IBERIAN MUN GENERAL ASSEMBLY

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*The question of ensuring security and freedom of expression in journalism.*

In a world where a vast amount of our knowledge is acquired from the media, the need to ensure journalists’ security and freedom of expression is vital to uphold the transparency and credibility that are indispensable in the shaping of democracy and public debate in modern and future societies. As stated in article 19 of the “United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights” (often abbreviated as UNUDHR), “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,”. In other words, journalists have the right to search for and publish information without being a target of censorship, independently of their perspective that, most of the times, originates from confirmation bias.

Since 2000, 1286 journalists have been killed worldwide, meaning that one journalist is killed about every 5 days. The areas where these deaths are most common are Central and Latin America, the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia. Nevertheless, there are much more eminent threats faced by journalists than death, including: political and economic pressure, intimidation (such as job insecurity and use of defamation laws), censorship, physical violence, surveillance, arbitrary arrest and detention, and kidnapping. An inevitable consequence of these threats is the decline of youth’s interest in pursuing journalism which can lead to a lack of uncensored information and make the media vulnerable to governmental control. With world-renowned presidents publicly questioning media’s credibility, controversial reporters disappearing in foreign embassies, and the incarceration of journalists under inhumane conditions, this issue has never been more relevant.

The main focus of the debate should be on brainstorming measures to ensure journalists’ safety both at home and abroad (regardless of any political animosities between their country of origin and their country of work), protecting journalists’ physical and moral integrity, decreasing governmental censorship, removing barriers faced by journalists to obtain reliable information, and eliminating impunity to those who commit attacks against the press. These measures should encompass the media sources, the government and, most importantly, the public (giving special emphasis to the youth). Other topics that can be touched upon are the protection of confidential sources, editorial autonomy, as well as recommendations for the police and government officials on how to deal with negotiations for reporters held in custody abroad.

During the debate, delegates need to pay attention to their Member States’ system of government. Those who support democracies will be in favor of the protection of journalists and will defend free press. On the other hand, countries with authoritarian regimes should bear in mind that their leaders rely on media outlets as propaganda tools; hence, freedom of speech and open debate are scarce, while all news fonts are strictly reviewed and censored by the party in charge. Nevertheless, as much as controversy is a crucial aspect in any debate, all 192 Member States have signed the UNUDHR, so the goal of every delegation should be to come to a consensus that complies with the human rights listed in this declaration. After all, the solutions should be global.

The economic status of the delegation often plays a role on the level of press freedom granted by the party in power. For instance, Member States with a greater technological budget have access to the technology to build firewalls blocking digital communications, as well as install cameras and microphones in journalists’ equipment.

To prepare for the debate, delegates are encouraged to begin by researching the Press Freedom Index, which is an annual rank published by non-governmental and non-profit organization Reporters Without Borders (RWB), whose two main focuses are to assist journalists in danger and to track internet censorship.

Another recommended source is the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), which is the UN agency responsible for the promotion of the freedom of press. It not only specializes in training professional journalists to grow acquainted and comply with national and international legislations (like in the World Journalism Education Congress held in July 2019), but also sponsors worldwide events during the “World Press Freedom Day” (namely in post-conflict regions where proper communication is essential to re-establish social bonds). Additionally, UNESCO works side by side with IFEX (a network of over 100 non-governmental organizations focused on protecting article 19 of the UNUDHR), who most successful works is the “No Impunity Campaign” that ensures justice is brought upon those who commit crimes against freedom of speech. Finally, delegates should take note of UNESCO’s Internet Universality ROAM-X Indicators (a framework to map media outlets’ compliance with human Rights, their Openness, Accessibility and involvement with Multistakeholders). These indicators will be a good tool to measure the success of the resolutions proposed and to track progress.

Amnesty International is another key fighter for freedom of expression and it has three goals: sponsor free and global access to information, emphasize the distinction between hate speech and free speech, and negotiate the release of prisoners of conscience (activists who are imprisoned because their background and ideals clash with the government). A solution that should inspire delegates to brainstorm their own is a tool created by this organization called “Detekt”, whose purpose is to help journalists scan their equipment for spyware.

In addition to these global networks, delegates are urged to investigate organizations based in their own Member States. Those from Latin American delegations should investigate the network Voces del Sur (a collaboration between seven different organizations also linked to IFEX), FEPALC (The Federation of Journalists of Latin America and the Caribbean), and the Inter America Press Association (whose works branches out throughout the Americas). Middle Eastern delegations should begin by investigating the Arab Network for Human Rights Information (ANHRI) and the Seyes Center for Media and Culture Freedom (focuses only on the Arab Levant region). For North African Member States, Rocky Peck Trust will be a good source of innovative workshops that touch aspects of journalists’ lives that are often overlooked, such as their physical health and traumas. In Asia, the most active is SEPA (Southeast Asian Press Alliance). Due to the lack of local organizations for free press in the Middle East, delegates should follow the efforts of the Ethical Journalism Network (EJN) and conferences such as the Arab Free Press Forum hosted by the World Association of News Publishers. All delegates are encouraged to conduct further research and use he previously mentioned sources as baselines.