

Forum: Middle School Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice (CCPCJ)

Issue # 1: Addressing the criminalization of news outlets and their impact on democracy.

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Guiding Questions as you Read

What are the different ways in which journalism helps to create or uphold a democracy?

How do news outlets in your country influence its government and how it is managed?

In what way does the criminalization of news outlets relate to safety of a country and its citizens?

What aspects contribute to a nation having successful journalism or a lack thereof?

Why is silencing of journalism considered a Human Rights concern?

Introduction

Key Terms

Criminalization
Censorship
Journalism
Defamation
Freedom of press

The issue of media censorship and the criminalization of news outlets is a growing global concern that greatly impacts democracy. News outlets play a key role in informing the public about issues of public interest such as healthcare, education, politics, etc. An informed society is important for democracy since it empowers citizens to make informed decisions and hold world leaders accountable for their actions. Although news outlets are crucial for democracy, they are increasingly facing criminalization and censorship by those in power through the use of vague national security laws that restrict press freedom. Many journalists have been discouraged from reporting on issues that concern the public due to fear of facing legal repercussions, these include suing journalists for defamation and breaching privacy and data protection laws (UNESCO). These lawsuits scare journalists away from reporting on these crucial issues due to the constant threat of imprisonment,

expensive trials, and fines.

Media censorship has been an issue for decades; however, with the growing use of social media, the criminalization of journalists has increased significantly. In the past five years, over 40 countries have reportedly enacted/amended laws to increase cybercrime laws that are often misused and exploited to punish journalists who cover topics such as organized crime, corruption, and state violence (Columbia Journalism School). This issue is highly controversial, seeing as it relates to both national security and press freedom. Governments often justify the censorship of news outlets by claiming that it is for the protection of the citizens, however, it is argued that governments abuse their power to suppress transparency and silence critical voices.

Comprehension Question(s):

How have news outlets impacted governments, conflicts, and tensions?

What makes journalism be a frequently persecuted profession?

Definition of Key Terms

Censorship: The practice of someone, usually the government in power, completely erasing and or suppressing particular media from being accessible to the general public due to it being perceived as harmful, sensitive, or negative (Cambridge Dictionary).

Criminalization: To make something illegal and punishable by the law, usually due to the belief that such a thing can be harmful to society (Harvard Law School, 2018).

Defamation: Involves the distortion of an individual or group's image through the spreading of misinformation by means of the media (Cambridge Dictionary).

Democracy: A governmental system governed by individuals who, after a candidacy, were elected either directly or through representatives voted on by the public of a nation (Oxford Dictionary).

Freedom of Speech: A fundamental right to self-expression without legal or authoritative restrictions (UN).

Freedom of Press: The right of the media, such as newspapers, magazines, television, radio, and other means, to propagate information and ideas without external restrictions (UNESCO).

Propaganda: Broadcasted images, opinions, or ideas that were curated to propagate an idea or influence public opinion.

Plurality: To hold a large number of different religious, ethnic, academic, and social groups within a single society to provide, express, and share different perspectives.

Inform: The act of transmitting concepts and or knowledge

Hate Speech: An open speech or form of expression sharing ideas of violence or contempt towards an individual or group, typically based on beliefs, ethnicity, race, gender, and sexuality (UN).

Totalitarianism: A political structure in which authoritative figures subject citizens to their authority and typically suppress those opposing them (Cambridge Dictionary)

Journalism: To produce, collect, edit, and publish news stories to public media outlets, with those who pursue this as a career being called journalists.(Cambridge Dictionary)

Key Terms

Freedom
Ratification
Weaponized
Jurisdictional
Networks
Impunity

Current Situation

"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," states Article 19 of the Universal

Declaration of Human Rights (UN). Since the ratification of Article 19, free expression through media has become synonymous with democracy and humanity.

Government Acts

Nevertheless, the past years have presented significant rises in attacks and threats amongst other tactics intended to silence news sources. Rises in authoritarian regimes in all corners of the world have weaponized their jurisdictional power and allowed for an increase in lawsuits, financial pressure, and social media harassment, not to mention imprisonment. War-torn zones are known to have greatly contributed to such trends by making for the most deadly zones for journalists to traverse due to multi sided tensions and constant persecution, turning 2024 into the deadliest year for journalism in recent history (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2025).

Journalist Actions

As a result, news outlets have shifted their defenses towards establishing support networks, fortifying legal defense, and enhancing physical and digital security. Despite efforts to improve safety, harmful acts towards news outlets are only predicted to rise, mostly due to impunity from governing bodies. In turn, several concerns regarding Human Rights have been raised concerning the upholding of freedom of expression with the global trend of declining democracy and general safety. For as Berkeley Political Review journalist Soliana Samson said, "The war on journalists is a war on truth, and the stakes could not be higher. Protecting those who bring us the news is not just a matter of safeguarding individuals; it is about defending the principles of transparency, accountability, and democracy" (Berkeley Political Review, 2024).

Major Parties Involved and Their Views

United States

The First Amendment of the US Constitution protects press freedom, which means that news outlets should be able to report freely on issues of public interest. Even though it is included in the constitution, news outlets still face criminalization and censorship in the USA. In 2023, journalists who were covering pro-Palestinian protests were arrested and charged with jaywalking and criminal trespassing. This shows that even though freedom of speech and press is supposed to be a constitutional right, in practice, the United States still criminalizes and censors news outlets. The United States is 55th in the RSF index.

Russia

Historically, Russia has systematically suppressed press freedom, and with the

Russia-Ukraine war, this suppression has intensified. The Novaya Gazeta was an independent Russian newspaper; the Russian government censored this newspaper until September 2022, when it revoked the newspaper's media license. Russia's freedom of the press has been on a steady decline ever since President Vladimir Putin came into power. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), 43 media workers have been killed in Russia since Putin came to power. Russia is very strict in restricting the freedom of the press. Russia is 164th in the RSF index.

Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia has very strict restrictions on freedom of speech, and this is heavily criminalized in this country. The restrictions apply to both printed newspapers and social media platforms. Article 6 of the draft law prohibits publishing and/or exercising media activity without licensing, which restricts the freedom of expression of the people in Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia is 166 in the RSF index.

Norway

Norway has a well-structured and strongly enforced legal basis regarding the press, allowing a lot of freedom of the press thanks to its press support initiatives. As a result, it hosts a very free media culture, which has allowed it to be the country with the best World Press Freedom Index out of all the countries considered. An important collaboration that Norway has is the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). This organization focuses on strengthening protections for journalists, addressing digital surveillance risks, and supporting sustainable independent media that reflect diverse voices. Norway's active participation in the OSCE reflects the country's commitment to protecting media freedom and enhancing freedom of speech (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe). Norway is number 1 in the RSF

index.

International Federation of Journalists (IFJ)

The IFJ was created in 1926 in Paris, France, and has developed into an organization for journalists in the United Nations and the international trade union movement. The federation is a politically neutral organization that acts primarily by supporting unions, advocating for press freedom, speaking about gender equality, and above all, defending equality, democracy, as well as pluralism. Recently, the federation has focused on directing its change-enforcing powers to promote journalism in environments to construct democracy through campaigns such as advocating for a UN convention to protect journalists. (IFJ)

United Nations Involvement

The United Nations has played a key role in addressing the criminalization of news outlets through resolutions and spreading information. The first step that the UN took toward freedom of speech was when the Declaration of Human Rights was first released. Article 19 establishes and recognizes the right to freedom of expression as a human right which was a huge step in protecting news outlets. This article states that *"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."* (United Nations). UNESCO has also been a huge participant when it comes to addressing the criminalization of media outlets. It leads the UN plan of action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity which aims to create a safe environment for journalists. UNESCO has also organized World Press Freedom Day which is celebrated

May 3rd and highlights the importance of news outlets and media as pillars of democracy (Media Freedom Coalition).

Overall, the UN has been crucial in addressing and protecting the criminalization of news outlets by recognizing, celebrating, and advocating for press freedom. The UN has taken this stance when it comes to protecting freedom of the press and speech since it acknowledges that these are key contributors to a democratic and just society. Even though the UN has taken important steps to ensure the protection of news outlets, states continue to suppress and censor freedom of the press, such as the continuous use of Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs). This shows how, despite the UN's efforts, there is still much to be done to completely ensure and protect freedom of the press across the globe.

Timeline of Events, Relevant Resolutions, Treaties, and Events

| Date | Description of Event |
|------|---|
| 1605 | Publication of the first-ever printed newspaper. The "Relation aller Fürnemmen und gedenckwürdigen Historien" was a newspaper that was published weekly in Germany (History of Information). |
| 1948 | The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) was a milestone for human rights across the globe. It was proclaimed by the General Assembly of the United Nations on December 10th, 1948. This declaration is widely recognized around the world, and it protects fundamental human rights (such as freedom of speech). The UDHR has paved the way for the adoption of several human rights treaties across |

the globe (UN).

- 1990 The digital revolution was a major shift in the media industry and it greatly impacted news outlets and their accessibility. During the digital revolution, many newspapers shifted to online platforms and shifted their focus to online platforms.
- 2012 The UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists aims to create a safe and free environment for media workers. This plan addresses how many countries were censoring the media and recognizes threats to press freedom as threats to democracy. This plan of action was coordinated by UNESCO and included six areas: raising awareness; standard setting and policy making, monitoring and reporting, capacity-building, and research (UN).
- 2016 There was a surge in restrictive laws during this time; over 50 countries created or amended laws that used vague language and disproportionate punishments to threaten and censor press freedom (Columbia Journalism School).
- 2020 According to the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), there was a global surge in murders and imprisonment of media staff during 2020, with 66 murders globally as opposed to 2019, which reported 49. During this year, the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) also reported that at least 274 journalists were imprisoned during 2020. They also found that many governments were using the pandemic as a pretext to delay trials for journalists and disregard public health concerns in prisons.

Evaluation of Previous Attempts to Resolve the Issue

UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity, 2012

The UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity was first proposed by UNESCO's Intergovernmental Council of the International Programme for the Development of Communication (IPDC) in 2010 to be approved in 2012. The initiative began with the purpose of developing a more standardized approach to journalism globally while creating strategies to protect freedom of speech and ensure media workers find themselves in safe environments, both in conflict and non-conflict regions (OHCHR). The layout of said plan has allowed several global journalistic networks to be formed, has raised awareness of the issue at hand, constructed policies, and provided data on their efficiency.

Declaration of Windhoek, 1991

Following the UNESCO seminar, 'Promoting an independent and pluralistic African press' in Windhoek, Namibia in 1991, the declaration was made. May 3rd of that year, the Windhoek Declaration was adopted with a clear objective of promoting freedom of the press and expression for all, and has since been discussed in several resolutions (UNESCO). The declaration helps countries establish clear guidelines to prevent media from being monopolized by a state, being controlled by a ruling force, inhibiting pluralism, and for media to have a legal as well as practical stand to aid freedom when needed. Such a declaration served as a benchmark for all other media protection initiatives that followed and to this day plays a significant role in Africa's news cast systems of work.

International Declaration on the Protection of Journalists, 2016

The International Press Institute (IPI), alongside the aid of other news casting entities,

analyzed extensively international standards for the protection of journalists by which resulted in the International Declaration on the Protection of Journalists. The document was published in 2016 to set principles for journalists in conflict zones, highlight the role governments play in the safety of journalists, and give measures for combating impunity (Al Jazeera). Since the International Declaration on the Protection of Journalists was published, it has been used as a reference document for organisations like UNESCO, news outlets, and even by journalists individually. The said declaration helps all of those in the media business consider when working to make sure the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and safety are respected (IPI).

Global Pledge on Media Freedom, 2019

In London, UK, the Global Pledge on Media Freedom was signed and published in 2019 as an effort hosted by the UK as well as Canada. The pledge is centered primarily on holding countries accountable to protect journalists in the face of digital, physical, judicial, and societal threats that can come to be made both within one of its 51 member countries and outside of them (MFC). To ensure the pledge was followed through by all member countries, the Media Freedom Coalition. The Media Freedom Coalition is the entity that, through diplomatic efforts, legal reforms, and international conferences, ensures that the principles integrated into the Global Pledge on Media Freedom are followed through and respected. The initiative as a whole has promoted advocacy, action through embassies, legal reforms, and established a Global Media Defense Fund to provide financial grants to media initiatives..

Possible Solutions

Setting Impartial Safety and Media Regulators

The criminalization of journalism is mostly due to governments' fear of being opposed in the media and the potential threat it poses to their power. To address such fear, it would be best to establish a relationship and or system in which both parties do not oppose each other. Possible approaches could include the protection and monitoring of news outlets by a neutral third party, which would be set to enforce journalistic policies while diminishing the possibility of tensions between governments and media sources.

Strengthening Public Conviction

It must be considered that the countries with the highest rates of criminalization of news outlets are usually seen as less democratic and oppressive by their citizens (Pew Research Center). To ensure a country follows democratic values, it would be most effective to provide citizens with monetary or humanitarian support to do so. Allowing citizens to be assured of their ability to communicate and advocate for themselves and others helps strengthen democracy and freedom of speech. Promoting changes in the public to see news outlets as things that should be criminalized helps to prevent tensions between the outlets with the government, and providing more external aid are all initiatives set to resolve the conflict at hand.

Sustainable Development Goal (SDG)

This issue connects strongly to SDG 16, Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions. This SDG aims to promote peaceful and inclusive societies around the world. Its focus is on reducing violence and combating corruption, which leads to inclusive participation in public life (UN). This SDG relates strongly to the issue of the criminalization of news outlets

since, by criminalizing these, citizens have limited access to information about various topics (likely controversial), which violates fundamental freedoms such as freedom of expression and the press. The criminalization of news outlets also promotes fear, which weakens the public's trust in institutions.

Useful Links for Research (Appendix)

In the appendix, chairs provide helpful resources for delegates to use during their research process.

<https://rsf.org/en/index?year>

Source A: The World Press Freedom Index is a well-established Reporters Without Borders (RWB) yearly assessment of countries' freedom indicators, journalistic mortality rates, and brief overviews of each country's present press status.

<https://www.ifj.org/>

Source B: The International Federation of Journalists is a global network of journalists that constantly reports on injustices against journalists, as well as reporting on what is done to improve journalistic safety and freedom.

<https://www.unesco.org/en/safety-journalists/basic-text>

Source C: An extensive list of documents curated by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) regarding journalistic protection from distinct perspectives, people, as well as places around the globe.

<https://unterm.un.org/unterm2/en/>

Source D: A multilingual UN database for in-depth definitions of international relations terminology.

<https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>

Source E: The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is a document resulting from a global effort to ensure all individuals are treated as humans and is crucial to the basis of all UN acts, projects, and resolutions.

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