



July 2021

# FOC Joint Statement on Freedom of Expression Online Presented at the 47<sup>th</sup> Session of the United Nations Human Rights Council

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Presented by H.E. Ambassador Kirsti Kauppi, Permanent Representative of Finland in Geneva, during the interactive dialogue on the annual report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, Irene Khan.

This statement is delivered on behalf of the Freedom Online Coalition.

The Freedom Online Coalition is a Coalition of 32 governments deeply committed to the human rights and fundamental freedoms proclaimed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. We strongly believe that human rights including the freedom of expression and the freedom of peaceful assembly and association must be respected and implemented both offline and online – worldwide. We welcome other states' support for this view.

The Coalition extends its warmest thanks to Special Rapporteur Khan for her contribution to the Coalition activities this year.

The Internet should be guided by policies that promote the free flow of information and that protect human rights and foster innovation, creativity, and economic growth. The Freedom Online Coalition will continue to advance these goals worldwide. The Coalition believes that digital technologies and, in particular the Internet, provide a unique platform that enable individuals to exercise their human rights more fully, including the freedom to hold and express opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

The Coalition is deeply concerned with the growing trend of state-sponsored actions to curb these freedoms. This includes the use of arbitrary or unlawful surveillance practices; partial or complete Internet shutdowns and network disruptions as well as online content regulation and censorship that are inconsistent with human rights law. The Coalition is also alarmed by the manipulation of information and spread of disinformation by both State and non-State actors to undermine the international rules-based order and erode support for the democracy and human rights that underpin it.

Shutdowns and state-sponsored network disruptions may silence political opposition, limit peaceful protests and prevent human rights defenders from documenting abuses. Moreover, arbitrary network disruptions are inconsistent with the targets of the Sustainable Development Goals, undermine the economic benefits of the Internet and disrupt access to essential services such as health care.

Internet censorship can deprive individuals, whose voices are not equally represented by mainstream media sources, of the core platforms where they access educational resources, express themselves and

interact with each other. Censorship often affects women and girls and other individuals who may face multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination.

The Coalition calls on all governments to immediately end Internet shutdowns and to refrain from content restrictions or actions that restrict civic space online and offline, in violation of states' obligations under international human rights law. All governments should act in a manner that ensures a free, open, interoperable, reliable and secure Internet, and fully respects human rights including the freedom of expression.

Thank you.

## Freedom Online Coalition Background

The FOC is a multilateral coalition of 32 governments that collaborate to advance Internet freedom worldwide. The Coalition provides a forum for like-minded governments to coordinate efforts and work with civil society, the private sector, and other Internet stakeholders to support the ability of individuals to exercise their human rights and fundamental freedoms online. The FOC invites all states that support an open and interoperable Internet to apply to join the FOC.

The mission and vision of the FOC are founded upon the notion that the same rights that people have offline must also be protected online; a pioneering notion originally outlined in the founding FOC Hague Declaration, reaffirmed in the Nairobi Terms of Reference, Tallinn Agenda and San José Statement, and further confirmed in UN Human Rights Council resolutions 20/8, 26/13, 28/16 and 32/13, adopted July 5, 2012, June 26, 2014, March 26, 2015, and July 1, 2016, respectively, as well as resolutions 68/167, 69/166 and 71/199 adopted by consensus by the UN General Assembly respectively on December 18, 2013, December 18, 2014, and December 19, 2016.

The FOC seeks to identify best practices regarding the application of human rights obligations and commitments in the evolving online landscape, as well as to call attention to conditions that undermine those rights.

The FOC, through the Digital Defenders Partnership, also provides rapid response to a range of threats to Internet freedom; from supporting bloggers and cyber activists who find themselves under digital attack, to helping them exercise their human rights online in Internet repressive environments. More information on the Digital Defenders Partnership is available at: <http://www.digitaldefenders.org/>.

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