

Committee: Special Conference on Social Media (SPECON)

Issue: Censorship and the social media

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INTRODUCTION

"Hundreds of billions of dollars are spent every year to control the public mind"¹

-Noam Chomsky

Our technologically developed society has unquestionably changed the people's way of thinking and mentality. Arguably, the shaping of minds through extensive concealment of facts seems to be a more decisive and lasting form of domination than the submission of bodies by intimidation or violence. It has been implemented by many repressive countries in an unprecedented level in order to ban access in the outside world and limit information spreading stemming from sources outside the boundaries of their countries. Such governments have always been nervous about free communication on the Internet because their authority throughout history has been largely based on the control of information and communication. Conversely, in other liberal states almost everyone is capable of signing up in social platforms, thus uploading photos and videos, sharing news, informing their friends about their status. In such an occurrence of considerable communication power, many social media users have the tendency to upload posts that contain insulting content. Other such posts may also be simple threats against humanity and intent to terrorize the international community. This aforementioned context is ubiquitous in our world and it seems to be the bone of contention when bearing in mind the extent to which the concealment of facts may be beneficial and how it should be implemented in order to dissuade adverse consequences.

The democratic principles define that everyone has the inalienable and fundamental right to express themselves freely through any form of communication and media, with the sole limitation being to trigger harm in someone's reputation by using misleading and lying words. Unfortunately, many paradigms of censorship constitute an immense stain to the world's conscience. Especially, in social media platforms many users are deprived of their

¹ "Changing the Way We Think about AIDS", Noam Chomsky interviewed by Huw Christie, "Continuum", September-October, 1996 <https://chomsky.info/199609__/>

rights and do not manage to express their opinions openly. Undoubtedly, the UN ought to cater for the reinforcement of human rights in social media and the freedom of speech, but at the same time to play a decisive role for the elimination of threatening material coming from terrorist groups. Such material could damage social cohesion and bring about overwhelming consequences. The power of social media has given the opportunity to terrorists to take advantage of them in order to promote their beliefs and make citizens apprehensive of their future.

DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS

Censorship

An act of censorship can be defined as “the control of the information and ideas circulated in the society”². Common practices of censors are the examination of “books, plays, news reports, motion pictures, radio and television programs, letters, and cablegrams”³.

In the antiquity censorship played an important role in controlling public minds. In ancient China, “censorship was considered a legitimate instrument for regulating the moral and political life of the population”⁴, as well as in ancient Greece and Rome it was deemed necessary for a good government to shape the character of people. In modern times censorship constituted the hallmark of dictatorships. Literature confiscation was really common by Nazis during the WW II (1940-1945). Hitler “implemented severe censorship and intolerable propaganda”⁵ in all countries that he occupied.

Social Media

“Social media is the collective of online communications channels dedicated to community-based input, interaction, content-sharing and collaboration”⁶. Social media are platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Google+, LinkedIn, Reddit, Pinterest, etc.

² “What is censorship?” <<http://gilc.org/speech/osistudy/censorship/>>

³ “Censor”, The world dictionary <<http://www.dictionary.com/browse/censor>>

⁴ “The Long History of Censorship”, Beacon for Freedom of Expression, Mette Newth, 2010 <http://www.beaconforfreedom.org/liste.html?tid=415&art_id=475>

⁵ “The Long History of Censorship”, Beacon for Freedom of Expression, Mette Newth, 2010 <http://www.beaconforfreedom.org/liste.html?tid=415&art_id=475>

⁶ “Social Media”, WhatIs.com <<http://whatIs.techtarget.com/definition/social-media>>

Social media provide their users with the opportunity to: “1) construct a public or semi-public profile within the bounded system, 2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and 3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system”⁷. The nature of such connections varies from site to site.

All over the world people have the tendency to be connected to social media on a daily basis. The first quarter of 2016 statistics placed emphasis on the fact that more than

THE CONVERSATION PRISM

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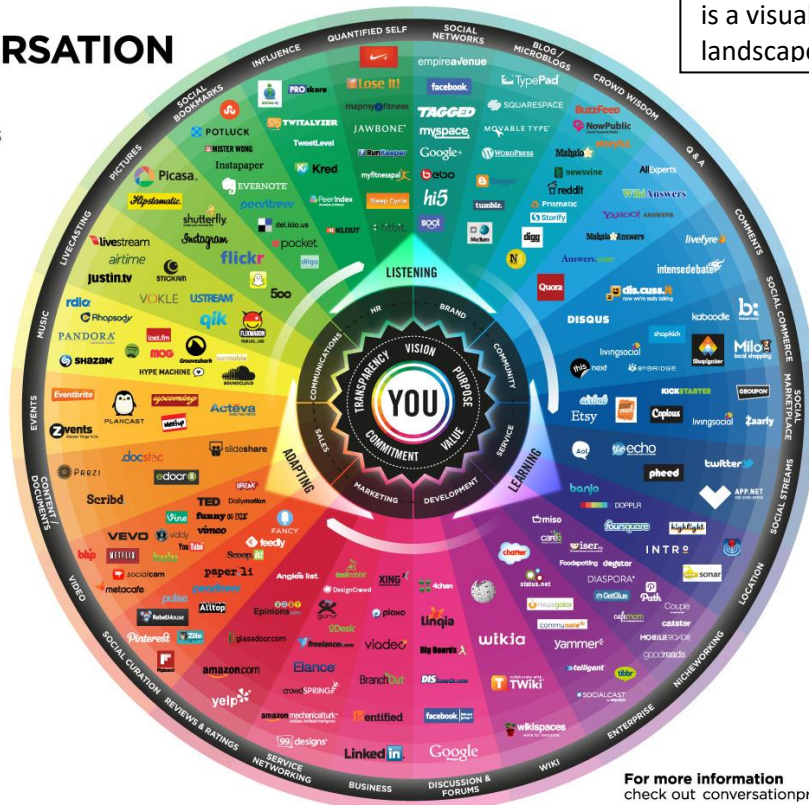


Figure 1: The Conversation Prism is a visual map of the social media landscape

For more information
check out conversationprism.com

1.65 billion monthly active users are on Facebook,⁸ hence they use all its tools and programs. Actually, social media have radically transformed the meaning of communication and provide people around the world with the beneficial advantage to communicate, share or upload photos and videos, as well as post texts publicly.

Hate speech

⁷ “Social Network Sites: Definition, History, and Scholarship”, D. M. Boyd and N. B. Ellison
<<http://www.danah.org/papers/JCMCIntro.pdf>>

⁸ “Number of monthly active Facebook users worldwide as of 2nd quarter 2016”, Statista
<<http://www.statista.com/statistics/264810/number-of-monthly-active-facebook-users-worldwide/>>

The term hate speech occupies an important position in international law. The article 20(2) of the “International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights” defines hate speech as: “Any advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence shall be prohibited by law”⁹. Many people claimed that such practices are capable of restricting freedom of speech and expression and there is no actual coverage of categories of hatred that fall under this article.

Another useful definition of hate speech: “speech that attacks, threatens, or insults a person or group on the basis of national origin, ethnicity, color, religion, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, or disability”¹⁰. Nevertheless, until now the international community has not agreed upon a universal definition for what hate speech constitutes¹¹. In the European Law, hate speech is strictly punishable and many conventions have been signed to terminate this phenomenon.

Activism

Activism is commonly known as “taking action to effect social change”¹². Throughout the history, activism has been an integral part of every change in social life. Activists strive to ensure a better life and transform the society into a more prosperous place to live. Such acts succeeded in ending the scourge of slavery, challenging the overwhelming dictatorships, rendering some non-negotiable working standards, protecting the environment, promoting equality, and opposing to racism and intolerance¹³. It is indispensable to understand that without activism our world could be extremely different.

Activism is capable of existing not only through the traditional methods, but also via the Internet. Many users engage themselves in online activism and have the freedom to promote their ideals and strive to ensure the desirable world.

⁹ International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
<<http://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/ccpr.aspx>>

¹⁰ Dictionary.com <<http://www.dictionary.com/browse/hate-speech>>

¹¹ “European hate speech laws”, The Legal Project <<http://www.legal-project.org/issues/european-hate-speech-laws>>

¹² “Introduction on activism”, Permanent Culture Now
<<http://www.permanentculturenow.com/what-is-activism/>>

¹³ “Activism, social and political”, Brian Martin
<<https://www.uow.edu.au/~bmartin/pubs/07Anderson.html>>

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Freedom of speech

Nowadays, many countries have the tendency to censor social media for the purpose of avoiding public trouble and controversy among their citizens. When their citizens do not know what is happening in the outside world, it is easier for the authorities to control their minds and impose other measures that may sometimes violate their rights and be unfavorable for them. So, they succeed in having citizens absorbed in their daily life and being incapable of questioning their decisions. This is actually the framework of censorship. However, such acts violate fundamental human rights and do not suit with The Universal Declaration of Human Rights that regulates in article 19 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”¹⁴.

Apart from governmental acts that violate freedom of speech, there are plenty of cases where social media companies themselves decided to determine the content of their pages, as well as remove content deemed to be inappropriate. For example, in 2013 Facebook’s decision to remove videos showing people being decapitated sparked a controversy on whether a censorship policy should be implemented in social media or not. Many child safety campaigners praised Facebook’s act and claimed that such videos may cause psychological negative repercussions to children, and recommended that social media have kinds of filters in order to block shocking images from appearing in the news feed.

By taking such cases into consideration the United States Supreme Court has discerned speeches related to obscenity, child pornography, and true threats that fall under the category of unprotected speech or even banned speech. According to distinguished lawyers, governments should meet some standards when attempting to regulate speech in a constitutional manner.

Censorship and Activism

¹⁴ “The Universal Declaration on Human Rights”, United Nations <<http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/index.html>>

Since the rapid development of Internet and social media, activism has decisively changed. The increasing accessibility and the ability to communicate with other citizens from all over the world have

Figure 2: Countries where several social media have been banned



inaugurated a new era of more effective activism. Many independent activists take advantage of the Internet and its digital tools like social media to spread ideas and contribute to the mobilization of other open-minded people across the globe. Arguably, the age of communication is capable of offering activism plenty of benefits, but at the same time it can adversely enhance the efforts of repressive regimes to deprive citizens of information and communication.

Social deprivation is constantly happening in states like India where solely 90 million people have access to the Internet. India’s situation is a little bit different than other cases. A state which is commonly known for its censorious policies, China, has strictly banned several social media platforms since 2009. Apart from China, North Korea is the country that has blocked social media for the longest period, as the country’s policy concerning Internet has always been extremely restrictive.

In an attempt to deal with state censorship many activists have developed a wide range of strategies in order to get their messages across via social media and the Internet. The authoritarian state control and the determination of content seem to be incapable of

making activists compromise with the regulations and the laws that do not help them spread their ideas. Such strategies are the symbolic language, the pseudonyms and the willing misspelling. Activists have equivalent methods at their disposal, thereby they have more chances to communicate with each other about controversial issues and surpassing the obstacles posed by the track and identification mechanisms of the governments.

Terrorism and Social Media

It is commonly known that cyberspace has been transformed into a venue where terrorists have the unique opportunity to recruit or terrorize people, as well as make propaganda. Low cost Internet infrastructure and social media sites have contributed to the spread of web-terrorism. Actually, the convenience of social media in terms of “availability, accessibility, message redundancy, ease of use, and the inability to censor content”¹⁵ in a direct way, have played a key role in order to promote terrorist operations and make their actions publicly known.

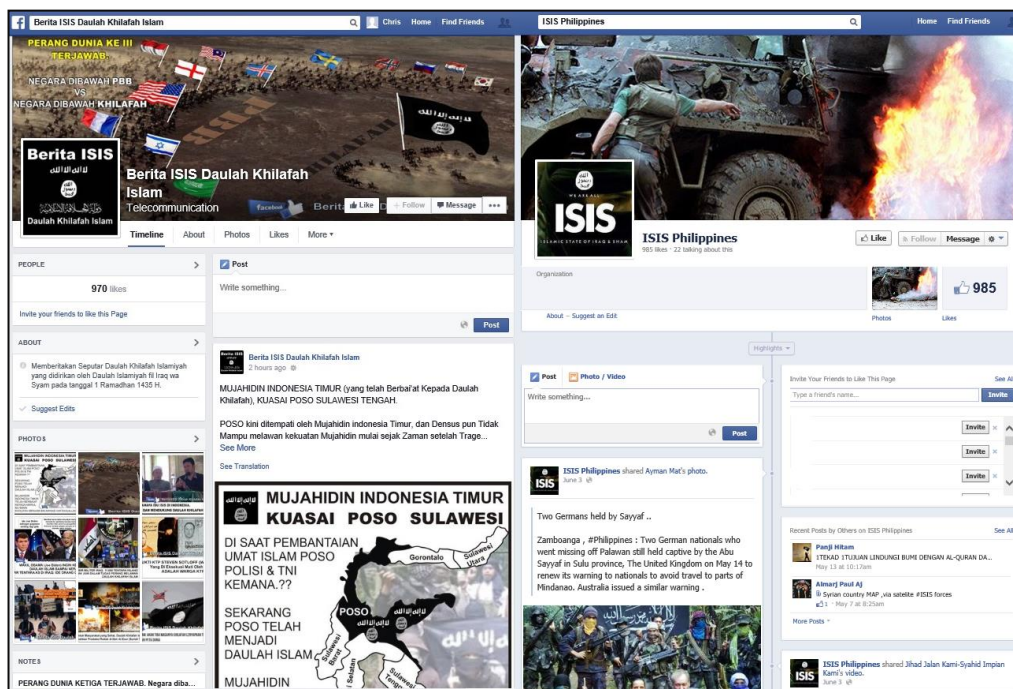
During recent years, the world needs to deal with many terrorist groups that intend to spread their influence through the media. Social media platforms seem to be the way which gives the unique opportunity to terrorists to acquire a loyal audience, willing to harm our society. The Islamic State (ISIS) is committed to disseminating violence and terror among citizens, therefore it often makes its public/audience afraid and pushes the society into unawareness. Social media give the opportunity to promote terrorists’ propaganda in a miraculous level. Videos vary from live executions to brutal decapitations. Many western aid workers and journalists, as well as other soldiers, homosexuals and Christians were finally executed and the videos were uploaded on the Internet. Needless to say, ISIS representatives can be easily found online by common social media users by clicking only a few words in their Internet browser. Videos are able to disgust and frighten people, yet simultaneously recruit several groups of people and especially young people.

¹⁵ “Cyberspace: A venue for terrorism”, Issues in Information Systems
<http://www.iacis.org/iis/2015/3_iis_2015_33-42.pdf>

In cases of such terrorist propaganda, it is essential for some control mechanisms to be established. Censorship seems to be one method of inhibiting terrorists' material from appearing in the web. However, censorship is solely lawful "when a government does it clearly, defines plainly the matter it impedes, attentively pursues merely banned material, and offers liability in its decision-making to the people"¹⁶. Many governments engage themselves in Internet content filtering, consequently determining the content to a great extent, yet more efforts are the prerequisite

in order to achieve the optimum results.

Figure 3: ISIS Facebook pages in Indonesia and the Philippines



MAJOR COUNTRIES AND ORGANISATIONS INVOLVED

China

The People's Republic of China is known for its censorious policies in order to avoid a potential subversion of its authority. Its tactics to restrict social media action often entail "strict media controls using monitoring systems and firewalls, shuttering publications or websites, and jailing dissident journalists, bloggers, and activists"¹⁷. The Chinese government has decided to launch a campaign related to Internet surveillance and censorship; the Great

¹⁶ "Cyberspace: A venue for terrorism", Issues in Information Systems <http://www.iacis.org/iis/2015/3_iis_2015_33-42.pdf>

¹⁷ "CFR Backgrounders", Council in Foreign Relations <<http://www.cfr.org/china/media-censorship-china/p11515>>

Firewall of China is a sophisticated blend of human censors and technological tools to block websites and rein in the social media, especially in cases when the news stories show China or its leaders in a bad light, as well as other dubious political issues. Sites like the world's leading searching engine, Google, international news sites like BBC, and the most popular social media sites like Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Twitter and other, are totally banned. It is specifically pertained in some media that the Chinese government shut down coverage of the Panama Papers when a scandal emerged that many elitist families and political leaders were engaged in offshore companies. The Committee to Protect Journalists, an American independent non-governmental organization, places China among the 10 most censored states in the world and claims that in countries, such as China, where means of technology are remarkably advanced, Internet restrictions are combined with threats of imprisonment. Thirty-two of China's 44 jailed journalists worked online and they finally culminated in prison due to their beliefs. Indubitably, China puts emphasis on censorship policies in order to deter social tension and insubordination.

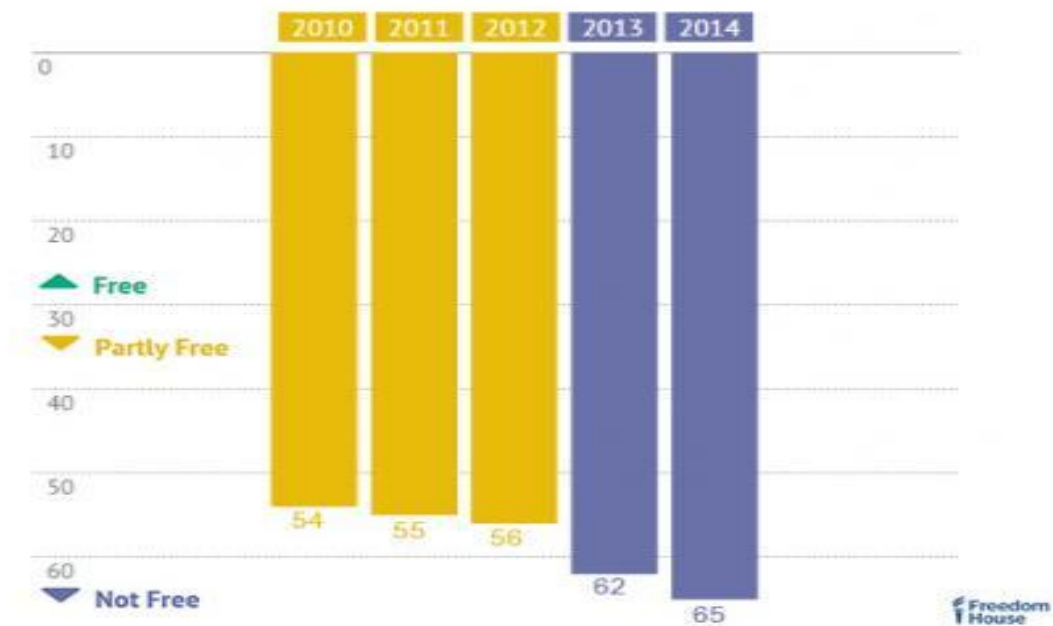
Turkey

In 2007, the Turkish government passed the Internet Regulation Law 5651 with a view to virtually cleaning the Internet from undesirable content, yet it actually paved the way for the censorship of websites. This law gave the opportunity to citizens to make complaints about websites to the Presidency of Telecommunication and Communication (TIB), which in turn was able to ban various websites and services. Dr. Asli Tunc, professor of Media Studies at Istanbul Bilgi University, claims that many sites are blocked in Turkey. While the actual number remains unknown there are estimations that it is around 100,000 sites. The professor also notes that social media platforms were banned when critics of government tried to get their messages across. Other allegations prove that before local elections in March 2014 such platforms were restricted due to documents purported to reveal corruption within the inner circle of the government. Current Turkish President Mr. Erdogan has repeatedly stated that "Social media is the worst menace to society" and he is totally committed to restricting their function during his service. Since 2013, journalists faced unparalleled legal obstacles as many courts restricted reporting on corruption and national security issues in order for the current political system to be protected. The antiterrorism laws played a significant role in depriving journalists of free speech. They were implemented under the guise to protect citizens from misinformation and propaganda by terrorists, but in fact it adversely contributed to enhance the efforts to render censorship an

invaluable tool for the Turkish government to control and determine people’s minds and criticism.

Figure 4: Statistics revealing deterioration of media freedom after new censorship laws during the period of five years

**Turkey:
5-Year Decline in Press Freedom**
Media freedom deteriorated as new laws increased the government’s censorship power over websites and news media.



Amnesty International

Founded in 1961 by a British lawyer, the Amnesty International is a non-governmental organization with more than 7 million members around the world. Such an organization is committed to promoting human rights as established by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Amnesty International has undertaken action focused on preventing human rights abuses, thereby it strives to bring about “universality and indivisibility of human rights, impartiality and independence, and democracy and mutual respect”¹⁸. Moreover, the organization has taken into consideration and recognizes the impediment of freedom of expression in many states and especially censorship on the Internet and the social media, and it has pledged to take action for another social change.

¹⁸ Amnesty International's Statute <<https://www.amnesty.org/en/about-us/how-were-run/amnesty-internationals-statute/>>

TIMELINE OF EVENTS

Date	Description of Event
1933	In Germany, Nazis burnt books deemed to be offensive and adversely contributed to a great form of censorship and propaganda.
December 10, 1948	The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was signed and set fundamental human rights standards.
April, 1993	World Wide Web (WWW technology) free for everyone without fees.
1997	The birth of social media: the first social media called Six Degrees was created.
2000	By the beginning of the millennium, almost 100 million people had access on the Internet, thus being totally common to be online socially engaged.
2000	'Kwangmyong', North Korea's internal network was created to replace Internet in its territory, so as to implement totally censorious practices.
2004	One of the leading social media today, Facebook, was launched by Harvard students.
2006	Amnesty International after a long fight for freedom of expression across the world moved to the Internet.
November 16, 2006	The first part of the Great Firewall of China went into service by using several means to make it difficult to reach sites deemed to be illegal.
July, 2009	The Chinese government banned Facebook and Twitter.
March, 2014	The Turkish government blocked twitter before local elections.

UN INVOLVEMENT: RELEVANT RESOLUTIONS, TREATIES AND EVENTS

The United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has taken plenty of actions to promote freedom of expression and its fundamental principles that ought to be respected by any state. It has shown great support and accountability in ensuring transparency and the rule of law across the globe.

During a UNESCO seminar on May 3, 1991, the organization paved the way for the Windhoek Declaration. "This document calls for free, independent, pluralistic media

worldwide, characterizing free press as essential to democracy and as a fundamental human right¹⁹. The Windhoek Declaration was used as an enrichment to Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights for the purpose of protecting freedom of speech and maintaining democracy. The UN has declared May 3 to be the “World Press Freedom Day” to remind governments’ duties to respect freedom of speech and mark the anniversary of the Windhoek Declaration. Furthermore, UNESCO has also created a number of documents to bring about significant results. These include the Medium-Term Strategy for 1996-2001²⁰ to promote free flow of information and ideas and the development of communication, as well as the Resolution 29 “Condemnation of violence against journalists” in 1997.²¹

In 2012, the UN Human Rights Council adopted Resolution 20/8 on “The promotion, protection and enjoyment of human rights on the Internet.” The resolution places emphasis and affirms the fact that “the same rights that people have offline must also be protected online”. Moreover, in 2013 the Social, Humanitarian and Cultural Committee of the UN General Assembly passed the Resolution on “The right to privacy in the digital age.” Particularly, it is pertained that “unlawful or arbitrary surveillance and/or interception of communications, as well as unlawful or arbitrary collection of personal data, as highly intrusive acts, violate the rights to privacy and freedom of expression and may contradict the tenets of a democratic society”²².

PREVIOUS ATTEMPTS TO SOLVE THE ISSUE

Apart from UN actions there are limited attempts by other international institutions to solve the issue of censorship in the social media. However, several cases of intense efforts to improve the situation should not be underestimated.

Since 1981, The Committee to Protect Journalists²³ struggles to promote the rights of journalists not only offline, but also online, and it is committed to denouncing press freedom violations, meeting with heads of states, and collaborating with other organizations to ensure that justice prevails for imprisoned and killed journalists. Generally, the organization provides journalists with an invaluable aid in cases of extreme censorship in

¹⁹ “Declaration of Windhoek” <<http://www.un.org/en/events/pressfreedomday/windhoek.shtml>>

²⁰ “Promoting the Free Flow of Information and the Development of Communication”, UNESCO <http://www.unesco.org/webworld/fed/temp/communication_democracy/freelflow.htm>

²¹ Resolution 29 “Condemnation of violence against journalists”, UNESCO <http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/FIELD/Brussels/pdf/ipdc_resolution_29.pdf>

²² “The right to privacy in the digital age”, United Nations <http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/C.3/68/L.45/Rev.1>

²³ Committee to Protect Journalists <<https://www.cpj.org/>>

dangerous environments that tends to deprive citizens of awareness of the public affairs, and caters for the free flow of information for a better society.

Another such prominent act stems from Amnesty International. The activist organization organizes many worldwide campaigns for the purpose of demanding respect of human rights and principles. In many cases, AI has protected journalists and individuals who expressed themselves freely and has done a lot to abolish imprisonment and executions. AI has also engaged with tech companies on Internet censorship by multi-stakeholder initiatives, legislative advocacy and shareholder activism²⁴ that make it feasible to boost international community's efforts to deal with unilateral acts that are not in compliance with human rights regulations.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

Social media censorship has been used by many governments as a policy to force citizens into compliance. However, censorship policies are proven to be beneficial in cases of threats by terrorists who are constantly taking advantage of the amenities provided by the social media to promote their propaganda.

Close attention needs to be paid on human rights violated in cases of censorship and cases where particular actions online are deemed to be quarrelsome must be marked, consequently being condemned by the international institutions. For example, the circumstances that regulate whether information published on the Internet are considered inappropriate or not, as well as the means of filtering technology used in order to refine unsuitable content should be stressed out.

In addition, educative measures can be taken and public raising awareness campaigns can be launched, so as to inform people about the potential adverse circumstances of being censored for a long period and the significance of struggling to ensure freedom of speech via any form of media. Such education could also emphasize on mutual respect and recognize the need to protect and esteem social, religious, and racial sensitivities, etc.

Last but not least, censorious governments need to be pushed into transparency in order for their intentions to be clarified. Civil society could play a decisive role through its involvement and monitoring. Institutionalization of freedom of expression and a more

²⁴ "Freedom of Expression and the Internet", Amnesty International
<<http://www.amnestyusa.org/our-work/issues/censorship-and-free-speech/internet-censorship>>

precise international legal framework could contribute to a better protection of journalists, thus giving the opportunity to more people to use social media platforms.

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