

# Arab authorities use digital surveillance to control press freedom: journalists' perceptions

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – *The purpose of this study is to investigate the extent of digital surveillance by Arab authorities, which face risks and threats of surveillance, and how journalists seek to press freedom by using tools and techniques to communicate securely.*

**Design/methodology/approach** – *The study used focus group discussions with 14 journalists from Syria, Saudi Arabia, Libya, Yemen, Oman, Jordan and Egypt. While in Egypt, questionnaires were distributed to 199 journalists from both independent and semi-governmental outlets to investigate how Egyptian journalists interpret the new data protection law and its implications for press freedom.*

**Findings** – *The study indicated that journalists from these countries revealed severe censorship by their respective governments, an element inconsistent with the Arab Constitution. The recommendation of the study encourages media organisations to play a more active role in setting policies that make it easier for journalists to adopt and use digital security tools, while Egyptian journalists see the law as a barrier to media independence because it allows the government to exercise greater information control through digital policy and imposes regulatory rules on journalists.*

**Practical implications** – *The study identifies practical and theoretical issues in Arab legislation and may reveal practices of interest to scientists researching the balance between data protection, the right of access to information and media research as an example of contemporary government indirect or "soft" censorship methods.*

**Originality/value** – *To the best of the authors' knowledge, this paper is one of the first research contributions to analyse the relationships between Arab authoritarians who used surveillance to restrict freedom of the press after the Arab Spring revolutions of 2011 to keep themselves in power as long as they could. In addition, Egypt's use of surveillance under new laws allowed the regimes to install software on the journalists' phones that enabled them to read the files and emails and track their locations; accordingly, journalists can be targeted by the cyberattack and can be arrested.*

**Keywords** Arab authorities, Online news monitoring, Surveillance, Arab countries, Press freedom

**Paper type** Research paper

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## Introduction

Arab Governments after Revolution 2011 are massively expanding their capacity for surveillance by using new technologies to collect user data and track user behaviour (Tsui and Lee, 2019 – Journalism). However, journalists offer renewed opportunities to protect themselves by encryption against surveillance because they represent a potential threat to security (Thorsen, 2019).

After COVID-19, authoritarian regimes began surveilling online news information and the ability to gather and analyse huge amounts of digital information by using sophisticated applications and devices (Mills, 2019). Unfortunately, journalists' inability to know if they are being monitored and to what extent their communications are being recorded represent an unparalleled threat to watchdog journalists and their confidential sources, including

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whistle-blowers, thus, affecting their role as watchdogs and more broadly, press freedom (Jamil, 2020).

There is a relationship between Arab surveillance and control of press freedom by restricting the information sources, while journalists face the exponentially growing challenge of securing their communication sources and secret information they store (Mills and Sarikakis, 2016).

However, digital surveillance is now widespread in Arab countries, turning them into “surveillance societies.” As a result of the political landscape that has seen political unrest and has adversely impacted the space for political opposition from 2011 until now, the government clamps down on dissenting voices, creating a deeply polarised society (Jamil, 2021; Mann *et al.*, 2002; Brivot and Gendron, 2011). On the other hand, the public used the internet as an alternative space for political opposition. Because of that, the government controls the internet by building upon arbitrary policies, overlapping jurisdictions and contradictory laws (AlAshry, 2021a, 2021b and 2021c). The authoritarian regimes in Syria, Saudi Arabia, Libya, Yemen, the Sultanate of Oman, Jordan and Egypt have severely restricted media freedom and journalistic freedom has always been controlled by the ruling authorities and monitored by intelligence agencies (Gul *et al.*, 2017; The News, 2020).

This study aims to explore how journalists face a wide range of threats, including surveillance, physical harassment or even threats of arrest, and focuses on their experiences of surveillance and how it impacts their professional and personal lives. In this vein, examining Arab journalists, thus, allows seeing how different reporting environments shape journalists’ thinking and behaviour when it comes to press freedom. Until now, no qualitative study has been done in Arab countries that reveal journalists’ real-life experiences of surveillance in the country. Leaning on the surveillance theory, the main research questions following:

- RQ1. How do authoritarian regimes use surveillance against journalists?
- RQ2. What is the impact of digital surveillance on journalists’ professional lives?
- RQ3. How does surveillance work in Arab countries?

## Literature review

### *Digital surveillance and press freedom*

The Arab scholars are concerned about restrictions on press freedom and concern legal surveillance, which pay less attention to the Arab countries’ experience of digital surveillance (see, for example, AlAshry, 2022a, 2021b). Freedom from surveillance is an important part of the freedom of the press practiced by Arab countries and can be classified as “surveillance societies”. While many journalists are doing their investigative work and holding rulers and powerful institutional actors to account, they need to be free from government surveillance (Mills, 2019; Andrejevic, 2006) Pen America’s (2014) freedom from surveillance is classified as a “surveillance society”. The study found that 75% of citizens living in democratic countries were concerned about surveillance, compared to 80% in non-democracies, and that the degree of self-censorship is also fast approaching in authoritarian countries. Arab Governments now constitute a “surveillance society” in which a grey zone fuses state and journalistic surveillance, collecting information about journalists from media houses who have broken or not broken the law in the name of national security. Consequently, the government’s ability to monitor their work or activities, including that inherent to the use of social media, concerns journalists and expresses dread of a possible chilling effect on their right to freedom of expression and an increased challenge to their watchdog role (Lashmar, 2018).

As [McQuail \(2010\)](#) argues, there are many forms of surveillance created to monitor journalists. In the first form, it is critical for journalists to understand the watchdog role, which requires them to monitor incidents and individuals to report on news stories by using the clandestine means of audio and video recordings of politicians. The second form is carried out by state authorities who monitor political activities, both online and offline.

[Tsui and Lee \(2019\)](#) noted that digital security can be really challenging and difficult to properly put into practice to understand what factors shape or influence users' digital security behaviour. The Arab Governments used that fear-driven impact on democracy to close civil liberties of debate and control over dissent which is called "double-edge" depressive and oppressive primacy of darkly internalised self-constraints ([Eley et al., 2016](#), p. 305; [Friedman, 2011](#)).

[Jamil \(2021\)](#) noted that surveillance is not just done by media houses when journalists produce work, it can be executed by authorities through the enactment of new digital laws and the creation of various watchdog agencies. Under those laws, journalists are threatened or pressured by politicians and government agencies that have an interest in exaggerating fears to justify ever more advanced surveillance to keep countries safe ([Eley et al., 2016](#)).

[Stoycheff \(2016\)](#) argue that there are significant differences between journalists when they face threats, fear and other violence, and this varies from country to country, and the response rate is also different. Press freedom committees in Arab countries are concerned about threats to the press by implementing harsh digital laws that shut down press websites while journalists are subjected to torture and physical violence. Freedom of the press is often described as being eroded and under attack ([Marx, 2002](#)).

### ***Cases of Arab countries using digital surveillance***

After the revolutions of the Arab Spring (2011), the media in Arab countries became under more surveillance due to the existence of complex politics and the attempts of authoritarian regimes to eliminate counter revolutions ([Shires, 2022](#)). This led to shrinking the space for freedom of expression and opinion, but the public and political activists played a prominent role on electronic platforms and gathered Arab countries to provoke revolutions and did not give in to changing societies. Many countries responded to this change, but most of them in the second transitional stage played an important role in controlling all websites ([AlAshry, 2021a](#), [2021b](#) and [2021c](#)).

With the spread of conflicts and wars, the rise of tyranny and the deterioration of conditions caused by political crises, the Governments of Arab countries have a monopoly on technology and use social media platforms to advance their policies. Threats against press freedoms and growing restrictions on access to information are becoming problematic issues, now more than ever ([AlAshry, 2019](#)).

In terms of how the Arab countries implement digital surveillance methods using modern laws to block online websites and social media platforms, in Syria, Saudi Arabia, Libya, Yemen, Oman, Jordan and Egypt.

*Syria:* At the beginning of the revolution, the Syrian regime issued a legislative decree in 2012 that tightened censorship on many websites and blocked many press websites, such as Arabi newspaper, BBC English and Wikipedia, and amended cybercrime law, a form of "intellectual and cognitive intimidation against users" ([Al-Saqaf, 2016](#)). In 2022, President Bashar al-Assad issued new laws stating that journalists who criticise or embarrass the Syrian Government or publish "fake news" that undermines the prestige of the state or prejudices national unity can be jailed for up to 15 years and face penalties of up to S £15 million (£23,000; [Frery, 2022](#)).

*Saudi Arabia:* The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia differs from other Gulf Cooperation Council countries in that its constitution does not protect freedom of expression. Article 39 of the

Basic Law of Governance in the Kingdom states that “[the media] are prohibited from committing acts that lead to chaos and division”. The internet is restricted in the kingdom. The authorities blocked a wide range of 500,000 websites between 2007 and 2020, which means that news websites that publish opposing views of the Saudi Government are subject to the rules of blocking content considered against the kingdom (Alhuntushi and Lugo-Ocando, 2020). When Jamal Khashoggi was also killed in 2018 in Istanbul while working for the Washington Post by Saudi intelligence agents, none of the senior officials were held accountable, despite evidence that the killing was coordinated by the Deputy Chief of General Intelligence (Saudi Arabia: Freedom in the world 2022 country report. Freedom House, 2022). Journalists who violate copyright laws face imprisonment and fines of up to \$66,000, while website owners face revocation of their commercial licenses and prison sentences of up to six months (Alsharif et al., 2016; Braibanti, 2019). The government has also passed a cybercrime law that indicates penalties of up to five years in prison and a fine of up to 3 million riyals (Alshammari and Singh, 2018).

*Libya:* Prior to the revolution and under the rule of Muammar Gaddafi, Libya had restricted freedom of expression and the dissemination of information, as well as suppressed the freedom of journalists to express their opinions or dissent. The regime used several laws to suppress journalists, such as the Publications Law, which restricted expression and control over publishing (AlAshry, 2021a). On October 26, 2021, the Libyan House of Representatives passed the “Cybercrime Law”, which blatantly focuses on freedom of expression by imposing vague provisions that allow for complete control of the press by two political authorities, one in the East and one in the West, without any judicial permission. Libyan journalists see this law as repressive, especially as it punishes those who publish content on the internet (AlAshry, 2021b).

*Yemen:* in Yemen, it has a multi-party system and does not allow the issuance of newspapers and magazines. Journalists have many restrictions on freedom of the press under Law No. 25 of 1990, and the print media is controlled by the Press and Publications Law in accordance with Article 103, which prohibits any criticism of the state and publishing false data or publishing details that may harm the course of justice or incite violence. If the journalist violates the law, he will be punished with a fine or imprisonment for a period not exceeding one year. Judgments were issued to journalists to stop practising journalism (Abdi and Basaratie, 2016). Moreover, with the continuation of the war in Yemen in 2018, the suppression of press freedoms continues. Ansar Allah (Houthis), in Sana’a, arrested more than 30 journalists by kidnapping and forcibly disappeared for a few months. During the past five years, the authorities have also used the limits on the practice of journalism under Articles 19 and 13 to prosecute and imprison rebel journalists. The state has also historically controlled most terrestrial radio and television (Alsridi and Karim Ziani, 2020).

*Oman:* Governments in Oman exercise many restrictions in accordance with Article 29 of the Constitution, which limits freedom of expression. In addition, Articles 26 to 31 of the 1984 Press and Publications Act restrict these freedoms by banning publications. The 2011 Cybercrime Law imposes a prison sentence of up to three years on anyone who insults privacy by publishing news, electronic images, photos, or information (OCHR-Oman, 2021). These restrictions severely affect people’s rights to freedom of expression, privacy and access to information. Many activists, writers, journalists and blogger’s view Article 26 of the Omani Press and Publication Law as a blatant violation of the right to freedom of opinion, while Article 115(a) of the recently updated Omani Penal Code can be seen as a threat to any attempt to carry out journalistic work outside the limits it imposes. The rest of the press is subject to governmental and security requirements (Al-Kindi and Al-Syabi, 2016).

*Jordan:* The Jordanian administration has relied on the Ottoman Publications Law and the Palestinian Publications Law, which, beginning with the 1953 law and ending with the 1998 law, affirmed that freedom of the press and freedom of opinion are guaranteed within the

limits of the law (AlAshry, 2022c). Jordan suffers from laws and regulations that restrict media freedom and professional practice. The Center for Media Freedoms in Jordan recorded that 26.5% of media professionals describe press freedoms as low, while 2.4% consider them excellent, while 869 violations occurred against media professionals during the last five years, most of which were blocking websites. Self-censorship through laws increased by 95.2% (Center for the Protection and Freedom of Journalists, 2022). The Cybercrime Law is also used as a legal justification for the arrest and detention of journalists, who are tried by arrest and will be charged with fines. It had previously blocked 45 news websites in 2021 (AlAshry, 2021a).

*Egypt.* The government has imposed decades-old censorship laws using Emergency Law No. 162 of 1958, but in October 2021, President Sisi announced the lifting of the state of emergency. But the government used many laws, as the number of detainees reached about 17,000 people, while the total number of political prisoners ranged from 4,000 to 6000 (AlAshry, 2022c). Recently, the government has amended several laws restricting press freedom and opening the door for governments to monitor journalists, such as Press Law 96 of 1996, which prohibits censorship; Combating Information and Communications Technology Crimes Law No. 175 of 2018 and Data Protection Law Resolution No. 151 of 2020; Whereas in the constitution, Article 48 prohibits censorship, except under emergency law. About 35 articles in various laws set penalties for the media and allow for the detention of journalists pending criminal investigations for breaching censorship laws, along with strict fines and prison sentences for publishing “false news” deemed harmful to the state or public officials. Moreover, under Article 195 of the Penal Code, the editor-in-chief can be held criminally liable for defamatory content in any part of the newspaper (AlAshry, 2022b).

## Theoretical framework

Panopticism is a theoretical approach to understanding the concept of surveillance, which was developed by Michel Foucault, who conceived it from Jeremy Bentham’s widely used metaphor for surveillance (Schofield, 2009). Galič *et al.* (2016) developed a panoptical approach to surveillance by using alternative theoretical frameworks to the Panopticon as the primary model to conceptualise surveillance in modern Western societies, but in Arab countries, they used that approach and it takes a fundamentally different way of thinking about how and where to control journals.

Surveillance studies tend to Marx, arguing that his works are out of date, and investigate the relationship between capitalist society and surveillance to explain the connection of surveillance with the modern state, media and technology, ideologies, hegemony, class struggles and alternatives to the surveillance society (Raab *et al.*, 2015).

The dictator state depends on the control of media houses by using the existence of global internet surveillance systems such as Prism, XKeyScore and Tempora that are operated in collaboration with secret services and capitalist communications companies (Fuchs and Trottier, 2017).

Recently, in Arab countries, the rise of so-called social media has resulted in a specific share of political revolutions and capitalist communications companies’ exports of surveillance technologies to regimes that use these tools for monitoring journalists and activists who, as a consequence, have been threatened, tortured and repressed (Fuchs, 2013).

In addition, Ericson (2000) looks particularly at the new combinations of digital surveillance by locating new places in a physically and technologically changed environment. While Zuboff (2015) used another approach of surveillance capitalism to analyse how digital surveillance changes power structures in the Arab countries to control journalists’ by using regulatory laws not to give sources and confidential information to the journals, as well as their fundamental rights (Jamil, 2021). The authoritarian regimes have power through

intelligence that has devices to monitor media and journalists and consolidate certain content for the public (AlAshry, 2022d).

## Methodology

We conducted semi-structured interviews using zoom platform with 14 journalists who were purposively sampled as being responsible for covering political issues from March 2021 to May 2022 to discuss how Arab Governments' use of digital surveillance has affected their work, with a particular focus on press freedom. The discussions were conducted in Arabic and then translated into English.

Secondly, the Questionnaires in Egypt, there are 9,260 Egyptian journalists under the Egyptian Journalists' Syndicate (EJS; 2020), Based on that list of names provided by the Syndicate the sample was 199 journalists were invited to participate in this study because of geographical coverage, all of the journalists' from the sample published news, reports, interview and investigation when the Parliament implemented the law.

### *The sample*

Firstly, Questionnaires were distributed to 199 journalists divided to: (100) journalists from semi-governmental newspapers, while (99) journalists were sampled from the independent newspaper.

The instruments that were used for data collection in this study were documents such as news articles in English and Arabic from Freedom House, Amnesty International and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights were used.

The interview was designed to be open questions to understand how governments affect journalists from different countries, which means that I explicitly ask about Arab countries using digital surveillance and instead allowed it to surface if the conversation took us to know the system of laws of each country and what the practises and pressures exerted against journalists from various points of view are, and if the forms of violence practised by one or each country differ.

For background information on the journalists (see [Appendix Table A1](#)) sampled reporters from online print news organizations targeted at Arab journalists working in investigative reporting.

### *Ethics*

Before conducting the interviews, I received the approval from the unions of Arab journalists, because journalists are not able to speak without permission from the union of each country. About the participants' identities were withheld at their request, as well as to protect them from potential retribution, and that instead they were to describe their general professional role and their organization.

## Findings

### *Authoritarian regimes use surveillance against journalists*

Governments across Syria, Saudi Arabia, Libya, Yemen, Oman, Jordan and Egypt have increasingly procured surveillance technology; they depend on 24 firms based in North America and Europe, such as four – Airbus, Thales Group, G4S and Iris Guard. Governments are purchasing everything from digital tools to spyware and wiretapping tools to facial recognition technology for targeted and mass surveillance. Upon asking the journalists about how surveillance works in your country the Government in Syria used spyware and

manipulated it to record videos and phone calls. While (journalist #2 says) in 2011, Bashar al-Assad used the Italian company Area SpA to monitor journalists and imprison them.

[Cayford and Pieters \(2018\)](#) argue intelligence agencies use surveillance technology from drones to satellites to wiretap journalists and deal with communications data (monitoring phone calls, emails, internet activity, etc.).

Furthermore, the situation in Saudi Arabia is different. “The authorities manipulate recorded phone calls and videos by, for example, allegedly using spyware to spy on those close to journalists” (journalist #3). In addition, “the government used televisual surveillance as a new variety of first-person camera and present document their own lives under different circumstances. After all, the programme makers are essentially transforming raw video footage of confessions and self-reflections into self-surveillance footage” (journalist #4).

[Bolin and Jerslev \(2018\)](#) noted authorities in Arab countries use strategies of internet censorship as part of large-scale military offensives with significantly higher levels of journalists’ repression. On the other hand, journalists, dissidents and other individuals who share their opinions online continue to face such risk in many places:

“The government exercises restrictions on newspapers by controlling information, and censorship of the press takes forms that are not regulated by law and in some cases, the most stringent law is chosen to be applied to newspapers that the censor believes have committed a publishing crime”(journalist #5). In addition, “journalists, writers, and intellectuals are also subject to strict laws regarding freedom of expression and publication. They are tried before special publishing courts or before emergency courts” (journalist #6).

While in Oman, the state’s control over freedom of communication and information includes freedom of access to and circulation of information, freedom to issue newspapers and publications; freedom of radio and television broadcasting; freedom of theatre and film productions, and freedom of professional and union organization for workers in the fields of communication and media. (Journalist #7) says “there are no constitutional or legal safeguards to protect journalists”. While (journalist #8) “confirmed that state monopoly media ownership and state control of internet services exist, which limits freedom of expression and journalistic work, and makes the political authorities and security services control the process of information flow and the freedom to disseminate knowledge”.

“Jordan has features of an authoritarian media system, and they control the state through the government’s Ministry of Information by using the Press and Publications Law (PPL), which underwent extensive modification by parliamentarians, to control press freedom and autonomy” (journalist #9). In addition, “the role of the Jordan Press Association involves pressuring or arguing with unruly elements within the press and has also included an extensive list of direct constraints. The journalists kept secret sources of their information, but the court decided otherwise (Article 5). The court used it to follow the journalists” (journalist #10).

[Jones \(1998\)](#) argues that the government exercises restrictions on media houses by controlling the information and censorship of the press takes forms that are not regulated by law. Journalists, writers and intellectuals are subject to publishing crimes or other strict laws regarding freedom of expression. They are tried before special publishing courts or before emergency courts.

While Egypt’s surveillance technology improves year after year. (journalist #11) says “governments are employing covert surveillance technologies using means of varying sophistication, such as Canadian company Sandvine and in 2016 Egyptian NGOs received emails purportedly containing sensitive information—a technique that allows for surveillance” (Journalist # 12). “claims that the government amends many laws, such as Egyptian cybercrime legislation for its facilitation of mass surveillance. In the 2019 constitutional referendum, greater restrictions on and violations of press freedom were

witnessed, and six reporters were arrested for reporting charges of spreading false news in an attempt to defame the state, the state given the lack of legal protection for citizens and the predominant use of surveillance in rights violations”.

Regarding whether the laws in Egypt include many obstructions, this study revealed that where the law regulating the press and media and the Supreme Council of 2018 were applied, Egypt is the only one of the Arab countries that has left many laws to control press websites. that the largest number of articles in the law may be ambiguous, allowing the interpretation of many phenomena, most journalists disagree (64.8%); the same percentage agree (15.6%); and are neutral (19.6%)  $M = 1.51$ ;  $SD = 0.751$ . Then, restrictions on journalistic work by law for example authority issue decisions to block websites, the journalists agree (68.3%) and disagree (17.6%); and neutral (14.1%)  $M = 1.49$ ;  $SD = 0.778$ .

The media landscape in Libya is very difficult due to the tension between the governments. (Journalist # 13) “Argues that on September 15, 2022, the Government of National Unity issued Decision No 811 of 2022, which is about audio-visual media activities that violate media freedom and control by the intelligence service”. Furthermore, (Journalist # 13) says “there are conditions that threaten the viability of media institutions, such as that media houses should pay between 4,000 and 20,000 dollars each year to renew their licenses. Which finds media houses unable to continue their operations and suggests that they seek approval from security or intelligence services on the content that will be published on their website. Hopefully, the upcoming elections will require that media institutions be protected from political tensions and any threats of closure and respect media freedom, independence, and pluralism”.

### ***Authoritarian regimes use surveillance against journalists***

From the interviews, we found groups with different answers about how authoritarian regimes use surveillance against journalists when they do in their investigative news stories, among the 14 participants, 5 of them said the government used legal law to threaten them, and 7 said the government put them into remand, while 2 were imprisoned for more than 5 years.

Most of the participants from (Syria, Saudi Arabia, Libya, Yemen, Oman and Egypt) respond Arab countries used intelligence agencies induce fear and pressure on reporters who cover sensitive topics they are fear of murder, surveillance threat, physical surveillance, electronic surveillance, harassment and death anxiety.

Asking the journalists about how governments spy on them, (Journalist #11) covered a corruption investigative story and noted that: “I worked on many journalistic investigations inside Egypt, but they were not published, as I work in a government newspaper. But now I am working in a research team for many cross-border investigations, such as the corruption cases of the former President Hosni Mubarak, but I recommend not mentioning my name for fear of being pursued by the authorities” While (Journalist #12) says, “The law restricts a journalist’s right to circulate information if it is confidential in nature, which is ambiguous, especially with no law for the circulation of information, which usually contains information considered confidential”.

Asking the journalists how much freedom your media outlet gives to you half of the sample explain no freedom with (43.4%) semi-governmental; (45.0%) independent. Then the percentage the same with little freedom (25.0%) while (6.1%) with some freedom. The study showed that there are no significant differences between the degree of agreement for both semi-governmental  $M= 3.74$ ;  $SD= 1.454$  and independent  $M = 3.79$ ;  $SD= 1.431$ , as the  $p$ -value is 0.797 ( $> 0.05$ ).

[AlAshry \(2022b\)](#) argues that the government restricts freedom of the press and freedom of digital expression via social media, as well as prevents the circulation of any news or



information about crises and their developments. In addition, the Supreme Council for Media Regulation has a responsibility for a prominent role in besieging the news and data that are being circulated, so that the blocked 16 news websites under Article 8 of Law No. 96 of 1996 and the most recent law regulating the work of the press, No. 180 of 2018, in Article (10). While [Jamil \(2021\)](#) noted, this implies that the surveillance of journalists translates into risks to them that extend beyond surveillance and impinge upon the security of the journalists as well as the safety of their sources.

In Syria, “I covered a critical story about Bashar Al-Assad’s. After that, the government targeted me and put me in jail. Since the beginning of the revolution, the government has been monitoring the internet; on the other hand, citizens have used social media to spread protests and communicate with activists and journalists” (Journalist #1.). While “The Assad regime recently developed some spyware programmes that work on mobile phones with the “Android” operating system, as well as taking advantage of some of these programmes to penetrate devices with the Microsoft operating system and several other programmes to penetrate mobile phone devices, and this process was called Silver Hawk. Fake news programmes are also planted on the journalist’s phone, such as WhatsApp and Telegram program” (Journalist #2). [Irum and Laila \(2015\)](#) recognises that Syrian Government stringent internet surveillance apparatus that effectively blocks websites and subtly filters information; as a result, only selective government news, such as selling meaningless sensations that could potentially harm people, sects, races and religions, is allowed to pass through the firewall. That platform system also hunts down journalists accessing disallowed news websites to create an ubiquitous atmosphere of fear, harassment and persecution.

Moreover, the response was the same from Saudi Arabian: “The violation of press freedom in Saudi Arabia continues due to the repression pursued by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman since he came to power in 2017.” (Journalist #3). In addition, “The highest number of arrested journalists was 31 journalists, the severe and systematic repression by the Saudi regime reached even the alternative media represented by social networking sites, and the emphasis on freedom of expression and speech increased under the rule of bin Salman” (Journalist #4).

The results confirmed with [Alnajrani et al. \(2018\)](#) study that Saudi journalists are afraid of being killed after the murder of Jamal Khashoggi and that if the journalists want to work, they should change their tribal and family names to escape judgement and work freely.

Furthermore, different journalist from Yemen as “journalists suffering from digital surveillance, there are many cases of disappearance, arbitrary detention, and/or torture of journalists and human rights defenders aimed at silencing their opposition and legitimising their power by spreading fear”. (Journalist #5) While (Journalist #6) confirmed “The deliberate attack on journalists is part of a widespread and systematic campaign aimed at preventing access to information. The Yemeni intelligence services are listening in on journalists’ phone calls”.

Governments are the main players in forcing journalists to censor their news stories, threaten them with death and apply pressure to prevent them from writing by enforcing laws and regulations that require journalists to follow the rules ([Yesil, 2014](#)).

Moreover, Oman has more restrictions on freedom of the press than any other country. “The Omani government uses the power of authority it enjoys by monitoring the performance of newspapers and journalists by using articles 24, 36, 55, and 59 of the Press and Publication Law, knowing that it is fully aware of its violation of the international human rights system” (Journalist #7). Furthermore, “The Sultanate of Oman imposes direct censorship on the internet through the telecommunications company that manages it, through Article 5 of the Telecommunications Regulatory Law, which refers to the control of information”. (Journalist #8) “While in Jordan after COVID 19, the state exercises extensive control over various websites, using the Smart Filter program, which is produced by an American company” (Journalist #9). In addition, “the Jordanian government decided to subject news

websites to the censorship of the Press and Publications Law and allow arrest and imprisonment in expression and media cases” (Journalist #10).

However, there were mixed feelings from those interviewed. Some of the participants from Libya did not acknowledge the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Law that the current Constitution allows to restrict journalists. The journalists responded: “One of the biggest challenges is the lack of stability. The difficult challenges faced by Libyan journalists in a hostile environment notwithstanding, for the work of field correspondents and journalists working for news agencies and independent media, Libya is one of the most dangerous countries in the world” (Journalist #13). “There are no specialised bodies in Libya to monitor the work of institutions supervising the Internet”. “With the exception of judicial institutions, the southern region was subjected to a complete internet outage, disrupting the internet’s aim to not broadcast news of crimes in Libya” (Journalist #14).

In the Arab uprising of 2011, military authorities and the state controlled the media and blockaded the Internet. Online social networking allows open access to information and restricts freedom of expression. When journalists and reporters are denied access to the protest locations, the governments also hunt down citizens and journalists accessing disallowed websites to create a ubiquitous atmosphere of fear, harassment and persecution (Alsridi and Karim Ziani, 2020).

### *The impact of digital surveillance on journalists’ professional lives*

Lashmar (2018) argues that there is clear evidence of a paradigmatic shift in journalist–source relations and that journalists need to protect themselves against being sued for defamation or libel, but have an incomplete mental model of digital threats. This explains how surveillance impacts the professionalism of Arab journalists.

All the journalists interviewed stated that the government conducts surveillance or targets journalists, and that it interferes with their work as chief editor. Some journalists believe there is nothing that can be done. We should give them all the information.

I will find out. A young Egyptian journalist working at Al-Ahram newspaper put it like this: “Governments threaten the freedom of journalists and media workers and commit human rights violations. It is increasingly becoming clear that digital censorship has contributed to the disguise of the democratic nature of access to information” (Journalist #12). “Journalists were exposed to violence on the Internet, which raised the right of journalists to work in press institutions”. “New newspapers do not appoint media graduates but rather young people who received training courses from the Presidential Intelligence Program with the aim of making the media fall under the misinformation of the intelligence services” (Journalist #13).

In another example from Yemen, the situation is different, “Media workers face fear in the areas where wars break out, where there are bombs and bullets in the coverage areas, journalists find themselves killed by the regime because they are getting rid of you because they found out that you would publish a press story” (Journalist #5). while (Journalist #6) confirmed, “They have no choice but to work amid increasing harassment, intimidation, surveillance, and risks to our lives and livelihoods.”

A Syrian journalist noted, “digital technology creates new channels of repression and abuse. Female journalists are more vulnerable to online harassment and violence. (Journalist #1)” While, “The Shiite regime in Syria has affected journalists by inducing fear and depression, whether in conflict areas because there is a restricted civil space or high levels of organized crime by Bashar’s regime, as it uses digital security techniques that threaten our lives and our families” (Journalist #2).

Saudi Arabia’s takeover of the region’s media is a reflection of what is occurring in the Arab countries after revolution 2011 this point reflect the response from interview noted,

“Saudi Arabia has a strong economy. Their role is critical in Arab society, but journalists continue to work under grave threat, and even in so-called safe and democratic spaces, their security is increasingly at risk” (Journalist #3). While (Journalist #4) confirmed; “it uses methods and tools that change the truth. Its goal is to discredit the media and cover up facts, such as what happened with the murder of journalist Jamal”.

The results confirmed with [AlAshry \(2022d\)](#) that the government placed restrictions on journalists by using the law to oppress journalists and media houses. In addition, the law has negatively impacted media freedom and given the government the ability to censor online information.

Furthermore, the media in Oman cannot exercise their professional role in the absence of information policies, the respond from Journalist says “the most widespread surveillance of Oman journalists and activists on social networks consists of depriving people and societies of the ability to distinguish between fact and fiction, in addition to the possibility of manipulating them in horrific ways by spreading news” (Journalist #7). While others say, “In this climate of self-censorship, there is also targeted electronic surveillance of journalists in Oman”. “Every day, the number of journalists imprisoned increases, and legal measures are increasingly used against investigative journalists to obstruct their work” (Journalist #8)

“Libya is still difficult to work in for journalists, media professionals, and activists who are still subject to campaigns of intimidation and defamation, such as Haftar’s crimes, and are being prosecuted arbitrarily because of the work they do” (Journalist #13). A similar response noted that “The increased censorship, the use of tools such as Pegasus or the Candiru spyware—the intrusion into journalists’ devices and their lives [. . .]. To confront these dangers, journalists are often forced to take the dangerous path of self-censorship or flee to Turkey”(Journalist #14).

[AlAshry \(2021c\)](#) As a result of civil wars and Islamic groups such as ISIS, the main challenge for journalists covering wars and conflict between civilians and Islamic groups such as ISIS is gaining access to secure areas. Journalists in Arab countries face violence in many forms, as follows: torture, imprisonment, closure of their websites and censorship of content.

Journalists in Jordan are facing a growing crisis of freedom of information and journalism as a thwarted coup and high-profile arrests shake the country. The fact that the main sources are Jordanian reveals a lot about the state of marginalisation and the weakness of the Jordanian media and information system. Journalist responded “the impact of the digital age on freedom of expression and the safety of journalists, access to information, and the issue of privacy, have become a matter that is difficult to find a solution to, and the decline in press freedom during the past five years is a matter that has become a cause for fear and concern” (Journalist #9).

“The motive in all cases of assassination of journalists in relation to reports they wrote about royal corruption involving King Abdullah or journalists suffering horrific torture, most journalists received death threats, and the killings that ensued later, create a climate of self-censorship in the journalistic landscape [. . .]. There are many cases that are never properly investigated, and where too few investigations lead to prosecutions or convictions” (Journalist #10).

## Discussion

Based on the testimonies of journalists from Syria, Saudi Arabia, Libya, Yemen, the Sultanate of Oman, Jordan and Egypt, we can establish the following comparative digital surveillance monitor press freedom for journalists covering sensitive investigative topics:

Surveillance, especially towards journalists, is not a new thing. In Arab countries after the revolution of 2011, the regimes used the cyberspace to harass journalists, attacking those

whose voices are critical of authority and using bans as part of surveillance measures. These dynamics are intensifying the chilling effect on the profession and press freedom.

After the revolution of 2011 Surveillance is a stifling issue in Arab societies. The authorities increased surveillance technologies to keep themselves in power. It is feared that the presence of surveillance in the digital world will only slow democracy's movement. Many surveillance tools are used by Arab countries to track journals (Mills, 2019). In Arab countries, there is a lack of studies from Arab researchers to contribute to surveillance studies, while in journalism studies, there is a growing body of literature in Western countries that reflects upon the ever-expanding forms of surveillance and its influence on journalistic practice (Martin *et al.*, 2019; Gynnild, 2013; Jamil, 2021; Mills and Sarikakis, 2016).

The political surveillance against journalists makes demonstrative the power of the state while at the same time starkly underscoring the vulnerability of journalists' rights and protections. The surveillance-linked fear for journalists covering investigative topics, such as the assassination of Jamal Khashoggi story by agents of the Saudi Government at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, Turkey. There are many types of surveillance that require country-specific studies for a better understanding of the effects of surveillance on journalists in diverse political and cultural contexts.

In repressive Arab regimes, using erosive digital legal frameworks such as the cybercrime law that was applied in most countries after the Arab Spring revolutions, laws can be bent, interpreted and ignored at will. Ultimately, the goal underlying the surveillance of journalists to cultivate a chilling effect that promotes fear and is aligned with the dominant governing view. In addition, journalists are being threatened through their Editor-in-Chief, who monitors all sections by order of the state, such as Egypt, Syria and Saudi Arabia, which control the media through intelligence services.

The finding from the questionnaires shows that Egyptian law has very contradictory provisions with specific provisions to control data; the field remains widely regulated at the national level, which is still very narrow, in particular, regarding the application of journalists' rights. We find that there are huge differences in the impact of violence against journalists in Libya and Syria. This variation is due to the influence of each journalist from country to other, as well as their willingness to pursue sensitive stories, particularly in national security, defence and terrorism. We noted that prosecutions by intelligence agencies for surveillance are directly linked to the threat of assassination and torture, and to controlling the privacy of the people. They themselves work on investigative stories but use confidential sources to protect their identities because their lives are threatened.

There are attempts within the press to participate in the full use of data and information, but it has dangerous effects. Further blocking of websites does not contribute to more transparency due to the danger of censorship by the intelligence services, for example, in Egypt. All news websites are under the umbrella of the United Media Company and are in fact owned by the intelligence services. Parikesit (2020) argues that journalists' who become objects of surveillance fear being threatened and get disturbed, which changes their behaviour to become more submissive to authority.

Most journalists recognize that digital surveillance threatens press freedom. Most of those who are faced with fear of the government regarding their personal safety and the safety of their sources do not receive a salary, most of them due to financial constraints. Because newspapers in Arab countries are subject to the state budget, which has potentially serious consequences for democracy, which means institutional unwillingness is rendered powerless by governments.

These results are similar to (Mills and Sarikakis, 2016) study which is remarkably similar in Western and non-Western countries, journalists increasingly interact with technology and other societies, they aim to defend journalism. While Foucault (2019). argues that

surveillance studies demonstrate how information collected from individualised people is organised and manipulated to alter, manage, or even control the lives of those people.

Foucault's Panopticism theoretical approach suggests surveillance as a surveillance is an act that creates discipline with fear among the individuals under observation. The theory has also been used to guide the actions of journalists to analyse ethical issues in journalism studies (Galič *et al.*, 2016, p. 735). The theory explains how to transform journalists according to their professional standards and how to discipline state power. Therefore, the authorities of Arab countries can exercise surveillance to maintain power, not inform the public of the news and control the activities of journalists, which indicates more political and social repression and a decline in democracy in the Arab world.

## Conclusion

The starkest examples from Arab counties of how authorities use digital surveillance to control press freedom by using laws to block websites that are considered a threat to national security. This study has both theoretical implications understanding press freedom and digital surveillance and practical implications for news organizations and journalists. As a result of digital surveillance, the press is in a dangerous situation. We find journalists in a constant state of fear of surveillance threats or facing steep fines and penalties. The digital surveillance tactics used against journalists demonstrate the power of the intelligence agencies while at the same time starkly underscoring the vulnerability of journalists' rights and protections.

Finally, in repressive regimes all journalists might encounter digital threats is quite clearly a serious breach of the rights to freedom of expression and freedom of information as guaranteed under international law. The authoritarian leaders seek strict control of the content to limit citizens' freedoms and using the current counter-tactics of journalists offers no guarantee as to future strategies. The recommendation of the study encourages media organisations to play a more active role in setting policies that make it easier for journalists to adopt and use digital security tools to protect themselves and information.

In this context, further research could include a joint trans-disciplinary approach between the realms of media psychology and political science, with a view to seeking to identify correlations between Arab documented surveillance of journalists and the impact of state surveillance, which is on journalists who feel inhibited through fear, hoping to live in a democratic health state .

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### Further reading

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## Appendix

**Table A1** Journalists' interviews background

No.	Country	Gender	Current roles	Name of organization	Interview length	Freedom indexes (2022)
1	Syria	Male	Journalist	Al-Watan	1:30:40	165/180
2	Syria	Female	Journalist	Baladna	1:20:49	
3	Saudi Arabia	Male	Chief editor	Umm Al-Qura	2:10:15	155/180
4	Saudi Arabia	Male	Journalist	Al Madina	1:20:49	
5	Yemen	Male	Journalist	Al-Thawra	1:06:15	163/180
6	Yemen	Male	Chief editor	Aljournhouria	2:07:40	
7	Oman	Female	Journalist	Oman Arabic Daily	1:08:50	133/180
8	Oman	Male	Journalist	Al Watan	2:20:33	
9	Jordan	Female	Journalist	Al-Dustour	2:10:15	94/180
10	Jordan	Male	Chief editor	AlGhadAssabeel	1:08:40	
11	Egypt	Male	Journalist	Al-Ahram	1:20:31	161/180
12	Egypt	Male	Journalist	Al-Shorouk	2:26:45	
13	Libya	Female	Chief editor	AlBilad	2:35:31	156/180
14	Libya	Male	Journalist	Al-Tadamun News Agency	2:40:05	

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