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The international foundation "Witnesses of Ashoora" was established in 2013 as a religious and cultural organization and was granted a consultative status in 2021. The goals of this institution are as follows:

- Countering Islamophobia
- Countering Shia phobia
- Defending Human Rights

Restrictions on Media Freedom and Journalists in the United States

Introduction

Freedom of expression and the press are among the most fundamental principles of democracy and human rights, explicitly enshrined in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. This principle not only forms the basis for cultural and political development but also plays a critical role in enhancing governmental transparency and accountability. The United States, as one of the most prominent proponents of freedom of expression and the press, has faced serious criticisms in recent decades regarding its track record in this area.

Despite the prominent role the country claims in promoting democratic ideals and human rights, credible international reports indicate a declining state of media freedom in the United States. Journalists and media outlets face numerous threats and challenges that directly restrict their freedom of operation. These threats include legal pressures, physical violence, digital censorship, and extensive surveillance by government entities.

Censorship and restrictions are not limited to the digital sphere but are also evident in areas such as coverage of protests, disclosure of governmental documents, and sensitive political and social issues. The U.S. government has employed advanced surveillance tools and ambiguous legal provisions to manage the media landscape in a way that minimizes the voices of critics. As a result, journalists often work in an environment where legal and security threats are part of their daily reality.

This situation starkly contrasts with the image the United States projects globally as a defender of freedom of expression. This discrepancy raises fundamental questions about the credibility of its human rights claims. This report examines documents and reports from international and academic organizations to provide a clearer picture of the current state of media freedom in the United States.

1. Restrictive Legal Frameworks

1.1 The Espionage Act and the Suppression of Whistleblowers

The Espionage Act, enacted in 1917 during World War I to protect national security and counter external threats, has in recent decades become a tool for suppressing media freedom and journalists exposing government policies. One of the most prominent examples of this misuse is the case of Julian Assange, the founder of WikiLeaks, who faced prosecution for publishing government documents related to war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan (Committee to Protect Journalists - CPJ). This case exemplifies a concerning trend where the line between safeguarding national security and suppressing freedom of expression is dangerously blurred.

Research by the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) in 2022 revealed a 50% increase in the use of the Espionage Act against journalists in the United States (Committee to Protect Journalists - CPJ). This alarming statistic poses a significant threat to media freedom in a country that presents itself as a champion of human rights and free expression. Originally intended to prevent foreign interference, the Espionage Act has now become a pretext for targeting journalists, publishers, and whistleblowers who criticize government policies or expose official misconduct.

This approach directly contradicts the principles of democracy and human rights that the U.S. claims to lead globally. Freedom of expression and access to information are fundamental pillars of democracy. However, using the Espionage Act to prosecute journalists and whistleblowers poses a severe threat to these principles. In many cases, journalists merely aim to inform the public about governmental wrongdoing, but instead of being supported for seeking the truth, they face censorship and intimidation.

The case of Julian Assange is a vivid example of this crisis. The publication of documents exposing war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan, which brought global attention to U.S. military misconduct, underscores the value of media whistleblowing. Yet, the judicial response to Assange demonstrates the instrumentalization of the Espionage Act to suppress public information. Rather than recognizing his contributions to public awareness, Assange's prosecution has become a symbol of information censorship.

The Espionage Act in the U.S. no longer serves its original purpose; instead, it has become a severe threat to media freedom and the public's right to access information.

The continued use of the Espionage Act to suppress journalists and whistleblowers not only erodes public trust in the government but also tarnishes the image of the United States as a defender of freedom and human rights. It is imperative that this law be

reviewed to strike a balance between national security and the respect for freedom of expression. Without such reforms, media freedom in the United States will remain under threat.

2. Violence and Threats Against Journalists

2.1 Physical Violence During Protests

Police and security force violence against journalists during public protests represents a serious threat to media freedom in the United States. During the protests following George Floyd's death in 2020, over 150 journalists were attacked or arrested by the police (American Journalism Review). These attacks included rubber bullet shootings, pepper spray usage, and even physical assaults. Targeting journalists in these protests underscores repressive policies that aim to suppress freedom of information. In such circumstances, journalists are often treated as potential adversaries rather than protected under the law.

In another incident in 2021, during protests following the court ruling in George Floyd's case in Minneapolis, CNN correspondent Omar Jimenez and his news crew were arrested by the police. This incident, which occurred during a live broadcast, demonstrated blatant disregard for journalists' legal rights to cover events (CNN). Such incidents, carried out in public view and without legal justification, undermine public trust in law enforcement and constitute a clear violation of freedom of expression.

2.2 Online Threats

Violence and threats in the digital space, particularly targeting female journalists, have become a critical issue in the U.S. media landscape. According to a 2023 Pew Research Center study, over 60% of female journalists in the country have been subjected to online threats. These threats often include abusive messages, death threats, and even sexual violence, directly targeting their dignity and mental well-being.

The nature of these threats is diverse and severe. From threatening messages on social media to the publication of personal information intended for harassment, the scope of these attacks has expanded. Examples include cyberstalking, repeated abusive messaging, sharing violent imagery, and threats of physical harm or assault. In some cases, these attacks are orchestrated by extremist groups to intimidate and silence journalists.

Beyond the psychological harm, these threats have significant professional repercussions. Many female journalists, out of concern for their safety or that of their families, refrain from publishing sensitive or controversial reports. Consequently, these pressures lead to widespread self-censorship among journalists and significantly undermine the quality of independent reporting.

The lack of oversight on social media platforms is a major factor in the proliferation of such threats. The absence of stringent regulations and clear policies to address this behavior has hindered effective responses. For this reason, stronger legal mechanisms and the obligation of tech companies to monitor content rigorously are essential to address this crisis (Pew Research Center).

2.3 Arbitrary Arrests

The arbitrary detention of journalists for reasons related to their professional activities is another glaring manifestation of media suppression in the United States. According to a 2023 report by Reporters Without Borders (RSF), the United States ranks among developed nations with the highest number of journalist arrests. Over 100 journalists were detained in the past year, many of whom were released without trial or specific charges.

During the 2022 protests following the Supreme Court's ruling on abortion rights, several journalists in cities such as Los Angeles and New York were arrested. These arrests, carried out without clear and legal justification, were clearly intended to intimidate journalists and prevent coverage of widespread demonstrations (RSF). Such actions challenge the fundamental rights of journalists and serve as warnings to others seeking to uncover the truth.

3. Digital Censorship and Government Surveillance

3.1 Content Control Through Technology Companies

The U.S. government, leveraging its influence over major technology companies such as Meta (Facebook), Google, and Twitter, has gained powerful tools to control and manage the flow of information. Research by Stanford University in 2023 revealed that these companies, under government pressure, delete or restrict access to content targeting sensitive and critical policies. This includes topics such as immigration policies, police violence, and even social protests (Stanford University).

The government employs tools like formal requests, indirect pressures, and threats of heavy fines to compel these companies to comply. One example of such pressure involves repeated requests for the removal of content published by independent journalists or freedom-of-expression advocacy groups. Furthermore, by threatening stricter regulations on data protection or imposing higher taxes on tech companies, the government creates an atmosphere of coerced cooperation. This approach limits access to information and reduces transparency on social media platforms, thereby undermining the role of independent journalists.

3.2 Surveillance of Journalists

The U.S. government's direct surveillance of journalists is another tool for controlling and pressuring media freedom. According to research by Harvard University, the government uses advanced software and artificial intelligence to monitor journalists' activities. This surveillance includes tracking phone calls, emails, online activities, and even the physical locations of journalists (Harvard University).

The primary objective of such surveillance is to identify journalists' information sources and prevent the disclosure of sensitive governmental data. These methods, often justified under the guise of national security, have essentially become instruments for suppressing media freedom and restricting journalistic activity. For instance, in some cases, journalists have been interrogated after publishing sensitive reports, and their sources have faced intense scrutiny.

This widespread monitoring has left many journalists feeling insecure. They fear losing their information sources or even facing more severe threats to their professional and personal security. Such an environment not only limits media freedom but also fosters self-censorship among journalists, as many prefer to avoid sensitive topics to escape continuous surveillance and its associated risks.

4. Structural Discrimination in the Media

4.1 Gender Discrimination

Women in the U.S. media industry face significant structural barriers that severely limit their roles in key decision-making positions. According to Pew Research Center, only 20% of managerial positions in the media are held by women, while men occupy the

remaining 80%. These managerial roles include editor-in-chief positions, executive roles, and leadership of major news teams—positions that shape the overarching policies of media organizations. This gender imbalance not only impacts women's career opportunities but also restricts their influence in strategic decision-making (Pew Research Center).

Additionally, female journalists face online threats and sexual harassment. In 2023, a prominent case involved a journalist who, after exposing sexual harassment by a senior media executive, was forced to resign from her position. Such incidents not only create an unsafe work environment for women but also erode trust in the judicial system and available legal protections.

4.2 Racial Discrimination

Journalists from racial minorities, such as Black, Latino, and Asian communities, face compounded challenges. For example, in 2023, several Black journalists covering issues related to police violence and racism were subjected to widespread online threats. These threats, which included racist messages and personal attacks, forced some of them to resign from their positions (American Journalism Review).

Moreover, in many cases, minority journalists face editorial censorship when reporting on racial issues. They are often restricted from publishing sensitive reports by their editors. Such discriminatory practices highlight the persistent racial inequality in the media industry.

5. Social and Political Impacts

5.1 Declining Public Trust in the Media

Gallup Institute's 2023 study shows that only 34% of Americans trust news media. This decline in trust is a direct result of censorship, biased reporting, and lack of transparency in media practices (Gallup Institute).

5.2 Threats to Democracy

Restrictions on media freedom have led to decreased political transparency and increased misinformation. This was particularly evident during the 2020 presidential election and the COVID-19 crisis (American Journalism Review).

Conclusion

Despite its global reputation as a promoter of press freedom, the United States faces significant challenges in upholding media freedom. These restrictions are a clear violation of Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and have detrimental effects on democracy, political transparency, and public trust. The United Nations Human Rights Council is urged to take serious actions to monitor and compel the U.S. government to address these issues.

Recommendations

1. Repeal Oppressive Laws and Reform Legal Frameworks

The United States must repeal or amend restrictive laws such as the Espionage Act, which have become tools for silencing journalists and whistleblowers. These laws undermine democratic principles and violate the country's international obligations to uphold free speech and information flow.

Recommendation: Enact legislation that provides greater protections for whistleblowers and independent journalists, preventing unjust prosecutions.

2. Guarantee Unrestricted Access to Public Information

Unreasonable delays and frequent rejections of information requests under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) must be addressed. These practices undermine governmental transparency and deny citizens their right to information.

Recommendation: Establish an independent and nonpartisan body to oversee government compliance with public information requests and ensure timely responses.

3. End Violence Against Journalists

Physical violence and threats against journalists, particularly during protest coverage, should be recognized as severe human rights violations and addressed accordingly.

Recommendation: Create an independent committee to investigate cases of violence against journalists and impose stricter penalties on law enforcement officers or security

personnel involved in such acts.

4. Halt Digital Censorship and Surveillance

The U.S. government must refrain from pressuring technology companies to censor media content and monitor journalists. Such practices compromise press independence and violate journalists' privacy and the confidentiality of their sources.

Recommendation: The UN should call for greater transparency from the U.S. government and tech companies regarding censorship and surveillance policies, and establish an international framework to protect journalists from these threats.

5. Enhance Support for Minority and Women Journalists

Structural discrimination in the media industry, including racial and gender biases, must be addressed and rectified.

Recommendation: The U.S. government should initiate programs to empower women and minority groups in media and provide equal opportunities for leadership positions.

6. Cease Arbitrary Detentions of Journalists

The unlawful detention of journalists for covering sensitive events represents one of the most egregious violations of human rights and requires immediate attention.

Recommendation: The UN must urge the U.S. government to end such detentions, provide a detailed account of these cases, and commit to compensating affected journalists.

7. Rebuild Public Trust in Media

The steep decline in public trust in the U.S. media necessitates urgent measures to restore credibility.

Recommendation: Media outlets must commit to greater transparency in news production, and the government must ensure non-interference in editorial decisions.

8. Establish an International Monitoring Body

Given the widespread violations of press freedom in the U.S., it is essential for the United Nations to establish an independent body to monitor freedom of speech and media in the country.

Recommendation: This body could produce periodic reports on media conditions and hold the U.S. government accountable to international standards.

9. Support Independent Journalists and Local Media

Independent journalists and local media are at risk of extinction due to financial constraints and governmental pressures.

Recommendation: The UN should introduce financial and legal support programs for these groups and urge the U.S. government to strengthen the independence of local and independent media.

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