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Considering the protection of freedom of expression in the digital age

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Introduction
Freedom of expression is the right of people to express their opinions without unfair interference. It is one of the most important human rights because it allows people to discuss political issues and participate in society. Before the digital age people spread their opinion through newspapers, books or conversations but nowadays the internet and social media have made it much easier for people to express their opinions to people from all over the world.

Although this seems like an improvement, the digital age also creates new problems. The government has power on the internet and can block posts or even arrest people for what they post online. But this is also necessary because people can also spread misinformation around the world or hate speech. These can harm individuals and society. Therefor this MUNO debate will look at how UN member states can protect freedom of expression in the digital age while also dealing with harmful content.

General overview
Freedom of expression is currently protected by Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). These agreements state that everyone has the rights to share opinions and information. But it also states that restrictions can be used to protect individuals and society. But this may only occur when the government follows international law.

One flaw is that the government can also block and restrict social media for criticising political leaders. Although they may claim this is necessary for national safety it can also prevent people from expressing their opinion. But not only the government but also social media platforms hold a lot of power. Platforms sometimes remove content or restrict content unfairly which can take away the right of expression of your opinion.

In conclusion this means that finding a right balance is necessary but very hard. Removing too much content can limit the freedom of expression, while allowing all the content can lead to harm. A solution is already in action. The European Union has introduced the Digital Services Act. which requires online platforms to be more transparent and accountable.

Major parties involved:

- United Nations (UN). The UN promotes and protects human rights through the agreements such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the ICCPR. This means that member states are responsible for respecting freedom of expression and ensuring that restrictions comply with international law.
- European Union (EU). The EU has introduced the Digital Services Act which requires online platforms to follow rules on transparency and users rights.
- Digital platforms. Big companies such as Google, TikTok and X have an important role because they control major platforms for online communication. They have to make decisions about content moderation and harmful behaviour. Their policies can strongly influence what people can see and say online.
- Journalist. Journalists provide information about public events and hold governments accountable. Journalists also gather the information that is later spread to big parts of the world or in a certain country.

Possible solutions

More transparency and accountability from digital platforms. Social media companies should explain why they remove or restrict posts. They should publish regular reports about their moderation decisions and provide accessible systems for users to appeal.

Better action against misinformation and hate speech. Governments and platforms should work together to reduce the spread of harmful content and misinformation without creating general censorship. They could improve the transparency of political advertising.

Protecting journalists and human rights defenders. Countries should investigate the daily threats, harassment and violence against journalists and activists, not only in real life but also online. International organisations should provide training and support for people working in dangerous environments.

International standards for online freedom of expression. UN member states could work together to strengthen international guidelines based on Article 19 of the ICCPR. These guidelines should make clear that online expression deserves the same protection as real life expression. Any restriction should have a clear legal basis, serve a legitimate purpose and be necessary.

Independent oversight and international cooperation. Countries could encourage independent regulators and cooperation between governments, technology companies and civil society. This would help prevent abuse of power and make sure that protecting people from online harm does not become an excuse for censorship.