Keynote Speech:
“Media Freedom and Security: Challenges in the Digital Age”
By Everette E. Dennis

Good afternoon. Your excellencies, ladies, and gentlemen:

My thanks for that generous introduction and for the kind invitation of the Austrian Chairmanship of OSCE to join you today. I come here with great respect for the important and far reaching work of the OSCE and especially its office of Representative on Freedom of the Media. It reflects an institutional commitment to freedom of expression almost unique among international organizations.

The progressive agenda of the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media has calibrated a fine balance between individual and institutional liberty in the context of both appropriate and needed regulation and legislation. A priority such as decriminalizing defamation is a vital precondition for robust and unconstrained freedom of expression—and deserves our keen attention and support for legislation in countries where this is not already the law of the land.

Regarding our focus here today, I understand and appreciate that a comprehensive approach to security embraces the linchpins of geopolitics: the politico-military, economic, environmental and human dimensions. It is, of course, in the human realm that we find ourselves today, exploring the role of free and independent media that are essential to the functioning of the modern state in an increasingly global and digitally-connected society. Still, it is important to acknowledge each and all pillars of national and regional security because one set of priorities can encroach on others and the human dimension is most often overlooked or abandoned in the face of urgent military or economic demands.

The media have what sometimes seems a contradictory mandate—both to support and to challenge the fundamental foundations of security, especially in this digital age, when a hacked website or the spreading of false information can be just as dangerous and threatening as military intervention was in the past. If security in its simplest form is the state of being free from danger or threat, then the functions of all media are vital to the free flow of information as well as for public confidence in government or the international order. This is true for the traditional instruments
for the delivery of news, opinion and entertainment as well as increasingly influential and pervasive social media—across all technological platforms.

While media operate under different legal regimes and different governmental structures, their first function is observing and surveying society itself on behalf of their audiences and stakeholders. They have an obligation when all is said and done to tell the truth, to facilitate the free flow of information for the benefit of the body politic and to encourage the interplay of differing perspectives and views. They provide what communication theorist Harold Lasswell called “surveillance of the environment.” This surveillance function of the media is linked to the fundamental human right to communicate and to have access to information to make personal, institutional and societal decisions, whether as individuals or collectively.

What then, should be the role of the media writ large in the face of global disruption affecting human beings in war, terrorism, refugee migration, pandemics or other national and international emergencies, whether urgent and immediate or longstanding and pervasive? At the most basic level for the news media, this mandates them to cover the news as completely as possible so that citizens in a free society are fully informed to navigate their lives and the world around them.

It is simply dangerous not to be informed. But, of course, it is not all that simple when it comes to matters of security. The ancient conflict between secrecy and publicity, between full disclosure and withholding information, comes into full view here. This is one of the great dilemmas for human society today because of legal requirements, proprietary rights, government obfuscation or other institutional constraints that make full disclosure difficult. Idealists pray for good will, for intelligent and rational leadership and a commitment to the public interest to win the day, but we know that does not always happen. This struggle, of course, is all about intelligence, a commodity once held secretly and securely by governments or private interests. It is, now more often accessible through leaks, information espionage and even accidental discoveries. In societies where no prior restraint of publication is a fundamental condition of free media, post hoc sanctions or punishment might follow, but only after information is in the public realm. Where such guarantees do not exist, formal censorship is more likely, fueling fears that can result in self-censorship. The old regimes of censorship, which might have been
eviscerated in an information society, are, sadly alive and well in states where the media are often at risk.

The digital age of high speed communication and instant interactivity presents even more and new challenges to the interplay between secrecy and publicity. There is, at once, the technical capacity for communication to, between and among almost every person on the planet, thanks to the internet and world wide web, artificial intelligence and other developments. But, there is also the infinite opportunity for deliberately destructive information wars between state or nonstate parties. In my country as elsewhere, well-documented cyberhacks aimed at disrupting elections are the subject of governmental investigations. This frontal attack on democracy and governmental functions is not new and is more widespread across Europe and other regions than was once realized. As digital media conquer time and space, their consequences are the subject of newly enacted cybercrime laws.

At the same time in several countries, including my own, attacks on the news media are rampant and growing. Whether this involves extreme cases such as the killing or imprisonment of individual journalists, draconian new cybercrime laws, thinly veiled threats or even generic attacks on the media as “the enemy of the people,” the result is the same—that of a chilling effect on free expression. It concurrently challenges the security of the people in the quiet enjoyment of their lives. As the International Press Institute, the Committee to Protect Journalists and other organizations continuously document, these threats are legion—and growing. Together they constitute a great infringement on human freedom. Governmental attacks on the media, whether verbal or physically violent, are on the rise the world over. In the United States where an adversary relationship between the White House and the news media, is nothing new, something has changed. Increasingly that exchange is more threatening, deeply disturbing and ugly. It is often fueled by the President’s taunting tweets and expressions in a joust replete with denigrating attacks on individual journalists or institutional threats to suspend broadcast licenses. How much of this is part of a combative media/marketing strategy as opposed to actionable concerns is still unknown, but surely it warrants continuous attention, coverage, analysis and advocacy. Freedom of expression is always in play even in advanced societies.
Only recently, I have seen at close hand the powerful impact of cybercrime and disinformation in the Middle East. The June 5 blockade of Qatar by a quartet of neighboring countries was triggered by an earlier hacked website which ignited a fierce information war, exacerbated by errant tweets by the President of the United States.

For various reasons, too complex to review here, the blockade, virtually a siege, is far more than the curtailment of air routes, shipping and other considerations. It is the cause of deeply human fissures as closed borders separated families, disrupted businesses and incomes, incurring costs in the billions of dollars. The stoppage of people—from ordinary travelers to individuals urgently needing medical care or students wishing to resume their studies across borders—this artificial and unnecessary disruption of formerly close relations between nations is costly for all parties. It has been accompanied by the information war I spoke of earlier replete with fabricated news stories, crude attempts to undermine government and the social order. And the centerpiece of the aggressors’ demands was the closure of Al Jazeera, the most pervasive voice in the region and one that champions investigative reporting. And it was accompanied by threats to sovereignty itself.

In the midst of the continuing blockade there is even an astonishing new regulation in two countries. It prohibits the dissemination of positive news about Qatar, subject to a 15-year jail sentence. Perhaps this is the other side of defamation. That the blockade began during the Holy Month of Ramadan is especially repugnant. It even included the initial denial of pilgrims from Qatar travelling to the Haj. There are many perspectives on the cause and continuation of this diplomatic rupture, but in the end from a media perspective, there is the unvarnished reality of deliberately erroneous, misleading and other damaging communication that serves no human interest. I see daily reports so outrageous and hate- filled that it is hard to believe they come from media outlets that were heretofore professional, responsible and generally reliable. Whatever the grievances in the dispute, contaminating the media is an unfortunate and destructive response.

Be assured this is more than a war of words as national and regional security is greatly challenged. Recent reports indicate how the surprise attack of the blockade might have ignited armed conflict. This suggests just how dangerous cyberwarfare can be and potentially impede and impair security with a devastating impact on people and the human condition.
With massive expenditures in dueling public information and propaganda campaigns, the Qatar case is unusual, but not unprecedented, and likely to be repeated elsewhere. Since regional or even bilateral disputes these days are influenced by international public opinion and even settled by outside parties, it is critical that media take their role seriously to cover and call out risks to security. Media also need partners to make this happen—whether in government, business, universities, NGOs or other interests. So, what is to be done?

First, at a basic level, media literacy training for citizens everywhere is the best way to ensure an informed and critical populace, capable of distinguishing truth from disinformation;

Second, media need to have clear protocols regarding security, explaining regulations that protect justifiable secrets or otherwise guard the public while exposing those laws simply being used by rulers to contain criticism, public discourse and understanding;

Third, media in concert with their key stakeholders must fight actively for their freedom using all appropriate means including advocacy;

Fourth, media must police their own house, assuring factual and verified reports along with responsible commentary as well as exposing the excesses of digital and social media aimed at disruption and distrust;

Fifth, social media platforms and their leaders need to accept responsibility for enforcing ethical standards for content and advertising that are anonymous to the public or inaccurately identified as well as funding by destructive interests;

Sixth, the continuing dialogue wherein secrecy and publicity are in play needs to engage leaders of government, business and media toward mutual agreements and best practices;

Finally, universities, think thanks, policy centers and international organizations need to continue to study, document and assess the role of media in understanding and challenging unwarranted security constraints, while defending those that serve the public interest.
The media have a large and growing role in communication risks that threaten security. Media should help build an understanding for policies and practices essential to public safety and should serve as the true representative of the people and human values.

Thank you for your attention.