



# Southern China International MUN

*HRC: On measures to suppress propaganda while encouraging transparency of the free press*

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## Introduction

In the epoch of digitalization and online connectivity in all aspects of life, propaganda and free press remains one of the biggest challenged in the world. Most country remain staunch supporters of freedom of press, while few select others may be against it. However, no matter the degree to which freedom of press is allowed, such freedom has always resulted in partisan bias, or misinformation. Furthermore, in special cases of authoritarian regimes, no freedom of press or media exists at all in its entirety, so populations of such regimes could be easily manipulated. Propaganda on the other hand is often employed by partisan agents to further their agendas However, limits on propaganda is likely to inadvertently limit freedom of press as partisan bias comes into play. What left-wing politicians may see as propaganda, may not be thought of as such by right-wing politicians. Therefore, it is critical for a solution applicable to all the peoples on the political spectrum and all countries to be implemented. However, though most nations would be in support of this, some select few may be averse to this idea.

## Propaganda

### **1.1 (Propaganda)**

The *Encyclopedia Britannica* defines propaganda as “dissemination of information-facts, arguments, rumors, half-truths, or lies-to influence public opinion. Deliberateness and a relatively heavy emphasis on manipulation distinguish propaganda from casual conversation or the free and easy exchange of ideas.”<sup>i</sup> Propaganda was used extensively in Weimar Germany before the Third Reich, which was one of the factors which led to World War Two. The propaganda in Nazi Germany largely started in 1933 after Hitler’s rise to power and establishment of the Reich Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda.<sup>ii</sup> Nazi Propaganda Minister Josef Goebbels used posters, radios, and many forms of art to advertise Hitler. To quote Hitler he said propaganda’s “task is not to make an objective study of the truth, in so far as it favors the enemy, and then set it before the masses with academic fairness; its task is to serve our own right, always and unflinchingly.”<sup>iii</sup> Furthermore, films portraying Jewish characters was often misleadingly antisemite, which helped spread the cause of Hitler. Other films like *Triumph of The Will* directly supported Hitler and portrayed Hitler in a misleading manner.<sup>iv</sup> More examples of propaganda in the past includes the propaganda of the Soviet Union which were extensively used ever since the inception of the USSR.

### **1.2 (Propaganda)**

Until the end of the nineteenth century, propaganda was spread either in print or by word of mouth.<sup>v</sup> However, in the early twentieth century, this issue was far exacerbated by personal radio and telecommunications technology.<sup>vi</sup> As time progressed, social media and other media platforms largely obsoleted radios and television, and largely worsened the propaganda problem as it propagated fake information not fact. Furthermore, as social media developed, governments gradually moved away from censorship, employing in place more propaganda.<sup>vii</sup> However, unlike direct censorship, propaganda is much harder to detect.<sup>viii</sup> Furthermore, it is important to note that propaganda is not only distributed by government sources, but also by non-governmental agents such as terrorist organizations.

The Arab Spring movement was spread largely through messages on social media. A study found that social media was central and played key role in the start of Arab spring which overthrew many dictators, such as Gadhafi of Libya. Due to Arab springs, people endured the worst cholera outbreak in the world along with famine looms.<sup>ix</sup> As a result, tens of thousands of civilians were killed. An estimated 12.4 million people are currently internally displaced across the region. When the Arab Spring protests broke out a decade ago, the MENA region was home to more than 3.5 million internally displaced people.<sup>x</sup> Another example is the Rohingya Muslim crisis in Myanmar where the Rohingya Muslims are driven out of their righteous homes and massacred. A large part of this was due to social media spreading information inciting the killing and massacring of these peoples.

Apart from these humanitarian crises, propaganda and social media also played a central role in climate change denial.<sup>xi</sup> Social media platforms like Facebook remain one of the biggest enablers of fake news. Without the ability to leverage massive social networks to spread fake news, it would be very difficult to gain the traction required for ideas to go viral. To a scale of 1500 people, fake news spreads 6 times faster than the truth. On Facebook, climate change deniers circulate information among themselves and push that information to others. The Internet enables supportive environments where skeptical perspectives are communally validated and reinforced. An article linking climate change to Earth's solar orbit went viral last year, racking up 4.2million views on social media and widely shared on Facebook. It was the most engaged with climate story in 2019, according to Brandwatch.<sup>xii</sup>

Despite recognition of the problem, little action has been actively undertaken in the past to effectively resolve this issue. Due to protests of this issue in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, countries in the league of nations joint together in 1936 to ratify a treaty which holds states accountable to “restrict expression which constituted a threat to international peace and security”.<sup>xiii</sup> After World War Two, the United Nations Human Rights Council drafted and Ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights which states that any propaganda for war shall be prohibited by law and any advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence shall be prohibited by law.<sup>xiv</sup> This leads to another issue, such treaties allowing for or binding governments to restrict propaganda gives a useful pretext for governments to restrict or ban information not actually propaganda or necessary for restriction, thereby relegating press freedom to a position of secondary importance.<sup>xv</sup>

## Freedom of Press

### 1.1 (Freedom of Press)

Freedom of press on the other hand is often used interchangeably with freedom of media. In the modern sense, freedom of media is a much more accurate term because most sources of information are not limited to the press anymore. The *Encyclopedia Britannica* defines freedom of media as “freedom of various kinds of media and sources of communication to operate in political and civil society. The term media freedom extends the traditional idea of the freedom of the press to electronic media, such as radio, television, and the Internet.”<sup>xvi</sup>

Press freedom was first defended by John Milton in his pamphlet *Areopagitica* published in 1644, in retaliation to a law passed by the British parliament requiring government approval before the publication of any book.<sup>xvii</sup> Furthermore, among the many rights enumerated in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* signed and ratified in 1948, it says “everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom...impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.”<sup>xviii</sup> However, despite the proclamation, totalitarian regimes still limit press freedom. For example, the DPRK's (Democratic People's Republic of North Korea) press and mass media services are all controlled by the Korean Worker's Party, leading to the prohibition of any dissent in the media.<sup>xix</sup>

Additionally, one argument is that propaganda is only a belief so therefore should not be restricted at all, as such restrictions would be a violation of free speech rights. Furthermore, opponents of restrictions cite publications which support the claim that people are not easily swayed by propaganda anyways, so the impacts are small.<sup>xx</sup> Instead, they argue that the impacts on press freedom would surpass that of propaganda.

Another argument raised by John Mill in his famous essay *On Liberty* is to do nothing. As he argues that ideas irregardless of whether true or false should not be censored. Free speech should be absolute, even if something is false or harmful it should still be allowed to be published as the public should be able to tell the true from the untrue. To quote John Mill, “the peculiar evil of silencing the expression of an opinion is,

that it is robbing humans; posterity as well as the existing generation; those who dissent from the opinion, still more than those who hold it. If the opinion is right, they are deprived of the opportunity of exchanging error for truth: if wrong, they lose, what is almost as great a benefit, the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth, produced by its collision with error.” And he further notes that even when an idea is false the public having experience should be able to discern and therefore make no impact on society. However, the issue with this argument is that his assumption of a totally rational public is nonsensical when considering how emotionally swayed the public is.

## **1.2 Freedom of Media**

Freedom of media had largely improved in many countries owing to modern technology. Instead of news or media being limited to large companies printing newspaper or broadcasting news, even the everyday person is now able to post things online which makes freedom of media easier to achieve. However, many authoritarian regimes still has great limitation on the amount of freedom which the press has.

### **Emphasis of Discourse**

Although most nations are described as left or right on the political spectrum, nearly all nations have different parties with different standings on the political spectrum. Thus, most nations’ policies would be of bipartisan support or constituent of opinions from both sides. However, nearly all nations despite political standing have pledged to support press freedom. Thus, this section would mostly focus on real world examples of policy enforcement, and political standing more based on authoritarianism and totalitarianism.

## **2.1 Authoritarian Approach**

Authoritarian governments in general tend to voice hypocritical support for press freedom. Most such governments despite its support have laws for the arrest or prevention of the publication of materials they believe to be an incitement for the subversion of state power. This means that despite the law granting press freedom press freedom is limited because the government gets to decide what should or should not be published, using subversion of state power as a pretext for its limitations. On the other hand, such state activities tend to be relatively unknown and undiscussed in the public, so press freedom holds little public support. When protests do happen, they are quickly labeled subversions of state power, and therefore quickly ended by use of force. Furthermore, populations inside such nations often have no idea what is not being published, so they no knowledge that such limitations exist. Most of the time, even when the public realizes this, supporters of press freedom, in holding their opinions are quickly labeled treasonous. As the so-called patriots of the nations would quickly strike whatever is being published illegally fake news. For example, the DPRK (Democratic People’s Republic of North Korea) banned all mentions of executions occurring on its soils.<sup>xxi</sup> This is a clear violation of what is called the protection of press freedom in its constitution. Thus, such countries may choose to oppose any measures which attempt to expand press freedom.

Such governments to some degree tend to deny the existence of propaganda in their respective nations, so would tend to present the argument that propaganda does not affect their nation. On the other hand, it is also possible for nations to admit to the usage of recruitment or public advertisements for the purpose of achieving what they title public good. This means that either way, whether they deny the existence of propaganda or argue that propaganda is for good, such nations would largely be opposed to any international action which may limit propaganda usage in their respective nations.

## **2.2 Right Wing Approach**

Right wing parties and nations would be relatively closer to authoritarian regimes, however, in governance they still much less control over the press comparatively. These nations would be more willing to support free press and liberal ideas whilst still retaining some parts of state control over media. Such nations would promote freedom, however, attack fake news and misinformation on the internet, irregardless of whether the criteria for real news or fake news is decided arbitrarily by the right parties or decided by

everyone.

As to propaganda, right wing states in general would be opposed to propaganda in general. However, it would not be opposed to spreading propaganda themselves like the authoritarian governments. But right states would usually be willing to make concessions to regulations as long as international legal status for propaganda does not change largely. Moderate limitations such as banning neo-Nazi propaganda or antisemite propaganda would usually be allowed as right-wing states still require bipartisan support and would remain only right-leaning on the political spectrum, as opposed to the extreme right of authoritarian regimes. For example, presently the German law bans holocaust denial and disseminating Nazi propaganda.<sup>xxii</sup>

## 2.3 Left Wing Approach

Left wing states, who are more liberal would be leaning towards less government regulations overall on propaganda. Instead of the government or any entity actively controlling propaganda, such states may wish for more self-regulation, or raising public awareness. The efficacy of such methods is clearly doubtful, though not saying that it would never work.

Left wing states as a general rule of thumb should not interfere in other nation's business. However, most left-wing states would actively voice their support for anti-propaganda. Therefore, instead of directly coming up with regulations aimed at regulating propaganda, the leftist states should focus on persuading other states to follow in their "liberal" steps and impose regulations voluntarily in their respective nations. For example, Switzerland actively promotes democracy and is entrenched as a functionally democratic nation.<sup>xxiii</sup>

## 2.4 Stance of intergovernmental organizations

There is relatively little NGO involvement for propaganda regulation. However, for press freedom many human rights organizations have efforts focused in such areas. NGOs which directly protect reporters are NGOs such as the **Committee to Protect Journalists**, and **Freedom of The Press Foundation**. These NGOs all have branches or groups focused on protecting the rights of journalists.

## Possible Solutions

### 3.1 All Countries

#### A wealth of misinformation

Countries affected by social-media misinformation campaigns, 2020



The Economist

<sup>xxiv</sup>The most often cited solution for propaganda is usually automated or non-automated review and censure of materials which are seen as propaganda. However effective this may seem, the issue lies in the fact that what is considered propaganda is not objectively defined, but subjectively decided based on an arbitrary law or regulation imposed by the government which may harm press freedom. Therefore, this solution would most likely be imposed by authoritarian regimes who hope to limit the powers of the press, and censor information which they might see as disadvantageous to them. Most other countries who remain liberal would be generally against the idea of censoring the internet. However, this measure has been very effective in decreasing misinformation and fake news. For example, the

enactment of a automated process for removing fake news on Facebook led to a 75% decrease, and facebook was almost able to completely remove all terrorist related materials on its website with automated processes.<sup>xxv</sup> However, with all things there are flaws, for example the Christchurch shooting broadcast was not reported and shut down until almost 29 minutes after the broadcast started.

## **3.2 Developed Countries**

Another solution is the education of the public. Instead of suppressing propaganda directly, it would also make sense to educate the public about the identification of propaganda. Just as John Mill support inaction over action towards misinformation and free speech. There is evidence to some degree in support of this. Andrew 2019 found that more than 90% of people have shared no links from fake news domain at all.<sup>xxvi</sup> Which means that propaganda may not have as serious an effect as we would have previously thought. Thus, instead of focusing all the efforts on mitigating fake news, some believe what is more valuable is the adaptation to propaganda, or simply making sure that the general public doesn't believe in propaganda at all. However, there are just as many issues with this strategy. For one, most developing nations won't have the budget to do so since it would be extremely costly to inform everyone about propaganda. Many people in these nations won't even have enough food to eat, or are in extreme poverty, so most likely wouldn't put much thought into what they learn through advertisement campaigns about propaganda anyways. Furthermore, teaching about propaganda identification may also lead to biased viewpoints, when whoever teaches or organizes such a course has a bias. An example of this would be telling everyone that what the republicans say is propaganda so therefore should not be trusted.

## **3.3 Developing Countries**

To decrease propaganda without decreasing press freedom, the limits which regulations and restrictions place on press freedom has to be carefully evaluated. In this case, most nations would most likely choose to form a separate UN committee specifically for tackling this issue, as any one party or few parties being in control of an operation to decrease propaganda may lead to disastrous results with press freedom. Thus, for most democracies, what they would seek is a collectivized action globally organized by some organization which includes all affected parties, this would minimize the risks associated with attempting to solve these issues by a single party. Countries in the European union are the most likely participants in this, as they are already quite reliant on each other and work quite well together as a group. Their collective action means that in this topic they are very likely to form some sort of new committee together to combat this issue. This is a developing nation stance because rather than undertaking some huge educative initiative or costly venture, they are more likely to support solutions with multilateral collaboration which wouldn't harm their own interests.

### **Keep in Mind the Following**

It is especially important to keep in mind the interesting link and correlation between propaganda suppression and press freedom limitations. However, what is more important is the duality of propaganda and press freedom. Propaganda may be good depending on the definition of propaganda whilst press freedom may lead to hate speech and extremism in some cases. An argument in favor may be social movements such as Black Lives Matter or MeToo, both of which used facts, arguments, and information to sway the general opinion. Although propaganda is mostly used to refer to bad campaigns, this may not be the case in its entirety. And if propaganda is good, then is there really a need to suppress some aspects of propaganda?

### **Evaluation**

In conclusion, the problems of propaganda and freedom of press is one of great severity, of which we have to address now. The propagating nature of propaganda means that the solutions need to be and should be implemented as soon as possible as one day saved is one less lie spread on the internet. Furthermore, approaches which different countries should take in addressing these issues should vary to great degree since all the countries are different and have varying amounts of freedom and authoritarianism which makes them greatly different. Just remember, more authoritarian more propaganda less freedom of speech, less authoritarian appears to be less propaganda and more freedom of speech.

### **Questions**

Some questions to consider:

1. Can propaganda lead to good results?
  - a. For example, anti-war campaigns and covid vaccine advertisements.
2. Why do we need to ban propaganda? Are the effects of propaganda really that serious in the modern world?
3. Will restrictions on propaganda also limit press freedom?
4. How can we protect Press Freedom?
5. Is press freedom really needed in autocratic nations?
6. Should authoritarian countries be challenged for their uses of propaganda?
7. Do self-proclaimed liberal democratic countries also use propaganda?

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