The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)

*Background Guide*

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The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) is a specialized agency of the United Nations that was founded in 1945. UNESCO’s initial goal in the wake of World War II was to assist in rebuilding libraries, museums, schools, and academic infrastructure that was destroyed during the war. In the 1950s, as more less-developed countries joined the United Nations, the agency’s focus shifted toward addressing poverty, illiteracy, and underdevelopment. UNESCO headquarters are located in Paris and currently, UNESCO has 195 Member States and 9 associate members. Today, UNESCO’s main function is promoting collaboration in the fields of education, science, and culture. UNESCO summons international conferences to set standards and discuss current issues in these fields.  

I. Promoting Internet Universality and open Internet for all

Statement of the Issue:

In the digital age, citizens are struggling to protect their rights of free speech and assembly on the internet because of government censorship and government monitoring. Over two-thirds of all internet users reside in countries where criticisms of the government or military are subject to censorship.

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UNESCO’s 38th General Conference, in 2015, adopted the concept of “Internet Universality,” which recognized the internet as a network of economic and social interactions that enabled rights, empowered communities, and helped to facilitate development. The concept of Internet Universality encompasses four principles, also known as the ROAMX principles. The four principles ROAMX represents are rights, openness, accessibility, multi-stakeholder participation, and cross-cutting issues. In 2017, UNESCO and the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) began to develop a set of Internet Universality indicators that covered these four principles. Internet Universality Indicators will help governments and other internet stakeholders address their national internet environments and promote values of internet universality, such as free and open internet for all.

UNESCO’s perception that the internet connects the global community by allowing the sharing of ideas, experiences, and information is a widely accepted idea. There are some members of the international community that do not share this view of the internet, or more accurately, that believe the internet is a tool for government to control information and wield economic power. For as long as the internet has existed, China has sought to control and monitor how its citizens view and use it, a concept they call “internet sovereignty.” The Chinese government developed a technology called “The Great Firewall” for the purpose of controlling and monitoring the internet activity of Chinese citizens. “The Great Firewall” is a part of “The Golden Shield Project” that blocks a plethora of websites on a wide variety of topics. The government’s rules as for what online content is permissible are extremely vague. Some of the guidelines include that news should be “in the public interest” and “healthy,” and that no content should damage “China’s culture or traditions.” No internet content is permitted that challenges the Chinese Communist Party. A severe example of the Chinese government’s restriction of internet access occurred in the Xinjiang region in 2009, after ethnic violence erupted between Muslim Uighurs and Han Chinese. In response to this

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violence, the Chinese government imposed a 10-month internet blackout in Xinjiang. The government believed that the violence had been orchestrated using the internet.  

The Chinese government is not the only member of the international community that believes monitoring internet access is an effective way to control its content. In 2018, the European Union voted to accept Article 13, a bill that establish tech companies and platforms responsible for copyright infringing content posted to their websites. Some members of the EU believe that the filters needed to conduct online surveillance are detrimental to freedom of expression. German lawmaker Julia Reda believes that legal content, such as parodies and memes, will be caught up in these online filters. Supporters of the bill believe that it will restore the balance of artists and journals getting credit for their published works.

On the other hand, countries such as Iceland and Estonia have astonishingly low levels of government censorship. Iceland is an international leader in promoting the right to free speech as well as one of the most web connected countries in the world, as it holds one of the highest percentages of households with access to the internet. In 2007, the city of Seltjarnes in Iceland became the first city in the world where every citizen had access to fiber-optic internet service. Further, there are no government imposed restrictions on internet connectivity in Iceland.

UNESCO’s aim is to help protect human rights on the internet by promoting multilingualism and equitable access to information and knowledge. UNESCO holds a leading role in the international community to encourage access to information for all and cultural diversity on global information networks. UNESCO encourages all of its member states and extends this encouragement to the international community to provide “Internet Universality” to all of their citizens.

History:

In 1958 the “Internet,” at the time interconnected computer networks linked by copper wires, was pioneered by the U.S. Department of Defense to diminish the

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possibility of communications being intercept in the case of a nuclear attack. Nearly thirty years later, in 1989, the World Wide Web was invented. The World Wide Web is a system of information sites that can be accessed over the medium of the internet. In 1996, the United States passed the Communications Decency Act (CDA), which prohibited the posting of indecent or offensive content on the internet. In 1997, the United States Supreme Court struck down CDA as an unconstitutional restriction on internet speech. The United Kingdom passed the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act in 2000. This controversial legislation allowed public bodies the use of surveillance and the ability to monitor people’s internet activity, amongst other things.

In the wake of the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks, countries began to reevaluate their approach to internet censorship and monitoring. Countries such as France, Switzerland, Spain, the U.K., and Belgium began to implement data retention laws, which allowed for governments to keep logs containing information on transaction data. Kenyan lawmakers then passed a law which made it a criminal offense to post, transmit, or collect information that could be useful for a person committing or preparing to commit an act of terrorism. The vague language of the Act caused a lot of criticism about the impact on internet users.

In 2003, the first World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) was held. The goal of the Summit, which was endorsed by the U.N., was to find solutions and reach agreements in internet governance. More than 147 countries attended the Summit and in 2006, the U.N. General Assembly adopted Resolution 60/252 on WSIS, which acknowledged the need to bridge the digital divide by assisting developing countries. Following the Summit, the Secretary General of the U.N. called the convening of the Global Internet Governance Forum, which further debated internet governance. In 2016, as a result of this Forum, Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights stated

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that everyone enjoyed the promotion, protection, and enjoyment of human rights on the
internet.9

Analysis:

Since its start, navigating through the digital age and the internet has not been
easy. Citizens and governments alike are entering uncharted territory as issues such as
internet privacy, internet censorship, and free speech on the internet are becoming
prominent. The U.N.’s concept of Internet Universality and Internet Universality
Indicators are supposed to serve as guiding principles for nations when navigating their
approach to internet access and content. The issue of internet universality could result
in major discrepancies in opportunity and access to information for future generations.
Internet universality advocates for free and open access of internet to all citizens. Critics
of internet universality believe that the concept does not address the concerns of
national security, privacy, and intellectual property rights.

The plausibility and practicality of achieving internet universality around the world
is another aspect of the concept that critics question. The global digital divide is the
uneven development of internet throughout the world. It is the disparity of quality of and
access to the internet that caused some countries to fall behind in technology, labor,
and education. In order to establish internet universality across the globe, all countries
need to have around the same access to and quality of internet. The global digital divide
widens when internet universality is imposed and enforced only in developed countries
that have access to high-quality internet.10

China’s censorship of internet content and access to internet in general is a prime
example of a country whose internet practices would be addressed as a result of the
U.N.’s internet universality. China’s disregard of their citizens’ human rights on the
internet violates the internet universality concept of ROAMX. The U.N. and the
international community have, thus far, failed to act to change laws of censorship and
international security in China. In August of 2017, China sentenced Lu Yuyu, a journalist

who used social media as a platform to protest issues in China, to four years in prison on the charge of ‘picking quarrels and stirring up trouble.’ The international community and the U.N.’s lack of protest on China’s severe act of censorship demonstrates a lack of commitment to promote internet universality where it is needed most.

Wholly and completely achieving internet universality is a goal, but helping to reduce extreme censorship of internet content and access is priority. In 2016, the U.N. helped to ignite and prioritize this conversation on internet censorship by creating the concept of internet universality. The international community and the U.N. should work to hold countries accountable for their extreme censorship of the internet as a violation of human rights. The first thing the international community needs to draw attention to is the fact that under half the world’s population, 42% or around 3 billion people, are online.11 Accessible and affordable internet in poor countries is hard to come by. This problem is further stemmed by lack of literacy and good education in those countries that are the foundation to navigating the internet. The lack of internet access in poor countries and regions creates a further divide between developed and developing countries.

Conclusion:

The concept of internet universality will aid developed nations in guiding their future internet governance and will guide developing countries in building their internet infrastructure and designing their governance strategies. The international community and UNESCO must acknowledge the global digital divide between developed and developing nations when attempting to create legislation on internet universality. Further, the international community has to commit to addressing countries that currently violate people’s human rights on the internet. The first step in achieving internet universality is to stop government censorship from infringing on people’s human rights. Internet universality will be a defining issue for generations to come and the U.N. must establish a clear stance on its positon on internet governance so it can be developed and enforced around the globe.

Questions:
1. Is internet universality achievable in your lifetime?
2. Does internet universality help to bridge or widen the global digital divide?
3. How can the U.N. aid people who are subject to government censorship in uncooperative countries?
4. Is internet universality easily enforced? Is the concept of internet universality too broad?
II. Protecting Cultural Heritage and Art in Conflict Zones

Statement of the Issue:

Often times, civil society does not realize the importance of protecting natural and cultural heritage until it is too late. War and conflict bring inherent destruction and devastation. War’s destruction does not discriminate between targeted land and regions rich with cultural heritage. Cultural heritage sites are wrecked in these conflicts, and often, militant groups destroy cultural sites to send a message of violence to citizens and governments. UNESCO World Heritage’s mission is to ensure the protection of natural and cultural heritage sites around the world. It works to encourage state parties to protect and conserve their cultural heritage, as well as to urge the international community to embrace the concept that heritage sites belong to all peoples of the world, irrespective of the territory on which they are located.\(^\text{12}\)

For a site to be considered for a spot on the World Heritage List, the site must be of outstanding universal value and meet at least one of ten criteria. Some criteria include: to represent a masterpiece of human creative genius, to exhibit an important interchange of human values, and to bear a unique testimony to a cultural tradition or to a civilization. Only countries that have signed the World Heritage Convention can submit nomination proposals for properties to be considered for a place on UNESCO’s World Heritage List.\(^\text{13}\)

An old temple is often not the first image that comes to mind when thinking about victims of war. This is because the media and governments often neglect to focus on the cultural and historical destruction that can take place during active wars, as these instances are less pressing than the human loss and suffering that occur during wartime. Dating decades ago, Mao Zedong’s Cultural Revolution destroyed thousands of ancient Chinese historical sites to rid the country of traditional influences. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan destroyed long-standing Buddhist temples and monuments in


the region. The Azerbaijani government of Armenia destroyed thousands of cross stones, called Khachkars, which date back to the 6th century that represent unique Armenian burial traditions. There are numerous examples of war destroying cultural sites, but like the examples cited above, there is not much documentation or public knowledge of them. UNESCO and the World Heritage List are trying to change this pattern and to bring more awareness to these patterns and crimes of war.

As an example of destruction in war time, we can look to the ancient city of Palmyra. Palmyra is an oasis in the Syrian Desert, which used to feature ancient temples, ruins, and shrines. It is home to monumental ruins of a great city that was once a cultural center of the ancient world. The art and architecture of Palmyra combined Greco-Roman techniques with local traditions and Persian influences. This great city was added to the List of World Heritage in Danger in 2013. In 2015 and part of 2016, the Islamic State occupied the city of Palmyra and destroyed its historic treasures. The jihadist group destroyed the Temple of Bel, the Temple of Baalshamin, the Arch of Triumph, and part of a Roman theater. In Palmyra’s museum, statues were mutilated and destroyed and the head of antiquities in Palmyra was executed by these terrorists. Palmyra’s cultural treasures are world history and the responsibility in protecting these treasures belongs not only to Syria, but to the world. UNESCO brands this destruction as “cultural cleansing” and UNESCO’s Director General, Irina Bokova commented that this destruction “shows how extremists are terrified by history and culture.” UNESCO and the World Heritage List are currently working to restore some of Palmyra’s treasures and to preserve and protect its remaining cultural sites. Their goal is to encourage civil society to become more engaged in protecting cultural sites so that new resources can be developed from preventing future atrocities.

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History:

War has brought death and destruction to every piece of land that it's touched, beyond human suffering and death, it has long had a negative impact on history and culture. Attempts to preserve important cultural sites from the destruction of war are often seen throughout history, but most of the time, the only advocates for preservation are the people who have cultural ties to the heritage site.

In 1847, the first international document concerning the protection of cultural heritage sites from war was constructed. Article 8 of the Brussels Declaration stated that in times of war seizure, destruction of, or willful damage to, historic monuments or works of art and science was subject to legal proceedings by competent authorities. In 1899, Czar Nicholas II of Russia initiated an international peace conference aiming to revise the Brussels Declaration and to adopt a Convention with Respect to the Laws and Customs of War on Land, also known as the Hague Convention. This Convention established the immunity of cultural property. Nearly 30 years later, in 1935, the Roerich Pact, a Pan-American initiative, formed the idea that cultural property must be “respected and protected in time of war and in peace.” The Netherlands, in 1948, proposed a new draft international text to UNESCO focusing on the protection of cultural property in times of armed conflict. From this new draft, the Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict and its two Protocols were formed. This Convention formally recognized that damage to any specific region’s cultural property is “damage to the cultural heritage of all mankind.”

The same year of the Convention’s first protocol, 1954, Egypt decided to build the Aswan Dam. The dam would flood the Upper Nile Valley and numerous ancient monuments. UNESCO launched an international campaign to safeguard these monuments, also known as the Nubia Campaign. The World Heritage List stemmed from this campaign, which is a running list of properties threatened by conflict or natural disasters.

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In 1999, the Second Protocol of the Convention was adapted which allowed national legislatures to punish serious violations of the Convention. Serious violations were labeled as theft, pillage, attacks, or acts of vandalism against cultural property. In 2016, the International Criminal Court found jihadist Ahmad Faqi Al Mahdi guilty of war crimes for destroying religious sites in Timbuktu. This was the first time in history that the destruction of cultural property was considered a war crime and marks a significant step for the international community.

**Analysis:**

The destruction of cultural heritage is cultural cleansing, a form of genocide in which the victims span entire civilizations. Neither nation nor government has sole responsibility or sovereignty in protecting the world’s cultural heritage, but rather all peoples of the world are bound by this collective responsibility. UNESCO’s World Heritage List and civil society must delegate resources to protect cultural heritage sites and ensure that sites across the globe have equal access to resources that aid in preservation and protection.

Numerous studies and a number of scholars have looked into the protection of cultures and historical sites. A study carried out by the International Council on Monuments and Sites in 1993 found that sites in Europe and sites regarding Christianity were over-represented on the World Heritage List, whereas living cultures and ‘traditional cultures’ were underrepresented. The World Heritage List, in 1994, launched the Global Strategy to combat this over-representation. The Global Strategy broadened the definition of World Heritage to better reflect the spectrum of the world’s cultural and natural treasures and made efforts to encourage countries to become state parties to the Convention to nominate regions that were not well-represented on the World Heritage List. There are currently 178 countries that have signed the World Heritage Convention and 132 state parties who have submitted tentative lists of sites for nomination to the official list. In order to further enhance the under-represented categories of sites and improve geographical coverage, the World Heritage Committee limited the number of nominations that a state party can present. Furthermore, the World Heritage Committee works in cooperation with every state party, the International

It’s imperative that the international community works as a whole to ensure that all nations are a party to the World Heritage Convention and that citizens remain vigilant and interested in the mission of respecting cultural heritage, especially in times of war. UNESCO and the World Heritage List cannot accomplish this lofty goal without the international community’s support and resources. Protecting cultural heritage is important because it shows humanity’s past accomplishments and it prompts future innovation.

Conclusion:

No citizen of the world can afford the privilege of being complacent in addressing this issue, as the international community has already seen the destruction of a magnitude of history and art. The cultural sites UNESCO attempts to preserve and protect are property of the world and represent the rich histories of past civilizations and societies. Protection and preservation of these cultural heritage sites must be prioritized in areas experiencing current armed conflict and adequate resources must be allocated to ensure legitimate protection of these sites.

Questions:

1. What methods should UNESCO use to protect cultural sites in regions that have not signed the World Heritage Convention?
2. How can UNESCO incentivize countries to sign the World Heritage Convention?
3. To what extent is the Global Strategy effectively diversifying the World Heritage List?
4. What role do civil society and individual countries hold in protecting cultural heritage?