

Committee: SPECPOL 2

Topic: The Question of Freedom of the Press

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Summary

The role of the press and its responsibilities are key aspects of domestic policy in every nation, though the degree of freedom and regulation can vary depending on a country's priorities. These priorities often involve balancing the need to keep the public informed and productive with concerns over public safety, state sovereignty, and national integrity. The rise of the internet as a global communication tool has become an essential part of how the press operates, allowing news and agenda points to be disseminated across both local and international communities.

Historically, early forms of the press emerged in medieval Europe, taking over from the roles of messengers and town criers that had existed in ancient times. The spread of information was often subject to restrictions, whether due to societal taboos or the interests of ruling powers.

In some nations, the press plays a crucial role in expressing various agendas while ensuring a stable and highly trusted society.

Definition of Key Terms

Press: A collective term for organizations and individuals responsible for publishing and disseminating information on a wide range of topics, from societal and pop culture issues to political affairs.

Social Media: Online platforms and tools through which individuals and organizations exchange information and communicate.

Sensationalism: The exaggerated or dramatic presentation of events or stories, often designed to provoke strong public reactions, sometimes at the cost of accuracy and credibility.

Censorship: The practice of restricting or suppressing certain information or content from being made available to the public.

Agenda: A set of policies or objectives put forward by news organizations or entities with the intention of shaping public opinion on a specific issue or topic.

Freedom of Speech: The principle that allows individuals or publications to express ideas without restriction. In some nations, this may be limited, especially when it comes to hate speech or conspiracy theories, which can affect how freedom of speech is applied.

Independent Journalism: News reporting conducted by organizations or individuals that are free from government or corporate influence.

Classified Information: Sensitive government information that is not meant to be accessible to the public or foreign entities, often for national security reasons. Such information may be declassified after a set period, depending on the country's policies regarding public access.

Public Unrest: A situation where groups of citizens express their dissatisfaction or distrust toward the government and its institutions, often through aggressive or disruptive behaviour.

Propaganda: Content intentionally crafted to influence public opinion or attitudes in a way that aligns with the publisher's objectives.

Echo Chamber: A scenario where individuals are exposed only to a narrow set of viewpoints or information, while alternative perspectives are suppressed or excluded, often to control public perception.

Global News: News content produced by international media organizations, consumed widely by audiences beyond the country where the outlet is based, often available in multiple languages and catering to a global audience.

Background Information

The modern concept of the press began in the 15th century, transitioning from oral traditions like town criers to written communication that could be preserved and distributed more widely. Before this, Ancient Roman *Acta Diurna* served as one of the earliest forms of preserved public news, though it was strictly controlled by the state. The Protestant Reformation saw a resurgence of this practice with the mass distribution of religious and rhetorical texts, marking one of the first major information wars. Pamphlet printing became a popular method of disseminating news in Europe and eventually spread to colonies and emerging nations, laying the groundwork for the modern press. However, governments often imposed strict restrictions on what could be published, recognizing the growing influence of the press on public opinion.

Significant advances in communication technology came in the 1840s with the telegraph, which allowed news to be shared quickly across national borders, especially among allied nations. This development expanded the reach of information beyond localized perspectives. The introduction of radio broadcasting in 1901 revolutionized news access further, allowing even the illiterate to stay informed. Over time, governments moved from outright banning media outlets to regulating them through licensing, controlling which channels could operate. The press became a powerful tool for shaping public opinion, particularly during times of war.

During both World Wars, press propaganda became a critical instrument for governments, as they censored information to control national sentiment. The interwar period saw the rise of fascist media, which further illustrated the press's role in spreading political ideologies. Global recognition of free speech didn't come until 1948, when the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) affirmed the right to freedom of thought, speech, and expression, extending these principles to the press. This established a global standard, though the interpretation and enforcement of press freedoms still varied from nation to nation.

The Cold War marked the height of media influence on global society, particularly through anti-Soviet campaigns like the Red Scare, which used the press to spread paranoia and misinformation. Similarly, the war on terror saw governments once again leveraging the media to influence public opinion. Today, press freedom remains heavily dependent on individual governments, many of which regulate access to information in the name of national security or

public well-being. However, press freedoms are also challenged by corporate interests or influential individuals who may seek to suppress unfavourable stories.

The shift from print to digital media has further complicated press freedoms. Governments increasingly request social media platforms to remove content deemed problematic, and when these platforms refuse, they may impose firewalls to block access to certain information. This digital censorship raises concerns about the public's right to information. In some cases, societal taboos, rather than government interference, pose the greatest challenge to press freedom, particularly in developed nations where cultural restrictions may limit access to sensitive topics.

Although the UN recognizes the right to share and receive information, this freedom comes with responsibilities, such as avoiding content that promotes violence. Governments and corporations sometimes exploit these responsibilities to justify broad censorship policies, deterring press organizations from pursuing critical stories that could impact public discourse or the reputation of officials. Clearer international standards are needed to protect press freedoms and ensure journalists can report without fear of retaliation.

The current state of press freedom varies significantly across the globe. Violations of journalists' rights, legal threats, and violence against reporters continue to hinder the free flow of information. To ensure global press freedom, stronger protections for journalists and clearer guidelines on what constitutes censorship are essential, allowing the press to fulfil its role as a watchdog for society.

Major Countries and Organisations Involved

United States of America: While the U.S. upholds freedom of speech and access to information, the government has recently taken steps to limit or censor certain politically sensitive content and has pursued legal action against individuals who leak classified state information online. These actions are justified by the U.S. government as necessary for national security. Despite its strong stance on free speech, the U.S. ranks poorly among developed

nations in terms of press freedom. According to Reporters Without Borders (RSF), the country faces significant challenges, including censorship and institutional hostility that restrict access to press content.

RSF - Reporters sans frontières (Reporters Without Borders): A nonprofit organization with UN consultative status, founded in France in 1985, RSF is dedicated to protecting the rights of journalists and ensuring that press content is accessible to the public.

Germany: Germany adheres to policies that restrict access to press content deemed as incitement to hate speech, in line with its broader efforts to limit dissident or extremist speech. Recently, the country's press freedom score has declined from good to borderline satisfactory. Journalists and media outlets face increasing restrictions, as the government enforces anti-constitutional provisions aimed at curbing extremist content from both far-left and far-right sources.

China: China, home to the world's largest population of internet users, tightly controls online access through state regulations. According to Article 51 of the Chinese constitution, any publication that conflicts with government interests can be censored. While Article 35 guarantees freedom of speech, press, assembly, and association, these rights are superseded when state security is at stake. The government maintains that press freedom exists but can be overridden by arbitrary state interests.

Timeline of Events

Date	Description
1508	Formation of the first printing press and the rise of press in Europe with unwritten Socio Political taboos in place of conveyance in seditious or heretical documents
1662	Licensing Act passed in the United Kingdom, the earliest recorded form of direct limitation to speech that is not sanctioned and deemed not within the realms of reason to publish
1766	Freedom of the press Ordinance issued on the first declaration document of Freedom Of Speech and Press under the Kingdom of Sweden in facilitating exchanges of ideas

1834 – The development of Trans-Atlantic Telegrams that transfer information between continents

1905 – Wireless Radio is adopted by the general population making information accessible to illiterate members of society

1958 – RFS is founded working in defence of the rights and integrity of International Press

1971 – The Munich charter was drafted and signed by the European Federation of Journalists as a determined standard that the International Community of both states and Journalists should abide by

1984 – In July the Associated press leaked information concerning CIA secretive undercover operation against the Columbian Drug cartel in Nicaragua, resulting in this leak preventing any opportunities for the capture of cartel leaders Pablo Escobar and Juan David Ocha who were the leading drug traffickers in the Americas

1993 – UN General Assembly Resolution A/48/643 canonised May 3rd as World Press Freedom Day with the purpose to value and spread awareness of the importance of press in terms of information of Global Affairs and International Stability

2001 – The September 11th attacks enabled member states in both oriental and occidental circles to suppress any political faction's media under use of counter terrorism

2010 – The Wikileaks incident of exposure of classified US documents led to international outcry on the rights on the citizens while leading to a surge crackdown on individuals sharing classified information

2014 – June after the Arab Spring wave in Egypt had subsided, three journalists employed by the International Arab news outlet Al Jazeera were held for detention under alleged charges of terrorism for which they were convicted and sentenced for between 7 to 10 years in imprisonment by the Court, eleven other Press Members were tried in absentia (in their absence) and sentenced each for 10 years in prison on Terror related offences with including spreading misinformation in the cause of "political Strife"

2016 – The UN sustainable development goals for 2030 set SDG 16.10 as the right of members to convey and receive information

2020 – The Human Rights Council adopted the Resolution concerning the safety and rights of Journalists and condemns any measures taken by Governments that seek to limit digital access to information through methods such as denial of access to sites or internet shutdowns in the most extreme of scenarios

2022 – The Council of Europe Expressed concerns over obstacles facing journalists and press officials in the European continent from governments and societal groups

2024 – July of this year was the heating point of political upheaval in Bangladesh which received the attention of international media outlets reporting on the violently suppressive approach by Government that led to the deaths of Protestors, in response to the recent publications of the allegations and information circulating online, the government decided to implement a national internet shutdown for a week to prevent negative press coverage

Relevant UN Treaties and Events

Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights:

This article affirms the right of all individuals to freely share and receive information, without interference. It ensures the free flow of information between people, emphasizing that everyone has the right to communicate freely with whoever they choose. Any violation of this principle is a violation of fundamental human rights, which governments worldwide are obligated to respect and protect.

International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR):

Signed in 1966 and enacted in 1976, this multilateral treaty secures the rights of citizens to participate in society and public discourse. With 114 member states, it serves as a foundation for global human rights. Article 19 of the ICCPR specifically guarantees individuals the right to receive and share information and ideas in any form, whether oral, written, or through modern

media, including digital platforms. This covenant is essential in guiding nations to honour their treaty obligations and safeguard the rights of citizens and press organizations for the public good.

RSF (Reporters Without Borders) as a Recognized Public Interest Organization:

Since gaining recognition as an NGO in 1995, RSF has achieved consultative status with key international bodies, including the UN, UNESCO, the Council of Europe, and the International Organization of La Francophonie (OIF). This status provides RSF with a platform to voice its concerns and opinions on how these institutions uphold press rights and ensure transparency.

UN Security Council Counter-Terrorism Resolution 2178:

This resolution, like others of its kind, has been misused by certain regimes to suppress press organizations and minority groups, particularly political dissidents. Intelligence agencies in the Middle East, for example, often use the vague definition of "extremism" in the resolution as a pretext to silence opposition voices and their affiliated media outlets. The loosely defined terms within such resolutions allow regimes to label groups as "extremist" without requiring proof of violent intent, effectively stifling dissent and preventing any challenges to national politics, even when the groups' goals are more locally or politically focused.

Previous Attempts to solve the Issue

UN Security Council Condemnation of Attacks on Journalists and Press Personnel (Resolution 1738):

In 2006, amid growing concerns over the targeted attacks on civilians, particularly journalists in conflict zones, the Security Council issued its first formal condemnation of such actions. These attacks were often carried out by regimes attempting to silence journalists and prevent transparency about their actions from reaching the global community. The resolution called on all member states to not only refrain from harming journalists and press personnel but to

actively protect them and support the integrity of their work. This would ensure the continued flow of vital information, helping to keep global citizens and experts informed.

UN Secretary-General's Message Condemning Threats to Press Personnel (SG/SM/2008):

In October 2023, the Secretary-General, António Guterres, addressed the UN General Assembly following an alarming rise in the detention and killing of journalists worldwide, which had reached its highest level in recorded history. Notably, most of these abuses occurred in nations not actively engaged in conflict. Guterres urged all countries to respect the essential role of journalists and to ensure they can operate in safe environments. He emphasized the responsibility of states to protect press personnel and support their efforts in serving the public and upholding transparency.

Possible Solutions

Building Consensus on the Importance of the Press:

Achieving global consensus on the press's role in society could be facilitated by expanding the framework of the ICCPR, already signed by most member states. Solutions may include amendments or a new covenant to encourage countries like China and Cuba to participate. Given regional differences in press freedoms, any agreement must be broad enough to allow nations flexibility in how they implement provisions. However, safeguards are needed to prevent misuse that could target press organizations unfairly.

Enhancing Accessibility to Press Content:

A key aspect of the right to information is ensuring individuals can access data to make informed decisions. A global platform providing access to both archived and current news articles would ensure more people have access to reliable information. However, in restrictive regimes, access to such a platform may be blocked, making legal protections essential to safeguard public access and preserve information that serves the public good.

Promoting a Positive View of the Press:

Mistrust of the media, particularly in politically polarized environments, threatens press freedom by limiting access to diverse perspectives. A UN-backed campaign could help restore trust by encouraging bipartisan support for media access. This initiative should focus on promoting diverse viewpoints and reducing the stigma surrounding engagement with different perspectives, helping individuals in politically charged areas avoid echo chambers.

Eliminating Echo Chambers:

Political divides in regions like Europe and the Americas often result in communities becoming isolated in their viewpoints. Many young people grow up exposed only to one political perspective. Offering balanced news in public schools and libraries, alongside promoting critical thinking, can help break these echo chambers. Access to bipartisan information will foster a more open and informed society.

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