
Challenges to Freedom of Press, Assembly, and Association in the Digital Age: A Comparative Study of Jurisdictions

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ABSTRACT

The digital age has brought unprecedented opportunities for the exercise of fundamental freedoms, including press freedom, the right to peaceful assembly, and freedom of association. However, it has also posed significant challenges that vary across jurisdictions. This comparative study explores these challenges, focusing on the intersection of technological advancements, state control, and legal frameworks. Freedom of the press faces threats such as online censorship, the spread of misinformation, and surveillance technologies, which jeopardize journalistic integrity and independence. Governments in some jurisdictions exploit digital tools to suppress dissenting voices through internet shutdowns, content moderation laws, and targeted cyberattacks. Meanwhile, social media platforms, while offering a global reach, raise concerns over algorithmic biases and corporate influence on free speech. Similarly, the right to assembly is increasingly curtailed through digital surveillance, geofencing, and restrictions on online mobilization. Governments in authoritarian regimes often monitor and disrupt digital platforms to prevent protests, labelling them as threats to public order. On the other hand, democratic jurisdictions struggle with balancing the protection of digital assemblies with combating hate speech and disinformation. Freedom of



association is also under threat, as online organizations face restrictive regulations, data breaches, and cyberattacks. International non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and advocacy groups operating online face legal and operational hurdles, including restrictive cyber security laws and digital taxation policies. This study compares jurisdictions across democratic and authoritarian regimes, highlighting differences in legal approaches, technological adaptation, and civil society resilience. It emphasizes the need for balanced legal frameworks that protect these fundamental freedoms without compromising public safety or national security. By understanding these challenges, the study seeks to foster dialogue on safeguarding democratic principles in an increasingly digitalized world.

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INTRODUCTION

The digital age has revolutionized the exercise of fundamental rights, such as press freedom, peaceful assembly, and freedom of association, which are critical to democratic societies. Advancements in technology, particularly the internet and social media platforms, have enabled the swift dissemination of information, the organization of protests, and global collaboration. However, these opportunities come with significant challenges that threaten these freedoms across various jurisdictions. Authoritarian governments increasingly utilize digital tools for online censorship, surveillance, and internet shutdowns to suppress dissent, while even democratic states face difficulties balancing individual rights with national security amidst the rise of misinformation and data privacy concerns. Social media platforms, despite empowering voices, contribute to issues like algorithmic bias, corporate control, and the spread of disinformation and hate speech.¹

Additionally, online mobilization for peaceful assembly and association is hindered by geofencing, digital surveillance, and restrictive cybersecurity laws, with NGOs and advocacy groups often encountering operational and legal barriers. This comparative study explores these challenges across democratic and authoritarian regimes, analysing the interplay of legal, technological, and political



factors. It emphasizes the need for balanced legal frameworks to protect these fundamental freedoms while navigating the complexities of the digital era and preserving democratic values.

2. LEGAL FRAMEWORK GOVERNING FREEDOM OF PRESS, ASSEMBLY, AND ASSOCIATION

Freedom of the press, assembly, and association are essential democratic rights protected by international, regional, and domestic legal frameworks. These rights form the foundation of democracy by enabling the free exchange of ideas, fostering public participation, and ensuring government accountability. However, their interpretation and enforcement differ across jurisdictions, shaped by historical, political, and cultural contexts, leading to variations in the extent of protection and the challenges faced in upholding these freedoms.

2.1. INTERNATIONAL STANDARDS: UDHR AND ICCP

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) are key international instruments that set essential standards for the protection of human rights, including the freedoms of press, assembly, and association. Adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948, the UDHR serves as a universal benchmark for human rights and forms the basis for international law. Articles 19, 20, and 21 of the UDHR guarantee the rights to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly, and association, ensuring every individual's right to seek, receive, and share information through any medium and to assemble and associate peacefully. The ICCPR, adopted in 1966 and binding on its signatories, provides a more detailed legal framework, with Article 19 reaffirming the right to freedom of expression, including press freedom, subject to only limited restrictions for reasons like national security or public order. Articles 21 and 22 protect the right to peaceful assembly and association, allowing restrictions only when necessary to safeguard national security, public safety, or public order. While both documents recognize that these freedoms are fundamental, they also permit restrictions under specific circumstances, provided they are proportional, necessary, and legally prescribed. These international standards form a crucial foundation for protecting these freedoms, though their application varies across different national contexts, shaped by local laws and political environments.²



2.2. NATIONAL CONSTITUTIONS AND LEGAL PROTECTIONS

National constitutions often reflect international commitments by codifying freedoms of the press, assembly, and association. For example, the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution explicitly protects freedom of speech, press, and assembly, while Article 19 of the Indian Constitution guarantees these rights with reasonable restrictions. In democratic nations, specialized laws, such as media freedom acts or public assembly regulations, operationalize these rights while balancing them against public interest concerns. However, the digital age has driven the evolution of legal frameworks to address new challenges. Governments worldwide have introduced cybersecurity laws, content regulation policies, and surveillance mechanisms, which, while intended to combat online harms, often impose disproportionate restrictions on these freedoms. The effectiveness of such legal frameworks lies in their ability to strike a balance between safeguarding fundamental rights and addressing legitimate state interests, ensuring that democratic values are upheld in both physical and digital spheres.

2.3. CASE STUDIES OF SELECTED JURISDICTIONS

The challenges to freedom of press, assembly, and association differ widely across jurisdictions due to distinct political, legal, and cultural contexts, as evidenced by key case studies. In the United States, the First Amendment robustly protects these rights, yet incidents like the Edward Snowden revelations (2013) exposed government surveillance programs, raising concerns about press freedom, while the Black Lives Matter protests (2020) highlighted tensions between peaceful assembly and police responses.³

In India, Article 19 of the Constitution safeguards these freedoms, but the Kashmir Internet Shutdown (2019) drew criticism for curtailing press activities, protests, and NGO operations under the guise of maintaining public order.⁴ Similarly, Germany's Basic Law guarantees these rights, but the Network Enforcement Act (NetzDG), aimed at combating harmful online content, has faced backlash for potential over-censorship by social media platforms. In China, constitutional provisions theoretically protect these freedoms, but the Hong Kong Protests (2019) revealed their severe curtailment through the National Security Law, with arrests, surveillance, and censorship used to suppress dissent. These examples demonstrate the varying approaches to balancing fundamental freedoms with state interests, especially in the context of the digital era.



3. CHALLENGES TO FREEDOM IN THE DIGITAL AGE

The digital age has created new opportunities for exercising freedoms of press, assembly, and association but has also introduced significant challenges. Governments increasingly use digital tools for surveillance, censorship, and internet shutdowns to suppress dissent, particularly in authoritarian regimes. Even in democracies, algorithmic biases, misinformation, and corporate control over online platforms raise concerns about press freedom and impartiality. The right to assembly is curtailed by digital surveillance and restrictions on online mobilization, while NGOs and advocacy groups face cyberattacks, restrictive laws, and data breaches. These challenges underscore the need for balanced frameworks that protect fundamental rights while addressing legitimate concerns like public safety and national security.

3.1 CENSORSHIP AND CONTENT MODERATION ON DIGITAL PLATFORMS

Censorship and content moderation are critical issues in the digital age, as governments and platforms struggle to balance free expression with regulating harmful content. Authoritarian regimes use censorship to suppress dissent, while even democratic nations face criticism for enacting laws that sometimes restrict free speech in efforts to combat hate speech or misinformation. Social media platforms also face scrutiny for opaque moderation practices, with algorithmic biases and inconsistent enforcement disproportionately affecting marginalized groups. A balanced approach that includes transparency, accountability, and collaboration is essential to uphold free expression while addressing harmful content in the digital era.⁵

3.2 SURVEILLANCE AND PRIVACY CONCERNS

The digital age has heightened surveillance practices, raising serious privacy concerns worldwide. Authoritarian regimes increasingly use advanced technologies like facial recognition and data tracking to monitor citizens and suppress dissent, as seen in China's extensive surveillance network targeting activists. Even in democracies, programs like the PRISM surveillance system, revealed by Edward Snowden, expose the conflict between national security and individual privacy. Meanwhile, corporations collect vast amounts of user data for targeted advertising, raising ethical issues around consent and data protection. These practices risk chilling free expression and association, as individuals may self-censor out of fear of surveillance. To address these challenges, robust data protection laws, transparency, and accountability mechanisms are essential to safeguard privacy while balancing security needs.⁶



3.3 MISINFORMATION AND ITS IMPACT ON FREE EXPRESSION

The rise of misinformation in the digital age presents significant challenges to free expression and public discourse. While social media platforms foster open dialogue, they also facilitate the rapid spread of false or misleading information, which can distort public perception and undermine democratic processes. Misinformation surrounding political events, health issues, and social movements can lead to confusion, division, and even incite violence or discrimination. In response, governments have begun implementing content moderation laws to combat false narratives, but these measures can inadvertently infringe on free speech. Balancing the need to address harmful misinformation while protecting individuals' right to express differing views remains a complex issue. Furthermore, the role of digital platforms in moderating content raises concerns about algorithmic biases and the influence of corporate or political interests in determining what constitutes misinformation. To protect both free expression and the public interest, it is crucial to establish transparent content moderation practices, promote media literacy, and foster international cooperation to combat misinformation without curtailing democratic freedoms.⁷

4. FREEDOM OF PRESS IN THE DIGITAL ERA

The digital era has revolutionized press freedom by providing broader access to information and empowering independent journalists through digital platforms, social media, and citizen journalism. While this has democratized information and allowed diverse viewpoints to reach global audiences, it has also created challenges, with governments and corporations attempting to control or manipulate online content. In authoritarian regimes, digital tools are often used to suppress critical media and target journalists, while even in democracies, concerns about misinformation, data privacy, and corporate influence over news content threaten the integrity of digital journalism. Despite these challenges, the digital age offers opportunities for investigative journalism to bypass traditional barriers and reach wider audiences, making it crucial to address issues like censorship, corporate control, and media literacy to protect press freedom.

4.1. THE RISE OF DIGITAL JOURNALISM

The rise of digital journalism has dramatically reshaped how news is created, consumed, and shared. With the internet, social media, and mobile devices breaking down traditional barriers, anyone with internet access can now report and distribute news, bypassing traditional media outlets like newspapers



and TV. This shift has democratized information, allowing for a broader range of voices and making news more accessible globally. Digital journalism also offers real-time updates and interactive, multimedia storytelling, enhancing engagement. However, it also brings challenges, including misinformation, declining revenue for traditional media, and ethical concerns around online reporting. Despite these issues, digital journalism continues to thrive, fostering greater public participation and enabling faster dissemination of news.⁸

4.2. CHALLENGES POSED BY GOVERNMENTAL CONTROL AND CORPORATE INFLUENCE

In the digital age, both governmental control and corporate influence present serious challenges to press freedom and the integrity of information. In authoritarian regimes, governments often use digital tools to suppress dissent, censor media, and control the flow of information, turning the internet into a vehicle for surveillance and content manipulation. In democracies, while press freedom is generally protected, concerns are rising about the impact of government regulations on media, particularly regarding national security, hate speech, and misinformation. Simultaneously, corporate control over digital platforms raises issues, as tech giants like Google, Facebook, and Twitter have the power to shape news visibility through algorithms, often prioritizing engagement over truth. These platforms' content moderation practices can be perceived as biased or censorious, undermining free expression and stifling diverse voices, while concentrated media ownership limits journalistic independence. Balancing these challenges is crucial for maintaining freedom of expression and ensuring responsible governance in the digital era.

4.3. NOTABLE CASES OF PRESS SUPPRESSION

Notable instances of press suppression illustrate the varied threats to journalistic freedom across the globe. In India, during the Emergency (1975–1977), Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's government imposed strict censorship, requiring newspapers like The Indian Express to obtain approval before publishing and arresting dissenting journalists. In China, ongoing crackdowns involve internet censorship, journalist arrests, and the use of the "Great Firewall" to block critical content, targeting those who report on sensitive issues. Similarly, in Turkey, after the failed coup in 2016, the government closed numerous media outlets and detained hundreds of journalists under accusations of terrorism, severely limiting press freedom. In Russia, independent media face consistent suppression, with journalists



enduring threats, harassment, and strict media laws under Vladimir Putin's regime, as seen during the Ukraine war. Even in democracies like the United States, revelations from Edward Snowden in 2013 exposed mass surveillance programs like PRISM, raising concerns about journalists' ability to investigate without fear of retaliation. These examples underscore the pressing need to protect press freedom globally, ensuring transparency and accountability.⁹

5. FREEDOM OF ASSEMBLY IN THE AGE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media has revolutionized the exercise of freedom of assembly by enabling the organization of protests, mobilization of communities, and amplification of voices on a global scale. Movements like the Arab Spring and Black Lives Matter highlight how platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram facilitate large-scale demonstrations, spread awareness, and provide activists with the means to document abuses and reach wider audiences, bypassing traditional media. However, this digital transformation also brings challenges. Governments often exploit social media to monitor dissent, track protestors, or impose internet shutdowns to stifle mobilization. Additionally, the spread of misinformation and hate speech online can polarize communities and incite violence, while content moderation practices by social media companies have raised concerns over bias and censorship. To preserve freedom of assembly in the digital era, it is essential to balance technological advancements with protections against surveillance, censorship, and the misuse of online platforms.

5.1 .ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN ORGANIZING PROTESTS

Social media has become a vital tool in organizing protests, offering activists a platform to mobilize supporters, coordinate events, and amplify their message to a global audience. Platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram enable real-time organization, information sharing, and rallying participants without relying on traditional media. The accessibility and widespread use of social media allow grassroots movements to gain rapid momentum, even in regions with limited independent media. Notable events like the Arab Spring and the 2011 Occupy Wall Street protests demonstrated the power of social media in organizing demonstrations, sharing live updates, and documenting abuses. However, social media also presents challenges, including government surveillance, censorship, and the spread of misinformation, which can impact the success of these movements. Despite these risks, social media remains a potent tool for promoting free expression and facilitating collective action in the digital era.¹⁰



5.2 .INSTANCES OF INTERNET SHUTDOWNS

Internet shutdowns have been widely used by governments to suppress dissent and control information during times of political unrest. In India, the 2019 shutdown in Jammu and Kashmir, following the revocation of Article 370, was one of the longest in a democracy, disrupting communication and services. In Sudan, during the 2019 revolution, the government blocked internet access to prevent protests and information sharing, though activists found ways to continue organizing. Similarly, Iran shut down the internet in November 2019 during protests over fuel price hikes, stifling communication and documenting human rights violations. Myanmar's military junta imposed internet blackouts after the 2021 coup to hinder protests, while in Ethiopia, shutdowns followed the killing of a popular singer in 2020, aiming to curb violence and misinformation. These shutdowns reflect how authorities use digital control to suppress public expression and stifle movements for change.¹¹

6. FREEDOM OF ASSOCIATION IN THE VIRTUAL WORLD

In the digital age, freedom of association has expanded into the virtual realm, allowing individuals and groups to connect, organize, and advocate for various causes through online platforms. Social media, forums, and messaging apps have become essential tools for building communities, sharing ideas, and mobilizing support for social justice movements and political activism. These platforms eliminate geographic boundaries, enabling diverse and inclusive spaces for collaboration and expression. However, challenges persist, as governments and corporations may impose restrictions like surveillance, censorship, or content removal, particularly in authoritarian regimes where laws control online associations and punish virtual participation. Despite these obstacles, the digital realm remains crucial for exercising the right to free association, requiring protection against censorship, surveillance, and privacy infringements.¹²

6.1. DIGITAL PLATFORMS AS SPACES FOR ADVOCACY AND ASSOCIATION

Digital platforms have become key spaces for advocacy and association, allowing individuals and groups to connect, organize, and promote causes globally. Social media, blogs, and forums provide accessible tools for sharing ideas, mobilizing support, and amplifying voices on issues ranging from political activism to social justice. These platforms enable rapid dissemination of information, helping movements grow quickly and reach diverse audiences. However,



challenges like censorship, surveillance, and misinformation can complicate their effectiveness. Despite these risks, digital platforms remain crucial for fostering collective action and enabling free expression in the modern world.¹³

6.2. CHALLENGES POSED BY ALGORITHMS AND PLATFORM POLICIES

Algorithms and platform policies present significant challenges to freedom of expression and association in the digital age. Social media platforms often use algorithms to prioritize engaging or sensational content, which can amplify misinformation, hate speech, and polarization, while marginalizing diverse viewpoints. Inconsistent application of content moderation policies can result in accusations of bias or over-censorship, sometimes silencing political or social movements. Furthermore, the lack of transparency in content removal decisions leaves users unclear about the limits of free expression. These issues underline the need for more transparent and accountable algorithms and policies that protect users' rights while tackling harmful content effectively.¹⁴

6.3 IMPACT OF ONLINE REGULATION ON CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS

Online regulation has greatly impacted civil society organizations (CSOs) that depend on digital platforms for advocacy and mobilizing support. While the internet offers a way to reach global audiences, stricter regulations like content moderation, data privacy laws, and anti-terrorism measures can hinder CSOs' ability to communicate and organize freely. In repressive regimes, where governments monitor and censor online activity, CSOs may face surveillance, legal repercussions, or even content removal. The reliance on platforms with inconsistent policies further exposes CSOs to arbitrary restrictions, limiting their freedoms of expression, association, and access to information.¹⁵

7. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF JURISDICTIONS

A comparative analysis of jurisdictions reveals how different countries balance freedoms like speech, assembly, and association with concerns about national security, social order, or political control, especially in the digital realm. In the United States, the First Amendment protects free speech and assembly, but government surveillance, as shown by the PRISM program (2013), raises privacy concerns. India guarantees freedom of expression under Article 19, though restrictions can be imposed for public order, as seen in the Kashmir Internet Shutdown (2019). China takes a more restrictive



approach, enforcing heavy censorship, surveillance, and the National Security Law in Hong Kong, limiting free speech and assembly. Germany tries to balance press freedom with measures like the Network Enforcement Act, but concerns about over-censorship persist. Russia and Turkey use media control and laws to restrict protest and online communication, targeting journalists and activists. These varying approaches highlight the tension between protecting freedoms and maintaining state control, especially in the digital age.¹⁶

7.1. DEMOCRATIC VS. AUTHORITARIAN APPROACHES TO REGULATION

Democratic and authoritarian approaches to regulation differ in their balance of individual freedoms and state control, particularly in the digital age. Democracies focus on safeguarding rights like free speech and privacy while addressing issues such as misinformation and online harm, aiming for a balance between regulation and freedom. For example, Germany's Network Enforcement Act targets hate speech but is subject to judicial review. In contrast, authoritarian regimes prioritize state control, using censorship, surveillance, and restrictive laws to suppress dissent and maintain political power. China and Russia exemplify this approach, with heavy controls over digital spaces to limit criticism and opposition. Ultimately, democracies protect civil liberties, while authoritarian regimes use regulation to consolidate power and control public discourse.

7.2. SUCCESS STORIES IN UPHOLDING FREEDOMS

Success stories in upholding freedoms in the digital realm demonstrate how regulation can effectively protect civil rights. Estonia has created a digital society that combines broad access to e-governance with strong privacy protections and freedom of expression. Germany's Network Enforcement Act balances free speech with the need to combat hate speech without infringing on rights. In Canada, the PIPEDA framework ensures a balance between privacy and national security. Meanwhile, India's Supreme Court ruling in the Kashmir Internet Shutdown case reinforced the importance of transparency in internet shutdowns. These examples show that transparent regulation and robust legal frameworks can safeguard freedoms while fostering trust and innovation.

7.3. JURISDICTIONS WITH INCREASING RESTRICTIONS

Jurisdictions with increasing restrictions on digital freedoms are seeing heightened government control over online spaces, which limits free expression, assembly, and access to information. China is a prime example, with its Great Firewall blocking foreign websites and tightly controlling online content, stifling



speech and assembly. Russia enforces laws that curb press freedom and suppress protests through surveillance and arrests. Turkey has escalated restrictions, particularly after the 2016 coup attempt, with more control over social media, internet censorship, and targeting journalists. Iran frequently imposes internet shutdowns during protests and exercises tight control over digital platforms to prevent opposition. These cases highlight how governments use digital regulations and surveillance to control the flow of information and curtail freedoms in the digital age.

8. THE WAY FORWARD

To safeguard digital freedoms, a balanced approach is essential, protecting individual rights while addressing online harm. Governments need transparent, accountable regulations that uphold freedom of expression, privacy, and assembly, while also tackling issues like misinformation, hate speech, and cybersecurity risks. Digital platforms must ensure fair, non-discriminatory content moderation, with policies that respect user rights. International collaboration is key to tackling challenges like cybercrime and censorship, ensuring global human rights standards. Additionally, promoting digital literacy will empower users to navigate online spaces and participate fully in the digital era, helping to maintain a vibrant and inclusive platform for free expression.

8.1. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BALANCING REGULATION AND FREEDOM

Balancing regulation and freedom in the digital age requires a comprehensive approach. Governments should enact transparent regulations that safeguard individual rights while addressing issues like misinformation and hate speech, ensuring these laws undergo proper oversight to prevent misuse. Digital platforms need to be accountable for content moderation, ensuring fairness, transparency, and the avoidance of algorithmic bias. International collaboration is key to establishing global standards for digital rights, including data protection and online censorship. Additionally, promoting digital literacy will empower individuals to make informed online decisions, while public debate on the limits of freedom and regulation can help strike a balance between individual rights and the common good.

8.2. ROLE OF INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION IN SAFEGUARDING FREEDOMS

International cooperation is vital in safeguarding digital freedoms by fostering shared standards and addressing cross border challenges related to human rights. As digital spaces span beyond national borders, coordinated efforts between governments, international organizations, and civil society are



necessary to protect rights such as freedom of expression, privacy, and access to information. Global frameworks like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the European Union's GDPR help shape national policies, while international collaboration also tackles issues like online censorship, cybercrime, and misinformation. By exchanging knowledge, sharing best practices, and holding each other accountable, countries can ensure the protection of digital rights and uphold freedom in the digital world.¹⁷

8.3. EMPOWERING CITIZENS IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Empowering citizens in the digital age is crucial for ensuring they can fully participate in online spaces while protecting their rights and freedoms. This empowerment involves promoting digital literacy, teaching individuals to navigate online platforms, identify misinformation, and safeguard their privacy. Educating people on digital tools, security measures, and online ethics helps them make informed decisions, protect themselves from harm, and engage in social and political discourse. Access to information and the ability to express opinions and organize online are vital for strengthening democratic participation. Governments, civil society, and tech companies must collaborate to ensure citizens are aware of their rights and equipped to defend them, fostering a more informed, responsible, and active digital community.¹⁸

9. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, protecting fundamental freedoms such as speech, assembly, and association is critical in the digital era, where online platforms have become key to communication, activism, and expression. While the digital space provides unprecedented opportunities for global connection and engagement, it also brings challenges such as censorship, surveillance, misinformation, and privacy erosion. To safeguard these freedoms, it is essential to develop adaptive legal and ethical solutions that balance regulation with individual rights. Governments, tech companies, and international organizations must collaborate to establish transparent and accountable frameworks that protect digital rights and encourage responsible online participation. By creating an environment that respects human dignity and freedom, while addressing the complexities of digital technology, we can ensure that the digital realm remains a dynamic, inclusive platform for personal expression, societal progress, and democratic engagement.

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