OSCE: Why Free Internet Matters

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Dunja Mijatović, the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, laid out several basic principles on Internet governance in a position paper released in December.

Arguing that the Internet is becoming, more and more, an indispensable tool for all citizens to receive, seek and impart information, she said that governments have an obligation to enable their citizens to access the Internet unhindered; that they must create a legal environment that allows for independent and pluralistic media and the free flow of information across borders.

Mijatović said that governments have a role to play when it comes to Internet content, protecting children, and fighting racism and cybercrime. The question, she said, is not whether governments should or should not regulate the Internet, but how, what and to what extent content should be regulated. Restrictions are legitimate only if they are in compliance with international norms and standards, are necessary for a democratic society and set forth clearly by law.

The Representative argued for broad access to the Internet. Access to digital networks and services should be unhindered and non-discriminatory - network neutrality should be safeguarded. Online information and traffic should be treated equally regardless of the device, content, author, origin or destination.

Mijatović also said that governments across the OSCE region should provide affordable broadband access to all their residents. And while countries have a legitimate interest to combat piracy, restricting or cutting off users' access (for instance with the "three-strikes" approach) is a disproportionate response and incompatible with OSCE commitments. Access to the public domain is important for both technical and cultural innovation and must not be endangered through the adoption of excessive provisions related to patent and copyright law, she said.

Freedom of the media is not reserved for media companies or editorial offices, Mijatović said. Rights to freedom of expression apply to all forms of journalism that is meant for public distribution, whether professional or citizen. It is a basic human right and cannot be divided into traditional media and new media.

Today's news is social, she said. Social media and social networks change the way news is generated and accessed. They influence media in three ways: as a tool to

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create content, to distribute and impart information and to seek, receive and access information. Social media and social networks themselves are becoming instrumental to the exercise of the right to media freedom and freedom of expression.

Finally, Mijatović argued for Internet literacy, which is the result of media education that enables people to make informed decisions about their use of the Internet, evaluate the accuracy and possible bias of online information and to protect minors from possibly harmful content. A non-protectionist approach is a key to engaging students in media literacy. Young people should not be viewed as victims who need to be rescued from the excess of their culture, but instead should be empowered to make sound judgments about their own online activities. An educated mind is the best filter, she said.

OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, "Internet Freedom: Why It Matters"

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