



Audrezara Journal of Communication and Social Research (AJCSR), Vol. 2(1), 225-238, 2026.



AUDREZARA JOURNAL OF COMMUNICATION AND SOCIAL RESEARCH (AJCSR)

Vol. 2, Issue 1, pp. 225-238, April, 2026.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19943966>

E-ISSN: 3121-9721

Censorship, Surveillance, and the Media: Striking a Balance between Security and Press Freedom

¹Igein Omobolaji Tosin*, ²I. Bayo Oloyede & ³Ogunwuyi Omolara Ayomide

^{1,2} Department of Mass Communication, Redeemer's University, Akoda-Ede, Osun State

³ Department of Mass Communication, Kings University, Osun State



ORCID:

¹ <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-6834-1517>

² <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0261-5362>

³ <https://orcid.org/0009000294489988>

***Corresponding Author:** omobolajiadegoke@gmail.com

History: Received: February 15, 2026; Revised: March 18, 2026; Accepted: April 13, 2026.

Abstract

The intersection of state surveillance, censorship, and press freedom has become increasingly contentious in the digital age. Governments often justify monitoring and content regulation as necessary for national security, but such actions frequently infringe upon press freedom and democratic norms. This conceptual paper aims to explore the theoretical tensions between media freedom and state security, drawing from comparative studies and existing literature across different regions. Through the lens of liberal democratic theory, social responsibility theory, and surveillance theory, the paper examines how censorship and surveillance practices are rationalised and resisted. It proposes a normative framework that upholds transparency, proportionality, and accountability in state media interventions. The paper offers conceptual clarity and guidance for policymakers, journalists, and scholars on maintaining a delicate balance between protecting state security and ensuring an independent press.

Keywords: Press Freedom, Censorship, Surveillance, Media Ethics, National Security

Introduction

In an era dominated by digitisation and data, the concepts of censorship and surveillance have taken on more complex meanings. While censorship is traditionally understood as the suppression of speech or public communication by authorities, surveillance refers to the



monitoring of behaviour, activities, or information often in secret. Both mechanisms, once confined to authoritarian regimes, have now spread across the globe, often cloaked under the guise of national security or public safety. This shift has posed new challenges to democratic institutions and the media's role as a watchdog of power. As technology enables the rapid collection and analysis of personal data, the boundaries between legitimate protection and oppressive control continue to blur (Gyetván, 2025; Messina, 2023).

Historically, the press has served as a cornerstone of democratic societies, ensuring transparency and accountability. Yet, its freedom is increasingly compromised by both direct and indirect control. Governments around the world employ sophisticated censorship methods and technological surveillance tools to limit dissent, restrict access to information, and manipulate public narratives. In countries such as Pakistan and Egypt, for instance, laws like Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) and digital data regulations are applied not only to fight cybercrime but to control journalistic activity and intimidate investigative reporters (Mirza et al., 2025; Alashry, 2023). These measures often occur under vague or overly broad legal frameworks, leaving little room for journalistic autonomy. At the same time, democracies are not immune. The rise of private censorship, especially by social media platforms and corporations, introduces another layer of complexity. While not backed by the coercive power of the state, these actors wield significant influence over public discourse. Private entities often overcompensate in content moderation, fearing liability or reputational harm. The result is a subtle but powerful form of speech suppression that evades traditional definitions of state censorship. As Messina (2023) points out, this “new censorship” is particularly insidious because it hides behind corporate algorithms and content policies, with minimal transparency or public accountability.

The ethical implications of surveillance and censorship have become more pronounced with the expansion of artificial intelligence and digital surveillance technologies. AI-powered surveillance systems are now used for facial recognition, predictive policing, and behavioural analysis, often without adequate legal safeguards (Bodimani, 2025). These systems not only invade privacy but also facilitate targeted discrimination and control. In many contexts, such technologies disproportionately affect marginalised communities and dissenting voices, thus undermining the pluralism that media freedom seeks to protect. This conceptual paper sought to interrogate these developments through a multidisciplinary lens, drawing from liberal democratic theory, social responsibility theory, and Foucauldian surveillance theory. It aims to examine how states and other actors rationalise censorship and surveillance while also exploring the resistance and resilience mechanisms adopted by media practitioners. The paper does not aim to provide empirical generalisations but instead offers a theoretical foundation for understanding the evolving relationship between security and press freedom.

Ultimately, the central question addressed in this paper is: How can societies protect national security without undermining press freedom? Through conceptual analysis and extensive literature review, this paper proposes a normative framework that emphasises proportionality, transparency, and democratic accountability. Such a framework is essential not only for media professionals and policymakers but also for global citizens who rely on an independent press to hold power accountable and to preserve their civil liberties in an increasingly monitored world.

Conceptual Clarifications and Theoretical Foundations

The interplay between censorship, surveillance, and media freedom necessitates clear conceptual distinctions to guide scholarly inquiry and policy discourse. Censorship, in its broadest sense, refers to the suppression or restriction of speech, expression, or communication deemed objectionable by authorities. It can be overt through laws, bans, and regulations or covert, such as subtle content filtering and algorithmic demotion (Cherian, 2018; Messina, 2023). In authoritarian regimes, censorship is often legalised under national security, religious morality, or political stability. In democracies, it may manifest as “soft censorship,” where economic, regulatory, or social pressures indirectly stifle critical journalism (George, 2018). Understanding censorship in both its traditional and evolving forms is vital to assessing its impact on press freedom.

Surveillance, on the other hand, encompasses the monitoring and collection of data physical, digital, or behavioural about individuals and organisations, often by the state or powerful private actors. While surveillance can be justified for crime prevention and national security, it becomes problematic when deployed to monitor dissent, restrict activism, or control journalistic activities. As Foucault famously articulated in his theory of the panopticon, surveillance is not merely a method of observation but a tool of normalisation and social discipline (Foucault, 1977). Modern surveillance technologies, including AI-powered facial recognition and social media tracking, intensify this disciplinary function, often creating a “chilling effect” on freedom of expression, particularly among journalists (Mirza et al., 2025; Bodimani, 2025).

Press freedom is the foundational right of individuals to seek, receive, and impart information and opinions through any lawful media of their choice without undue interference, censorship, or restriction by the state or other powerful actors. It is enshrined in numerous global frameworks, including Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which affirms the right to “seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media.” However, as the literature from Afghanistan (Alokozay & Zarawar, 2024) and Iraq (Al-Karaawi, 2022) shows, constitutional guarantees often clash with practical restrictions. Press freedom must therefore be understood not only as a legal provision but as a lived experience shaped by political context, institutional capacity, and technological landscape.

To explore the intersection of these concepts, this paper employs three main theoretical lenses. The first is Liberal Democratic Theory, which posits that a free press is essential for the functioning of democratic society. Thinkers like John Stuart Mill and Jürgen Habermas have emphasised the role of public discourse in promoting deliberation, accountability, and informed citizenry. In this view, any form of censorship or excessive surveillance undermines the democratic fabric by silencing alternative voices and limiting access to information (Habermas, 1989). Hence, liberal theory regards press freedom as not just a civil liberty but a public good. The second framework is Social Responsibility Theory, originating from the Hutchins Commission Report of 1947. This theory advocates that while the press should be free from government control, it must also act responsibly toward society. Dike et al. (2025) argue that this theory must be interpreted not just by its formal guidelines (the “letter”) but by its ethical foundation (the “spirit”). Journalists must exercise ethical judgment, avoid sensationalism, and



ensure accuracy and fairness. In this context, self-censorship, when guided by professional ethics rather than fear, can be a legitimate practice of responsibility rather than submission.

Lastly, Foucault's Surveillance Theory enriches the analysis by exposing how surveillance operates as a mechanism of power. According to Foucault, surveillance is not merely a tool for information gathering but a technique for shaping behaviour and reinforcing hierarchical control (Foucault, 1977). This is especially relevant in the digital era where states and corporations deploy algorithmic surveillance to monitor dissent, track journalists, and manipulate information flows. Studies from Arab states (Alashry, 2023) and Bangladesh (Nughat, 2024) demonstrate that surveillance-induced fear leads to self-censorship, undermining the watchdog function of the press. The Foucauldian lens helps us understand not only the operational methods but also the ideological implications of modern surveillance.

Literature Review

The global landscape of media freedom reveals a troubling pattern: the increasing use of surveillance and censorship as tools to silence dissent and control public discourse. Across both democratic and authoritarian regimes, governments have increasingly used legal instruments, technological innovations, and coercive practices to limit press freedom. In Arab nations, for example, Alashry (2023) found that regimes in Egypt, Syria, and others systematically employ digital surveillance to suppress journalistic activities under the pretence of national security. The study revealed that such surveillance was often carried out through spyware installed on journalists' phones and through the use of broad data protection laws that functionally restricted media independence. This created a climate where journalists had to adopt clandestine communication strategies just to operate, demonstrating how legislative tools can be manipulated for indirect censorship.

The case of Pakistan similarly underscores the connection between law, surveillance, and the silencing of media. Mirza et al. (2025) examined how the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) is wielded not only to regulate cybercrime but to stifle investigative journalism. Their study, which involved surveys of media professionals, found that over half reported routine surveillance, with female journalists experiencing heightened levels of anxiety and self-censorship due to gender-based digital harassment. These findings show that even in countries with formally democratic institutions, surveillance often masquerades as regulatory necessity, when in reality it is used to constrain critical voices. Moreover, the psychological toll on journalists reveals the deeper, more insidious effects of surveillance: fear, silence, and withdrawal from public discourse.

A different but equally troubling form of censorship arises in private-sector environments, particularly in digital spaces governed by tech giants. Messina (2023) explored the concept of "private censorship," where corporations and online platforms control content through opaque algorithms, content takedowns, and moderation policies often influenced by political pressure or commercial interests. Although not state-driven, this form of censorship is no less harmful to press freedom, especially when digital platforms like YouTube or Facebook become the main conduits of news for billions of users. This was echoed in the work of Darles and Pavan (2025), who found that countries with lower Press Freedom Index scores submitted more takedown



requests to platforms like YouTube, demonstrating a direct link between national press restrictions and digital censorship.

Comparative studies in post-conflict or politically unstable regions add further nuance to the literature. Alokozay and Zarawar (2024) compared media censorship under the two Taliban regimes in Afghanistan, revealing a marked increase in technological sophistication and systemic suppression during the Taliban 2.0 era. The study emphasised that while the earlier regime relied on physical coercion, the latter used a combination of legal reforms and surveillance technologies to suppress media freedom. Similarly, in Iraq, Al-Karaawi (2022) documented how loosely defined communication regulations allowed prosecutors to arbitrarily punish journalists, highlighting the risks of vague legal language and weak institutional safeguards in transitional democracies.

Studies from Africa and Southeast Asia also confirm that press freedom is often sacrificed at the altar of state control. In Africa, Pride and Issa (2021) identified a trend where governments, including those in Sudan and Nigeria, implement digital surveillance technologies and pass laws targeting online journalism in the name of security. Their research noted that this expansion of technological oversight was often accompanied by threats, arrests, and financial pressures aimed at silencing dissenting journalists. In the Philippines, Dungog-Cuizon et al. (2022) illustrated how the COVID-19 pandemic provided a convenient justification for increased censorship in Cebu City, despite the population's growing reliance on digital media for health updates and crisis information. Their research employed Colaizzi's method to capture the lived experiences of journalists and demonstrated how even health emergencies are weaponised to restrict media access and freedom.

Finally, broader regional reviews, such as the one by Gokhale and Mate (2024), show that censorship and self-censorship are endemic in many Asian countries, largely due to authoritarian governance, legal ambiguities, and corporate consolidation in the media sector. The study pointed out that high levels of self-censorship are also linked to socio-cultural constraints, political patronage systems, and fear of retribution, particularly among minority journalists. This resonates with findings in Bangladesh by Nughat (2024), who highlighted that regime type plays a significant role in shaping online behavior, with hybrid and authoritarian regimes promoting a culture of fear that compels users and journalists alike to self-censor. These global insights collectively highlight the pervasive nature of media suppression and the urgent need for conceptual and normative responses that safeguard both security and freedom.

Method

This study adopts a conceptual research design to examine the relationship between censorship, surveillance, and press freedom in contemporary media environments. The research relies on qualitative analysis of secondary data, drawing extensively from scholarly literature, policy documents, and international reports addressing media regulation, surveillance practices, and democratic communication systems.



Relevant academic publications, including journal articles, books, and policy analyses, were systematically reviewed to identify key debates and theoretical perspectives surrounding state control of information and journalistic autonomy. The study particularly engages with established theoretical frameworks such as Liberal Democratic Theory, Social Responsibility Theory, and Surveillance Theory to explain the tensions between national security imperatives and media freedom.

Through thematic and comparative analysis, the paper synthesizes insights from existing studies conducted across different political contexts, including developing and developed democracies. This approach allows the study to identify patterns in how governments justify censorship and surveillance measures while highlighting the implications for press freedom and democratic accountability.

The conceptual analysis further enables the development of a normative framework aimed at balancing legitimate security concerns with the protection of journalistic independence, transparency, and freedom of expression in the digital age.

Conceptual Analysis: Tensions and Trade-offs

At the heart of the on-going debate over media regulation lies a fundamental paradox: how can governments protect national security without violating the principles of press freedom? This paradox reflects a broader conflict between collective safety and individual liberty, where the boundaries are often blurred by state narratives. National security policies are frequently framed in absolutist terms, portraying any form of dissent as a threat to sovereignty. This approach justifies censorship as a preventive measure, especially during political unrest, public health emergencies, or national crises. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic in the Philippines, authorities in Cebu City curtailed media activities under the pretext of controlling misinformation, even though journalists were essential for disseminating accurate public health information (Dungog-Cuizon et al., 2022). The state's desire to maintain order often becomes a gateway for suppressing essential democratic discourse.

One of the most critical tensions is between transparency and secrecy. Governments often operate under classified mandates or emergency laws that obscure the scope and purpose of their surveillance activities. This lack of transparency undermines public trust and makes it difficult for journalists and civil society organisations to hold power accountable. In authoritarian contexts, such as Egypt and Syria, the opacity of digital surveillance has created a “culture of fear” among journalists, who must assume they are constantly being watched (Alashry, 2023). Even in democratic systems, as seen in Indonesia and Pakistan, the combination of vague legal statutes and hidden monitoring mechanisms makes it nearly impossible to discern the line between legitimate oversight and rights violations (Mirza et al., 2025; Fakihi, 2024). This hidden censorship not only deters critical journalism but corrodes democratic institutions by eroding the public's right to know.

Another prominent trade-off exists between freedom and responsibility. While press freedom is indispensable for democracy, it also comes with ethical obligations to prevent harm, such as



inciting violence or spreading false information. This ethical dilemma is at the core of the Social Responsibility Theory, which advocates for a press that is both free and accountable to societal norms. In this sense, ethical self-censorship guided by professional integrity is distinct from fear-based self-censorship imposed by political pressure. However, distinguishing between the two is often difficult in practice, especially when journalists operate under legal or social threats that blur these boundaries.

The nature of censorship itself has evolved in the digital age, moving from overt state bans to subtler mechanisms such as algorithmic filtering, de-platforming, and content demotion. These new forms of censorship are largely enacted by private corporations, often under the influence of vague governmental policies or international pressure. Messina (2023) terms this “private censorship,” which lacks transparency and due process, making it even more difficult to challenge. The power of social media platforms to control content was exemplified in the findings of Darles and Pavan (2025), who demonstrated that countries with lower press freedom scores often exert more influence on content moderation policies on platforms like YouTube. In such environments, censorship becomes decentralised but no less dangerous, raising profound questions about the role of private power in shaping public discourse.

Gender and identity also emerge as critical fault lines in this debate. Surveillance and censorship disproportionately affect marginalised communities, including female journalists, minority reporters, and LGBTQ+ voices. In Pakistan, for example, nearly three-quarters of female journalists surveyed reported modifying their behaviour and content due to fears of privacy invasion, harassment, and cyber threats (Mirza et al., 2025). In many Asian countries, Gokhale and Mate (2024) observed that journalists from minority backgrounds or foreign affiliations face heightened scrutiny and are often targeted under national security laws. These discriminatory practices not only silence underrepresented voices but also undermine the pluralism necessary for a robust and inclusive media ecosystem.

Ultimately, one of the most complex trade-offs involves the relationship between technology and democracy. Technological advances, particularly in AI and surveillance tools, offer both promise and peril. On the one hand, they allow law enforcement agencies to preemptively address genuine security threats. On the other hand, their unchecked use often leads to overreach and abuse. Bodimani (2025) emphasises that AI-driven surveillance systems such as facial recognition and predictive analytics tend to reinforce existing biases and lack ethical safeguards. These technologies create an illusion of objectivity while amplifying structural inequalities. In the absence of strong regulatory frameworks, the very tools designed to enhance security may end up dismantling democratic freedoms, especially press freedom. Balancing innovation with accountability is therefore crucial in crafting sustainable solutions.

Proposed Framework for Balancing Security and Press Freedom

Achieving a functional and ethical balance between national security and press freedom requires a multidimensional framework rooted in democratic principles, human rights, and institutional accountability. The first pillar of such a framework must be proportionality a concept grounded in liberal democratic theory. Security measures, including surveillance and content restrictions, must be proportionate to the threat they intend to mitigate. Blanket bans on online platforms,



mass data collection, or generalised criminalisation of dissent lack this proportionality and often serve more to protect power than to enhance safety. As emphasised by Alokzay and Zarawar (2024) in the context of Taliban-era Afghanistan, the absence of proportionality in media controls led not only to information vacuums but to public distrust and fear. A proportional response ensures that restrictions are specific, necessary, and legally justified.

The second component of the framework is transparency. Both governments and private actors must operate within a clearly defined and publicly accessible regulatory environment. When states or corporations make decisions to censor, monitor, or restrict information, those decisions must be documented, subject to public scrutiny, and open to challenge. In many of the cases studied by Mirza et al. (2025) and Alashry (2023), lack of transparency in how laws like PECA or Egypt's data protection statute were implemented contributed significantly to journalists' vulnerability. Platforms like Facebook's Oversight Board, while imperfect, demonstrate an early model of how semi-independent, transparent mechanisms can function as checks on unilateral censorship decisions (Gyetván, 2025).

A third essential pillar is the protection of journalistic autonomy. Journalists must be safeguarded not only through constitutional rights but also through institutional protections, legal assistance, and psychological support systems. In many countries, journalists work in precarious conditions, often without legal representation or safety training, which makes them more susceptible to coercion. The African context, as illustrated by Chudey et al. (2021), reveals that journalists in Sudan, Nigeria, and Zimbabwe operate under direct threats from state agencies, cyber laws, and covert surveillance operations. Establishing legal funds, national watchdog bodies, and journalist protection commissions would serve as a bulwark against such harassment, reinforcing the role of the press as an independent democratic institution.

The fourth element of the framework emphasises inclusive digital rights. Surveillance and censorship disproportionately affect vulnerable groups, women, ethnic minorities, and independent journalists with no corporate backing. Intersectionality must be a guiding principle in crafting protections, ensuring that all media actors, regardless of background, have equal freedom to report and express. The findings by Mirza et al. (2025) on gendered surveillance in Pakistan and Gokhale and Mate (2024) on minority journalists in Asia reinforce the need for gender-sensitive and culturally aware policy interventions. Laws and platforms must offer explicit protections against online harassment, doxing, and defamation, including urgent response protocols for targeted individuals.

Accountability and oversight form the fifth pillar. Any surveillance or censorship policy should be subject to independent oversight by judicial, legislative, and civil society bodies. These bodies must have the authority to review classified security practices, audit surveillance programmes, and ensure they do not violate press freedoms. Furthermore, legal remedies must be accessible to journalists and media houses that have been unfairly targeted. As Cherian George (2018) notes, a rights-based approach shifts the focus from protecting media institutions per se to protecting public discourse ensuring that the public retains access to diverse, accurate, and critical information. Accountability mechanisms should also extend to tech corporations, whose private algorithms and moderation tools often function as de facto censorship.



The framework calls for multi-actor cooperation among governments, civil society, media institutions, and tech companies. Censorship and surveillance are not issues that can be resolved in isolation. Collective action through public advocacy, international human rights frameworks, and cross-sectoral partnerships is essential. This includes engaging in international treaties that promote freedom of expression, like the Windhoek+30 Declaration for Africa, and investing in journalist training on digital security tools. In the age of hybrid threats and cyber manipulation, striking the balance between security and press freedom is not merely a national challenge it is a global imperative. Collaboration across stakeholders ensures that democratic norms can evolve alongside technological change, rather than be eroded by it.

Discussion

The framework proposed in this paper offers not only theoretical clarity but also practical relevance in addressing the global challenges of media repression under the guise of national security. A critical implication of the framework is the reorientation of policy from reactive authoritarianism to proactive democratisation. In regions like the Middle East and North Africa, studies such as those by Alashry (2023) demonstrate that unchecked digital surveillance, when combined with censorship, creates a climate of fear that disables the watchdog function of the press. By emphasising transparency, proportionality, and oversight, the framework addresses this concern head-on. If applied, it would oblige governments to justify and disclose media restrictions publicly, reducing the likelihood of abuse under the pretence of national stability.

The framework is particularly relevant in contexts of fragile democracies and post-conflict societies. For example, in Afghanistan under the Taliban 2.0 regime, the blend of ideological repression and digital censorship has systematically stifled independent journalism (Alokozay & Zarawar, 2024). In such cases, the proposed framework not only highlights what is missing (judicial review, legal clarity, journalistic autonomy) but also provides a roadmap for reconstructing media freedoms in transitional governance systems. Additionally, the experiences from Iraq, where media control is fragmented across regional powers, show that institutional inconsistency can be just as damaging as overt repression (Al-Karaawi, 2022). A clear set of normative guidelines could help harmonize media practices across such fragmented political landscapes.

The framework's emphasis on inclusivity and intersectionality also holds important policy implications. In Pakistan, for example, the surveillance of female journalists and online harassment has led to high rates of self-censorship (Mirza et al., 2025). These dynamics are not isolated to South Asia; they are mirrored in Southeast Asia, where journalists from minority ethnic or religious groups face additional scrutiny and limitations (Gokhale & Mate, 2024). Incorporating specific protections for these groups through digital safety protocols, reporting hotlines, and platform accountability ensures that press freedom does not become a privilege of dominant identities but remains a universal right accessible to all journalists, regardless of gender, race, or background.

When the proposed principles are compared with current international practices, notable gaps emerge. In many Western democracies, the assumption is that constitutional protections for freedom of expression are sufficient safeguards. However, studies such as those by Messina (2023) and Gyetván (2025) illustrate that private content moderation decisions, often under



opaque terms of service, can lead to significant information suppression without state involvement. These findings challenge the notion that press freedom is automatically protected in liberal regimes. Therefore, the framework's inclusion of corporate responsibility and multi-actor cooperation adds a necessary layer to traditional press freedom debates, urging reform not only in government practice but also in the operations of tech companies that mediate global information flows.

Furthermore, the comparative aspect of surveillance technology regulation reveals the importance of harmonising ethical standards across borders. Bodimani (2025) argues that AI-powered surveillance poses both security benefits and democratic risks, depending on the presence or absence of legal safeguards. The contrast between authoritarian regimes weaponising AI for social control and democratic societies employing it for targeted criminal investigations reflects the dual-use nature of technology. Applying the proposed ethical and legal standards globally can help ensure that technological innovation does not outpace the development of human rights protections. Regional and international mechanisms like the African Union's declaration on freedom of expression and UNESCO's recommendations on AI ethics should be integrated into national policy efforts.

Furthermore, implementation of this framework demands not only political will but also civil society vigilance. History has shown that top-down reforms are often inadequate without grassroots advocacy, public discourse, and a culture of civic engagement. This is particularly evident in regions like Sub-Saharan Africa, where civil society organisations have played pivotal roles in exposing press violations and lobbying for legal reforms (Pride & Issa, 2021; Kurgat, 2025). A sustainable balance between security and press freedom will therefore require participatory governance models that include journalists, legal experts, tech developers, and community activists in shaping information policy. Only through such collaborative and accountable systems can societies navigate the complex demands of security while upholding the fundamental right to a free and independent press.

Limitations and Future Research

This relationship between censorship, surveillance, and the media remains one of the most contested issues in contemporary communication studies. Outlined below are the key limitations of this paper as well as directions for future scholarly inquiry.

1. While this paper offers a robust conceptual framework for balancing censorship, surveillance, and press freedom, it remains theoretical in nature. No empirical data were collected or analysed, limiting the ability to measure the framework's real-world effectiveness across different political systems.
2. Additionally, this study leans heavily on literature from specific regions such as the Middle East, South Asia, and parts of Africa. While this provides rich comparative insights, it may not fully capture the nuances of censorship and surveillance practices in Western liberal democracies or smaller digital societies.
3. Another limitation lies in the dynamic and fast-evolving nature of technology. Surveillance tools especially AI-based systems are advancing rapidly, often outpacing legal and ethical guidelines.



4. This paper also does not address the economic pressures media organisations face, such as corporate consolidation, advertising dependencies, or declining revenues all of which can lead to self-censorship and editorial compromise, even in the absence of state interference.
5. Future research should focus on empirically testing this framework in diverse political contexts. Mixed-method approaches such as policy analysis, case studies, and journalist interviews could validate how effectively the proposed principles mitigate censorship and protect press freedom.
6. Finally, further investigation is needed into the role of public digital literacy and civic engagement in resisting censorship. How citizens understand and respond to surveillance, misinformation, and press restrictions could be a key area for future interdisciplinary study.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper has explored the complex and often conflicting relationship between censorship, surveillance, and press freedom in a rapidly evolving digital age. Drawing from global literature and grounded in liberal democratic, social responsibility, and surveillance theories, the paper proposed a normative framework for balancing national security interests with the imperative of free and independent media. Central to this framework are the principles of proportionality, transparency, accountability, and inclusivity. The analysis demonstrates that while states may have legitimate reasons to monitor information for security, the unchecked use of surveillance and censorship can severely erode democratic norms. As studies from countries like Egypt, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iraq reveal, laws purportedly meant for public protection are frequently used to stifle dissent and intimidate journalists. In democratic societies, the growing power of tech platforms adds a new layer of content control, often hidden from public scrutiny.

The proposed framework offers a conceptual roadmap for navigating these challenges. It not only outlines what governments must do to uphold press freedom but also expands responsibility to tech corporations, civil society, and the global community. By centering on ethical standards and rights-based governance, the framework underscores that security and freedom are not mutually exclusive but require thoughtful and inclusive regulation. Nevertheless, the framework is only a starting point. Its effectiveness will depend on sustained dialogue, empirical validation, and adaptation to emerging technologies. The commitment to a free press must be ongoing and collective, requiring vigilance from journalists, legal systems, policymakers, and citizens alike. In an age of growing authoritarian tendencies, misinformation, and surveillance capitalism, defending press freedom is not just a professional concern it is a public necessity. Striking a balance between security and media autonomy is both a moral and political task, and one that demands immediate, informed, and collaborative action.

Having examined the interplay between censorship, surveillance, and the media, it becomes clear that maintaining security while safeguarding press freedom requires deliberate strategies. The study therefore puts forward the following recommendations:

1. Governments should establish independent oversight bodies to ensure surveillance and censorship policies remain transparent, proportionate, and legally justified.



2. Journalists should be equipped with digital security skills and ethical training to reduce vulnerability to surveillance and strengthen their watchdog role.
3. Collaboration among governments, tech platforms, civil society, and international organisations is essential to protect press freedom while addressing legitimate security concerns.

Acknowledgement: I acknowledge the contributions of scholars whose works on media freedom, surveillance, and democratic communication informed the conceptual development of this study. Special thanks to my Supervisor for invaluable guidance. I also appreciate the academic support provided by the Department of Mass Communication at Redeemer's University and Kings University, which created an enabling environment for the completion of this research.

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Conflict of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest regarding the research, authorship or publication of this article.

How to Cite: Igein, O. T., Oloyede, I. B., & Ogunwuyi, O. A. (2026). *Censorship, surveillance, and the media: Striking a balance between security and press freedom*. *Audrezara Journal of Communication and Social Research*, 2 (1), 225-238. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19943966>

References

- Alashry, M. S. (2023). Arab authorities use digital surveillance to control press freedom: Journalists' perceptions. *Digital Policy Regulation and Governance*, 25(3). <https://doi.org/10.1108/DPRG-05-2021-0071>
- Alokozay, N., & Zarawar, A. (2024). Media freedom and censorship: A comparative study of media freedom under the first and second Taliban regimes. *Cognizance Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies*, 4(8), 261–273. <https://doi.org/10.47760/cognizance.2024.v04i08.016>
- Al-Karaawi, N. J. M. (2022). The limitations of Iraq's freedom of press and communicative media censorship. In *The Limitations of Iraq's Freedom of Press and Communicative Media Censorship*. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4756094>
- Bodimani, M. (2025). AI-powered surveillance vs. privacy rights: Striking the right balance. *International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research*, 7(2). <https://doi.org/10.36948/ijfmr.2025.v07i02.42672>
- Cherian, G. (2018). Journalism, censorship, and press freedom. In *Journalism*. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781501500084-024>
- Darles, E., & Pavan, V. (2025). Who controls the internet? Press freedom, government takedown requests, and censorship on YouTube. <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.28746.27848>



Audrezara Journal of Communication and Social Research (AJCSR), Vol. 2(1), 225-238, 2026.

- Dungog-Cuizon, A. L., Monsanto Baba, K. M., Alkuino, K. A. S., Tictic, E., & Dungog-Cuizon, A. L. (2022). Press freedom and censorship during COVID-19 pandemic: The case of Cebu City. *Jurnal Studi Komunikasi*, 6(2), 383–402. <https://doi.org/10.25139/jsk.v6i2.4860>
- Fakih, A. (2024). Media under the law: Press freedom challenges in Indonesia. *Indonesia Media Law Review*, 3(1). <https://doi.org/10.15294/imrev.v3i1.78900>
- Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison* (A. Sheridan, Trans.). *Pantheon Books*.
- George, C. (2018). Journalism, censorship, and press freedom. In *Journalism*. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781501500084-024>
- Gokhale, S. S., & Mate, R. (2024). Press freedom in Asian countries (2010–2023): A systematic literature review. *Educational Administration Theory and Practice*, 30(5). <https://doi.org/10.53555/kuey.v30i5.4177>
- Gyetzán, D. (2025). Censorship and freedom of expression in the age of social media. *ELTE Law Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.54148/ELTELJ.2024.2.27>
- Harcourt Whyte Dike, H., Papamie, B., & Ofonmbuk, H. W. (2025). Media obscenity and the absolutism-relativism debate: A social responsibility perspective on self-censorship. *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science*, 9(3), 1410–1419. <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.90300110>
- Kurgat, M. (2025). The growth of journalism in Africa: A struggle for press freedom in democratic transitions. *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science*, 9(13), 137–149. <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.913COM0013>
- Messina, J. P. (2023). The “old” media: Censorship and press freedom. In *Private Censorship*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197581902.003.0004>
- Mirza, S. J., Rehman, M. A. U., Bashir, B., Usman, M., & Khalid, S. (2025). Digital surveillance and its impact on press freedom in Pakistan. <https://doi.org/10.59075/8b0a4z82>
- Nughat, S. (2024). Self-censorship in using social media in Bangladesh: Does regime structure matter? *Journal of Governance and Accountability Studies*, 4(1), 43–59. <https://doi.org/10.35912/jgas.v4i1.2284>
- Pride, C., & Issa, A. (2021). Exploring the impact of state-oriented communication technology surveillance and censorship on journalists’ work, safety, and democratic freedoms in Africa. In UNAM/UNESCO Academic Conference on the Safety of Journalists, *Windhoek, Namibia*.