

## **Committee: SOCHUM II**

### **Question of: Government Interference in the operation of a free press**

#### **Student Officer: Lucy Dornan**

#### **Introduction**

There is currently very little international framework outlining how much involvement governments can have with their country's media. As a result, journalists are often subjected to human rights violations, civilians are not receiving accurate information about their country's political leaders and political leaders in positions of power are given unfair advantages over other politicians or persons of importance.

#### **The Issue**

The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights states that free speech is a right, however it may be "subject to certain restrictions", i.e. censorship is allowed "(b) For the protection of national security or of public order, or of public health or morals". These restrictions are very broad, and allow governments to interpret them how they wish.

#### **Political Censorship**

Political censorship occurs when governments restrict certain information from being released to the public via the press as it would be considered harmful to the leading political party or a political leader. A common example can be seen in the People's Republic of China. The Chinese Premier, Xi Jinping, has insisted that all state-run media pledge "absolute loyalty" to him. As a result of this, it is unlikely to find any news articles criticising Xi in China. Political censorship is harmful as it means that citizens are unaware of how their country is being run, and the truths about their nation's leaders are being withheld from them.

#### **Military Censorship**

Military censorship occurs when State militaries withhold information from the public. Most countries are prone to military censorship as a tactical means, however how tight the censorship should be is a bone of contention for many people. For example, during the Vietnam War, American journalists were allowed to access all areas and perform interviews with ordinary soldiers. The resulting release of such raw content to the American civilian population through the media led to anti-war feelings in much of the civilians, and the Pentagon has since put strict restrictions on the access that journalists have in areas of conflict.

#### **The Safety & Treatment of Journalists**

The safety and treatment of journalists by governments is one of the highest areas of concern of the UN in regards to the press. Journalists are often arrested as political prisoners, and this violates their human rights. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UNDHR) Article 19 states that everyone has the right "to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers."

Journalists are also often killed during times of armed conflict. It is the State's responsibility to protect the journalists as civilians, under article 79 of the Additional Protocol to the Geneva Convention.

Furthermore, it has often been rumoured of States that journalists have been tortured to obtain information as to confidential sources. Journalists and their sources have a right to privacy, and state-sponsored torturing of journalists has been condemned.

### **Nationalisation of News Agencies**

The nationalisation of news agencies is not illegal; however, questions must be asked: will the news agencies hold the interests of the government or the citizens at heart? This issue and the severity of this issue will vary from nation to nation. To provide an example, Eritrea, one of the most censored nations in the world, only has one television channel, and this is provided by the Eritrean government.

### **Key States/Organisations Involved**

While many nations are perpetrators of interfering with the press, I've chosen a few of the most prominent countries to give you examples of how governments can interfere with their press.

#### Eritrea

Eritrea, as mentioned above, is one of the most censored nations in the world. It has one state-run television channel, and one newspaper for a country with a population of five and a half million.

#### The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK)

The DPRK is also one of the most censored countries in the world. Like Eritrea, its media is nationalised and furthermore, the criticism of political leaders is strictly prohibited. DPRK has also come under fire for imprisoning journalists, including journalists of other States.

#### The People's Republic of China (PRC)

As I mentioned above, the PRC is prone to the use of political censorship in order to ensure that the leading political party, the Communist Party of China (CPC), is reflected in a positive light. Access to certain websites or certain search terms is also prohibited in China.

#### The Russian Federation

The Russian Federation, like the PRC, has been suspected of political censorship. Furthermore, many journalists, considered to be enemies of the Kremlin, have been found dead, with the murderer's identities unknown.

#### The United States of America (USA)

The USA has long been considered a 'poster-boy' for free speech, however as previously outlined, is prone to military censorship. Also, the current US President Donald Trump has been criticised by the international community for his statements on the press, most notably by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra'ad al-Husseini. Recently, he said that, "President Trump's repeated denunciations of some media outlets as 'fake news' could amount to incitement to violence and had potentially dangerous consequences outside the United States." (New York Times, 30 Aug 2017)

## **Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue**

### Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Convention

The Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Convention article 79 states that journalists working in areas of armed conflict are to be treated as civilians, and that they will have the same rights as civilians. This means that they “shall not be the object of attack” (article 51(2)).

#### Security Council Resolutions

The Security Council has passed a number of resolutions concerning the safety of journalists in conflict zones, most recently Resolution 2222, passed in 2015. These reaffirm journalists’ stance as civilians and call on member nations to protect the journalists.

#### UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression

The UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression is responsible for ensuring that the UNDHR Article 19 is being supported and protected by member nations. The current Special Rapporteur is Mr. David Kaye.

### **Possible Solutions**

- Creating a dedicated international legal framework dedicated to outlining what involvement a government can have with their country’s press
- Outlining what rights journalists can have and what information there should be restrictions on spreading, e.g. information that could incite violence or war
- Calling for sanctions on nations found of unjustly treating journalists
- Providing incentives to nations who have little involvement with their press

### **Bibliography**

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