

SOCHUM

Study Guide

Freedom of Expression in Today's
Digital Age

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I. Letter From the Secretary-General

Highly Esteemed Delegates,

First and foremost, I would like to express my sincere gratitude for your interest and enthusiasm regarding our conference. My name is Yaren Keçili, and I have the honor of serving as your secretary-general for the 8th edition of the Troy Model United Nations Conference this year. I embrace this role with immense appreciation. Similar to previous years, we have dedicated our efforts to creating a range of engaging and diverse committees for your benefit. We take great pride in the work we have prepared for you and sincerely hope that you will find it beneficial as well. Both the academic and operations teams have been working very hard to serve you to the best of their abilities and give you an unforgettable experience.

I wish to show my gratitude to the chair board and Yaprak Nisa Akay, who is going to serve as your Under-Secretary-General. All my teammates made great efforts in the process leading up to the conference. Hence, they need all the praise for their hard work.

I trust that all our delegates will engage in enlightening discussions throughout the three days they are with us, cultivate creative solutions to global challenges, be at the forefront of diplomacy and academia, and enjoy the experience in the process. Once again, I would like to welcome you all to both the conference and the committee. Buckle up and get ready because we have prepared an incredible ride for you.

Yours Sincerely,

Yaren Keçili

Secretary-General of Troy Model United Nations 2025

II. Letter From the Under-Secretary-General

Most distinguished participants,

First of all, I would like to welcome each of you to our annual conference TroyMun.

My name is Yaprak Nisa Akay and I will be serving as your Under-Secretary General for this committee which is SOCHUM.

With the assistance of my chairboard we have worked and prepared the most helpful and inclusive study guide that we could create. But it is important to remember that study guides alone are not enough for achieving a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter. So please make sure to do further research before coming to the conference.

I hope that you will improve yourself, make new friends and have so much fun by the end of the conference.

If you have any prior questions do not hesitate to contact me via my email address below!

yaprakakay24@gmail.com

Best regards,

Yaprak Nisa Akay



III. Introduction to the Committee: Social, Cultural, & Humanitarian Committee

The Social, Humanitarian, and Cultural Committee (SOCHUM), also known as the Third Committee of the United Nations General Assembly (GA3), is one of the six main committees of the



UN. Every UN Member State, currently 193, is part of this committee, which means it is one of the most inclusive forums in the organization. SOCHUM's primary responsibility is to deal with matters related to human rights, humanitarian issues, and the promotion of fundamental freedoms across the globe. While it cannot create binding laws, it plays an important role in shaping international norms by passing resolutions that are later adopted by the General Assembly. These resolutions, although not legally enforceable, carry significant moral and political weight, influencing national policies and encouraging governments to act in line with international standards.

The committee's mandate is broad and covers a wide variety of issues. SOCHUM discusses questions relating to human rights and the right to self-determination, including reports from the Human Rights Council and other human rights bodies. It also examines the protection of refugees and issues of racial discrimination, the treatment of minorities, and the promotion of fundamental freedoms. In addition, the committee addresses social development issues, such as the advancement of women, the protection of children, the rights of Indigenous peoples, and the situation of persons with disabilities. Through its work, SOCHUM directly engages with vulnerable groups worldwide, giving a platform to their struggles and amplifying their voices in the international community.

Historically, SOCHUM has been deeply tied to the development of modern human rights. In the aftermath of World War II, the committee was one of the main bodies involved in the drafting and discussion of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which was adopted in 1948. This marked a turning point in the international recognition of freedom, equality, and dignity as universal values. Since then, SOCHUM has continued to provide a forum where states debate some of the most sensitive and pressing global challenges.

IV. Introduction to the Agenda Item: Freedom of Expression in Today's Digital Age

A. Understanding Freedom of Expression

Freedom of expression is one of the most essential rights we have, it allows people to speak their minds, share ideas, challenge injustice, and connect with others across borders. It's not just about talking freely; it's about being able to access information, create art, protest peacefully, and participate in conversations that shape our societies. Recognized in key international agreements like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), this right forms the backbone of any functioning democracy

Across time, countless voices, especially those of women, religious minorities, have been silenced through force, fear, and pressure. Even today, individuals who challenge dominant ideologies often face censorship, discrimination, or worse.

International law allows certain restrictions when necessary, for example, to prevent hate speech, protect national security, or stop incitement to violence. Balancing these limits while safeguarding people's ability to freely share ideas has always been a challenge for

governments and societies. In today's world, this challenge has become even more complex with the rise of digital technologies.

B. New Platforms for Expression and the Digital Age

The arrival of the digital age has transformed how people exercise their right to freedom of expression. In the past, opinions were shared mainly through newspapers, radio, or television. Today, digital platforms such as social media (Twitter/X, Instagram, TikTok, Facebook), messaging apps (WhatsApp, Telegram), and online forums (Reddit, blogs, podcasts) allow individuals to express their views instantly and reach global audiences within seconds.

These platforms have created new opportunities. They give young people, activists, journalists, and marginalized groups a space to make their voices heard, sometimes bypassing traditional media controlled by governments or powerful corporations. Online spaces have played a major role in political movements and protests, such as the Arab Spring in the early 2010s, climate change activism, and many recent campaigns for social justice.

At the same time, these platforms also bring new challenges. The speed and scale of online communication make it easier for misinformation and hate speech to spread. Governments and companies are still debating how to regulate harmful content without limiting legitimate free speech. In addition, digital platforms often use algorithms that decide what content people see, which can unintentionally promote extreme or false information while silencing other voices.

Overall, the digital age has created an environment where freedom of expression is both more powerful and more vulnerable than ever before. Understanding how these platforms work, and how they shape political, social, and cultural discussions, is essential for discussing freedom of expression in today's world.

C. History of Freedom of Expression

1. Ancient Period

The idea of free speech can be traced back to Ancient Greece. In Athens, citizens were encouraged to debate politics in the Assembly, a principle known as “parrhesia” (meaning “to speak freely”). Philosophers like Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle emphasized discussion and reason, although criticism of the government or gods could still lead to punishment. In Ancient Rome, orators like Cicero also valued open debate, but freedom was limited by the power of emperors. This shows that while the idea of free speech existed, it was far from guaranteed.

2. Medieval Period

During the medieval era, freedom of expression was often restricted by monarchies and the Church. In Europe, criticism of rulers or religious authorities could lead to imprisonment, exile, or even death. For example, writers and philosophers who questioned religious doctrines were frequently censored. However, some early ideas of freedom developed in this period. In England, the Magna Carta (1215) introduced the concept that rulers were not above the law, planting the seeds for future discussions about rights and freedoms. Still, for most of the medieval period, expression was tightly controlled by political and religious powers.

3. Renaissance and Enlightenment (15th–18th Century)

The Renaissance brought a renewed interest in knowledge, science, and art, supported by the invention of the printing press (1440). Books, pamphlets, and newspapers allowed ideas to spread more widely, leading to greater public discussion. The Enlightenment period in the 17th and 18th centuries was crucial for developing modern concepts of free speech. Thinkers like John Locke, Voltaire, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau argued that individuals had natural

rights, including the right to express opinions freely. These ideas directly influenced revolutions and new political systems.

4. Revolutionary and Industrial Periods (18th–19th Century)

The American Revolution (1776) and the French Revolution (1789) turned Enlightenment theories into law. In the United States, the First Amendment (1791) guaranteed freedom of speech and the press. In France, the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen (1789) also recognized free expression as a fundamental right. During the Industrial Revolution, newspapers, telegraphs, and later photography created new ways to share opinions, making free expression central to political life. However, many governments still censored opposition voices, especially during times of unrest.

5. 20th Century: Universal Recognition

After the horrors of World War II, the international community realized the urgent need to protect human rights. In 1948, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) was adopted, with Article 19 clearly stating that *everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression*. This principle became a global standard, later reinforced by documents like the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights

(1966). Throughout the century, free expression played a vital role in movements such as the fight against apartheid in South Africa, the U.S. Civil Rights Movement, and the struggle for democracy in Eastern Europe during the Cold War.



6. The Digital Age (21st Century)

In today's world, the internet and social media have transformed freedom of expression. Unlike in earlier periods, individuals can now share opinions instantly with a global audience. Online platforms have empowered activists, youth, and marginalized groups to organize movements and demand change. At the same time, they have introduced new challenges, including misinformation, online hate speech, government surveillance, and censorship of digital spaces. This has created a new era where freedom of expression is more widespread than ever but also faces unique risks.

D. Global Internet Access and Its Impact on Voice

The internet has become one of the most powerful tools for freedom of expression in today's world. With over 5 billion people now connected online, access to the internet allows individuals to share their thoughts, opinions, and experiences with a global audience in ways that were never possible before. Unlike traditional media such as newspapers or television, the internet is not limited to a few voices; it gives almost anyone with access the ability to be heard.

One of the key impacts of global internet access is how it has amplified marginalized voices. Groups that were often excluded from public debates such as young people, minorities, or those living in rural areas, can now use digital platforms to speak out, organize, and advocate for their rights. Social media campaigns and online petitions have shown that even individuals without political or financial power can create global movements. For example, hashtags like **#MeToo** and **#BlackLivesMatter** spread awareness about social justice issues across borders.

The internet has also given young people a stronger voice. Activists such as Greta Thunberg used social media to spread climate change awareness, inspiring millions of students worldwide to join school strikes and demonstrations.

Even in daily life, internet access allows individuals to express their creativity and opinions, whether through videos on YouTube, podcasts, or posts on Instagram and TikTok. These platforms create opportunities for people to connect, debate, and build communities around shared ideas.

In short, global internet access has transformed freedom of expression by giving individuals and communities the ability to be heard on a scale that was once unimaginable. It has turned the internet into a powerful space where voices from all parts of the world can shape conversations, movements, and even government policies.

E. Global Challenges to Digital Freedom of Expression

1. Government Censorships

Government censorship refers to the control, suppression, or restriction of information, media, and expression by state authorities. While governments often justify censorship as a way to protect national security, prevent hate speech, or maintain public order, it frequently raises concerns about human rights, especially the right to freedom of expression.

Censorship can appear in different forms, such as:

- Restricting press freedom and silencing journalists,
- Blocking or filtering access to websites and social media platforms,
- Limiting artistic, cultural, and academic expression,
- Controlling information flow during times of conflict or crisis.

Examples of Government Censorship

- **China:** Operates one of the world's strictest censorship systems, controlling nearly all digital information through the Great Firewall and requiring domestic platforms to filter sensitive topics.
- **Turkey:** Frequently blocks or restricts platforms like Twitter, YouTube, and Wikipedia during political crises, while also prosecuting individuals for critical online posts.
- **Russia:** Introduced laws that allow the government to label independent journalists and activists as "foreign agents," while blocking websites and limiting access to platforms like Facebook and X (Twitter).
- **Egypt:** Since 2013, the government has tightly controlled media and online platforms, blocking hundreds of news websites and jailing bloggers.

Government censorship not only restricts political debate but also affects everyday life.

Citizens lose access to independent news, opportunities to share cultural and social content, and platforms to organize communities. In many cases, censorship creates an atmosphere of fear and self-censorship, where people avoid speaking out even on minor issues.

Overall, government censorship highlights the fragile nature of digital freedom of expression.

While the internet has expanded opportunities for people to raise their voices, many governments continue to limit or control this freedom to protect their own power.



2. Internet Shutdowns and Content Filtering

Another major challenge to digital freedom of expression is the use of internet shutdowns and content filtering by governments. These methods are often justified as measures to maintain security, prevent the spread of “false” information, or protect public order. However, in reality, they limit the ability of people to communicate, share information, and organize peacefully.

Internet Shutdowns

An internet shutdown occurs when a government deliberately restricts or completely cuts off access to the internet or certain apps. Shutdowns can last from a few hours to several months, depending on the political situation.

- Governments often use shutdowns during elections, protests, or social unrest to prevent people from organizing demonstrations or spreading critical information.
- For example, in **India**, the region of Jammu and Kashmir has experienced some of the longest internet shutdowns in the world, lasting for months at a time.
- In **Myanmar (2021)**, after the military coup, the government cut off the internet repeatedly to suppress pro-democracy protests.
- Similarly, **Iran** has used internet blackouts during protests to silence dissent and block international awareness of events inside the country.

The impact of shutdowns is not only political but also economic and social. They disrupt businesses, schools, healthcare, and communication, affecting millions of ordinary people.

Content Filtering

Content filtering is when governments or internet providers block specific websites, apps, or keywords to prevent access to certain information.

- This can include blocking social media platforms (like Twitter, Facebook, or TikTok), independent news outlets, or content about sensitive political, religious, or social issues.
- **Saudi Arabia** has blocked websites related to human rights, political dissent, and even certain cultural content deemed inappropriate by authorities.
- In **Vietnam**, the government requires platforms like Facebook and Google to take down content that criticizes the state, leading to widespread removal of political posts.
- In **Russia**, content about protests or independent journalism is regularly filtered or removed to maintain control over public narratives.
- With the enactment of the National Security Act in **Hong Kong** in 2019–2020, the government began to implement content filtering on social media platforms. Freedom House stated that with this law, the government has requested that they remove protest content from social media platforms.



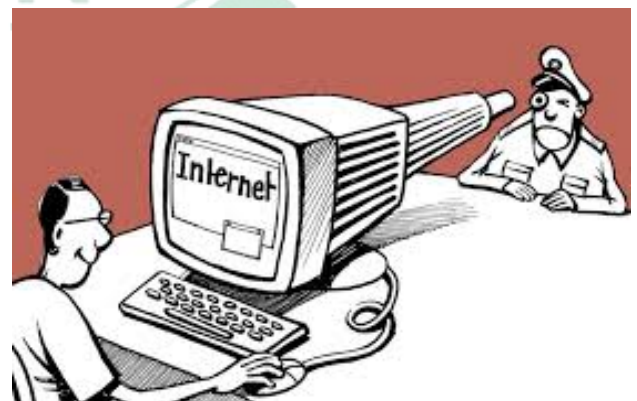
3. Surveillance and Privacy Violations

In the digital age, one of the most concerning challenges to freedom of expression is the growth of government surveillance and violations of online privacy. Surveillance refers to the monitoring of people's online activities, communications, and personal data, often without their consent. While some governments argue that surveillance is necessary for national security, counterterrorism, or crime prevention, it can also be used to silence dissent, intimidate activists, and discourage citizens from expressing their views freely.

Forms of Surveillance

- **Mass Data Collection:** Many governments gather large amounts of data from internet traffic, phone records, or social media activity. This allows them to track what people say, who they talk to, and what websites they visit.
- **Facial Recognition and AI Tools:** Advanced technologies are increasingly used to identify individuals at protests or in public spaces, raising concerns about constant monitoring.
- **Spyware and Hacking:** Some states use spyware programs, such as Pegasus, to secretly access the phones of journalists, opposition figures, and human rights defenders, giving authorities control over private conversations and files.

Surveillance and privacy violations have a chilling effect on free expression. When people know they may be monitored, they are less likely to speak openly, share critical opinions, or



participate in political debates online. This leads to widespread *self-censorship*, where individuals silence themselves out of fear of consequences.

Privacy is directly linked to freedom of expression: without the right to communicate safely and privately, true free expression cannot exist. In the digital age, protecting privacy has become one of the most important challenges for ensuring that people can express their views without fear.

4. Online Harassment and Hate Speech

While the internet has opened new spaces for free expression, it has also created environments where individuals are targeted with harassment, abuse, and hate speech. Online harassment includes threats, bullying, and intimidation directed at individuals, while hate speech refers to content that promotes hostility or discrimination against people based on race, religion, gender, sexuality, or other identities. Both issues can make digital spaces unsafe and discourage people from speaking freely.

The spread of online harassment and hate speech is influenced by several key factors. The anonymous nature of the internet allows users to hide behind pseudonyms, reducing accountability and facilitating abusive behavior. Social media algorithms and the rapid dissemination of content amplify the reach of hateful messages and coordinated harassment campaigns, often exposing large audiences in a short period. Online communities and forums may normalize harmful behaviors, further reinforcing harassment and hate speech.

Consequently, these actions can have serious consequences beyond the digital space, including psychological harm, reputational damage, and even real-world acts of violence.

Here are some real life examples of online harassment and hate speech.

Gamergate (2014): The online harassment campaign that emerged on Twitter primarily targeted female video game developers. Analysis of approximately 340,000 users and 1.6 million tweets revealed how mass harassment and waves of hate can propagate across digital platforms.

a) Zoë Quinn

During Gamergate in 2014, Zoë Quinn was subjected to intense harassment and threats on Twitter. She had to leave her home, which revealed how fragile women can be in the video game industry.

b) Anita Sarkeesian

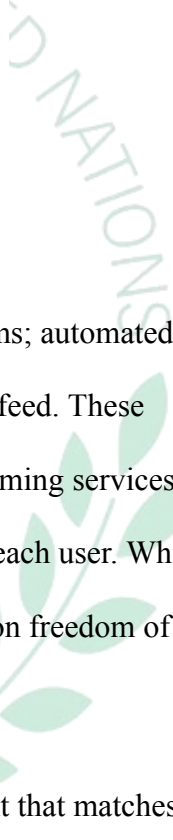
Anita Sarkeesian, in which she criticised video game clichés for women, "Tropes vs. He encountered online threats and harassment after the "Women in Video Games" project. These threats led her to cancel her speeches and made the challenges faced by female critics visible.

c) Brianna Wu

During the Gamergate process, Brianna Wu was forced to leave her home due to threats of death and violence. Her experience, the hostility faced by women in the technology sector and the need for online security to the agenda.

Twitch Hate Raids (2021): LGBTQ+ and Black streamers were targeted by coordinated spam of hateful messages through automated bots. These incidents prompted platforms to strengthen security measures and moderation mechanisms.

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Amplification of Certain Voices: Content that is sensational, emotional, or controversial often spreads faster, while moderate or less popular opinions may receive little visibility.

Echo Chambers and Filter Bubbles: Algorithms tend to show people content similar to what they already believe. This can create “echo chambers,” where users are exposed only to ideas that reinforce their views, limiting access to diverse perspectives.

Suppression of Minority Voices: Smaller or marginalized communities may struggle to be heard if the algorithm favors mainstream or commercial content.

Unintended Bias: Since algorithms are created by humans, they can reflect existing biases, accidentally prioritizing some groups or silencing others.

Algorithms don't censor content directly, but they strongly shape which voices are heard and which are ignored. This means that freedom of expression online is not only about what people post, but also about what platforms choose to make visible. In this way, algorithms have become powerful “gatekeepers” of information, raising important questions about transparency and fairness in the digital age. Overall algorithms choose what you see and what you don't, they can censor people, and they prioritize what gets attention.

V. Case Studies

a) China

China provides one of the most well-known examples of how governments regulate freedom of expression in the digital age. The country has developed what is often referred to as the “Great Firewall,” a large-scale system of filtering and blocking that restricts access to many

foreign websites and social media platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Wikipedia (Freedom House, 2024). Domestic platforms are heavily monitored, and in 2022 alone, regulators removed more than 54 million pieces of online content considered to be in violation of national rules (BRICS Competition Law, 2023). In addition, laws such as the “real-name registration” requirement link online activity directly to individuals, making it easier for authorities to regulate and monitor speech. Surveillance tools, such as the Integrated Joint Operations Platform in Xinjiang, combine large amounts of data to track citizens’ activities (Human Rights Watch, 2019). Regional studies also show variations in censorship levels, with some provinces blocking far more websites than the national average (The Guardian, 2025). These measures create a highly regulated digital environment where citizens primarily rely on domestic platforms, and where online expression is closely tied to official standards of permitted content.

b) Russia

Russia has severely tightened state control over the media and online platforms since the start of the sweeping invasion of Ukraine in 2022. According to the July 2025 report of Human Rights Watch, Russian authorities arbitrarily widely block unwanted websites and content access tools that avoid censorship, and isolate users by disconnecting internet connections. Over 4,000 people have been investigated under the fake news laws in the period 2022-2023; the government can even punish content that defines 'war' as a 'special military operation'. According to the Free Dom on the Net report, self-censorship has become a serious problem among social media users in Russia; they feel public pressure, especially on sensitive issues such as LGBT+ rights and the Ukrainian war. while blocking access to the content of independent and foreign media organisations such as Roskomnadzor, BBC, Deutsche Welle, and Radio Liberty, the Russian government aims

to control the flow of information and limit citizens' access to alternative viewpoints. It was reported that Putin has regressed to one of the 180 countries, number 164, which pointed to a systematic decline in the field of media freedom. These repressive policies pose serious threats to access to information, freedom of expression and thought in the Russian public, and clearly show the state's strategy of tight control of the online space.

c) Iran

Iran has frequently used internet shutdowns, social media censorship, and restrictions on messaging apps during periods of political unrest. One major example occurred in November 2019, when protests broke out over a fuel price hike. At that time, authorities ordered a near-total internet blackout starting 16 November; by 2 pm local time, cellular operators were instructed to disconnect services, and online access remained severely restricted until around 27 November. During the blackout, independent reporting and communications with the outside world became extremely difficult. Authorities reportedly killed at least 304 protesters in that period, with some reports estimating that number to be much higher.

In addition to shutdowns, Iran also blocks or filters messaging apps and platforms that are used by many citizens. For instance, Telegram was blocked because it was widely used to organize and share information during protests. Platforms like Instagram and WhatsApp have also been restricted during large protests (e.g., after the September 2022 protests following the death of Mahsa Amini), limiting the ability of people to mobilize, share images or video, and coordinate responses.

These kinds of measures affect how freely people can speak, especially during sensitive times when public protest or criticism is more likely. Even when access is restored, there is often a lasting impact: reduced trust, reliance on workarounds (like VPNs), and sellers, activists, or journalists may have already faced losses or disruptions.

d) India

India is the country with the highest number of internet shutdowns in the world, recording 116 shutdowns in 2023, mostly in states like Manipur, Jammu & Kashmir, and Rajasthan during protests or unrest. Jammu & Kashmir experienced one of the longest blackouts globally after its special status was revoked in 2019, with mobile and broadband services restricted for months. Shutdowns are authorized under rules such as the Telecommunications (Temporary Suspension of Services) Rules, 2017, which allow authorities to suspend services for public safety, though experts note concerns about necessity and proportionality. These measures often disrupt education, businesses, and healthcare, as seen in Kashmir where livelihoods and services were heavily affected.

e) United States of America

The United States has faced important debates about content moderation on social media platforms. These debates focus on finding a balance between protecting free speech and stopping harmful or false information. The United Nations and other international organizations recommend that online platforms take action against harmful content while respecting human rights. They suggest that moderation rules should be clear, fair, and transparent. Social media companies are encouraged to prevent hate speech, misinformation, and harmful content, especially during important events like elections or public health emergencies.

During the 2020 U.S. presidential election, misinformation on social media was a serious problem. A study by Stanford University found that fewer Americans visited websites that spread false information compared to the 2016 election, decreasing from 44.3% to 26.2%.

This suggests that public efforts to teach people how to recognize unreliable information may have helped. However, social media still faced criticism: some people said platforms did not

remove enough false content, while others argued that certain political content was removed unfairly. Similarly, during the COVID-19 pandemic, false health information spread quickly online, showing how important content moderation is for public safety.

f) Turkey

Turkey often imposes restrictions on social media and websites, often justifying it for national security or moral reasons. In 2023 alone, according to the Free Web Turkey report, 219,059 URLs were blocked, including 197,907 domain names, 14,680 news articles, 5,641 social media shares, and 743 social media accounts. In 2022, at least 137,716 different web addresses were blocked, including 6,528 public benefit news articles. Since 2016, more than 467,000 websites have been blocked, including platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp and YouTube. In addition, with a regulation published in 2018, Supreme Council of Radio and Television (RTÜK) was authorised to monitor and license online broadcast services, thus further expanding control over the internet ecosystem. These measures severely restrict access to independent media, hinder political opposition, and centralise the flow of information. Widespread platform restrictions in Turkey can be considered as a sustainable digital censorship effort aimed at shaping public debate.



VI. International Responses and Frameworks

1. UN Core Documents and Principles

- The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948, Article 19)* was the first global statement to recognize that everyone has the right to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive, and share information and ideas through any media, regardless of frontiers.
- The *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR, 1966, Article 19)* made these rights legally binding for countries that signed and ratified it. Unlike the UDHR, the ICCPR has a monitoring body, the Human Rights Committee, which reviews states' implementation. Both documents are often cited in debates about freedom of expression online.

2. UN Human Rights Council (HRC)

- The HRC is the UN's main body dealing with human rights. It holds sessions in Geneva and passes resolutions. In recent years, it has declared that "the same rights that people have offline must also be protected online," directly applying Article 19 to the digital sphere.
- The Council appoints the Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression. The current and former rapporteurs (like David Kaye and Irene Khan) have produced reports on issues such as internet shutdowns, online hate speech, and the responsibilities of tech companies. These reports help shape international standards.

3. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)

- The OHCHR is essentially the UN's "human rights office." It provides legal analysis, publishes studies, and supports states in implementing human rights law.
- It regularly publishes reports on digital rights, privacy, and free expression online. For example, the OHCHR has warned that mass surveillance and censorship can violate Article 19 of the ICCPR.
- It also engages directly with governments and civil society to encourage compliance with human rights obligations.

4. UNESCO

- UNESCO's mandate includes promoting freedom of expression, press freedom, and media development.
- In the digital age, UNESCO focuses on internet governance, digital literacy, and the spread of misinformation and hate speech.
- It promotes the **Internet Universality ROAM principles**:
 - *Rights* (human rights online),
 - *Openness* (free and open internet),
 - *Accessibility* (affordable and universal access),
 - *Multi-stakeholder participation* (governments, companies, and civil society working together).
- UNESCO also organizes *World Press Freedom Day* and other global initiatives that now cover online media and digital safety for journalists.

VII. Balancing Freedom and Responsibility

Where to Draw the Line: Speech vs. Harm

One of the biggest challenges in protecting freedom of expression is deciding when speech is acceptable and when it crosses the line into harm. International law recognizes that freedom of expression is a fundamental right, but not an



absolute one. Article 19 of the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (ICCPR) allows restrictions if they are necessary to protect the rights or reputations of others, or to safeguard national security, public order, or public health and morals. This means that the line is drawn where speech has the potential to seriously harm individuals or society.

In the digital age, this distinction has become increasingly complex. While free speech empowers citizens and gives space to diverse voices, harmful content like hate speech, disinformation, or incitement to violence can spread widely and quickly online. For example, coordinated disinformation campaigns during elections can undermine democratic processes, while online hate campaigns can put minority communities at risk. Governments and digital platforms often step in to limit such content, but the challenge lies in making sure these measures do not silence legitimate voices.

Striking the right balance requires careful consideration. Too much restriction can lead to censorship and silence dissenting opinions, while too little control can allow harmful narratives to cause real damage. As a result, international organizations, governments, and

companies continue to debate and adjust where the line should be drawn between protecting freedom of speech and preventing harm in today's digital environment.

Who Decides What Stays Online?

In the digital age, the question of who controls online speech is one of the most important challenges. Unlike traditional media, where governments and courts often had the final say, the internet is largely managed by private companies. This makes the issue more complicated because multiple actors are involved.

1. Governments

Governments pass laws and regulations that set the legal limits of online content. For example, many countries have laws against hate speech, incitement to violence, or child exploitation online. In democratic states, courts often review whether such laws respect human rights. In more restrictive systems, however, governments may directly order platforms to remove content or block entire websites.

2. Technology Companies

Private platforms like Meta (Facebook, Instagram), X (Twitter), YouTube, and TikTok play a central role in deciding what stays online. They set *community guidelines* that determine what kind of content users can post. If a post violates these guidelines, such as by spreading hate speech, nudity, or violent threats, it can be removed by the platform, even if it is not illegal under national law. This means companies act as “gatekeepers” of digital expression.

3. Algorithms

It is not only humans who make decisions. Algorithms, automated systems that decide what content is promoted or hidden, also influence what people see online. While not directly

removing content, they shape visibility and can push some voices forward while hiding others.

4. International Standards

At the global level, documents like the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* and the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* set guiding principles. They remind states and companies that any restriction must be lawful, necessary, and proportionate. Organizations such as the UN Human Rights Council and UNESCO also provide recommendations on how digital platforms should respect freedom of expression.

VIII. Points A Resolution Should Cover

- What limits should governments have when regulating online content?
- How much responsibility should companies like Meta, X (Twitter), or TikTok have in moderating content?
- Should internet shutdowns ever be allowed? If so, under what circumstances?
- How can privacy be protected in the digital age without limiting security needs?
- Should there be global rules on mass surveillance and data collection?
- What role should schools, NGOs, or international organizations play in this?

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