

Forum: Human Rights Council 2022

Issue: The Question of the Freedom of the Press in Time of War

Student Officer: Nan Jiang

Position: Deputy President HRC

Introduction

Freedom of the press, also known as freedom of media, is the right to publish and express opinions and thoughts through various types of media such as news media and social media. Media is the primary method the majority of the public relies on to receive information and formulate opinions on ongoing matters. Additionally, the media is an outlet for public opinions, expressing the voice of the public, and serving purposes such as discussion and education. More importantly, freedom of the press ensures basic government transparency, making it an important aspect of democratic societies.

However, freedom of media is often threatened in times of war due to tension between governments and the government's wish to mobilize the population behind its efforts to win the war. Opposing voices against the government during wartime can distract citizens and weaken their faith in the government. Since media such as news are people's main way of obtaining information, some news sources that publish content from the opposite political stance of the government can be blocked or forbidden. Press freedom can be affected in various ways, including but not limited to the murder of journalists, censorship of information, and suppression of public discussion.

A lack of press freedom prevents people from making informed decisions and opinions on ongoing matters. Media censorship is the most severe during wartime, making the consequences larger as well. When certain opinions and media are censored, the population will only receive information from a limited perspective, making it nearly impossible for media consumers to formulate a well-informed opinion. The constant reinforcement of the same perspective and opinions often leads to radicalized populations that further fuel the conflict.

Definition of Key Terms:

Press (media)

A combined term for news sources, journalists, and secondary information sources on current events. Press is also known as the media where material, opinions, and thoughts are published and shared.

Freedom of the press

Freedom of the press is the freedom for the press to publish material and opinions, and hold public discussions. Freedom of the press is crucial to ensuring the transparency of the government, the flow of information, and public awareness. Freedom of the press often links to freedom of speech and freedom of opinion and expression making it a fundamental right in a democracy.

World press freedom index

The world press freedom index is an annual ranking of countries based on the country's press freedom records in the previous year. The press freedom index is assessed and published by Reporters Without Borders

Censorship

Censorship is the suppression of ideas, expression, communication, and information that are considered threatening to a certain individual, organization, or government. There are many types and ways of censorship such as book banning, forbidding the publishing of certain information, and disallowing the expression of certain opinions.

Background Information:

Press freedom during wars in the past

When there is war, there is always censorship of information and threats to freedom of expression in some form. Censorship during wartime can be traced back to the first world war. During the first world war, news, speeches, and photographs were all subjected to censorship initially to prevent the leak of information to enemies. However, censorship quickly became a way for people in power to control the public. Voices against the war or questioned war efforts were heavily targeted. During the first world war in New Zealand, communication and movement

were heavily censored to the point that some people were unaware of the ongoing atrocities. During the second world war, the UK established a ministry of news that carefully examined every piece of news submitted for publication. However, the over-censorship and examination of news caused repercussions. The public and certain official departments of the UK received delayed information on the war, which created a domino effect that resulted in the UK government receiving heavy criticism and questioning from the people.

Australia established a similar department for information censorship during World War II called the Department of Information (DOI). The DOI determines what information is to be shown and released to the public. For example, when the government released news about the bombing of Darwin, the public is told that the “official” death toll was 17 when in reality, more than 250 people died.

Subtopic 1: Protecting the safety and rights of journalists such as in Ukraine and Russia

As of June 2022, at least 32 journalists have been killed in Ukraine since the start of the armed conflict between Ukraine and Russia in 2022. On average, every five days a journalist is killed for bringing information to the public. The murder of journalists is a form of limiting press freedom because it stops professionals from reporting certain information and spreads fear around sharing opinions. Specifically, in times of conflict between nations where there is strong political pressure, opposing voices and the leak of information are unwanted by the government, which can often result in extreme actions. Using extreme actions such as killing, governments and organizations hope to discourage reporters, journalists, and various types of media from reporting information.

Journalists play a crucial role in ensuring the flow of information, allowing open discussion, and fostering the pursuit of truth. The murder and imprisonment of journalists are some of the most extreme and direct threats to freedom of expression. Therefore, when journalists are murdered, press freedom is severely threatened. To prevent the consequences of lack of press freedom, there must be a flow of information; in times of war, journalists are crucial sources of information, meaning that ensuring the security of journalists and reporters is an important step towards preventing the repercussions of

Subtopic 2: Addressing the censorship of certain media and opinions on the Russia-Ukraine war (2022)

The ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine remains a sensitive topic on the internet. Due to the rise of social media platforms in recent years, the freedom of expression of the public is much improved, and people are free to share their opinions on ongoing matters. However, along with the rise of social media is the rise of the concept of “political correctness”. The original definition of political correctness is the careful expression of opinions avoiding offense. In the past decade, political correctness has been taken to extreme levels, to the degree that unless an opinion completely aligns with what is considered politically correct, it is wrong and attacked.

Extreme political correctness creates a new form of censorship that discourages people from expressing their thoughts. When taken to the extreme, this form of “invisible” censorship can be highly dangerous. In the context of the current conflict between Russia and Ukraine, only voices in support of Ukraine are heard and promoted in western media. On the other hand, any voice that represents Russia’s perspective is considered politically incorrect and under attack on the internet. Even on large news platforms such as the New York Times and CNN, most of the articles published are anti-Russia. However, in reality, the conflict between Russia-Ukraine conflict has an extended and complicated history that cannot be simply categorized into “right” and “wrong”. Unless both perspectives are equally represented, not only will the conflict be more difficult to resolve, but the public will lose the right to formulate their own opinions, and eventually take stances that continue to fuel the fire that is the conflict between Russia and Ukraine.

Subtopic 3: Mitigating the impact of media and opinion censorship during wartime

Throughout history, information during wartime had always been heavily monitored and filtered. Governments deliberately select information that will be shown to their citizens to maintain their morale and prevent fear. In order for a country to have a strong position in a war, its citizens must have strong faith in the nation; thus, propaganda and censorship are often used to strengthen the public’s faith in the government. However, due to the limited flow of information from outside the country and the lack of diverse opinions presented to the public, individuals could not formulate their own opinions. The reinforcement of the same opinions and information through censorship and propaganda makes people form radicalized perspectives. In the long term, a radicalized population will only further fuel the conflict during wartime. An example is the

censored educational material during the second world war in Germany. In Germany, Children were taught in school to hate and discriminate against Jews, and the long-term submergence in such an environment will influence peoples' judgment.

Additionally, the censorship of expression highly threatens the safety of victims of war. Since victims of war are forbidden to share their status, the war situation, and their stance on the war, much information is kept away from the rest of the world, putting the safety of innocent people at threat. During the second world war, due to the strict monitoring of speech and expression under the Nazi's control, the atrocities taking place in Germany is unknown to the rest of the world until the later stages of WWII. Due to censored expression, the outside world might be unaware of the events occurring in war-torn areas, making it impossible for international organizations to send help to resolve the issue, which can lead to more tragedies and deaths. Today, the large amount of digital information people are exposed to and an increased number of resources to obtain information makes the emphasis of opinions easier and more prevalent. People are more likely to form radicalized opinions when the social media and other advantages of the information age are used for negative purposes.

Major Countries and Organizations Involved:

RSF (Reporters Without Borders)

RSF is a non-governmental organization (NGO) that specializes in protecting the freedom of information. RSF aims to ensure everyone's equal access to information and news by protecting the digital and physical security of journalists and raising public awareness through campaigns against the abuse of journalists. RSF maintains long-term collaborative relationships with various news media around the world and holds consultative status at the UN and many UN-affiliated organizations. Furthermore, RSF evaluates the level of the press freedom of each nation each year and releases the world press freedom index. Member states can collaborate with RSF to raise public awareness of the dangers faced by journalists and provide security for journalists in areas engaged in armed conflict.

IFJ (International Federation of Journalists)

The IFJ is a "global union federation of journalists' trade unions" first established in 1926. IFJ represents more than 600,000 media professionals across 146 nations from 187 different

organizations. The IFJ is an associate member of the United Nations Education, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and has played a role in representing journalists at the UN since 1956. IFJ focuses on protecting the work conditions and labor rights of journalists, promoting international action to defend press freedom and the security of journalists, and raising awareness of the misuse of news and social media. The IFJ can cooperate with member states to ensure the freedom of expression on media platforms, and prevent the use of media to promote conflict.

CPJ (Committee to Protect Journalists)

CPJ is an NGO that aims to protect and promote press freedom and the safety of journalists around the world. Each year, CPJ releases a census of journalists that have been killed or imprisoned during the practice of their work. The CPJ contributes to the protection of press freedom through awarding and sharing advocates for press freedom. Before CPJ branched out to promote global press freedom, CPJ was mainly focused on press freedom in the US. CPJ helped launch the US Press Freedom Tracker Project aimed to protect reporters from harassment.

WAN-IFRA (World Association of News Paper and News Publishers)

WAN-IFRA is an NGO composed of 76 national newspaper agencies, 12 news agencies, 10 regional press organizations, and individual new executives from across 100 nations. WAN-IFRA holds global influence in terms of the protection of journalists and freedom of expression. WAN-IFRA focuses on promoting the freedom of the press through providing support for the publication of news, specifically, WAN-IFRA advocates for international collaboration or publications to ensure press freedom worldwide. Like the RSF, WAN-IFRA also holds consultative status at the UN. Member states are encouraged to cooperate with WAN-IFRA as a resource to facilitate the collaboration between media to ensure the level of press freedom during wartime.

Russia and Ukraine

Since February 24th, 2022, Russia and Ukraine have been in a state of armed conflict. The conflict between Russia and Ukraine has an extended history, creating populations with contrasting opinions on the topic. However, due to the censorship of information entering Russia and Ukraine and exiting Russia and Ukraine, many victims of the ongoing war are unaware of

the reaction of other nations and the discussions and information being shared with the rest of the world. Additionally, varied perspectives on the conflict between Russia and Ukraine are unable to be shared due to the strict monitoring of the flow of information and the highly one-sided public opinion on the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Multiple journalists have been killed during the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, meaning that press freedom is already severely threatened. To prevent freedom of expression and press freedom from being further harmed as well as to prevent the radicalization of citizens, Russia and Ukraine have crucial responsibilities and active roles when addressing the safety of journalists and press freedom currently.

Norway, Denmark, and Sweden

As the three nations with the highest scores on the past year's World Press Freedom Index issued by RSF, Norway, Denmark, and Sweden can play active roles in addressing the protection of press freedom. The high press freedom in Norway, Denmark, and Sweden is highly contributed by an active and diverse media market and a robust legal framework that protects press freedom.

OHCHR (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights)

The UN General Assembly established OHCHR in December 1993 through resolution 48/141. OHCHR is an organization under the UN that specializes in the protection of human rights. OHCHR is responsible for promoting global human rights and freedom through cooperation with governments and to ensure a human rights perspective is presented in ongoing issues. Member states are highly encouraged to collaborate and use OHCHR as a resource to raise awareness on the potential human rights violations related to press freedom in a war setting.

Timeline of Events:

Date	Description of event
1917	The UK banned 253 publications from the United States alone. Censorship during the first world war marked the start of using censorships as tools for political conformity in wartime.
1939	During Britain's involvement in the second world war, the Ministry of Information in Britain established "censors" to review media before it can be published to the public.

December 9, 1941	An agency established by the US during the second world war to monitor all communication entering and exiting the US to protect sensitive war-related information at the same time preserving press freedom.
December 1993	World Press Freedom Day was announced in the General Assembly.

Relevant UN Treaties and Events:

- UN Plan of Action On the Safety of Journalists and Issue of Impunity ([CI-12/CONF.202/6](#))
- The Safety of Journalists ([A/HRC/45/18](#))
- Protection of Civilians and Condemn Attack of Journalists During Conflict ([S/RES/1738](#))
- Combat Impunity for Attacks Against Journalists ([S/RES/2222](#))

Previous Attempts to solve the Issue:

The UN had made many previous efforts to address the safety of journalists during severe political situations and wartime. During the Iraq War, the OHCHR organized multiple campaigns to raise awareness on the violence that journalists in Iraq are facing for reporting information. Since the start of the Iraq war, the UN has also put a heavy emphasis on global press freedom through the promotion of World Press Freedom Day. In recent years, the UN and OHCHR are strongly promoting education on press freedom and the safety of journalists. In the history of the UN, there are several resolutions addressing ensuring the livelihood of journalists and penalties for violence against journalists. However, there is no resolution at the moment that specifically addresses the impact of media and opinion censorship during wartime. There are also no resolutions that address the issue of press freedom in the specific context of the current conflict between Russia and Ukraine.

Possible Solutions:

Delegates are encouraged to consider solutions in both large and small scales to consider how different scales of censorship and lack of press freedom can cause different consequences. Large scale solutions being solutions that can be applied to all member nations, small scale solutions being solutions that a specific group of nations are encouraged to adapt.

Establish penalties for ones who threaten the livelihood of journalists

The delegates can ask the UN to establish a department under OHCHR that specializes in ensuring the safety of journalists, specifically journalists in war-torn areas. The safety of journalists registered under the department for journalist safety is placed into a database and tracked and ensured. Therefore, when the life or livelihood of a journalist is targeted and threatened, it could be reported, and the people who committed crimes against these journalists could receive penalties. Note that journalists are protected by the international humanitarian law; therefore, member states can make the penalties for violating the law more severe to discourage violence against journalists.

Ensure the representation of a wide-range of perspectives on media

Ensuring the equal representation of different voices is crucial to holding open discussions that give people the opportunity to formulate their own opinions. Media nowadays, especially western media, often only present one-sided perspectives. Since most dominating news sources and social media are under western companies, the balance of perspectives presented on global media have significant impacts on people's awareness of ongoing issues. It is also a basic human right to have the freedom to express opinions. To protect the diversity of perspectives represented on social media, the monopolization of certain media companies must be prevented to ensure that different media and different perspectives are fully represented and censorship is not used to enforce political conformity.

References:

“A Brief History of Press Freedom | Britannica.” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 2022, www.britannica.com/story/250-years-of-press-freedom.

Barry, Eloise. “Russia’s War on Ukraine Is a Threat to Press Freedom, Report Says.” *Time*, Time, 4 May 2022, time.com/6173543/world-press-freedom-index-2022/.

Defending Press Freedom in Times of Tension and Conflict 2022 Annual Report by the Partner Organizations to the Council of Europe Platform to Promote the Protection of

Journalism and Safety of Journalists.
rm.coe.int/platform-protection-of-journalists-annual-report-2022/1680a64fe1. Accessed 20 Sept. 2022.

“Factors Affecting Freedom of the Press.” *Nature*, vol. 138, no. 3497, Nov. 1936, pp. 795–95, <https://doi.org/10.1038/138795b0>.

“Freedom of Expression in Times of Conflict.” *Freedom of Expression*, 2014, www.coe.int/en/web/freedom-expression/freedom-of-expression-in-times-of-conflict.

“HRC44: UN Resolution on Freedom of Opinion and Expression.” *ARTICLE 19*, www.article19.org/resources/hrc44-un-resolution-on-freedom-of-expression/.

“Mass Media | Definition, Examples, Characteristics, & Facts | Britannica.” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 2022, www.britannica.com/topic/mass-media.

“Nazi Propaganda and Censorship.” *Ushmm.org*, 2021, encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/nazi-propaganda-and-censorship.
Reporters without borders. “RSF.” *Bienvenue Sur Le Site de Reporter sans Frontières* | RSF, 2019, rsf.org/en.

“The History of Censorship and State Control during the First World War | WW100 New Zealand.” *Govt.nz*, 2014,

ww100.govt.nz/censorship-state-control#:~:text=Mail%2C%20telegrams%2C%20pamphlets%20and%20books,from%20falling%20into%20enemy%20hands..

“Threats to Freedom of Press: Violence, Disinformation & Censorship.” *Unesco.org*, 19 Sept. 2022, www.unesco.org/en/threats-freedom-press-violence-disinformation-censorship.
“Threats to Media Workers’ Freedom ‘Growing by the Day’, UN Chief Warns.” *UN News*, 3 May 2022, news.un.org/en/story/2022/05/1117362.

Ukraine. “32 Journalists Killed in Ukraine since War Began, Says Minister.” *Aa.com.tr*, 2022, www.aa.com.tr/en/world/32-journalists-killed-in-ukraine-since-war-began-says-minister/2606858.

Unbound, Chicago, and Geoffrey Stone. “Freedom of the Press in Time of War.” 59 *SMU Law Review*, 2006, p. 1663, chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2955&context=journal_articles.

UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity.” *UNESCO*, 20 Feb. 2017, en.unesco.org/un-plan-action-safety-journalists.

“WAN-IFRA Is the Global Organisation of the World’s Press. What We Do - Who We Serve - Why Join.” *WAN-IFRA*, Aug. 2022, wan-ifra.org/about-us/.

Appendices

- I. <https://www.article19.org/resources/hrc44-un-resolution-on-freedom-of-expression/>
- II. <https://www.unesco.org/en/threats-freedom-press-violence-disinformation-censorship>
- III. https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Journalists/UN_plan_on_Safety_Journalists_EN.pdf
- IV. <https://www.article19.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Closing-the-normative-gap-What-t-en-years-of-Human-Rights-Council-Resolutions-tell-us-about-its-approach-to-the-safety-of-journalists-1-1.pdf>