



Human Rights Committee

Topic Guide: The question of freedom of political expression on social media

Introduction

Considering the state of the political stage, with polarising candidates and the alarming proliferation of misinformation, the preservation of our freedom of political expression on social media is all the more necessary. Moreover, cross-border influence operations were first thrust into the spotlight as a result of Russian interference in the 2016 US presidential contest, and further questions arose in regard to remedies to ensure the right to political expression. An independent media sector “draws its power from the community it serves and in return empowers that community to be full a partner in the democratic process”, and alongside the necessary media literacy skills, citizens are able to critically analyse and synthesize the information as well hold the media accountable for its actions. It is essential that citizens have access to and contribute to a free and uncensored press, our concern is that without regulations and rules that favour an unbiased press, member states will continue to jeopardise the freedom of opinion and expression in favour of greater authority. States should never penalize media outlets, publishers or journalists for reporting or disseminating critical views and dissenting opinions.

General Information

The list of countries of following in the footsteps of member states such as China, Iran, Saudi Arabia etc, in increasing the efforts of authorities in the manipulation of the online environment and influence of foreign political outcomes, is growing. Increasingly, some states have attempted to build firewalls around digital communications, or in the case of Egypt, Sudan and Zimbabwe among others, respond to mass street protests with an internet shutdown. Iran, China and Viet Nam have all tried to develop systems that enable them to control access to digital information. In India’s northern Kashmir region, mobile Internet and communications are suspended in response to any unrest.

A startling number of governments are deploying advanced tools to identify and monitor users on an immense scale, this evident disregard for the right to privacy enables the criminalization of free expression. Such censorship encourages a culture of self-censorship and fear that further erodes the inherent right to hold and express opinions without interference. This menacing surveillance has added to the decline protection of journalists who are constantly fearing for their lives, as authoritarian government continue to unlawfully prosecute those who fight to show citizens a balanced and honest view of their countries. In 2014, Amnesty and a coalition of human rights and technology organizations launched ‘Detekt’ - a simple tool that allows activists to scan their devices for surveillance spyware, in response to governments hacking into journalists’ cameras and digital technology.

UN Involvement

Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) permits freedom of expression and both receiving and seeking information providing that it does not infringe on public security, public order or of public health or morals, and Article 20 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which recognizes the right to peaceful assembly.

Irene Khan, UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, having released a report on the freedom of expression on social media stated: “Independent, free and pluralistic news media is crucial for democracy, accountability and transparency and should be nurtured by States and the international community as a public good,”

Further Reading

- Equality and Human Rights Commission: Article 10: Freedom of Expression
 - <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/human-rights-act/article-10-freedom-expression#:~:text=Everyone%20has%20the%20right%20to,authority%20and%20regardless%20of%20frontiers.>
- UN Chronicle: Freedom of Expression, a Fundamental Human Right
 - <https://www.un.org/en/chronicle/article/freedom-expression-fundamental-human-right>
- Freedom House: The Crises of Social Media
 - <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2019/crisis-social-media>