



STUDY GUIDE

United Nations Human Rights Council



**THE STATE OF INTERNET CENSORSHIP AND
INFORMATION SUPPRESSION**



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1. LETTER FROM THE CHAIRS

Dear delegates,

We are honored to welcome you to the Human Rights Council at the very first edition of MegaMUN2024.

Seeing as the topic is multi-faceted and the directions the debate could take are endless, we have high expectations of you. For this reason, we did our best to write a fitting study guide that will help you understand the issue at hand, the magnitude of its importance on the global scale, and thus guide you throughout your research, all while giving you the freedom to decide on your own approach of the debate.

We expect you to prepare yourselves thoroughly, as you ought to understand the topic and your country's position well, as well as how the committee operates. Therefore, we kindly request you to write a position paper covering the topic, which is to be submitted by the 14th of January.

We are incredibly excited to welcome and meet you here at our school, so, if you ever might need any help, do not hesitate to contact either one of us.

Sincerely, your Chairs,

Sara and Victor



2. INTRODUCTION

a. TO THE COMMITTEE

The United Nations Human Rights Council (HRC) is the main body within the United Nations responsible for human rights, with the goal of promoting and protecting them. HRC was established in 2006 by the UN General Assembly as a replacement to the former United Nations Commission on Human Rights.

Moreover, the Human Rights Council profits from significant assistance in terms of content and technical matters, as well as in administrative matters from the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). The latter is the department of the United Nations secretariat responsible for the protection and promotion of human rights, which are guaranteed by the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The Human Rights Council's responsibilities range from offering a lobby for dialog on human rights matters to holding crisis meetings as a response to urgent human rights violations. It is responsible for reviewing each member state's record on human rights. Moreover, HRC has the power to adapt and discuss resolutions, which would then be discussed in the General Assembly.



b. TO THE TOPIC

Censorship and information suppression date centuries back in human history. These terms are often used interchangeably, although they do present some differences.

Information suppression serves as the umbrella term for everything regarding the change or deletion of information. When talking about information suppression, the strategies and means to control the flow of information are usually what is discussed.

When information suppression is led by authoritative figures, such as governments, then using the term censorship would be in order. Governments would retort to censorship usually to protect their population by preventing harmful information from freely circulating.

When these two notions are related to the internet, it generally means that websites or other digital media are being affected by it.

As stated in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, *“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.”¹ This is exactly why it is the responsibility of the Human Rights Council to assure that anyone can access information freely and inform themselves independently.

3. IMPORTANT VOCABULARY

To assist you in your research and in your understanding of the topic, we have collected some important notions that you might encounter while doing research.

- Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights:
*“The High Commissioner for Human Rights is the principal human rights official of the United Nations.
The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights is accountable to the Secretary-General and is responsible for all the activities of OHCHR, as well as for its administration.”*²
- Universal Declaration of Human Rights:
*“The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) is a milestone document in the history of human rights. [It was] [...] proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly [...] as a common standard of achievements for all peoples and all nations. It sets out, for the first time, fundamental human rights to be universally protected and it has been translated into over 500 languages.”*³
- IP address:
*“An IP address is a unique address that identifies a device on the internet or a local network. IP stands for “Internet Protocol,” which is the set of rules governing the format of data sent via the internet or local network.”*⁴
- Blacklist:
A blacklist is *“a list of the names of people, companies, products or countries that an organization or a government considers unacceptable and that must be avoided.”*⁵
In relation to the web, a blacklist is a list of websites, IP addresses or other content that is blocked or restricted by a network or service provider, or by a government.
- Firewall:
A firewall is *“a part of a computer system that prevents people from reaching information without permission, but still allows them to receive information that is sent to them.”*⁶

¹ Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). Available at: <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/udhr/drafters-of-the-declaration> (Last visited: 23/11/2023)



- (Proxy) server:
“A proxy server is a system or router that provides a gateway between users and the internet. Therefore, it helps prevent cyber attackers from entering a private network. It is a server, referred to as an “intermediary” because it goes between end-users and the web pages they visit online.”⁷
- Algorithm:
“An algorithm is a procedure used for solving a problem or performing a computation. Algorithms act as an exact list of instructions that conduct specified actions step by step in either hardware- or software-based routines.”⁸
- Content moderation:
“Content moderation is the process of reviewing and monitoring user-generated content on online platforms to ensure that it meets certain standards and guidelines. This includes removing inappropriate or offensive content and enforcing community guidelines and terms of service.”⁹

4. HISTORY ON INTERNET CENSORSHIP AND INFORMATION SUPPRESSION

a. CENSORSHIP AND INFORMATION SUPPRESSION IN THE PAST

As previously mentioned, censorship dates as far back as to ancient civilizations. In ancient Greece and Rome, for instance, anyone endangering the town would either be exiled or – in the worst of cases – sentenced to death. The famous philosopher Socrates had to endure such a fate, following his teachings in ancient Athens.

Similar practices were in place over the following centuries. It was only after the discovery of the Gutenberg press that censorship would evolve. During the remainder of the European medieval era up until nowadays still, one form of censorship is the destruction or prohibition of written work.

The discovery of radio and the invention of film further changed media consumption but have not truly impacted information suppression tactics. Seeing as radio stations and TV broadcasters were not as big in numbers as information is nowadays on the Internet, banning transgressors was easier.



b. THE IMPACTS OF DIGITALIZATION AND GLOBALIZATION

However, the invention of the Internet completely revolutionized media consumption, as the Internet and online pages have become the main source of information for many. Consequentially, censorship and other content moderation strategies have evolved, creating a new range of methods to control the flow of information reaching the audiences.

On the one hand, anyone with access to the internet can share or change available information, meaning that verifying the veracity of information online becomes nearly impossible.

On the other hand, service, and network providers as well as governments, in some cases, restrict the web at will. They have the right to ban certain websites or IP addresses.

For instance, in 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, various social media platforms grappled with the spread of misinformation about the virus, treatments, and vaccines. False claims, conspiracy theories, and misleading information like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Ever since then, social media platforms have implemented various measures such as content moderation policies, fact-checking partnerships and the removal of false or misleading content.

5. PAST ACTIONS

1948:

The proclamation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations General Assembly on 10 December 1948 is set as a common standard of achievements for all peoples and all nations. Included is Article 19: *“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.”*

1993:

The Human Rights Council has created the mandate of the Special Rapporteur of Freedom of Opinion and Expression to protect and promote freedom of opinion and expression, offline and online, in light of international human rights law and standards. This mandate has been extended and is still in effect today. The Special Rapporteur submits an annual report to the UNHRC and General Assembly containing an overview of the global situation and recommendations to Member States and other stakeholders. These reports help guide global discussions and offer detailed reports in relation to the right to freedom of opinion and expressions in all its forms.



2015:

UNESCO's Internet Universality Indicators advocates for an Internet that is human-Rights based, **O**pen, **A**ccessible and nurtured by **M**ulti-stakeholder participation, an approach UNESCO calls ROAM. The goal is to promote a comprehensive understanding of how well a country is adhering to these four principles, thus providing countries with a framework for evaluating and improving policies and practices related to the Internet.

2018:

The General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) is a landmark EU regulation enacted in May 2018 to safeguard individuals' privacy and data rights. It introduces stringent requirements for organizations processing personal data within the EU or offering goods and services to its residents. Key provisions include the necessity for clear and explicit user consent, the right to access and control one's data, mandatory data breach reporting, and the potential for substantial fines for non-compliance. The GDPR has had a profound global impact, influencing data protection standards, encouraging transparency, and emphasizing individuals' control over their personal data in the digital age.

2022:

The Digital Services Act and Digital Markets Act of the European Union form a single set of rules that apply across the whole EU. Their goals are to ensure the safety of users online, to tackle disinformation and misinformation, to establish governance and to protect fundamental rights, all while developing a fair digital environment for everyone. This set of rules came into force in November 2022 and large online platforms, such as Facebook, Pinterest, Booking.com and search engines, like Bing and Google Search had to comply with new obligations. These obligations include user empowerment, protection of minors, diligent content moderation, more transparency and accountability.

6. CURRENT SITUATION

The use of AI in content moderation has become widespread on social media platforms and online services. AI algorithms are employed to detect and remove content that violates platform policies, including hate speech, misinformation, and graphic material. On the other hand, challenges persist, seeing as there are concerns about the accuracy of these algorithms and the potential for over-censorship. Moreover, around the world there are regions where the internet is censored, and information is suppressed considerably more than in other areas. This type of content moderation ultimately comes down to the government's wishes, to whether it deems foreign websites and platforms a threat to the nation's political, economic or social stability.

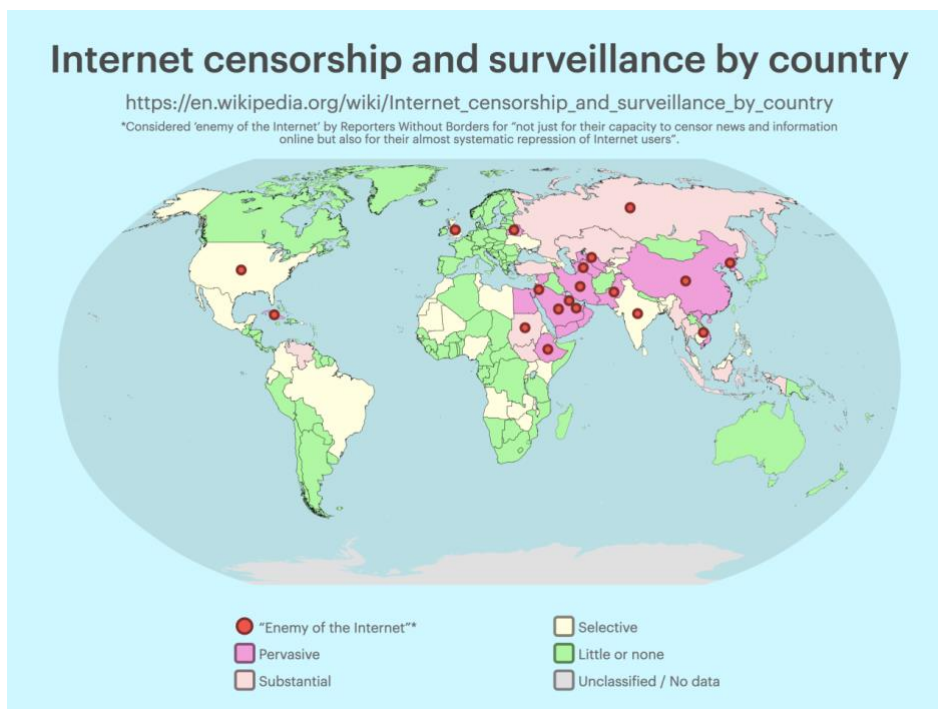


The Golden Shield Project, often called the “Great Firewall of China”, is an initiative managed by the Ministry of Public Security division of the Chinese government, and a good example of Internet censorship: a combination of technologies and legislations action together to regulate the domestic use of the Internet by checking keywords and sensitive words, which then activate a function and restricts access to the respective controversial content. Moreover, it acts as a tool that the government can use to monitor residents’ access on the Internet and even potentially gain visibility into data traffic that users are expecting to be secure and private.

This is how most governments or other parties exert their control over the national population’s Internet use. However, there may also be additional methods applied, such as:

- Internet shutdowns, where the government resorts to regionally disrupting the Internet in times of political unrest, perceived threats, or protests;
- The enactment of laws specifically targeting social media platforms, including data localization, requiring the data generated to be stored within national borders;
- Disregarding net neutrality means prioritizing certain types of Internet content or applications over others for payment or other benefits.

As illustrated on the map attached below, many nations have adopted laws that moderate the content on the Internet. This means that the people's ability to access information is restricted, and thus may affect other rights including work, health and education to different extents.





7. POINTS TO CONSIDER

Since we are aware of how easy it is to get lost while researching a topic, we gathered the following questions to keep you on track.

- Can present-day algorithms moderate content accurately while respecting human rights?
- Should there be internet censorship or not? How can boundaries be set?
- How can co-operation with large media companies be assured?
- How can it be assured that regulations will be respected in the future?

8. FURTHER READING

- OpenNet Initiative (ONI):
"The OpenNet Initiative is a collaborative partnership of three institutions [...] [whose] aim is to investigate, expose and analyze Internet filtering and surveillance practices in a credible and non-partisan fashion."
<https://opennet.net/about-oni>
- UNESCO's ROAM:
<https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000367617/PDF/367617eng.pdf.multi>
- Human Rights Measurement Initiative:
 - <https://rightstracker.org/en>
- About the European Union's Digital Services Act and Digital Markets Act:
 - <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/digital-services-act-package>
 - https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_23_2413



9. APPENDIX

a. FINAL STATEMENT

Please keep in mind that delegates are expected to write a position paper, which is to be sent by the 14th of January to our Discord channel.

Moreover, do not hesitate to contact fellow delegates, as we strongly recommend a certain extent of cooperation between delegates.

Would help ever be required, do not hesitate to contact us, our DMs on Discord are open to any and all questions.

Finally, and most importantly, we know very well that research and conferences can get stressful, so do not forget that MUNs are safe spaces to have fun and to give it all you have got!

b. SOURCES

- Ben WAGNER, Joanna BRONOWICKA, Cathleen BERGER and Thomas BEHRNDT (Centre for Internet and Human Rights, European University Viadrina, Germany) (2015) *Surveillance and censorship: The impact of technologies on human rights* on request by the European Parliament's Subcommittee on Human Rights. Available at: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2015/549034/EXPO_STU\(2015\)549034_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2015/549034/EXPO_STU(2015)549034_EN.pdf) (Last visited 23/11/2023)
- Annual Thematic Reports of the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression and Opinion: Available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/sr-freedom-of-opinion-and-expression/annual-thematic-reports> (Last visited 23/11/2023)
- Feldstein Steven (2021) *Digital Technology's Evolving Role in Politics, Protest and Repression*. Available at: <https://www.usip.org/publications/2021/07/digital-technologys-evolving-role-politics-protest-and-repression> (Last visited 23/11/2023)
- **Vocabulary:**
 - ² ohchr.org (2023) *About us*. Available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/about-us/high-commissioner> (Last visited: 23/11/2023)
 - ³ Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). Available at: <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/udhr/drafters-of-the-declaration> (Last visited: 23/11/2023)
 - ⁴ kaspersky.com *What is an IP address*. Available at: <https://www.kaspersky.com/resource-center/definitions/what-is-an-ip-address> (Last visited: 23/11/2023)
 - ⁵ Oxford Learners Dictionary (2023) *Blacklist*. Available at: https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/blacklist_1?q=Blacklist (Last visited: 23/11/2023)



⁶ Oxford Learners Dictionary (2023) *Firewall*. Available at:

<https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/firewall?q=firewall> (Last visited: 23/11/2023)

⁷ Fortinet.com (2023) *What is a proxy server? How does it work?* Available at:

<https://www.fortinet.com/resources/cyberglossary/proxy-server#:~:text=A%20proxy%20server%20is%20a,web%20pages%20they%20visit%20online> (Last visited: 23/11/2023)

⁸ TechTarget (2023) *Algorithm*. Available at:

<https://www.techtarget.com/whatis/definition/algorithm#:~:text=An%20algorithm%20is%20a%20procedure,throughout%20all%20areas%20of%20IT> (Last visited: 23/11/2023)

⁹ besedo.com (2023) *What is content moderation?* Available at:

<https://besedo.com/knowledge-hub/blog/what-is-content-moderation/> (Last visited 23/11/2023)