

# Human Rights Council

## The Question of Private and Public Sector Censorship of Media

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## Introduction

The censorship of private and public media has strongly influenced the information that everyday citizens consume. With media becoming more accessible, ascribed by a series of advancements in technological innovations, governments have obligated themselves to control and censor various forms of communication to filter unwanted content. Information is a critical part of society, and sometimes, information is better kept out of the public's view. Information can be a key factor of passing knowledge, but it is also subject to inappropriate content, and potentially lead to 'misleading' ideologies. The various types of media have been significantly controlled by the government. Methods not limited to strict laws, search restrictions, and intimidation are increasingly common. Additionally, Freedom of expression and the media have been censored in recent years. For instance, a study by the University of Michigan states that censorship has increased in 103 countries, including democracies like Norway, India, and Japan ('Extremely Aggressive' Internet Censorship Spreads in the World's Democracies). The director-general of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has stated that "Crimes against journalists have an enormous impact on society as a whole, because they prevent people from making informed decisions." (Threats to Freedom of Press: Violence, Disinformation & Censorship). The facts suggest that countries are becoming stricter on censorship, and contest whether or not censorship is beneficial. This report will conduct a comprehensive study on the issue of censorship by the public or private sector.

## Definition of Key Terms

### ***Public Sector***

"The area of the nation's affairs under governmental rather than private control." (Dictionary.com | Meanings & Definitions of English Words) This includes public services and state owned or affiliated businesses. Real life examples relating to this topic including but not limited to Russia Today, China Central Television, and Al Jazeera.

### ***Private Sector***

"The area of the nation's economy is under private [ownership by individuals or corporations] rather than governmental control." (Dictionary.com | Meanings & Definitions of English Words) Real life examples relating to this topic include but not limited to Cable News Network, Fox News, Meta, and New York Times.

### ***Censorship***

"To prevent part or the whole of a book, film, work of art, document, or other kind of communication from being seen or made available to the public, because it is considered to be offensive or harmful, or because it contains information that someone wishes to keep secret, often for political reasons." ("Cambridge Dictionary").

### ***Freedom of Speech***

“The right of people to express opinions publicly without censorship or government interference.” (Dictionary.com | Meanings & Definitions of English Words)

### ***Media***

“The means of communication, as radio and television, newspapers, magazines, and the internet, that reach or influence people widely.” (Dictionary.com | Meanings & Definitions of English Words)

### ***Propaganda***

Information, ideas, opinions, or images, often only giving one part of an argument, that are broadcast, published, or in some other way spread with the intention of influencing people's opinions (“Cambridge Dictionary”).

### ***Totalitarian***

“Of or being a political system in which those in power have complete control and do not allow people freedom to oppose them”  
 (“Cambridge Dictionary”)

### ***Democracy***

A country in which power is held by elected representatives (“Cambridge Dictionary”)

## **Background Information**

In the past, especially during wartime like World War II or the Cold War, many democratic countries such as the United States, reportedly controlled and censored information. Unlike the present day, the forms of media which people had access to were much different. For instance, computers were rare and the demand for them was mainly by governments to do technological research and calculations (The Scientific and Technological Advances of World War II | the National WWII Museum | New Orleans). Between the Industrial Revolution and the end of the Cold War, main forms of media were literature such as books and poems, and different forms of arts such as music, paintings and films. There were three main reasons that information had to be censored. There was fear that military secrets such as strategic locations and troop movements would be leaked (Tuttle), and that opposite opinions that contradict the views of the government, would cause civil unrest and reduce public morale (YIVO | Censorship: Censorship in the USSR). Propaganda was used heavily to help shape public opinion on government actions. An example would be unpopular wars such as but not limited to the Vietnam War, where this information was hidden and classified, to prevent public dissatisfaction. Governments that were more totalitarian pushed for more censorship while more democratic governments allowed greater freedom of speech (Stanford).

## Current situation:

With the advancements in technology and improvement of forms of communications, governments have increased cracking down on the information that is being spread. According to UNESCO, 85% of the world's population experienced a decrease in freedom of speech. Additionally, new laws have been amended or adopted since 2016, to address this issue, as billions of people now have access to social media (UNESCO). Private companies, such as but not limited to Instagram and Facebook, which are platforms part of Meta, TikTok's parent company ByteDance, and SnapChat's parent Snap Inc, have taken careful steps and have participated in censoring information to prevent legal trouble. As evidently, TikTok has been at the center of attention for controversy as the United States government is working towards banning TikTok as it 'poses a threat to national security' (Farivar). For instance, Information that is offensive, obscene, politically unacceptable, or a threat to security are some examples of what is being censored (Horowitz). It is beneficial to note that each country has its own regulations on what is acceptable. An instance of this is that an individual criticizing the public sector in a democracy like Canada will face no punishment, but the same cannot be said by other countries.

Methods of censorship include filtering and blocking software, internet regulations or cyber actions. The issues with censorship include the lack of freedom of speech, which leads to personal opinions being oppressed, and prevents situations from being voiced and improved. However, censorship does indeed have benefits, as it reduces the amount of misinformation or abusive language. Ideologies such as racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, xenophobia, and antisemitism can be suppressed (Censorship Is Not All Bad | University of Central Florida News). Additionally, violent and extremist ideologies which could be embedded in the minds of others and spread on social networks, can be suppressed to combat terrorist and extremism.

## Major Parties involved and their views

### ***United Nations (UN):***

The United Nations has ruled in a Universal Declaration of Human Rights that freedom of speech is granted to everyone. In Article 19, it states "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 and regardless of frontiers."

### ***United States of America (USA):***

The People of the United States of America are one of the most supportive of freedom of speech ("Countries with Freedom of Speech 2024."). They are usually free to express unpopular opinions and have the right to use the internet without government censorship.

Freedom of speech is strongly protected by the First Amendment which is written in the U.S. Constitution stating that “Congress shall make no law... abridging freedom of speech...”. However, it is important to note that there have been exceptions to this, such as the bill proposed in Florida, which would force citizens to register with the state if they criticize public officials.

***People’s Republic of China (PRC):***

According to a report by VOA, Amnesty International has stated that the government of the People’s Republic of China has placed “oppressive laws” that silences critics and restricts the right to freedom of speech. Amnesty’s Director for Research Advocacy and Policy, Rajit Khosla stated that “Communication channels have been targeted, social media has been censored, and media outlets have been closed down.” (VOA). Additionally, a report by AIDDATA also accused The PRC of exporting digital censorship tactics to other countries through providing technology, like censorship detection software (Aiddata). It is important to note that the constitution of the People’s Republic of China clearly guarantees freedom of speech.

***The Russian Federation:***

According to the same report by AIDDATA, The Kremlin has spread legislation to a foreign country on content regulation to promote harsh punishments of violators who share objectionable content. Additionally, an Al Jazeera report states that Russian courts have also detained foreign journalists and have accused them of spying and espionage (Al Jazeera). The Russian Federation does guarantee freedom of speech in its constitution.

## Timeline of Relevant Events

Date	Description
2nd November 1914	<p><b>First World War</b>            During World War 1, censorship laws were strengthened to protect military operations and communications. The government of New Zealand initiated the 1920 War Regulations Continuation Act allowing increased government surveillance powers that lasted for years after the war ended, not being revoked until 1947.</p> <p>WWI marked a change in how censorship was handled. Government control over the flow of news and reporting increased significantly. These stricter censorship policies enabled greater oversight of what the public was exposed to regarding the war and related topics.</p>

<p>12th December 1941</p>	<p><b>Ministry of Information Established in UK, United States starts censoring</b>        During World War II in the UK, the government established the Ministry of Information to take on key responsibilities related to news distribution and censorship. The primary goal of censorship during this time was to protect military operations and any communications related to the armed forces. Protecting strategic details about troop movements, weapons, and tactics was a top priority. Additionally, in an unsurprising move, the United States did the same by forming the Department of Censorship.</p>
<p>10th December 1948</p>	<p><b>Adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights</b>        This declaration was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly as General Assembly resolution 217 A to set out a standard for all people and nations on what human rights should look like.</p>
<p>1980s</p>	<p><b>Soviet Union: Perestroika and Glasnost</b>        In the late 1980s, the Soviet censorship system started to become less strict under Mikhail Gorbachev's policy of Perestroika, meaning the restructuring of the economy and Glasnost meaning increased openness and transparency. Prior to this, censorship targeted anything that went against established Soviet Socialist values.</p>
<p>2003-present</p>	<p><b>China and Russia legitimize Censorship (Aiddata)</b>        China and Russia have been accused of granting regimes access to different technologies such as Spyware and DPI for digital surveillance in its effort to help countries censor and monitor information.</p>

## Related UN Treaties and Events

- United Nations Universal Declaration for Human Rights (1948) was a declaration drafted by members of different legal and cultural backgrounds, to set a common standard for nations around the world. It was drafted 3 years after the United Nations was formed, and to this day, still serves as the basis for human rights as it reflects on all aspects.

- The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) (1966) is one created by the United Nations to guarantee and protect political and civil rights including freedom of speech. It is like the UN's Universal Declaration except it focuses more on civil and political rights.
- World Press Freedom Day (1993), which takes place on the 2nd of May, was declared by the United Nations. The main goal of this day is to promote journalism and the free press. The United Nations also hosts events at its headquarters to show this day's significance.
- HRC44: UN resolution on freedom of opinion and expression (2020), was a resolution that passed on the 16th of June 2020, by the United Nations Human Rights Council. It was led by Brazil, Canada, Fiji, and was co-sponsored by 50 other countries to reaffirm the rights of freedom.

## Previous Attempts to solve the issue

The United Nations has attempted to enforce international respect for freedom of expression multiple times. International treaties were adopted such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). Additionally, they have declared World Press Freedom Day, to voice their concerns over the issue. Although the United Nations has attempted to increase freedom of speech, they are still working towards reducing violators.

NGOs like Center for Protection of Journalists (CPJ) have also highlighted the issue at hand, and strongly condemn it. They have raised public awareness to combat the issue, by publishing articles condemning governments that violate freedom of speech.

Legal guarantees have also been put in place, like Japan's constitution which guarantees freedom of expression and speech. This is also present in multi-country organizations such as the European Union which states in The Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union that every citizen has the right to free speech. However, an instance of constitutions not providing enough action, would be Eritrea. Despite constitutional remarks which protect freedom of speech, people still face crackdowns and large amounts of censorship.

## Possible Solutions

When coming up with a solution, delegates should consider other impacts and decide whether the solution is actually viable or not. An example would be enforcing freedom of speech into constitutions, which is a possible solution, but if we look at the real world, there have been multiple cases where the government goes against this constitution, most notably in North Korea. Additionally, solutions like these, which pressure governments and nations to make decisions on behalf of foreign influence, are in violation of that particular nation's sovereignty. The solution must be something more practical and needs to be done more to address the issue.



A more viable solution may be calling for countries to elect representatives within the population to discuss what they believe should be censored, and represent the opinions and voices, even if it is a temporary solution. This allows for open debating and allows the public to be represented and not feel as if they are closed out and denied a voice. However, it should be noted that delegates must also be careful when implementing these solutions, as they are susceptible to misrepresentation and authoritarian leaders. Delegates must write subclauses to ensure their solution is justified and backed with specificity to prevent misinterpretations. These solutions will not solve the problem immediately or fully. However, over time, with hopes of successfully implementing and controlling these solutions, the problem will be less dire and improve to an extent. It should be noted and encouraged that a collaborative and diplomatic approach would best assist in solving the issue of private and public sector censorship of media.

## Suggested Reading

UNESCO - Threats to freedom of press: Violence, disinformation & censorship. This article talks about the problem at hand, and how UNESCO handles threats to freedom of the press.  
<https://www.unesco.org/en/threats-freedom-press-violence-disinformation-censorship>

VOA - Disinformation, Censorship, Trigger Global Retreat of Press Freedom. This article gives statistical information and real-life examples of countries or organizations which are violative of press freedom.  
<https://www.voanews.com/a/press-freedom-advocacy-group-says-propaganda-a-global-threat-to-free-media/6554791.html>

Article 19 - What is freedom of expression? The article talks about the basics of what freedom of expression is, what it isn't, and why it is important to us.  
<https://www.article19.org/what-is-freedom-of-expression/>

Council of Europe - Freedom of expression and information. This article talks about your rights as a citizen of Europe, and specifies what you are entitled to.  
<https://www.coe.int/en/web/freedom-expression/freedom-of-expression-and-information>

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