



SMUSMUN 2024

United Nations Human Rights Committee

Background Guide

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Dear United Nations Human Rights Council delegates,

My name is Bianca Toaxen and I am delighted to serve as director of the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) for the 4th iteration of SMUSMUN. I am currently a Grade 11 student at St. Michaels University School and a longtime participant in Model UN. On behalf of the rest of my dias team, Chair Peter Wang as well as Assistant Directors Haven Miller and Liam Pope-Lau, it is my pleasure to welcome you all to our committee.

I remember very vividly my first conference 5 years ago, too afraid and nervous to speak and contribute to the committee. Now, after over a dozen conferences in many roles and on behalf of many countries, I have unlocked a new way to view the world and developed many friendships along the way. Model UN is a way to look at the world around you, a way to try and understand it, and it is also fun. I hope that this committee brings you out of your comfort zone and changes the way that you think about the international landscape.

This year our general assembly, UNHRC, will be looking at a pressing issue across the globe: censorship. The dias chose this topic as it is an incredibly relevant problem that dates back to the beginnings of power and oppression. As a large and beginner-oriented committee, every single country has something to say about censorship and it is an accessible topic for first-time delegates. With that said, to be successful in this committee, we recommend that you begin researching as soon as you are assigned your country to ensure that your position paper is informed and is effective for your country's stance and position. Additionally, we recommend that you go beyond just the background guide for information about the topic and research subtopics such as political, cultural and social issues associated with the subject. Lastly, I would strongly encourage you to reach out to the dias team with any questions regarding the topic or Model UN as a whole if they arise.

On behalf of the dias team, we would like to thank you for choosing this committee and wish you all the best in your research. Whether this is your first conference or your twentieth, we hope that you learn something new, develop new skills, have lively debate, make lifelong friendships and, most importantly, have fun at SMUSMUN 2024!

Best Regards,

Bianca Toaxen

– Director of the United Nations Human Rights Council - SMUSMUN 2024

Position Paper Policy

What is a Position Paper?

A summary of a country's stance on the topics/issues discussed in the committee. Position papers are intended to outline a country's position, possible solutions to the issues a country may suggest, and what relevant action a country has taken in response to the issue at hand.

For the SMUS Model United Nations 2024 UNHCR committee, position papers are not mandatory, yet are recommended. If delegates wish to receive an award, position papers are a necessary prerequisite.

How Should a Position Paper be Formatted?

There is no specific format all position papers should follow, yet a good recommendation is:

1. Executive summary:
 - Summary of the country's position, possible solutions, and what actions they have taken (2-3 sentences)

2. Background:
 - History of the issue within the country
 - How has the government responded? Were the actions taken successful?
 - What issues do they face?
 - Country's position on the issue
 - Treaties they support/oppose

3. Proposed Solutions:

- What should the UN do to resolve the issue at hand
- What solutions has the country taken, and how can other countries take similar measures
- Who are the country's political allies

Tips

If you are finding it difficult to come up with relevant information regarding the stance of your designated country, the sources used during the research for this background guide can be found at the end of this document and can be quite helpful. <https://freedomhouse.org/> is a useful website that covers many relevant issues and has individual pages for most countries, assessing their democratic institutions and practices. It may also be useful, especially if you are representing a country that is less influential geopolitically, to do research on your country's allies and historical stances on human rights issues, as they will play into the formation of blocs in the committee as debate proceeds.

Requirements

1. Include the name of the delegate, their country, and the committee
2. Be in a standard font (e.g. Times New Roman) with a 12-point font size and 1-inch document margins
3. Not include illustrations, diagrams, decorations, national symbols, watermarks, or page borders
4. Include citations and a bibliography, in any format, giving due credit to the sources used in research (not included in the 1-page limit)

Due Date

Position papers should be submitted by April 1st, 2024 at 11:59 pm to be considered for awards. Position papers should be put into a PDF or Word document file titled “[Last Name], [First Name] - Position Paper”.

Position Papers should be sent to unhcr.smusmun@gmail.com.

Committee Overview

The United Nations Human Rights Committee is a unique committee that strives to keep international peace and uphold the core values of the UN. The main mission of the council is to protect human rights around the world, address situations of human rights violations, and, most importantly, make recommendations on how to approach and resolve them. For example, the council concerns itself with the Israel-Palestine conflict, human rights violations in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and Syria, LGBTQIA+ rights, women's rights, and the fundamental human right of freedom of expression (which outlaws censorship).

Censorship

Topic Overview

“If you don’t want a house built, hide the nails and wood. If you don’t want a man unhappy politically, don’t give him two sides to a question to worry him; give him one. Better yet, give him none.”^[1] This argument, made by the authoritative Captain Beatty to justify the burning of books that takes place in the story of Ray Bradbury’s classic 1953 novel *Fahrenheit 451*, encapsulates the contentious topic of censorship in the modern, diverse world. The concept of censorship refers to the suppression of political, personal, and ideological expression by authoritative institutions, and is a globally contentious subject that has fascinated researchers and the general public alike for centuries. International and domestic conflicts are more frequent than ever regarding both the ethics behind the act of censorship and the content and ideas which are restricted by it. While the origins of censorship date back to its utilization in ancient regimes, it has come under the spotlight in recent years for its role in modern media, art, and politics. The upsurge of global interconnectedness and information circulation, prompted by the rapid expansion of internet usage, has broadened the use of censorship and settings in which it can be employed and potentially exploited. For the purposes of this committee, we will focus our examination of the topic on two broad categories: matters concerning freedom of expression on public platforms such as social media, including political and social issues, as well as censorship of alternative forms of expression, including in television, film, literature, and music. Through three case studies, we will dive deeply into the impactful decisions shaping the geopolitical landscape and widen the scope of our investigation into the morality and practicality of censorship.

[1] Bradbury, Ray. *Fahrenheit 451*.

Case Study #1: The Freedom of Music

In their 1979 hit “The Spirit of Radio”, Canadian rock band Rush wrote,

“One likes to believe in the freedom of music
But glittering prizes
And endless compromises
Shatter the illusion of integrity”.^[2]

This cynical line is both a reflection of the past and a prophecy for the future. Pop music as we know it today began its time in the spotlight in the 1950s synonymous with censorship. The first wave of radio censorship happened to artists who were considered to be inciting and rebellious, which made many artists lose business. Most infamously, Elvis Presley was threatened with criminal charges for his suggestive dance moves while performing and was filmed only waist-up for his 1957 appearance on the nationally televised *The Ed Sullivan Show* for that reason. Music by African American artists, and even the genres that they inspired, were sometimes banned completely on air or in record shops. Some of the biggest stars of the pop culture revolution, including The Beatles and The Rolling Stones, were especially unpopular with conservative audiences who objected to their association to drugs or sexuality. The Beatles notably came under fire in 1966 after John Lennon quipped that they were “more popular than Jesus”, which prompted many radio stations in the southern United States to ban their music and churches to sponsor burnings of their records. Such acts of censorship were mostly regional and inconsistent, and didn’t delay popular music from evolving into the most progressive and politically charged form of music.

Things came to a head in the 1980s, a decade which saw an increasing number of artists begin to use profanity more freely and frequently in their works. In 1985, the Parents Music Resource Center (PMRC) was formed by a group of “Washington Wives” - spouses of prominent businessmen and politicians at the time. The objective of the PMRC was to “to educate and

[2] Rush. “The Spirit of Radio.” Rush, Terry Brown, Le Studio, Morin-Heights, Quebec, 1979.

inform parents of this alarming new trend... towards lyrics that are sexually explicit". Their methods were quite unforgiving: in a senate hearing, the PMRC argued that the trend was illustrated by "the proliferation of songs glorifying rape, sadomasochism, incest, the occult, and suicide"^[3]. They suggested a connection between rock music and teenage suicide and pregnancy rates, providing examples of young men who committed suicide while allegedly listening to AC/DC and Ozzy Osbourne. Even though the organization denied accusations of promoting censorship, it certainly left its mark on the music industry - its successful campaign to put warning stickers on records with "offensive" content and to ban explicit content on MTV and radio channels slowed business down for many artists, eventually leading to a general shift in thematic direction for many artists. Bills in certain states to criminalize the sale of "obscene" content to minors, introduce a sales tax on such records, and to outlaw explicit lyrics completely were narrowly avoided to prevent the movement from being an obvious case of censorship.

Another occasion where mass radio censorship has happened in the past in many regions has been during times of controversy and warfare. In 1991, BBC banned 67 songs from the radio and several TV programs from airing during the Persian Gulf War, likely due to potentially sensitive or triggering content. Immediately after the 9/11 attacks in 2001, Clear Channel released a memo listing roughly 160 songs that radio stations were discouraged from playing. In these unique circumstances, some listeners agreed with the temporary restrictions imposed upon songs with obvious references to violence and warfare, while others were perplexed by the inclusion of a handful of songs that did not seem to have any relevance to the events. Among the confusing picks were Phil Collins' love ballad "In the Air Tonight" and John Lennon's "Imagine", ironically one of the most famous anti-war songs of all time.

Censorship also exists prominently in musical performances, and often leads to much more trouble for the artist involved. The Chinese government strictly forbids western artists touring in mainland China from playing songs that have insubordinate political implications, even if only metaphorically. This has heavily decreased the local market for western artists, as well as their likelihood to include China in their tours. Other notable cases of prohibitive measures taken by illiberal governments in recent years also include:

[3] "PMRC Senate Hearing." 1985.

- Chinese singer Cui Jian, known as the “father of Chinese rock”, was prohibited from playing in all Beijing music venues for years after he released a song that seemingly poked at the 1989 Tiananmen Square Incident.
- Members of the Russian protest group Pussy Riot were arrested and convicted of “hooliganism” after a 2012 performance of theirs in which they voiced their disdain for Russian President Vladimir Putin.
- At the Good Vibes Festival in Kuala Lumpur in July 2023, British band The 1975 were forced off the stage, and, according to the band’s vocalist Matty Healy, “briefly imprisoned” after he made pro-LGBTQ+ remarks and shared a kiss with his bandmate during their performance in protest of the Malaysia’s anti-homosexuality laws. The festival ended being canceled entirely after the incident and the band has been banned by the Malaysian government from playing in the country in the future, in addition to having been demanded to pay more than \$2 million in damages caused by the festival’s cancellation.

Censorship of this type can happen in countries perceived to be liberal democracies as well, leading to plenty of debate. In March 2023, the government of Germany attempted to cancel a performance in Frankfurt by Pink Floyd co-founder Roger Waters under accusations of anti-semitism, pointing to an outfit he wears while playing certain songs live which resembled a Nazi uniform. Many found the accusation and censorship attempt distasteful and misinformed, since it had long been known that Waters’ usage of the costume was part of his satirical and critical portrayal of authoritarianism, a theme that is examined in Pink Floyd’s 1979 anti-fascist concept album, “*The Wall*”. A legal battle ensued, ending with a court ruling that the concert could happen as scheduled because it could be viewed as a “work of art”.

As the role of art becomes increasingly substantial in modern society, we have an urgent need to question the boundaries at which it is kept by authoritative institutions – or whether such boundaries should exist at all.

Case Study #2: Forbidden Literature

Literature is among the most historically significant forms of expression and recording, so it's no surprise that it has come across the topic of censorship quite frequently. In many cases, literary censorship does not inherently stem from opposing political ideologies, as it often deals with personal philosophies more than any other divisive factor, but patterns still exist between different governmental systems and political cultures. China, for instance, leaves very little room for any disputes, forcing all publications through a process in which they are searched for sensitive content, especially regarding politics. China's proactive stance has also extended its influence to Hong Kong SAR, where booksellers and publishers have become more alert for content that could potentially face censorship. Several other Asian countries have also experienced recent incidents of book censorship, including the Philippines, whose government, in 2021, asked universities to remove books that may contain communist ideologies, and Singapore, which recently blocked a book on the censorship of political cartoons from publication, stating that it denigrated the Islamic religion.

In countries with clear policies or stances regarding sensitive social issues, books are often banned in order to maintain governmental legitimacy. Russia and Hungary, for example, have both seen cases of censorship on LGBTQ+-themed material.

Just as in the other topics, the United States faces its own unique situation concerning book censorship—over the past couple of years, there have been several controversies regarding the removal of content in children's books. In 2021, it was reported that six Dr. Seuss books would no longer be published due to their use of allegedly offensive imagery. At least 10 of Roald Dahl's classic children's books have gone through the changing or removal of words that include character descriptions that are considered offensive or stereotypical. This act was reportedly also compounded by accounts that Dahl was a verbal anti-semitic and anti-feminist during his lifetime.

Even as books and other forms of extensive literature become lost in the digital age, they are among the most popular sources for those conducting research and documenting the state of the

world. The practice of book banning has led to mass disinformation and inter-cultural tensions, with the issue only becoming more severe with time as political actions are taken.

Case Study #3: Internet Censorship

The internet is the backdrop to a substantial paradox in modern society. Social media has provided a more efficient method of communication than ever before, but the overflow of content on social media platforms has made it a challenge to extract accurate information. This is especially complicated by the political leanings of powerful figures and institutions, which is where censorship comes into play. Western media platforms such as Instagram and Twitter are considered to be threatening to national security in illiberal states, which impose restrictions on these platforms or on internet access entirely. China, Iran, and Turkey are among the countries that have outlawed some of these platforms or restricted access to them via firewalls. These countries, in turn, promote local media platforms, which are affiliated with the government and are monitored so that sensitive content is reported. In China, for example, an account can be suspended or permanently deleted for violating the content policy repeatedly. Citizens who take their controversial opinions to foreign platforms have faced issues such as denial of reentry into their home country if their actions are discovered. On a national level, objections by the United States and other western countries have been raised regarding the allegedly inaccurate data that China has provided on local COVID-19 cases and other issues that may threaten the Chinese government's legitimacy to its citizens. Internet censorship is especially common as a means of political control in developing countries: In Cuba, for example, the several layers of laws targeting political dissent has further restricted internet access among its citizens, a large number of whom were already struggling with the hefty costs of digital services (the rate for a subscription to the state-run home internet provider is nearly ten times the national minimum wage).

Bloc Positions:

Western Liberal Democracies:

Prominent North American and European countries, such as the United States, United Kingdom and Canada, are renowned for their open and active civil society that promotes freedom of the press and protects against censorship. Countries within this bloc advocate for greater freedom of speech and fight against censorship. On a government level, individuals within these countries are protected by censorship imposed by law, but not on a corporate level. Large media conglomerates such as Twitter, Meta, and Google have been criticized for their censoring of media stories, articles, and individuals. In Canada, in response to a law that would compel tech companies to pay publishers for content, Google said it would block all links to Canadian news articles for people using the search engine^[4]. Google's decision came a week after Meta vowed to block news in Canada on Instagram and Facebook^[4]. With the majority of Canadians receiving their news from social Media (33%), private company's decisions to block news poses concerns about how corporations can censor content^[5].

Illiberal Democracies:

Countries such as Russia, despite having some democratic institutions, use censorship as a way to block information, criticism of the government, and dissent. While the country may have the facade of an open and active civil society, with independent media and freedom of the press, in reality, the government plays a key role in where and what information is shown. Following the invasion of Ukraine, Russia's President Vladimir Putin signed a law that made it illegal to "discredit" the army^[6]. The Kremlin's crackdown on anyone who questioned the war or showed

[4] Allyn. "Google Says It Will Start Blocking Canadian News Stories in Response to New Law." *NPR*, 29 June 2023.

[5] Government of Canada, Statistics Canada. "Canadian Social Survey - Quality of Life, Virtual Health Care and Trust, 2023." *The Daily* - , 10 Nov. 2023, www150.statecan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/231110/dq231110b-eng.htm.

[6] Troianovski, Anton, et al. "How the Russian Government Silences Wartime Dissent." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 29 Dec. 2023, www.nytimes.com/interactive/2023/12/29/world/europe/russia-ukraine-war-censorship.html

sympathy with Ukraine was liable for persecution. Russia, as well as other illiberal democracies, see the media as a tool for persuasion and to censor content, rather than for the promotion of speech and independent media.

Illiberal Nondemocracies:

Countries such as China, Saudi Arabia, and other illiberal non-democracies, have strict laws prohibiting freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and independent media. To prevent dissent and criticism of the government, countries in this group actively censor the media and individuals. For example, in late October, before the cremation of former Chinese Premier Li Keqiang, Chinese government officials ordered the censoring of any “overly effusive” comments that criticized the government^[7]. Within this committee, illiberal nondemocratic countries will play a key role in the debate of media censorship.

Past UN Actions

A resolution paper adopted by the UNHRC in 2021 included the following operative clauses:

- “Condemns unequivocally all human rights violations and abuses committed against persons for exercising their human rights and fundamental freedoms on the Internet, and calls upon all States to ensure accountability and effective remedies in this regard, in accordance with their international obligations;”
- “Calls upon all States to consider formulating, through transparent and inclusive processes with all stakeholders, and adopting national Internet-related public policies that have at their core the objective of universal access and the enjoyment of human rights;”
- “Stresses that many States all over the world need support in expanding infrastructure, technological cooperation and capacity-building, including human and institutional capacity-building, to ensure the accessibility, affordability and availability of the

[7] “China’s Censors Warn against ‘effusive Comments’ While Mourning Li Keqiang.” *Al Jazeera*, Al Jazeera, 31 Oct. 2023, www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/10/31/chinas-censors-warn-against-effusive-comments-while-mourning-li-keqiang.

A/HRC/RES/47/16 5 Internet in order to bridge digital divides, to meet the Sustainable Development Goal and to ensure the full enjoyment of human rights;”

It is clear that the United Nations Human Rights Council stands against internet censorship and advocates for equal access to digital media in its member states. However, with the concept of censorship varying depending on the context to which it is applied, it is essentially up to each country to form its own set of regulations and procedures regarding the matter.

Guiding Questions:

1. With the increasing concern of private corporations censoring individuals, what role should the government play, if any, in preventing companies from censoring media?
2. What incidents of human rights violations or media censorship have been reported in your country? What has your country done to address these human rights violations?
3. What diplomatic approaches can or should a country take towards other countries with opposing beliefs or systems?
4. To what extent should supranational organizations (such as the UN) and foreign countries have the ability to influence a country’s political practices and act as a “power check”?
5. Is freedom of expression a fundamental human right, and is it beneficial in all contexts?

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