Greetings everyone from New York, and congratulations to Southeast Asian Press Alliance for its 20th anniversary. I am pleased to be celebrating this event with you even though I’m far away. I still remember what it was at SEAPA founding in 1998. It was a time of hope, there were changes in Indonesia following the fall of Suharto, and of course, Philippines has its democratic transition with people power in 1996 and in Thailand in 1992. We were filled with hope when the media was opening up and the root of democracy was being planted in our countries. We also knew that we needed Asian voices to defend press freedom. SEAPA, over the years, has done just that, it has protested the killing and jailing of journalists, it has (inaudible) threats and intimidation of the press It has done the work of defending press freedom in Asia with great success and distinction but the media landscape has changed since the 1990’s and SEAPA has to be a stronger, and more resilient and innovative alliance, if it is to defend journalism and the higher threat of environment. I believe, there is a fundamental paradigm shift in our role, our challenges in the societies that we serve, it isn’t simply aren’t new threats, there are, but the very environment in which we operate has changed. And it has changed dramatically. The fact-based, the evidence-based, the independent reporting that holds power to account is under threat.

In the 1990s and the early aughts, there was a broad global consensus that journalists as representatives of the public -- as truth seekers and fact gatherers in the public interest -- needed to be safeguarded. Despite their deficiencies and excesses, the news media were believed to be serving vital public functions: They are watchdogs of power and purveyors of empirical information that become the basis for public conversation. Journalists help create a world of shared facts, without which rational and democratic discourse is not possible.

The journalists of my era thought, perhaps naively, that all that we needed in order to build the scaffolding for a free press are constitutional protections, courts to defend the rights of journalists, and the economic wherewithal to ensure press independence.

No longer. Many governments - and some sections of the public - now see journalists as dangerous to the public interest: We are untrustworthy, biased, tools of liberal and globalist elites, peddlers of fake news, and interested only in profiting from the misery of others.

Twenty-five years ago, the press had moral authority. We had helped unseat dictators and midwife democratic transitions. Our role as the Fourth Estate was largely unquestioned.

Today we are in a vastly different information space. The press is no longer the sole gatekeeper of information. For better or worse, its monopoly over the means of information production has ended. Public discourse is moving towards mobile phones and social media spaces -- in many places bypassing the press or journalists altogether.

In the process, we have lost our economic clout and our political influence. We’ve also lost control over own narrative. Today we are seen no longer as watchdogs or vanguards of an informed citizenry but as peddlers of fake news, presstitutes, enemies of the people. Populist
and anti-democratic leaders, polarized public, widespread dissatisfaction with the world economic order are all fanning the flames of resentment against the press.

Governments and autocratic heads of state dismiss the facts, distract with “alternative narratives,” deceive with outright lies and threaten and harass professional fact-gatherers like us.

Beyond governments, an array of actors – political parties, public relations and strategic communications firms, religious fundamentalists along with assorted trolls, conspiracy theorists, extremists and mischief makers – are creating cascades of disinformation that are polluting the public sphere. They are aided by computational tools, by bots, algorithms and other forms of automation that allow untruths to propagate, to reach targeted demographics with a speed never before possible.

One more key difference is this: Censorship in the internet era is no longer about denying citizens information -- no longer denial of access but the denial of attention, focus, and credibility. The aim is not to block information, but to drown it with misinformation. The goal is to distract citizens so their attention is diluted, to sow so much doubt and confusion, they no longer know what to believe. The objective also is to delegitimize -- and threaten -- media that produce accurate information.

When the institutional gatekeepers that were set up to filter falsehoods from facts are unable to function properly, the public conversation is poisoned by massive doses of untruths. When it takes too much effort to make it through the disinformation deluge, people just give up.

These are the new threats. But there are old ones as well -- and old and new are linked. In the past, rulers closed down newspapers or jailed journalists in order to stifle their voices. They still do that. The Committee to Protect Journalists says there are more journalists in jail now than there have been since they started counting. In 2000, there were 81. Last year, there were 262, three-quarters of the online journalists, attesting to both the explosion of online journalism and its riskier nature.

Put this all together, and it’s clear that simply soldering on - doing our work the way we’ve always done it, perhaps slightly better - isn’t enough.

Now, more than ever, we need new ideas, a new coalition, new ways of protecting and expanding the spaces where truth and facts can prevail. This is the challenge that faces, SEAPA, and all of us around the world committed to free and independent press. Let’s work together. Thank you very much for listening to me and congratulations again to SEAPA on the 20th anniversary.