As a staple of the technological age, the Internet has tremendous influence on society. On the one hand, being able to access news and educational sites such as National Geographic or Wired.com is a fantastic way to stay up to date about the world and learn about the best ways to contribute to it. But due to its largely unregulated nature, the Internet provides a perfect platform for users to abuse its impact as well. In recent times, more and more controversial forms of information such as hate speech, pornography and political slander have become easily accessible to the billions of people that surf the Internet every day.

In order to combat sites like these, governments have employed the use of censorship. Censorship offers benefits such as increased cyber security, a more morally clean database, and the squandering of hate groups and their propaganda. The problem, however, is where to draw the line. When does censorship become too much?

Freedom House (freedomhouse.org), a non-profit activist group that promotes free use of the Internet, concluded that in 2016, Internet Freedom around the world declined for the sixth consecutive year. Because of its large role in society, social media platforms have become targets for governments trying to rid their countries of outside influence. News sites are being censored and communication apps such as Whatsapp and Telegram are being shut down entirely in certain areas. Internet users around the world who disobey their government are being jailed, publically humiliated, and even killed.

In the Universal Declaration of Human Rights drafted by the UN in 1948, the preamble describes an "...advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief...[1]". Free speech is considered by the UNHRC to be a basic human right. As members of the Human Rights Council, it is our job to determine the best way to approach Internet Freedom and where to draw the line so as to protect fundamental rights of human beings around the world.

Food for thought:

- Should free speech really be considered a basic human right? Why or why not?
How does your country approach the use of the Internet? Why does your country choose that stance? Explore religious, social, political and moral implications.

Is censorship of the Internet an absolute or relative violation of free speech? Specifically, do we always ban censorship or do we allow the 'violation' if other values are in play? How would such a ban be enforced? Are there situations where censorship of the Internet would not be considered a violation of human rights (example- pornography, security)? If so, how do we square the concepts of free speech and human rights?

What past actions has the UN taken to regulate governmental censorship of free speech, and are the applications of these precedents similar or different with regards to Internet censorship?

A few good resources to get you started:

http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/

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[1] http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/

https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/freedom-net-2016

https://www.wired.com/story/why-big-tech-is-clashing-with-internet-freedom- advocates/

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Internet_censorship

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/the-university-of-central-florida- forum/censorship-is-not-all-bad_b_9417646.html

As always, please reach out to me at jasenders@gmail.com if you have any questions throughout your research and preparation for the conference!

Sincerely,

Joey Senders

Chair, UNHRC

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