not accuracy or diversity. This creates echo chambers, distorts public perception, and limits the variety of viewpoints people encounter.

More troubling is the power these algorithms give tech companies to shape discourse. Facebook's decision to suppress certain news stories or X's content moderation policies can effectively control what narratives rise or fall. Though private companies are not governments, their decisions have enormous implications for media freedom.

Social media has also made it easier to spread disinformation, propaganda, and conspiracy theories. Fake news can travel faster than the truth, especially when it seems to confirm existing beliefs or provokes strong emotions. Governments, political actors, and bad-faith users exploit this to manipulate public opinion or discredit legitimate journalism.

This has two major effects on media freedom. First, it floods the public space with noise, making it harder for reliable sources to be heard. Second, it undermines trust in all media. If people can't tell what's true or who to believe, even legitimate journalism suffers.

Governments have responded to social media's disruptive power in different ways. In democracies, they often grapple with balancing free speech and the need to curb harmful content. In authoritarian regimes, the response is more aggressive: surveillance, censorship, internet blackouts, and laws that criminalize dissent online.

Social media can thus become a tool of repression. Authorities monitor posts, track users, and arrest critics for what they publish online. China's Great Firewall, Russia's crackdown on online dissent, and the surveillance of journalists in countries like Iran or Egypt illustrate how digital platforms can be weaponized.

Despite these challenges, social media also empowers resistance. Campaigns for press freedom, digital

rights, and transparency are increasingly global and digitally coordinated. Organizations like Reporters Without Borders, Human Rights Watch, and the Electronic Frontier Foundation use these platforms to expose violations and rally support.

Social media allows suppressed stories to reach international audiences, increasing pressure on governments and companies alike. Journalists at risk can find solidarity, funding, and visibility online. In this sense, the same tools used to suppress can also be used to defend.

In short, social media has reshaped the landscape of media freedom. On one side, it democratizes publishing, enables resistance, and challenges old power structures. On the other, it introduces new forms of control, surveillance, and manipulation. The challenge is to preserve the benefits while mitigating the risks.

Moving forward, media freedom in the digital age will depend on thoughtful regulation, stronger digital literacy, platform accountability, and global cooperation. The goal should not be to shut down social media but to ensure it serves the public interest. As the line between user and publisher blurs, the responsibility for safeguarding truth and freedom falls on all of us.

## **The Indispensable Role of Investigative Journalism**

Investigative journalism remains a cornerstone of democratic oversight, exposing corruption and abuse. But it is under severe strain. Journalists require time, resources, and safety to conduct deep reporting—all of which are increasingly threatened.

Many OSCE countries see journalists targeted with lawsuits, surveillance, and economic pressure. Digital smear campaigns, especially against women journalists, have become common. These attacks silence critical voices and foster widespread self-censorship. Legal pressures exacerbate the threat. Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs) are increasingly deployed to burden independent media with costly, protracted litigation designed to exhaust and intimidate them.

The economic fragility of journalism magnifies these vulnerabilities. Across the OSCE region, independent outlets struggle to survive amid declining advertising revenues, fierce competition for attention, and monopolistic media ownership. In smaller markets, politically aligned oligarchs or corporations dominate the information environment, subtly but powerfully capturing public discourse.

Despite fifty years of commitments under the Helsinki Final Act, the reality remains grim in parts of the OSCE region. Journalists continue to be imprisoned simply for doing their jobs: exposing corruption, criticizing government policies, or challenging entrenched interests. In authoritarian contexts, independent outlets are branded as “foreign agents,” “extremists,” or “terrorists,” providing pretexts for harassment and closure. Their incarceration sends a chilling message: dare to speak truth to power, and you will be silenced.

Even more troubling is the widespread impunity for violence against journalists. In many OSCE participating States, investigative journalists face threats not just to their livelihoods, but to their lives. Across the OSCE region, murders of journalists—often those investigating organized crime, corruption, or abuses—remain unsolved for years, sometimes decades. Investigations stall. Witnesses vanish. Perpetrators, often shielded by power, walk free.

Supporting investigative journalism is not optional. It is a central pillar of democratic resilience. Without protection and support, the promise of media freedom collapses. The OSCE must reaffirm that journalist safety is non-negotiable. States must be held accountable for failing to protect journalists and for enabling impunity. Concrete actions—including independent investigations, judicial reforms, and sustained international pressure—are essential.

Supporting investigative journalism, defending imprisoned journalists, and ending impunity for crimes against media professionals must become strategic priorities—not symbolic gestures. Without real consequences for those who harm journalists, the promises of Helsinki ring hollow.

### **The Role of Journalists in War and Conflict: Bearing Witness When It Matters Most**

War distorts truth. Propaganda thrives, facts are weaponized, and silence often covers atrocities. In these moments, journalists play a critical role: they bear witness, document reality, and provide the public—and history—with an unfiltered account of events on the ground. In wartime, facts are often the first casualty. Independent journalists play a crucial role in countering propaganda, documenting human rights abuses, and informing the world about conditions on the ground. Despite threats to their safety, many continue to report from war zones. Their work influences humanitarian aid, policy responses, and historical memory. Yet many are treated as adversaries—arrested, censored, or even killed. Protecting them is not optional; it is a test of a society's commitment to justice and truth.

Journalists in conflict zones risk their lives to gather facts. They report from frontline trenches, bombed-out cities, refugee camps, and military briefings. Their work helps the world understand what's really happening—not just what governments or armed groups claim. In many wars, independent journalism is the only counterforce to disinformation. When institutions fail or collapse, the reporter with a camera or notepad often becomes the most trusted source of truth.

The role of journalists isn't just to tell stories—it's to expose war crimes, amplify the voices of civilians, and hold powerful actors accountable. Their reporting can pressure governments to act, mobilize humanitarian aid, and even become evidence in international courts. Journalists also shape how conflicts are remembered. Without them, much of the human cost of war would remain invisible.

Despite their vital role, journalists are often treated as enemies by those in power. Many are killed, kidnapped, detained, or censored. Some are targeted simply for refusing to tow the official line. In modern warfare, information is a battlefield—and journalists are on the frontlines. Despite the risks, many continue to report, not because it is safe, but because it's necessary. When journalists are silenced, impunity grows. When they're protected, truth has a fighting chance.

Protecting the safety and independence of journalists in war is not a side issue—it's central to defending human rights, democracy, and peace.

### **The Evolving Threat Landscape: From Disinformation to AI Manipulation**

Technology has opened extraordinary possibilities for journalism—data-driven investigations, real-time reporting—but the same tools have accelerated the erosion of media freedom.

Artificial intelligence is rapidly transforming journalism—offering new tools for data analysis and content production. But it also presents urgent threats. Automated content moderation systems frequently mislabel legitimate journalism, especially in non-dominant languages or high-risk regions. Biased training data can lead to disproportionate takedowns, silencing critical voices.

Governments increasingly use AI-driven surveillance tools to monitor and intimidate reporters, undermining source confidentiality and personal safety. Deepfakes and other synthetic content challenge the very notion of truth in public discourse.

Freedom of expression now includes the right to be heard, the right to access credible information, and protection from algorithmic manipulation. The digital public sphere is no longer neutral—platforms, code, and data policies shape what is possible.

Disinformation—often state-sponsored or amplified by malign actors—polarizes communities, undermines democratic institutions, and weakens societal trust. These dangers are now magnified by AI-enabled challenges. AI is rapidly transforming how content is created, disseminated, and moderated. While it offers opportunities to improve access to information and support journalistic work, it also introduces grave risks that demand urgent attention.

The speed, scale, and sophistication of these threats far outpace traditional regulatory frameworks. Defending media freedom now requires new strategies, tools, and partnerships.

One pressing concern is AI-driven content moderation. Automated systems, designed to detect and remove harmful material, often lack the nuance to distinguish hate speech from satire or incitement from legitimate reporting. Mistaken takedowns—particularly of content from journalists, activists, and minority groups—can have life-or-death consequences, especially in high-risk environments. Moreover, moderation systems are often trained on biased datasets, reflecting and reinforcing existing inequalities. Outsourced and automated moderation—without sufficient local context or language expertise—disproportionately silences marginalized voices.

Beyond moderation, AI is increasingly deployed in surveillance and predictive policing under vague or abusive legal frameworks. Journalists are targeted with facial recognition technology and spyware, endangering source confidentiality, eroding privacy, and stifling independent reporting. In authoritarian settings, such technologies are used to identify dissenters and suppress criticism under the guise of national security. Generative AI has enabled the mass production of false or misleading content. Deepfakes—hyper-realistic fabricated videos and audio—are cheap, scalable, and increasingly indistinguishable from authentic material. They can discredit journalists, manipulate public opinion, and sow confusion during elections, further eroding trust in visual and textual evidence.

Algorithms that drive search engines and social media feeds prioritize sensationalism and misinformation to maximize engagement and profit. Nuanced investigative journalism is often buried under viral outrage and disinformation. Pressing questions about AI-driven accountability, content moderation standards, surveillance practices, and the ethical production of media must be urgently addressed. While innovation must be fostered, fundamental rights must not be sacrificed. Responses so far have been fragmented, inadequate, and inconsistent.

## Media Freedom and Freedom of Expression: Inseparable Rights

Media freedom cannot be considered in isolation from the broader right to freedom of expression. In the digital age, millions have found new voices through social media and citizen journalism. Yet this democratization has unleashed unprecedented disorder. Meaningful freedom of expression requires: the right not merely to speak, but to be heard; the right to factual, fair, and adequate information; protection against algorithmic suppression and manipulation; defense against disinformation deliberately engineered to distort democratic debate.

The OSCE's unique human dimension commitments position it to bridge principle and practice. Doing so demands renewed political will and innovative, forward-looking responses.

Technology reflects the values, biases, and intentions of its creators, deployers, and regulators. It is not neutral, nor has it consistently respected ethical professional standards. Without strong ethical frameworks, technology will continue to corrode the democratic information space. A rights-based approach to digital governance must:

- Demand transparency and accountability in algorithm design and deployment.
- Ensure diversity in AI training datasets to counter systemic discrimination.
- Protect journalistic autonomy and the confidentiality of sources.
- Establish ethical standards for the creation, dissemination, and moderation of AI-generated content.

## Looking Ahead: A Legacy Renewed

As we commemorate fifty years of the Helsinki spirit, the OSCE stands at a critical juncture. Media freedom, freedom of expression, and the integrity of public discourse face existential threats. AI and tech giants are no longer mere disruptors; they are now the architects of the global information ecosystem. By broadening its commitments to reflect new realities, the OSCE can renew its legacy—strengthening protections, enhancing oversight, and holding both states and corporations accountable. It can ensure that the next fifty years build societies where truth prevails, voices flourish, and security rests on inclusive, informed dialogue. The Golden Jubilee must be a call to bold, united action—for the sake of our security, peace, and shared democratic future.

Many OSCE states continue to endorse the Helsinki principles in declarations and speeches, yet fail to act on them at home. The RFoM's experience is that “values and commitments” to media freedom are only as good as the will to uphold them. This is why political will is the linchpin of progress. Without governments in the OSCE actively enforcing protections – from ensuring safety to fostering pluralism – the best policies on paper will not translate into reality.

The OSCE's next fifty years must be defined not only by vigilance against digital threats but by an uncompromising commitment to those who risk everything to tell the truth. Safeguarding investigative

journalism, securing justice for murdered reporters, and freeing those unjustly imprisoned are not optional goals—they are tests of whether the spirit of the Helsinki Act endures. In an era of deepening digital challenges, the OSCE’s role in fostering dialogue, setting standards, highlighting misconduct, and defending its core principles remains as vital today as it was five decades ago. The future of media freedom—and of democracy itself—depends on it.


As the OSCE marks its 50th anniversary, the media freedom chapter of its legacy is still being written. The Helsinki Final Act’s ideals – free press, exchange of information, cultural openness – remain as vital as ever, but meeting them demands new strategies. The OSCE is now chaired by Finland (in 2025), which has highlighted the need to “re-ignite the original Helsinki spirit of compromise and cooperation” in a fractious era. For media freedom, that means both recommitting to old promises and tackling modern challenges.

First, governments must back up words with deeds. OSCE participating States should embed Helsinki principles in concrete laws and budgets. This could include legal reforms such as abolishing remaining criminal defamation laws and punitive media regulations; ensuring public broadcasters are editorially independent; enforcing antitrust rules so media markets aren’t dominated by hidden oligarchs; and protecting journalists’ safety with speedy investigations of attacks. States should also open space for more diverse media – for example by supporting community radio and easing restrictions on foreign news exchange as envisaged in the Final Act. Technical progress must not excuse regression: authorities should resist the temptation to use AI or cybersecurity concerns as pretexts for censorship.

Second, transparency and accountability are key. OSCE bodies and civil society can help by documenting violations and calling them out. The 2018 OSCE Ministerial Decision on Safety of Journalists obliges states to foster a safe environment for reporters; civil society and parliaments must keep pressing states to uphold that commitment. Greater involvement of parliamentarians (such as the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly) and of independent courts can inject more political will into meeting OSCE norms. Peer pressure works: when one country tightens the screws, others will notice and face diplomatic consequences.

Third, the OSCE itself must stay relevant. Its RFoM office should continue to innovate. The OSCE can also foster dialogue between media and tech companies to write “transparency requirements” into platforms’ policies, so that users know why content is promoted or removed. The OSCE and its partners should encourage models that make journalists economically viable without fear of oligarch influence or state subsidy strings.

Ultimately, Helsinki’s promise was that enduring security in Europe requires respect for basic freedoms. Media freedom is not a luxury; it is a safety valve in any healthy society. When people can speak truth to power and share information freely, the society becomes more resilient. As we reflect on 50 years of the OSCE, we should remember that freedom of the media is the fundamental right that underpins all others. It protects everything from peaceful protest to corruption exposés. The OSCE’s original vision was forward-looking – we must renew that vision. With strong political will, commitment to Helsinki’s spirit, and adaptation to today’s realities, the next 50 years can see media freedom flourish rather than falter.



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Netherlands Helsinki Committee  
Het Nutshuis  
Riviervismarkt 4  
2513 AM The Hague  
The Netherlands

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