

The issue of censorship by governments - balancing media freedom with national security

Background information

Censorship is defined as the suppression or prohibition of any parts of books, films, news, or any such media and public communication, that is considered obscene, politically unacceptable, or a threat to security. Censorship by governments occurs in various forms:

- Such as **political censorship**, where governments block access to websites, censor news articles, ban books, or restrict the content available on social media, with the intent of suppressing views contrary to the ruling power of the state.
- **Censorship during wartime** has been particularly prevalent throughout history, with explicit censorship of military and tactical information to prevent its release to opposing forces, which could pose a greater risk to both military and civilians. A prominent example of this is the censorship of letters sent by British soldiers during World War I.
- **Religious censorship** is where freedom of expression is limited on the basis of religious teachings, which may be enforced by powers such as religious police. For example in Saudi Arabia, the religious police prevent the practice of non-Islamic religions as they are banned. They enforce conservative Islamic norms of public behaviour, as defined by Saudi authorities, such as dress codes and gender segregation in public spaces.
- **Educational censorship** is the restriction of materials in an educational setting, such as book bans and limiting curriculum content or classroom discussions. For example in the United States, various topics have been censored and banned in education, including evolution, racism, sexism, sex education, and LGBTQ+ topics.
- **Soft censorship** is the indirect influence of governments on public discourse and media by way of putting pressure on media companies, either by putting financial pressure on those deemed to be spreading incorrect views or rewarding those spreading the favoured views of the ruling power.

Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) says: ‘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.’

Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) bares similarity to Article 19 of the UDHR but specifies that the right to freedom of speech may be ‘subject to certain restrictions’ that are ‘provided by law and are necessary, for respect of the rights or reputations of others, or for the protection of national security or of public order, or of public health or morals.’

Key examples:

- **DPRK:** Censorship in DPRK is evident, with the government owning and controlling all media outlets, and all news content being produced and censored by the Korean Central News Agency. The government oversees media content to promote political propaganda and maintain obedience to the government of Kim Jong Un.
- **Russia:** In 2022 Putin passed a law to impose sentences as long as 15 years for those who intentionally spread “false information” about the government or government operations.
- **Iran:** In Iran the Ershad (Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance) controls all cultural activities, and provides musicians, writers, artists and media makers with permits to publicly display their work only if they are deemed to align with the Islamic culture. Additionally the Iranian government imposes internet restrictions on social media platforms and popular websites.
- **China:** Censorship is mandated by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), mainly for political purposes. Chinese citizens’ access to various online media sources is largely limited, as website content is blocked and Internet access is monitored by the government.

Potential solutions to consider:

- Imposition of sanctions
- Development of an objective framework to identify relative risk to national security
- Enforcement of regulations on censorship standards
- Promotion of transparency amongst international media organisations
- Fact-checking initiatives

Useful links:

- <https://www.amnesty.org/en/what-we-do/freedom-of-expression/>
- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Freedom_of_speech_by_country
- <https://www.comparitech.com/blog/vpn-privacy/internet-censorship-map/>
- <https://www.mediadefence.org/ereader/publications/introductory-modules-on-digital-rights-and-freedom-of-expression-online/module-3-access-to-the-internet/national-security-as-a-ground-of-justification/>
- <https://www.article19.org/resources/foe-and-national-security-a-summary/>