



Courtesy BBC

## **Covering Government Control of Information**

Could This Be Coming To The United States?

By

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Pakistan recently shut down the Internet to control the flow of information to its citizens. Why? So the government could control nationwide protests. Pakistan is thousands of miles from the United States, so is that something that should concern journalists in the U.S.? I believe it should, and here's why I say that.

I have friends in Pakistan, India, and many other countries where governments control the Internet and many other types of mass communications. Living in that kind of government-controlled environment carries many dangers for people who want to speak freely and publish truth.

Many people across the world have only a few hours a day when their government opens the Internet "spigot" for citizens to look at email, read online news, talk with family and friends in other countries, and communicate on social media. Those governments can also turn off the Internet for longer periods of time if they deem that to be in the best interest of the government.

## Coming to America?

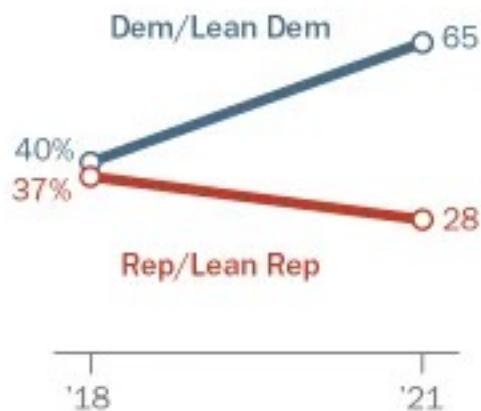
Pew Research recently (2021) showed that almost half of U.S. adults believe “the government should take steps to restrict false information, even if it means losing some freedom to access and publish content.” That’s up from 39% just three years earlier (2018).

Something else that’s up from 2018 is the partisan divide about how governments and tech firms should deal with “false” information. Here’s a graph from Pew Research that shows the change from 2018-2021 —

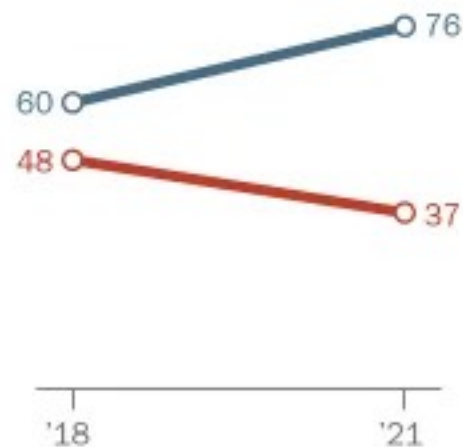
## Partisan divisions have widened over role of government, tech firms in restricting misinformation

% of U.S. adults who say ...

**The U.S. government should take steps to restrict false info online, even if it limits freedom of info**



**Tech companies should take steps to restrict false info online, even if it limits freedom of info**



Note: Respondents who did not give an answer are not shown.

Source: Survey conducted July 26-Aug. 8, 2021.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Notice the words “false info.” I’ve written about true information and false information many times before. You may find this article about [information, misinformation, and disinformation](#) helpful.

The definition of what is **true** information or **false** information is often determined by a person's age and political leaning. Journalists should make note of that as they report about this issue. Knowing demographic trends helps in seeing what the future may hold.

Here is Pew Research's findings concerning demographic groups. Notice how views about information changed among certain demo groups in a matter of just a few years —

## Majorities within each demographic group now say tech companies should restrict false information

% of U.S. adults who say ...

	<b>Freedom of info should be protected</b> even if it means false info can be published	<b>U.S. govt. should take steps to restrict</b> false info online, even if it limits freedom of info	<b>Freedom of info should be protected</b> , even if it means false info can be published	<b>Tech companies should take steps to restrict</b> false info online, even if it limits freedom of info
<b>2021</b>				
Ages 18-29	53%	43%	41%	58%
30-49	48	50	39	59
50-64	50	48	38	60
65+	49	48	40	57
Men	56	43	44	55
Women	44	52	35	62
High school or less	48	49	38	60
Some college	53	44	43	55
College+	48	51	38	61
<b>2018</b>				
Ages 18-29	65	31	56	42
30-49	62	35	47	52
50-64	53	42	33	64
65+	48	48	34	64
Men	63	34	46	52
Women	53	43	39	59
High school or less	44	50	37	61
Some college	64	33	46	51
College+	68	30	46	53

Note: Respondents who did not give an answer are not shown.

Source: Survey conducted July 26-Aug. 8, 2021.

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One question I have as a journalist reading this research is what “steps” the U.S. Government and tech companies would take to “restrict false info online.” Since almost half of U.S. adults believe the government should take steps to **restrict** false information, even if it means losing some freedom to access and publish content, that would make for an interesting story.

What “steps” would citizens approve or disapprove? What “content” would they be okay with losing the freedom to access or publish? Would that include personal letters? emails? texts? social media posts or comments? personal videos? personal medical information? How far is the public willing to go to feel “protected” against *false information*? Would it be okay for the government to use physical “force” to restrict information leaders believed to be false? If so, what kind of **force** would be acceptable?



Another question in that same vein would be about “rights” given U.S. citizens by the Constitution and its Amendments. Do people think Congress should make changes to those documents so that speech and the press are no longer “protected?”

The next question I’d ask is for people to define “false information.” Who determines what’s true and what’s false? What information is true or false in many countries is whatever the government in power determines it to be. Is that what Americans want? Ask them. You may find that asking those kinds of questions in your local community will lead to some important discussions and news stories. You could even follow a story or series of reports with a live town hall where citizens and government leaders (including members of state and national legislatures) could address the findings of your reporting.

# HOT OFF THE PRESS

Many countries across the world do not have a “free press.” The news media in those countries may be either “state-run” or “state-controlled.” That means the government in charge at the moment either runs or controls the flow of information to the public.

The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution specifically protects the open and free flow of information. We know them as *Freedom of Speech*, and *Freedom of the Press*.

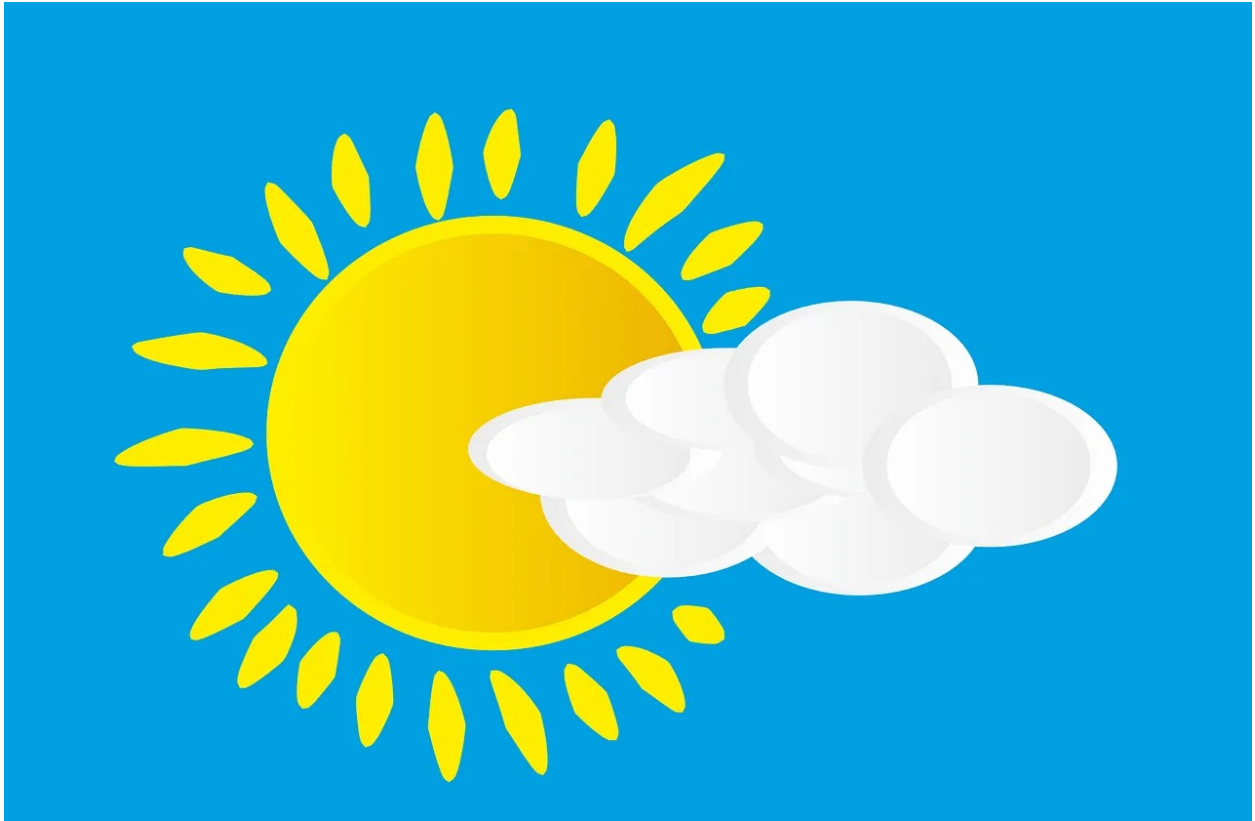
*Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances. First Amendment*

You can read more about the intent of the Founders in documents like the Federalist Papers. You may find the Madison, Jefferson, Hamilton, and Jay writings helpful in learning more about the freedoms of speech and press.

What's been interesting to me as a journalist since the 1960s is to see how the American public's beliefs about government control of information have changed. As information technology has increased in speed, so have the beliefs of many citizens. The change in just a few years in the Pew Research concerning government and tech control of information is a demonstration of that.

While journalists may look at what's happening in Pakistan, India, and other countries across the world as something that could never happen in the United States, I recommend it become one of the stories you watch closely. I think we may all be surprised by what happens in the U.S. in the next 5-10 years.

## Sunshine is the best disinfectant



Governments often don't want citizens to know what's going on behind their closed doors. I know because I've personally put my foot in doorways to ensure that myself and other journalists could cover quorum meetings that elected leaders did not want known or covered. While journalists should want the sun to shine brightly over government — many government leaders want to “cloud over” their real intent. I know that's true because in one situation the mayor and city

council members stood up and ended the meeting when I and other journalists walked into their “secret” meeting.

The reason I could do that as a journalist [and wasn’t arrested even though a police officer tried to close the door on my foot] was because of the hard work of journalists and journalistic organizations to fight for the rights of a “free” press. We fought for years to get *Government-In-The-Sunshine* laws passed across the country. I was involved in the effort in multiple states, so I remember the struggles to get legislatures to pass laws. I also remember the struggles to get government leaders to abide by the new laws.

Governments with the power and authority to control the flow of information on air and online should be of great concern to people who believe in the importance of the freedom of speech and freedom of the press. I continue to believe that sunshine is the best disinfectant to tyrannical rule. That’s the job of journalists, legislators, and the public to make sure those freedoms are not lost.

Whether you work in local, state, or national news, the challenge is the same. Find and report true information wherever you find it. Governments, large and small, often want to keep the truth from citizens. The job of keeping the truth in front of the public is the job of the press (news media).

Don't give up when government leaders or employees say you can't have information that the public has the right to see. Find a way to get it and report it. Will you win a popularity contest? No. If you care about being popular, look for another profession. If reporting the truth is more important to you than being popular, you're made for journalism.



1960s Radio News, © Mark McGee