

Best Delegate Model United Nations

Background Guide

Freedom of the Press



UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)

Topic: Freedom of the Press

Topic Background

Introduction

Freedom of the press can be defined as the right to report news without fear of censorship from the government.¹ Around the world, the media is a powerful tool to update people on what is happening inside and outside of their home countries. People use the daily news to keep up with what is happening around them. There are many ways that news organizations keep their listeners up to date. The average American adult spends around 30 minutes a night watching local news channels on TV.² Radio broadcasters make daily news updates. Big news companies such as Al-Jazeera and the New York Times print newspapers and make news accessible online. Social media has also become a popular way for people to engage with current events and the news.

The stereotype of the press is that it must antagonize its government in order to be truthful and free. While this is not always the case, one important characteristic of freedom of the press is the freedom for journalists to investigate and criticize their home governments. Traditionally, in democracies, this has been one way that the people hold their elected officials accountable to their actions. Governments and media, then, are often intricately intertwined. There cannot be one without the other (...unless the journalist is reporting abroad).

State governments play a key role in all three sub-issues mentioned: the protection of journalists, censorship of the media, and social media and misinformation. As this committee navigates the complexities of international rights for journalists and the press, they must keep that in mind.

Past International Action

The Sustainable Development Goals & SDG 16

¹<https://www.history.com/topics/united-states-constitution/freedom-of-the-press>

²<https://transition.fcc.gov/osp/inc-report/INoC-20-News-Consumption.pdf>

16 PEACE, JUSTICE AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS



Peace, justice, and institutional strength lie at the core of societal development. Contemporarily, society is divided; the international community is consistently faced with corruption, insecurity, and mistrust between and within nations, which correlates with stagnated global development. While rule of law, human rights, and institutional transparency are pillars of just and inclusive societies, Transparency International has reported that 57% of global citizens feel as if their governments are doing badly in the fight against internal corruption, which can be linked to a lack of freedom of the press.³ SDG 16 lists out a series of targets in the effort to ensure global governance standards, including: 1) promoting the rule of law at the national and international levels and ensuring equality and justice for all, 2) substantially reducing corruption and bribery in all their forms, 3) developing effective, accountable, and transparent institutions at all levels, 4) ensuring responsive, inclusive, participatory, and representative decision making at all levels, 5) broadening and strengthening the participation of developing countries in the institutions of global governance, 6) ensuring public access to information and protecting fundamental freedoms, and 7) promoting and enforcing non-discriminatory law and policies for sustainable development.⁴

The 2030 SDG 16 agenda requires that governments, civil society, the private sector, and international organizations come together in the fight toward achieving global standards for inclusive and equitable societies, which includes target 16.10 to “ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms, in accordance with national legislation and international agreements.”⁵ Freedom of the press and international regulations against the spread of misinformation and fake news are critical to the achievement of SDG 16 and to international development. Through the achievement of peace and justice, states and the international community have the capacity to improve economic prosperity and ensure global freedom and equality. There is a critical need for progress in the realm of SDG 16, including addressing the rise of misinformation and fake news, in order to achieve greater global prosperity by 2030.

The Work of the United Nations

³ <https://www.transparency.org/en/>.

⁴ <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal16>.

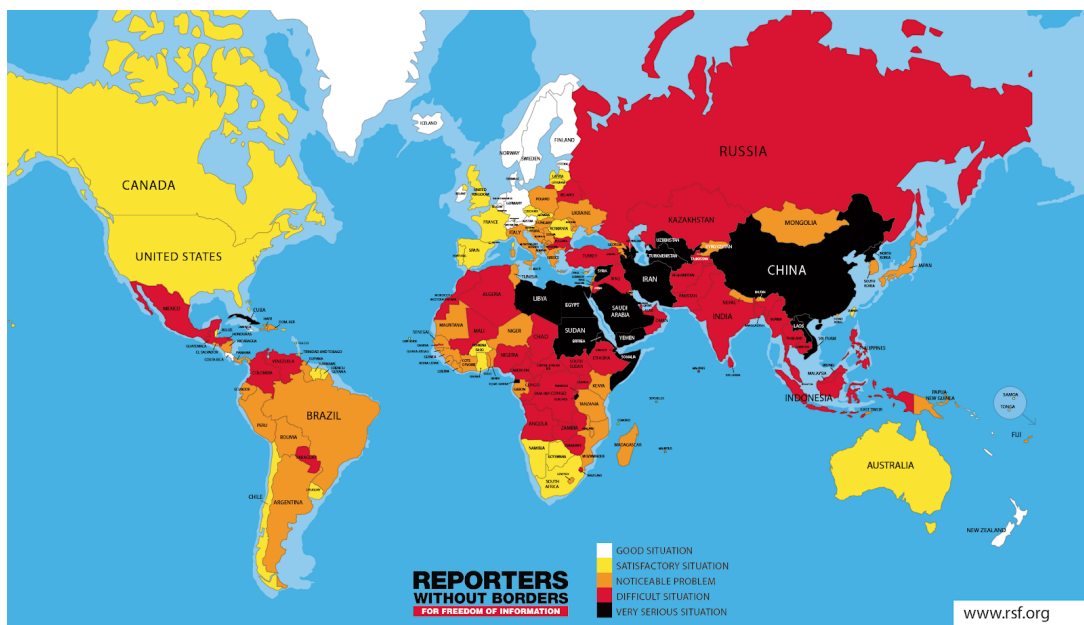
⁵ Ibid.



The United Nations dedicates time and resources to protecting freedom of the press and freedom of expression as human rights. UNESCO has organized campaigns on different social media platforms to spread awareness about unbiased journalism. The UN also hosts an annual conference, titled the World Press Freedom Conference, where it celebrates the achievements of the world's journalists and also discusses new obstacles standing in the way of free press. Lastly, the UN has declared May 3rd World Press Freedom Day.⁶

The United Nations and RSF, an NGO also working towards ensuring press freedom, work together to ensure that information about country governments stays current. They also try to bring awareness to crises in journalism and ways to protect journalists. However, it is very hard for the United Nations to act on their promises without infringing on national sovereignty. The committee, when considering the following three subtopics, must design actionable solutions that actually help media across the globe and do more than just spread awareness.

The Work of the NGOs, International Organizations, and Civil Society



⁶ <https://www.un.org/en/observances/press-freedom-day>

Reporters Without Borders (RSF) is a non-profit organization that monitors freedom of the press across the world. They release annual reports rating countries' governments based on how censored or not censored their national media is. Reporters Without Borders works closely with the United Nations in order to protect journalists and news from corruption and abuse. The map above shows the World Press Freedom Index, which RSF makes each year. The darker the color of the country, the less free its media is.⁷

Sub-Topics to Consider

Sub-Topic 1: The Protection of Journalists

On October 2, 2018, Jamal Khashoggi was murdered in the Saudi Consulate in Turkey. Khashoggi was a prominent journalist and Saudi dissident, and contributed frequently to the Washington Post. His death sparked international outrage because the Central Intelligence Agency discovered it was the crown prince of Saudi Arabia himself that ordered the assassination of Khashoggi.⁸ This was not only an act of violence against journalists, but an act of violence against the United States as well.



Journalism is a dangerous profession, though on the surface it does not seem to be. In 2019, 49 journalists died on the job and in 2018, a whopping 80 journalists were killed while reporting news.⁹ Death is not the only threat plaguing reporters. Many countries frequently jail reporters for publishing criticism against the government or for publishing anything that makes the country look bad. China, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt are the biggest perpetrators of this.

Reporting is more dangerous in countries facing instability. In 2018, Afghanistan was one of the deadliest countries for journalists due to the frequent bombings and violence in the country.¹⁰ Regions with heightened terrorist activity are also dangerous not only for the acts of

⁷ <https://rsf.org/en/2020-world-press-freedom-index-entering-decisive-decade-journalism-exacerbated-coronavirus>

⁸ https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/saudi-arabia-says-five-sentenced-to-death-in-killing-of-jamal-khashoggi/2019/12/23/02fc0ea4-256a-11ea-9cc9-e19cfbc87e51_story.html

⁹ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/266229/number-of-journalists-killed-since-1995/>

¹⁰ <https://www.npr.org/2018/12/18/677819169/violence-against-journalists-reached-unprecedented-levels-in-2018-report-finds>

violence that occur but also because terrorist organizations often target media headquarters or reporters. There is little to no protection for journalists in war zones, and they could at any moment get caught in the crossfire. However, reporting on what is going on in those regions is even more important so the world is kept well-informed on what happens in those conflict regions. Without those reporters, few people would know the truth.¹¹ The world is largely in agreement that journalists must be protected from harm in conflict zones.

RSF is currently pushing for the creation of a Special Representative to the UN Secretary General for the safety of journalists.¹² While this is certainly helpful, the United Nations needs to focus more on implementation and less on discussion. The injury, death, or detainment of journalists must be given importance on the international stage and must be investigated by international bodies.¹³ If the UN does not figure out a way to put real solutions into motion, journalists will continue to face danger.

Sub-Topic 2: Censorship of the Media



Censorship of the media has become a hot topic in, well, the media. Many authoritarian leaning governments rigidly control the flow of information available to the international community and to their own residents. China, for example, uses a firewall to prevent its residents from viewing most Western social media platforms and search engines.

Democracies are not free from censorship. Amidst conflict and crisis, leaders often turn to information blackouts in order to keep their approval ratings up. Such actions are dangerous as they violate multiple freedoms: freedom of the press to publish information, and freedom for people to be able to access that information. When tensions rose in Jammu and Kashmir--two hotly contested regions on the India-Pakistan border--earlier in 2019, the Indian government imposed an “electronic curfew” in the areas that restricted Internet or news access. This

¹¹ <https://www.cfr.org/blog/guest-post-protecting-journalists-armed-conflict>

¹² <https://rsf.org/en/protector-journalists-1>

¹³ <https://www.cfr.org/blog/guest-post-protecting-journalists-armed-conflict>

shutdown, which ultimately attempted to prevent protests of any kind against the Indian government, is still ongoing. It has been ten months since the censorship started.¹⁴

Al-Jazeera, one of the biggest news organizations in the world, is frequently criticized for being state-owned by the Qatari government. Its news, many claim, shows inherent bias in favor of Qatar because it seldom criticizes the actions of the Qatari government. Many worry that all pieces of news go through the government before being printed, which would mean the site is compromised and not impartial or trustworthy.¹⁵ Al-Jazeera shows the bigger issues associated with state-owned media. While this means that the news is accessible to all readers regardless of whether they can pay for a subscription, this also means the news being published may be extremely biased toward the government that funds that organization.

The United Nations has been criticized frequently for its soft approach on media censorship. In 2018, a World Press Freedom Day event was canceled amid claims that the UN itself was censoring certain groups. The UN Alliance of Civilizations refused to show a video presentation that one group made calling out the restrictions set in countries like Turkey and Mexico. This is not the first time the United Nations has tried to avoid angering a country's government, and has instead sidestepped the blatant human rights violations occurring in those countries. If the United Nations wishes to support freedom of the press, it must take a more hardline stance against government censorship and control.¹⁶

Sub-Topic 3: Social Media and Misinformation



Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter have become some of the public's most used platforms to get access to current events. Unfortunately, this also means that every person is given their own little piece of the spotlight. Because the Internet is largely unregulated and everyone can post what they want, there is almost too much information out there and fewer people know what is true. Social media and the press are becoming increasingly bonded together and these implications are important to consider for the United Nations.

¹⁴<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-india-kashmir-detentions/thousands-detained-in-indian-kashmir-crackdown-official-data-reveals-idUSKCN1VX142>

¹⁵ <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2017/07/01/why-al-jazeera-is-under-threat>

¹⁶ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/03/world/world-press-freedom-day-united-nations.html>

It is incredibly difficult to navigate the landscape of social media. On one hand, if we are encouraging freedom of the press, then all people should be allowed to publish their opinions and share articles they believe to be interesting. No information should be censored. On the other hand, keeping misinformation online can be incredibly harmful. With the rise of the COVID-19 pandemic, lots of people are circulating false cures and even potentially life-threatening “hacks” that are supposed to protect you from Coronavirus.¹⁷ Twitter has decided to include fact-check links on posts that are not accurate, but this was a company decision that no other social media site has decided to implement. With information everywhere, an informed reader would hesitate to trust anything they read from news sources while an uninformed reader may believe everything.

International cyberlaw is virtually non-existent.¹⁸ Because technology is growing and changing at such a rapid pace, Internet law is still a very new field within country borders, let alone on the international scale. There are different arguments about whether or not hate speech and misinformation should be monitored by the law or by international bodies. In countries that tout free speech as a human right, this could be seen as an infringement on freedom of speech. However, laws are created to promote public peace. Spreading misinformation on private platforms like social media could be very damaging to society as a whole and therefore may need to be fact-checked at the very least. Additionally, we’ve seen how misinformation could be a potential threat to democracy through election meddling.¹⁹ In the 2016 presidential election, Russian hackers used bots to infiltrate social media and spread misinformation, which may have influenced voters.²⁰

The rise of fake news accusations can also be seen as a type of indirect censorship and journalism abuse, though it is not as severe as outright blockage of information. While some countries use these claims to shut down dissent pages and sites, other countries’ world leaders decry news organizations as illegitimate and urge their followers to hate the media and not believe what they publish. The presidents of the United States and of Brazil are two examples of people who do this to credible and unbiased news sources.²¹

Questions to Consider & Further Reading

Questions to Consider

1. Should there be international laws or statutes on Internet use?
2. How do we protect journalists and their lives without infringing on national sovereignty?
3. Is there ever “ethical” censorship, when social media spreads false information?
4. Should the United Nations take a more hardline stance to countries who censor their media?

¹⁷ <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-52903680>

¹⁸ http://library.law.columbia.edu/guides/International_Internet_Law#:~:text=International%20internet%20law%20is%20a.and%20cyberwarfare%2C%20and%20economic%20developments.

¹⁹ <https://msutoday.msu.edu/news/2020/the-truth-behind-fake-news-and-politics-on-social-media/>

²⁰ <https://time.com/4783932/inside-russia-social-media-war-america/>

²¹ <https://rsf.org/en/2020-world-press-freedom-index-entering-decisive-decade-journalism-exacerbated-coronavirus>

5. What can the UN do to protect journalists in war zones? Is the truth more valuable than the journalists' lives?

Further Reading

- [RSF](#)
- [UNESCO](#)
- [SDG 16](#)
- [World Press Freedom Day](#)