

Defending Online Civic Space

Challenges facing Human Rights Defenders

Stanford | Global Digital Policy Incubator

GENEVA ACADEMY | Académie de droit international humanitaire et de droits humains
Academy of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights

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Kingdom of the Netherlands

The Internet has provided enormous opportunities for the exercise of the rights to freedom expression, association, and peaceful assembly. As global civic space has shrunk, the online sphere has proven essential for human rights defenders, media, and civil society more broadly, to access and share information and to hold the powerful to account.

The Internet has also brought new challenges. The proliferation of 'hate speech' and harassment targeting marginalised groups and human rights defenders, disinformation intended to undermine public debate and trust, incitement to terrorist acts, are among those with significant and negative human rights impacts.

Increasingly, States are engaging in regulation that threatens to restrict online civic space, often delegating the complex task of policing speech to private actors, without also delegating clear responsibilities to respect human rights.

While moves toward regulation are often rooted in genuine concern for the public interest, many States deploy similar arguments as a smokescreen for their efforts to consolidate power, control public discourse, and silence oppositional voices, under the auspices of protecting "national sovereignty" or "security".

Unchecked surveillance, criminalization of online expression and "cybercrime" prosecutions, data localisation regulations, attacks on encryption, increased website blocking and filtering, and internet shutdowns, are all on the rise, alongside less sophisticated but severe forms of harassment and intimidation. Private actors are often coopted into or actively profit from these human rights abuses, through arrangements that are opaque and outside of applicable legal frameworks.

These trends pose significant challenges to the Human Rights Council's often-repeated maxim that "the same human rights people have offline must also be protected online."

Join us to discuss what role the Human Rights Council can and should play in bolstering support for normative progress and action in defending our online civic space.

Panellists

David Kaye, UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of opinion and expression
Clément Voule, UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of peaceful assembly and of association
Leonid Volkov, Founder, Internet Protection Society, Russia
Zebo Tadjibaeva, Director, Asia Plus, Tajikistan
Maxence Melo, Executive Director, Jamii Forums, Tanzania
Gabriela Castillo, Defense Lawyer, ARTICLE 19 Mexico
Gayatri Khandhadai, Association for Progressive Communications (APC)

Moderator

Thomas Hughes, Executive Director, ARTICLE 19