



AISMUN VI
Background Guide

Committee:
Social, Humanitarian & Cultural Issues (SOCHUM)

Topic:
**Safeguarding Human Rights in the Digital Age: Addressing
Global Censorship and Freedom of Expression**



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Letter from our Chairs

Esteemed Delegates,

Welcome to the committee! We're thrilled to have you with us and can't wait to see the perspectives and solutions you bring. Whether this is your first conference or your fifteenth, our goal is simple: keep debate engaging, inclusive, and fun.

This background guide is meant to get you oriented, use it to familiarize yourself with the themes, context, and possible avenues for action. Come prepared, stay curious, and don't hesitate to ask questions about procedure at any point; we're here to help you make the most of the experience.

We're excited to watch thoughtful speeches, sharp negotiation, and creative resolution-building. Best of luck in your preparations, we can't wait to see what you accomplish.

See you soon,

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Introduction to SOCHUM

The Committee for Social, Humanitarian & Cultural Issues (SOCHUM) is the third committee of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA). SOCHUM was founded in 1945 in reaction to the establishment of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, and it is one of the six main committees of the UN General Assembly.

It addresses global issues and concerns related to social, humanitarian, and cultural affairs, and serves as a platform for member states to engage in profound deliberations on matters that impact the lives and well-being of people worldwide. The Third Committee also considers the rights to self-determination, the advancement of women, the safety of children, native issues, the treatment of refugees, and the promotion of fundamental freedoms through the abolition of racism and racial discrimination. Other topics discussed include issues pertaining to kids, families, the elderly, people with disabilities, crime prevention, criminal justice, and worldwide drug control.

Key Terms

Human Rights: The fundamental rights and freedoms inherent in all human beings simply because they are human, regardless of their race, sex, nationality, religion, or other status.

Freedom of expression: The right to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas of all kinds, through any medium, without interference. Protected under Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR).

Censorship: The suppression of speech, public communication, or other information claimed to be harmful by authorities. It can occur through laws, regulations, or overall social pressures.

Throttling: Purposely slowing the internet to limit access

Self-Censorship: The practice of withholding one's own speech or expression due to fear of repercussions or societal backlash. This can occur in various contexts, including workplaces, schools, and media.

Encryption: A method of protecting data by converting it into a code to prevent unauthorized access. Encryption can protect user privacy but may also hinder government surveillance efforts.

End-to-end encryption (E2EE): Only the sender and receiver can read the message.

Content moderation: The process by which platforms regulate user-generated content based on community guidelines or legal requirements.

Transparency Report: A public summary of takedown requests and decisions

Algorithmic bias: When the algorithm promotes a certain topic or group unfairly

Disinformation vs Misinformation: Disinformation is false information spread on purpose to mislead, and misinformation is false information shared by mistake.

Whitelisting and Blacklisting: Methods of controlling access to websites or online content, where “whitelisted” content is approved and accessible, while “blacklisted” content is restricted or blocked.

VPN (Virtual Private Network): A tool that can hide your location and protect your connection.

Firewall: A security tool that blocks unwanted internet traffic

Intermediary liability: When (and if) platforms are responsible for users’ posts.

Topic Introduction

As the world becomes increasingly digital, the balance between freedom of expression and government surveillance has emerged as a critical global issue, with powerful nations taking drastically different stances on how to navigate these rights. Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights enshrines the right to freedom of expression as fundamental; yet, in practice, this freedom varies widely across regions. Nations differ in their approach to regulating the internet: some perceive an unregulated online space as a threat to national security, while others uphold the belief that uncontested freedom of expression is indispensable to democracy, arguing that online censorship undermines this core right.

Through the dissemination of technology and its access around the world have greatly increased the presence of individuals from all races, languages, and backgrounds on digital platforms. However, as technology continues to evolve, so do the challenges involved in its regulation. Increased misinformation, cyberattacks, online hate speech, and surveillance make it increasingly difficult to balance both safety and free speech.

As nations grapple with these competing priorities, the international community faces the urgent task of establishing a shared framework that both protects citizens from digital harms and preserves their fundamental rights. Ultimately, the question remains: how can the global community ensure that the digital age becomes a force for empowerment rather than suppression, fostering a world where security and freedom coexist harmoniously?

Key Events and Timeline

1946 – UN General Assembly Resolution 59(I): “Freedom of Information”

The UN declares freedom of information a fundamental human right and a cornerstone of all other freedoms.

1948 – Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)

Article 19 enshrines the right to “seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers,” laying the foundation for global free speech protection.

1966 – International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)

Article 19 of this legally binding treaty codifies the right to free expression, while allowing only limited restrictions for national security, public order, or respect for others’ rights.

1993 – Creation of the UN Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression

Establishes a permanent independent expert to investigate violations and report annually to the Human Rights Council and General Assembly.

2011 – UN Human Rights Council Resolution 20/8

The first major UN statement recognizing that the same rights people have offline must also be protected online, marking a milestone for digital rights.

2012 – Joint Declaration on Freedom of Expression and the Internet

Issued by UN, OSCE, OAS, and ACHPR rapporteurs, it warns that online expression must not be restricted more severely than offline expression.

2013 – UN General Assembly Resolution 68/167: “The Right to Privacy in the Digital Age”

Adopted in response to revelations of mass surveillance, affirming privacy as essential to freedom of expression.

2016 – UN Human Rights Council Resolution 32/13

Condemns intentional disruptions of internet access and reaffirms that human rights apply fully online.

2018 – UN Human Rights Council Resolution 38/7

Condemns attacks on journalists and reaffirms the duty of states to protect media freedom, including in digital spaces.

2019 – UN General Assembly Resolution 74/146: “The Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity”

Calls for accountability mechanisms to address online harassment and violence against journalists.

2020 – UN Human Rights Council Resolution 44/12: “Freedom of Opinion and Expression”

Urges governments to avoid arbitrary blocking of online content and promote transparency in content moderation.

2021 – OHCHR Report on Disinformation and Freedom of Expression

Highlights the rise of “information manipulation” and emphasizes that responses to disinformation must not infringe upon legitimate free speech.

2023 – Global Digital Compact (Draft under UN “Our Common Agenda”)

Aims to establish global norms for digital governance, emphasizing privacy, human rights online, and the prevention of digital authoritarianism.

2024 – UN Human Rights Council Resolution 55/2: “The Promotion, Protection, and Enjoyment of Human Rights on the Internet”

Reaffirms prior resolutions and expands focus to algorithmic transparency, AI bias, and digital access as a human right.

Key UN Suggestions and Actions

The United Nations has already taken several steps to address the humanitarian and ethical challenges surrounding the use of autonomous weapons and cyber warfare. While these issues are often discussed in security-focused forums, SOCHUM has increasingly emphasized their social, cultural, and human rights implications, ensuring that technological progress does not come at the expense of human dignity and safety. One of the UN's main initiatives is the Group of Governmental Experts (GGE) on Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems (LAWS), established under the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW). This group works to ensure that any use of autonomous weapons follows international humanitarian law and ethical standards. Their discussions focus on maintaining meaningful human control and ensuring that accountability for life-or-death decisions always remains with humans, not machines. The UN has also addressed the humanitarian impact of cyber warfare through General Assembly resolutions and the Open-Ended Working Group (OEWG) on Information and Communication Technologies. These efforts highlight the importance of preventing cyberattacks that target civilians or essential infrastructure, such as hospitals, schools, or water systems, as such attacks can have devastating social and humanitarian consequences. Additionally, UN bodies such as the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) have raised concerns about the ethical use of artificial intelligence and autonomous systems. They have urged member states to consider how these technologies affect human rights, including the right to life, privacy, and security. While there is not yet a global treaty specifically regulating autonomous weapons or cyber warfare, the UN continues to support dialogue, cooperation, and capacity-building among states. These actions aim to develop shared norms that prioritize human

rights, protect civilians, and ensure that technological advancements serve the common good rather than create new forms of inequality or harm.

Possible Solutions

Increase Transparency and Accountability : Governments and technology companies should be open about how and why they restrict content. Publishing clear transparency reports on takedowns, censorship requests, and data access can build public trust and limit misuse of power.

Create Strong International Standards for Digital Rights

Nations can work together through frameworks like the Global Digital Compact to set global rules protecting online freedom of expression. These standards would ensure that internet rights are treated the same as human rights everywhere.

Protect Privacy and Encryption

Encouraging the use of encryption helps keep people's data and communication safe. Governments should respect the right to digital privacy while balancing national security needs.

Address Algorithmic Bias

Social media platforms and governments should check for unfair bias in algorithms that promote or block certain types of content. Setting clear rules and reviewing AI systems regularly can help make online spaces fairer.

Promote Media and Digital Literacy

Educating the public—especially young people—about misinformation, online safety, and responsible use of media can reduce the effects of censorship and disinformation.

Support Journalists and Civil Society

Independent media outlets, whistleblowers, and digital activists are often the first to face censorship. International funding, safety programs, and legal protections can help defend those who speak out.

Create Oversight Mechanisms

The UN could consider a global review body to monitor freedom of expression online, collect reports of internet shutdowns, and encourage fair digital governance.

Encourage Cooperation Between Sectors

Governments, tech companies, NGOs, and ordinary citizens all have a role in protecting online rights. Working together can make regulation more effective and balanced.

Guiding Questions

What are the various forms of censorship employed by governments and organizations, and how do they impact human rights and freedom of expression globally?

How can censorship arise unintentionally, like through algorithmic bias or safety protocols?

How does the way nations present themselves when it comes to censorship and freedom of expression differ from the reality of the country?

What methods do the general public use to circumvent censorship, especially online censorship and how can it be addressed?

How does digital censorship differ from traditional forms of censorship, and what challenges does it present for human rights?

What role do international treaties and conventions play in protecting freedom of expression and combating censorship?

How can countries promote media literacy as a means to counteract censorship and misinformation?

How can social media platforms balance content moderation with the need to protect freedom of expression?

How does censorship affect marginalized communities and their ability to express themselves?

What are the implications of self-censorship in societies with restrictive speech laws, particularly among artists and intellectuals?

How do national security laws intersect with freedom of expression, and what are the consequences for dissenting voices?

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