

Threats to Journalists and Free Speech

United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC)

OdeMUN II Study Guide

1. Introduction to the Committee

On March 15, 2006, UN General Assembly Resolution 60/251 established the United Nations Human Rights Council (or in short UNHRC), supplanting the Commission on Human Rights.⁽¹⁾ Forty-seven member states constitute the Council, elected by the General Assembly to three-year terms with seats divided among different regions to ensure fair representation.⁽²⁾ Member states need to claim commitment to promoting and protecting human rights globally. This makes them responsible for providing platforms for addressing violations of human rights, and coordinating international responses.⁽³⁾

The Council's special procedures are independent, unpaid experts who report and advise on human rights issues globally or by country, conducting visits, addressing violations, developing standards, and raising awareness.

In addition to these functions, the UNHRC serves as an international forum for dialogue on human rights issues with UN officials, mandated experts, states, civil society, and other participants. It adopts resolutions or decisions during regular sessions that express the will of the international community on given human rights issues or situations. Adopting a resolution sends a strong political signal which can prompt governments to take action to remedy those situations.⁽³⁾ The Council also holds crisis meetings known as "special sessions" to respond to urgent human rights situations, 36 of which have been held to date. It reviews the human rights records of all United Nations Member States using the Universal Periodic Review and authorizes commissions of inquiry and fact-finding missions, which produce hard-hitting evidence on war crimes and crimes against humanity.⁽³⁾

2. Background to the Issue

Chapter A: Key Definitions and Regulatory Approaches

Censorship - The action of preventing communication from being seen or made available to the public, because it is considered offensive or harmful, or because it contains information that someone wishes to keep secret, often for political reasons.⁽⁴⁾ Censorship works in two main ways: stopping speech before it happens or punishing people afterwards. Before anyone can hear a message, governments might block it entirely, like requiring approval before newspapers can print stories. After publication, authorities could force websites to delete posts or arrest journalists for what they've already written.⁽⁵⁾

Defamation laws - Are made to protect people from lies that damage their reputation. Two types exist: criminal defamation (which can land you in prison) and civil defamation (which costs you money through lawsuits).⁽⁶⁾

Despite international human rights groups arguing against imprisoning people for speech, 160 nations still treat certain false statements as crimes. Even when governments claim they're protecting citizens from harmful lies, these laws become tools for silencing critics and journalists.⁽⁶⁾

Digital surveillance- tracking what journalists say, where they go, and who they contact. Everything from phone calls to location data to online searches. Sometimes it's legal, like when courts approve wiretaps for criminal investigations.⁽⁷⁾ When a journalist's every communication might be compromised, protecting confidential sources becomes impossible. Meanwhile, powerful figures discovered they could weaponize lawsuits themselves. Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs) aren't filed to win in court. Instead, wealthy corporations or politicians sue journalists to drown them in legal bills and endless court proceedings. Years of court drain resources and energy, achieving censorship through bankruptcy rather than legal victory. During 2023, Europe documented 166 new SLAPP cases, with businesses filing 47% and politicians launching 37%, targeting investigative journalists who exposed corruption.⁽⁸⁾ By the time courts dismiss these baseless suits, the damage is done. Other journalists see what happened and think twice before investigating powerful people who can afford to weaponize the legal system.

Impunity - Getting away with crimes without facing punishment. When journalists are attacked or killed, impunity happens when governments fail to investigate or arrest the people responsible.⁽⁹⁾ UNESCO found that in 2022, 86% of journalist murders worldwide never resulted in justice.⁽¹⁰⁾

When killers know they won't be punished, they become bolder. Some countries have appeared on impunity lists every year since 2008, with 19-39 unsolved journalist murders each, showing consistent failure to solve these crimes despite democratic governments.⁽¹¹⁾

Independent courts are necessary to hold criminals accountable, but the same authoritarian trends that hurt press freedom also weaken court independence, creating a harmful cycle.

Chapter B: Foundations and Frameworks

1600–1800

The modern conception of **press freedom** emerged from Enlightenment philosophy in the 17th and 18th centuries, when European thinkers challenged kings who controlled information. The English Licensing Act demanded government approval before publication of any material. Its expiration in 1694 without renewal. This marked the first significant triumph against "prior restraint," the governmental habit of suppressing expression before it reaches the public. A revolutionary principle emerged: censorship should not occur at the pre-publication stage. Governments retained the ability to prosecute publishers after the fact, yet they lost the power to silence voices before anyone could hear them. This distinction remains foundational to contemporary press freedom discourse. Prior restraint is deemed the gravest violation precisely because it extinguishes ideas before they can enter public consciousness, denying citizens the opportunity to encounter and evaluate information independently.⁽¹²⁾

1948

Following World War II's devastation, the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights made press freedom a crucial part of international law.⁽¹³⁾ Freedom of expression emerged as a fundamental human right. Strengthening came through the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR): adopted 1966, force 1976, binding 174 state parties by 2024.⁽¹⁴⁾ Wide-ranging individual freedoms gained legal protection under the ICCPR: life, torture prohibition, expression, religion, and fair trial rights. Regional human rights treaties mirrored the pattern. The European Convention on Human Rights came into force in 1950.⁽¹⁵⁾ The American Convention on Human Rights followed in 1969. The African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights came in 1981.⁽¹⁶⁾ Each has established enforceable press freedom protections.

1947-1991

Cold War tensions fractured philosophical foundations. Western democracies emphasizing individual liberty, and communist states prioritizing collective welfare and state control. During the 1970s-1980s, UNESCO debates erupted over the "New World Information and Communication Order."⁽¹⁷⁾ North-South divisions deepened, developing nations arguing that media freedom isn't what it used to be when Western news agencies dominated global information flows, effectively imposing cultural imperialism. Cultural imperialism is the imposition of one culture's values, beliefs, and practices on another, often resulting in the erosion of the latter's unique identity.⁽¹⁸⁾ The fundamental discord between universal human rights principles and claims of national sovereignty remain at odds, manifesting in today's legal frameworks governing false information and social media oversight. This tension between universal rights and national sovereignty remains unresolved, manifesting in contemporary debates about "fake news" laws and content moderation.

Chapter C: Digital Era and Contemporary Challenges

1989-2000

Post-Cold War Democratic Wave - Press freedom experienced significant expansion during the democratic wave following the Cold War's end. The collapse of Soviet-bloc censorship systems, transitions to democracy across Latin America and parts of Africa, and the internet's emergence created optimism about irreversible progress toward global press freedom.

1990s

The digital revolution beginning in the 1990s changed forever the press freedom dynamics. The internet initially promised democratization: anyone could publish, geographic barriers disappeared, and information monopolies seemed obsolete. However, thanks to the digital revolution, digital platforms now allow governments and other actors to spy on journalists and their sources in ways that were never possible before, which undermines press freedom. In addition, The digital revolution has made disinformation much more widespread. Platform power concentrating gatekeeping authority in private corporations rather than governments or professional editors. Technological shifts cut both ways, making the current era simultaneously the best and worst time for press freedom depending on geographic and political context. Strict governments exploit digital tools for control. Citizen journalism enables democratic scrutiny. Understanding this historical path reveals that contemporary threats reflect longstanding tensions between power and accountability rather than novel challenges.

2010-2012

Across Tunisia's streets, initial protests sparked what became the Arab Spring: pro-democracy movements cascading through Egypt, Libya, Syria, and Yemen. Facebook and Twitter emerged as catalysts, enabling rapid protest coordination and international solidarity. Yet this digital revolution carried unforeseen consequences. Governments, rather than yielding to online activism, began mastering these same platforms for surveillance and authoritarian control.⁽¹⁹⁾

2021

Pegasus Project Revelations - Investigations revealed that journalists, human rights defenders, and political opposition members were targeted across multiple countries with surveillance tools sold to governments under counter-terrorism justifications but used for political repression.⁽²⁰⁾

October 2023

Gaza Conflict Begins - The conflict that would account for approximately 70% of journalist deaths in 2024, with over 230 media workers killed through March 2025, making it more deadly than any previous conflict documented.⁽²¹⁾

2024-2025

Record-Breaking Years for Violence: 2024 marked the deadliest year on record for journalists globally, with 124 killed.⁽²¹⁾ The Middle East and North Africa emerged as the deadliest region, accounting for 63% of global journalist killings. Only 21% of countries maintained satisfactory press freedom conditions, down from 36% just one year earlier.⁽²²⁾ Also, record political indicator drop: The global political indicator dropped 7.6 points in 2024, the steepest decline on record. 85% of the world's population experienced press freedom decline over five years.⁽²³⁾ These statistics demonstrate that threats to journalists represent broader democratic crises rather than isolated violations, requiring systemic responses addressing root causes of authoritarian resurgence, technological disruption enabling new control methods, and economic pressures undermining sustainable independent journalism. Understanding regional patterns without assuming universal solutions enables more effective advocacy recognizing different starting points and contextual factors shaping possible interventions.

3. Current Situation

Chapter A: Current Challenges and Vulnerable Populations

When we talk about threats to journalists and free speech, some reporters face dangers that multiply based on who they are and where they work. According to research by UNESCO and the International Center for Journalists, 73% of women journalists experienced online violence, with attacks designed not just to challenge their reporting but to drive them out of journalism entirely. Sexual violence threats reached 18% of women reporters, while 25% received physical violence threats.⁽²⁴⁾ The digital attacks often turned physical when 20% of women journalists were attacked offline in incidents that started online.

47% of these attacks targeted **women** covering gender issues, while 44% focused on political reporting. Political actors orchestrated 37% of identifiable harassment campaigns, using sexualized attacks to intimidate rather than debate. 26% reported mental health consequences, 37% started avoiding certain stories, and 29% considered quitting journalism altogether. Yet only 25% reported incidents to employers, with 58% saying their organizations didn't even recognize that these risks existed.⁽²⁵⁾

Freelance journalists work without the safety nets that news organizations provide, which means they don't have any legal teams when threatened, no insurance for dangerous assignments, no evacuation plans if situations explode, no therapists for trauma. Financial desperation forces them to accept risks that staff journalists can refuse.⁽²⁶⁾

Local journalists can't escape when danger escalates, unlike international journalists who usually fly home when receiving threats. Rural journalists face even worse odds given weaker rule of law and isolation from protective journalist networks found in cities.⁽²⁷⁾

The Pegasus Project revealed that governments bought surveillance technology marketed for counter-terrorism but used it to spy on journalists, human rights defenders, and political opponents across multiple countries. When reporters can't trust their phones, they can't protect sources. Fear of surveillance pushes 41% of journalists toward self-censorship, editing themselves before anyone else does, creating invisible damage that's impossible to measure.⁽²⁰⁾

Chapter B: Failed Solutions

Press Freedom Training Programs Without Institutional Reform

When journalists started dying in conflict zones at alarming rates, international organizations responded with a solution: teach reporters how to stay safe. UNESCO, made a hostile environment awareness training (HEAT) course across war zones and dangerous regions. In this program, journalists learned to spot landmines, duck crossfire, and wear protective gear correctly. But unfortunately, learning to use a bulletproof vest proves pointless against targeted killing. According to research by the International News Safety Institute, 92% of journalist deaths between 2015-2022 were deliberate murders.⁽²⁸⁾ Someone wanted these journalists dead and made it happen. Instead of asking "How do we help journalists survive dangerous places?" we can ask "Why are these places deliberately dangerous for journalists, and who's getting away with making them that way?"

Voluntary Codes of Conduct for Digital Platforms

After investigations exposed how organized groups were attacking journalists online, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube promised to do better. Each platform created its own rulebook, claiming they would stop coordinated harassment. While platforms obsessed over removing terrorist content, algorithms designed to catch harassment worked reasonably well in English but fumbled badly in any other language. Even worse, platforms let powerful politicians break their own harassment rules by calling their attacks "newsworthy." The exact people leading campaigns against journalists faced no consequences because their posts attracted attention. According to studies, platforms removed only 18% of reported attacks within 48 hours. By the time companies acted, the damage was done, making many journalists believe that they should stay quiet or face worse.⁽²⁹⁾ Platforms faced zero consequences for failing to protect journalists. Controversial content that harassed reporters often went viral, generating massive engagement and advertising revenue.

Emergency Relocation Programs

When a journalist's life is in danger, international protection organizations offer emergency visas to safe countries. Programs like Journalists in Distress, City of Asylum, and Scholars at Risk have moved hundreds of threatened reporters to Europe and North America, getting them out of harm's way. But follow-up studies show that two years after relocation, 67% of these journalists could not find proper work: either unemployed or stuck in jobs far below their qualifications.⁽³⁰⁾ Language barriers blocked them from practicing journalism in their new countries. Without local contacts, sources, or understanding of the audience, how could an Egyptian investigative reporter cover French politics? Financial instability caused psychological wounds. Around 40% attempted to return home within three years despite death threats still hanging over them. Why risk their lives? Because professional relevance matters more than safety.⁽³¹⁾ By saving journalists' lives but ending their careers, these protection programs accidentally accomplished what dictators wanted all along: silencing voices.

5. Further Research

Note on Further Research Directions

We've chosen not to include a "Further Reading" list or "Questions to Consider" here. Instead, we encourage our chair panel to explore the topic independently, find new sources, ask fresh questions, and share their unique insights. Later, we'll gather and publish these contributions as an extra resource, giving our delegates a wide range of perspectives and ideas for deeper research. This approach ensures that the final guide reflects diverse viewpoints and inspires independent, critical thinking among both our chairs and delegates.

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