

Inside the UN Plan to Control Speech Online

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A powerful United Nations agency has unveiled a plan to regulate social media and online communication while clamping down on what it describes as “false information” and “conspiracy theories,” sparking alarm among free-speech advocates and top U.S. lawmakers.

The U.N. Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) outlined a series of “concrete measures which must be implemented by all stakeholders: governments, regulatory authorities, civil society, and the platforms themselves.” in a [59-page report](#) released this month.

The approach includes the imposition of global policies, through institutions such as governments and businesses, that seek to stop the spread of various forms of speech while promoting objectives such as “cultural diversity” and “gender equality.”

In particular, the U.N. agency aims to create an “Internet of Trust” through a focus on what it calls “misinformation,” “disinformation,” “hate speech,” and “conspiracy theories.”

Examples of expression flagged to be stopped or restricted include concerns about elections, public health measures, and advocacy that could constitute “incitement to discrimination.”

Critics have warned that allegations of “disinformation” and “conspiracy theories” have increasingly been used by powerful forces in government and Big Tech to silence true information and even core political speech.

Just this month, the U.S. House Judiciary Committee released a report blasting the “pseudoscience of disinformation.”

Among other concerns, the committee found that this “pseudoscience” has been “weaponized” by what lawmakers refer to as the “Censorship Industrial Complex,” the goal of which is to silence constitutionally protected political speech, mostly by conservatives.

“The pseudoscience of disinformation is now—and has always been—nothing more than a political ruse most frequently targeted at communities and individuals holding views contrary to the prevailing narratives,” states the congressional [report](#), titled, “The Weaponization of ‘Disinformation’ Pseudo-Experts and Bureaucrats.”

Indeed, many of the policies called for by UNESCO have already been implemented by U.S.-based digital platforms, often at the behest of the Biden administration, the latest congressional report makes clear.

On Capitol Hill, lawmakers nevertheless expressed alarm about the UNESCO plan.

“I have repeatedly and publicly criticized the Biden administration’s misguided decision to rejoin UNESCO, putting U.S. taxpayers on the hook for hundreds of millions of dollars,” House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Michael McCaul (R-Texas) told The Epoch Times regarding the social media plan.

Calling UNESCO a “deeply flawed entity,” Mr. McCaul said he’s especially concerned that the organization “promotes the interests of authoritarian regimes—including the Chinese Communist Party.”

Indeed, UNESCO, like many other U.N. agencies, includes multiple members of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in its leadership [ranks](#), such as Deputy Director-General [Xing Qu](#).

The CCP has repeatedly made clear that even while working in international organizations, CCP members are expected to follow Party orders.

Lawmakers on the House Appropriations subcommittee that deals with international organizations are currently working to halt or reduce funding to various U.N. agencies that lawmakers say are using U.S. taxpayer funds improperly.

The U.S. government already has twice exited UNESCO—under the Reagan and Trump administrations—because of concerns noted by the administrations as extremism, hostility to American values, and other problems.

The Biden administration rejoined the agency earlier this year over the [objections](#) of lawmakers.

The UNESCO Plan

While being marketed as a plan to uphold free expression, the new UNESCO regulatory regime calls for international censorship by “independent” regulators who are “shielded from political and economic interests.”

“National, regional, and global governance systems should be able to cooperate and share practices ... in addressing content that could be permissibly restricted under international human rights law and standards,” the report states.

Unlike the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which prohibits any governmental infringement on the right to free speech or free press, UNESCO points to various international “human rights” instruments that it says should determine what speech to restrict.

These agreements include the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which states that restricting freedom of expression must be provided for by law and must also serve a “legitimate aim.”

In a [recent review](#) of the United States, a U.N. human rights committee called for changes to the U.S. Constitution and demanded that the U.S. government do more to stop and punish “hate speech” to comply with the ICCPR.

Another key U.N. instrument is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states explicitly in Article 29 that “rights and freedoms may in no case be exercised contrary to the purposes and principles of the United Nations.”

In short, the U.N. view of “freedom of expression” is radically different from that enshrined in the U.S. Constitution.

The UNESCO report states that once content that should be restricted is found, social media platforms must take measures, ranging from using algorithm suppression (shadow banning) and warning users about the content to de-monetizing and even removing it.

Any digital platforms found to not be “dealing with content that could be permissibly restricted under international human rights law” should “be held accountable” with “enforcement measures,” the report states.

UNESCO Director-General Audrey Azoulay, a former French culture minister with the Socialist Party, cited risks to society to justify the global plan.

“Digital technology has enabled immense progress on freedom of speech,” Ms. Azoulay, who took over the U.N. agency from longtime Bulgarian Communist Party leader Irina Bokova, said in a statement. “But social media platforms have also accelerated and amplified the spread of false information and hate speech, posing major risks to societal cohesion, peace, and stability.

“To protect access to information, we must regulate these platforms without delay, while at the same time protecting freedom of expression and human rights.”

In the foreword to the new report, titled “Guidelines for the Governance of Digital Platforms,” Ms. Azoulay states that stopping certain forms of speech and, at the same time, preserving “freedom of expression” is “not a contradiction.”

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Ms. Azoulay said.**

Citing a survey commissioned by UNESCO itself, the U.N. agency also said most people around the world support its agenda.

According to UNESCO, the report and the guidelines were developed through a process of consultation including more than 1,500 submissions and more than 10,000 comments from “stakeholders” such as governments, businesses, and nonprofit organizations.

UNESCO said it will work with governments and companies to implement the regulatory regime worldwide.

“UNESCO is ... not (sic) proposing to regulate digital platforms,” a spokesman for UNESCO, who asked not to be identified, told The Epoch Times in a statement. “We are, however, conscious that dozens of governments around the world are already drafting legislation to do so, some of which is not in line with international human rights standards, and may even jeopardize freedom of expression.

“Similarly, the platforms themselves are already making millions of human and automated decisions a day with respect to the moderation and curation of content, based upon their own policies.”

The European Union, which already places severe limitations on free expression online, has already provided funding for implementation worldwide, UNESCO says.

The Biden administration says it wasn't involved in creating the plan.

“We will reserve comment until we finish carefully studying the plan,” the State Department told The Epoch Times in an email.

Free Speech Concern Grows

As awareness of the UNESCO plan spreads, concerns about freedom of speech and free expression online are mounting.

Sarah McLaughlin, a senior scholar at the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE), expressed alarm.

“FIRE appreciates that UNESCO's new action plan for social media recognizes the value of transparency and the need for protecting freedom of expression, but remains deeply concerned about efforts to regulate online ‘disinformation’ and ‘hate speech,’” Ms. McLaughlin told The Epoch Times.

“As we've seen in recent weeks, enforcement of the EU's Digital Services Act, for example, has created even more uncertainty about platforms' content moderation policies and users' ability to speak freely online. Local legal restrictions and norms can ultimately influence how platforms operate on a global scale.

“As countries around the world ramp up regulation of speech on the internet, it becomes increasingly likely that platforms' enforcement will affect users—including Americans—outside of the states enforcing such rules.”

Indeed, across Europe, “hate speech” rules have increasingly been used, not just to silence speech on issues such as marriage, immigration, sexuality, and religion, but even to prosecute those who violate speech laws.

This month, Dr. Paivi Rasanen, a member of the Finnish Parliament and the former interior minister, triumphed after a yearslong “hate speech” prosecution over her online speech in support of the biblical understanding of homosexuality and marriage.

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In Poland, several members of the European Parliament are facing charges of “hate speech” for sharing political advertisements warning about the possible effects of mass Islamic immigration into Europe.

Even more troubling to critics is that the concept of “hate speech” itself was introduced into the U.N. system by the Soviet Union, which regularly described anti-communist speech as “hate speech,” Jacob Mchangama explained in a 2011 paper for Stanford University's Hoover Institution.



Patrick Wood, founder and chairman of Citizens for Free Speech. (citizensforfreespeech.org)

Patrick Wood, founder and chairman of Citizens for Free Speech, is warning that the UNESCO plan will certainly be used to silence critics of its agenda.

"When UNESCO trots out statements like, 'the result of extensive worldwide consultations and is backed by a global opinion survey,' the fix is in," Mr. Wood told The Epoch Times.

"In this case, it will lead to a deluge of global programs to censor speech deemed counter to its agenda."

The George Soros-funded Electronic Frontier Foundation, which styles itself "the leading nonprofit" defending free speech, said it didn't have anyone available to comment on the UNESCO plan.

Concerns about the U.N. attitude toward free speech aren't new and have grown in recent years—especially as so many of its member-states with agents in U.N. leadership are known for suppressing dissent.

The UNESCO plan also comes after the agency unveiled a plan last year to combat what it described as "conspiracy theories" and "misinformation" through education.

According to the organization, "conspiracy theories" can "reduce trust in public institutions" and cause problems, such as decreasing people's desire to "reduce their carbon footprint."

Examples of "conspiracy theories" cited in last year's report include everything from widely held beliefs such as "climate change denial" and concerns about "manipulation of federal elections" in the United States to more far-fetched and fringe notions such as the "Earth is flat" or "Michelle Obama is actually a lizard."

U.N. Under-Secretary-General for Global Communications Melissa Fleming last year spoke at a World Economic Forum event and boasted that the global organization had "partnered" with Google to promote its materials and suppress those that contradict it in search results.

"We own the science," she said. "We think the world should know it."

In an October 2020 World Economic Forum podcast on "seeking a cure for the infodemic," Ms. Fleming bragged of having enlisted more than 100,000 volunteers to amplify U.N. views while squelching competing narratives that she dubs "misinformation."

The revelation came after years of U.N. and governmental efforts to suppress what the global organization describes as extremism, misinformation, and more on the internet.

In 2016, the U.N. Security Council launched a "framework" to fight "extremism" online on the heels of a program from the previous year that pledged to battle "ideologies" that it said might lead to violence. Communism wasn't one of the targeted ideologies.

UNESCO Defends the Plan

The UNESCO spokesman defended the new plan, framing it more as an effort to protect free expression rather than a plan to limit it.

"Protecting freedom of expression has been at the heart of all of UNESCO's initiatives to promote best practices in communications for decades, and this principle underpinned our approach to the Guidelines from the start," the spokesman said.

He also pointed to a section of the guidelines that calls for adhering to “legal due process” when dealing with “hate speech.”

“They put a particular focus on the need for transparency as well as systematic human rights due diligence and impact assessments, as well as accountability to users,” the spokesman said, noting that the plan calls for “equal distribution of moderation capacity.”

“It is also clearly stated that the Guidelines should be considered in their entirety, rather than picking and choosing—for example, a policy on content moderation implemented by regulators that do not meet the definition of independence set out in the Guidelines would not be in alignment, regardless of the specific nature of the policy.”

The spokesman claimed that the guidelines will actually “expand” freedom of expression.

The organization didn’t provide a timeline for implementation, but more meetings are scheduled in the lead-up to the September 2024 U.N. summit in New York City.