Forum: Human Rights Committee
Issue: Addressing the right to freedom of speech and censorship (Article 19)
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Introduction:

"This is slavery, not to speak one's thought.'" - Euripides, The Phonecian Women

Freedom of speech is known to be a fundamental human right. It permits all to express their ideas and opinions freely, without any fear of censorship or persecution. Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that 'Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media regardless of frontiers' (United Nations, 1948). Article 19 was established to protect this right, and label it as a necessity. Through this, people are able to actively participate in public affairs as well as foster open and diverse discussions involving a myriad of perspectives.

However, in reality, the application of this right is subject to many limitations. According to The Guardian, Nearly half the world's people are living in countries where their freedom of speech and right to privacy is being eroded. Researchers have found that 3.38 billion people (roughly 46% of the global population), live in countries deemed to be at 'extreme risk' for the right to privacy and freedom of expression. Countries such as China, Cambodia, and Turkey are a few of the countries which are at this 'extreme risk' level.

In order to address this issue, the discussion of current, real-world societal concerns is paramount. The topic of freedom of speech and censorship has become increasingly relevant today, especially due to more global access to information and the increase in digital communication. This makes it a crucial topic for nuanced discussion, as it questions our privacy and freedom in today's digital world.

Definition of Key Terms:

1. **Freedom of Speech:** The power or right to express one's opinions without censorship, restraint or legal penalty (Oxford Languages, 2023)

2. **Universal Declaration of Human Rights Article 19 :** Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media regardless of frontiers

3. **Censorship**: The suppression or prohibition of any parts of books, films, news, etc. considered obscene, politically unacceptable, or a threat to security (Oxford Languages, 2023).

4. **Democracy:** A system of government by the whole population or all the eligible members of a state, typically through elected representatives (Oxford Languages, 2023).

5. **Government regulation:** A rule or mechanism that limits, steers, or otherwise controls social behavior (Britannica, 2023)

6. **Civil Society:** Society is considered as a community of citizens linked by common interests and collective activity (Oxford Languages, 2023).

Background Information

History of freedom of speech and censorship

Freedom of speech and censorship has always been an important topic in society throughout history. It can be dated back to ancient Greece, where numerous philosophers like Socrates defended the right to express ideas freely. The recognition of this concept became recognised as a human right in the 17th and 18th centuries during the Age of Enlightenment. However, there have always been challenges in which governments, authorities and institutions impose censorship to control the flow of information - these challenges, especially the more recent ones, highlighted the importance of freedom of speech and the problematic nature of censorship. It is not a recent issue, but it has become more and more widespread, impactful, and frequent - and the following events are examples of this.

China's Great Firewall

In 1997, The Chinese government implemented an extensive firewall that restricted access to foreign websites, social media platforms, or content deemed

sensitive or critical of the government. Its purpose was to maintain ideological control, suppress dissenting voices, limit exposure to foreign ideas, and to minimise the spread of information deemed critical of the Community party. A combination of technologies was used, including URL, DPS, and IP filtering, which allowed the government to block and intercept internet traffic. This had a huge impact on Chinese society. Citizens' access to information has been limited and this has resulted in a domestic internet ecosystem with only state-approved content; this also limited open discussion on sensitive issues. With large violations of their freedom of speech and expression, it is clear that censorship has had an irreversible impact on Chinese society.

Censorship in North Korea

North Korea is one of the most isolated and heavily censored countries in the world. All its media is state-controlled - and it becomes the sole source of information for its citizens. There is censorship of foreign media, as well as restricted internet access. What sets North Korea apart, however, is that there are severe punishments for dissent. Any dissent that shows even the slightest opposition towards regime will be severely punished. Punishments include forced labour, imprisonment, and even execution. The impact this has had on the citizens has been drastic. The extreme censorship has created a climate of fear and blind obedience to the regime, stifling free thought and expression; an essential human right.
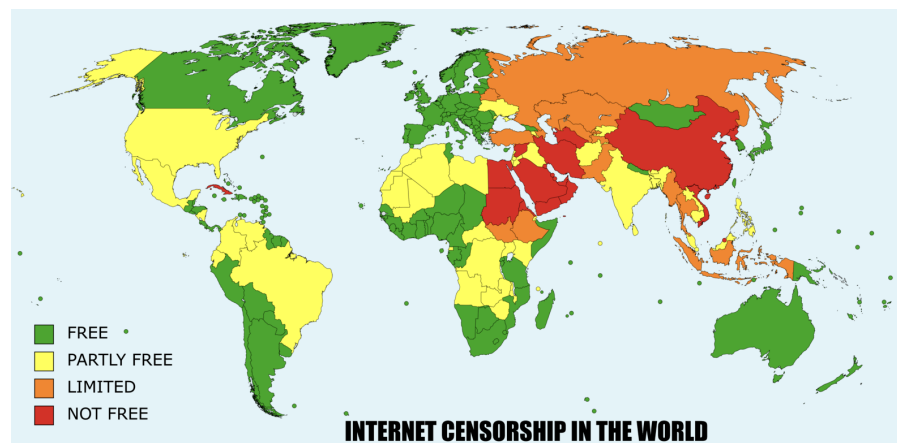
Social media content moderation

This is the more modern example of lack of freedom of speech and censorship. Censorship in social media is the act of controlling or restricting user-generated content on social media based on numerous guidelines dictated by the platform owners. The aim is to filter out offensive, harmful or inappropriate content to create a safer environment for viewers. However, the issue of censorship comes about when the platform restricts certain content that is sharing something important - but is labeled as 'harmful'. This is where freedom of speech, potential biases and the role of tech companies controlling information (censorship) comes in. Social media platforms are currently unable to safeguard user safety while upholding free expression at the same time - and therein lies the issue.

The Debate in the States

Debates over freedom of speech in the USA, particularly in the context of online content moderation and hate speech regulation, remain contentious. On one side, there is a call for stricter moderation to curb hate speech, misinformation, and online harassment, emphasizing the need to protect vulnerable communities. Conversely, concerns about potential censorship, bias by online platforms, and the sanctity of free expression persist. Striking the right balance between safeguarding open discourse and addressing the challenges posed by the digital age continues to be a challenge in the ongoing discussion around freedom of speech in America.

Current Situation

Source: Wikimedia Commons

Current influences on freedom of speech and censorship

Government Influence

Some governments are putting further restrictions on what people can say online, claiming issues like political opposition, national security, and misinformation. However, there are also worries that these actions could stifle dissenting voices and limit freedom of expression. Regulations that are made more stringent may have a chilling effect, prompting people to self-censor their thoughts for fear of repercussions. Journalists and media organizations may experience increased

pressure and harassment, and media freedom may also be jeopardized. In the digital age, finding a balance between addressing valid concerns and defending core human rights like the right to free speech remains difficult and continuing. Censorship poses a grave threat to journalists in oppressed nations. Journalists working in such environments often face violence, intimidation, and even death as they strive to report on critical issues. Governments in these nations frequently employ various tactics to curtail access to information, including imposing strict media regulations, shutting down independent news outlets, and monitoring online communication. This environment of censorship not only endangers the lives of journalists but also erodes press freedom and suppresses the vital role journalism plays in holding power to account, ultimately hindering the flow of information and stifling efforts towards transparency and democracy.

Content Moderation

Online communities and social media platforms always struggle with the problem of content moderation. It is a challenging and divisive topic to strike a balance between the protection of free speech and the suppression of the spread of damaging information. Owners of platforms must balance accommodating different viewpoints with keeping a secure environment for users. This frequently sparks arguments and discussions about the methods used for content moderation, particularly in relation to openness, consistency, and the possibility of bias in judgment. Effective content moderation that upholds users' rights while defending the online community requires a constant focus on guidelines that are as clear as possible, consistent rule enforcement, and an understanding of algorithmic biases.

Global Internet Governance

A lot of attention has been paid to the problem of internet governance and digital rights in international discussions. Organizations and governments are challenged with the difficulty of negotiating complicated challenges while maintaining individual freedoms and privacy due to the internet's extensive influence on numerous facets of modern life. In order to handle problems like data protection, online censorship, cybersecurity, and information access, there must be global coordination and cooperation. Finding common ground between nations with different cultural values and legal systems, meanwhile, is a difficulty. Effective and equitable internet governance laws that protect digital rights on a global scale must strike a balance between a united approach and respect for national sovereignty and cultural values.

Digital Surveillance and Cybersecurity

Governments increasingly employ digital surveillance and cybersecurity measures to control information flow and monitor journalists. These tactics involve invasive monitoring of online activities, hacking into journalists' accounts, and intercepting communications, all to silence dissent and stifle investigative journalism. Such practices violate individual privacy and undermine the fundamental principles of a free press. Journalists and media organizations must continually adapt and strengthen their cybersecurity measures to protect their sources and ensure the safe dissemination of information in the face of these government-sponsored threats to press freedom.

Case study : COVID 19

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on a number of societal facets, including the environment for free speech. While the pandemic increased the need for trustworthy information and open communication, it also gave some governments the chance to enact emergency regulations that had a negative impact on free speech. The pandemic served as a justification for various authorities to tighten their control over the flow of information, silence critics, and censor stories about the health crisis. Concerns concerning the abuse of emergency powers to hinder transparency, independent media, and the public's ability to obtain correct information have been expressed as a result of such measures. Attempting to report on the pandemic or present alternative viewpoints in several cases resulted in censorship, legal ramifications, or even physical threats to reporters and residents.

Major Parties Involved and Their Views

The American Civil Liberties Union

The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) is a prominent organization dedicated to defending and preserving freedom of speech in the United States. Founded in 1920, the ACLU has consistently championed the First Amendment rights of individuals and groups, advocating for their right to express themselves without censorship or government interference. The organization takes a strong stance against any form of content-based restrictions on speech, even if the ideas

expressed are unpopular or controversial. Through legal advocacy, public education, and policy engagement, the ACLU strives to protect the right to free expression for all, regardless of political affiliations or beliefs. By challenging laws, regulations, and practices that threaten free speech, the ACLU plays a vital role in safeguarding one of the fundamental pillars of American democracy and promoting an open and inclusive exchange of ideas in the public sphere.

North Korea

To maintain its ideological authority, North Korea imposes severe restrictions on speech and information. State-run media exalts the ruling Kim family and spreads pro-regime sentiment. Dissent is severely punished, foreign media is restricted, and communication avenues are strictly controlled. The extensive censorship isolates the populace from the outside world by encouraging fear and stifling free expression. North Korea is criticized internationally for its extreme censorship and violations of human rights.

Saudi Arabia

Censorship in Saudi Arabia is widespread, with strict control exercised over various forms of expression both offline and online. The government aims to maintain political stability, protect religious values, and prevent the dissemination of content critical of the authorities. Traditional media outlets face heavy censorship, aligning with state-approved narratives and avoiding criticism of the government or religious authorities. Online content is also heavily filtered, leading to restricted access to various websites and social media platforms. Fear of repercussions and self-censorship limit discussions on political dissent, human rights, and sensitive topics. Journalists and media outlets operate under tight constraints, facing restrictions on reporting critical views. While censorship aims to maintain social and political order, it has drawn criticism for stifling free expression and restricting access to information.

China

In China, media and information are subject to severe and tightly enforced censorship. The government restricts access to specific websites and regulates what can be said online using technical means and legal means. They carefully monitor social media and take down posts that criticize the administration. Government-controlled media is used to further its agenda and stifle criticism of it. Concerns regarding human rights and a lack of access to balanced information are raised by this filtering, which limits freedom of speech and access to independent news sources.

Cuba

Cuba has a long history of stringent censorship against news organizations and journalists. The government maintains strict control over the media, ensuring that it aligns with the state's narratives and ideologies. Independent journalism is heavily suppressed, with harassment, intimidation, and imprisonment commonly used to deter critical reporting. The result is a restricted flow of information and limited press freedom, making it challenging for journalists in Cuba to fulfill their crucial role as watchdogs and providers of unbiased news.

Venezuela

In Venezuela, censorship against news organizations and journalists is a grave and ongoing concern. Under President Nicolás Maduro's leadership, the government has taken extensive measures to stifle independent reporting and dissenting voices. These actions include the closure of critical news outlets, the harassment and arrest of journalists, and the manipulation of media ownership to align with government interests. As a result, freedom of the press is severely compromised, making it exceptionally challenging for journalists to report objectively and hold those in power accountable. The censorship in Venezuela has had a detrimental impact on the public's access to unbiased information and the ability of journalists to fulfill their vital role in a democracy.

UN Involvement, Relevant Resolutions, Treaties and Events

- Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 10 December 1948 (A/RES/217(III))
- Disinformation and freedom of opinion and expression during armed conflicts, 19 April 2023 (A/HRC/53/25)
- The Safety of Journalists, 7 October 2022, (A/HRC/51/L.14)
- Special Rapporteur on freedom of opinion and expression, 19th April 2023, (A/HRC/53/25)

Possible Solutions

1. Possibly exploring and establishing a clear and define legal framework that involves precise and cohesive boundaries of freedom of speech and defines the restrictions where censorship is acceptable

2. Ensuring that platforms and organizations make sure their content moderation policies are transparent, freely accessible, and open to public review. Platforms should clearly disclose their policies and criteria for what constitutes acceptable and undesirable content as part of their commitment to transparency in content management. Users should be able to quickly see these policies and comprehend the regulations controlling their online interactions without any ambiguity or hidden terms

3. Education in media literacy is also a possible solution. Possibly implementing educational programs that teach media literacy to aid the public in properly assessing information and distinguishing between reliable and false information.

4. Another beneficial solution could be to involve multiple perspectives in policy-making. Stakeholders such as civil society organizations, technology experts, human rights advocates and academia could work together to create stronger policies on freedom of speech and censorship.

5. Another possible solution could be to strengthen and protect laws for journalists. This entails passing legislation that expressly defends journalists' freedom to gather and distribute information without hindrance, as well as putting laws into place to protect sources and confidential material.

Writing Clauses

First, to draft MUN resolution clauses effectively, clearly state the global issue in preambulatory clauses. Then, propose actionable solutions in operative clauses using precise language and cooperative terms. Ensure feasibility and consider resource allocation. Emphasize the positive impact and address potential concerns. Maintain clarity, consistency, and logical order. Avoid duplication and be open to co-sponsors and amendments. Engage in constructive debate, revise when necessary, and seek consensus. Finally, present the final version for committee voting, remaining flexible to secure its passage.

Bibliography

Useful Links

[RIGHT TO FREE SPEECH AND CENSORSHIP: A JURISPRUDENTIAL ANALYSIS](#)

[How to respond to disinformation while protecting free speech | Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism](#)

[Threats to freedom of press: Violence, disinformation & censorship | UNESCO](#)

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