

STATEMENT FOR WORLD PRESS FREEDOM DAY

Saturday, 3 May, 2025

Reporting in the Brave New World: The Impact of Artificial Intelligence on Press Freedom and the Media”

Today, we join the rest of the world in commemorating World Press Freedom Day 2025 under the theme “Reporting in the Brave New World: The Impact of Artificial Intelligence on Press Freedom and the Media.”

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has transformed journalism in many positive ways. It has enhanced fact-checking and data analysis, allowing journalists to verify information in real time and analyse large datasets to uncover hidden patterns, corruption, and human rights violations. These capabilities have improved the credibility of reporting and empowered journalists to expose the truth, even in the most difficult environments.

However, we also reflect with deep concern on the growing threats to independent journalism—both physical and digital. AI, while powerful, has become a dangerous tool in the arsenal of digital repression. In Africa, the fight against digital repression is particularly fraught, as authorities increasingly use surveillance tactics to monitor and silence dissenting voices. Media censorship and restrictive digital tools further limit access to crucial information, pushing many human rights defenders into self-censorship due to fear and intimidation.

In repressive environments, AI is being used to undermine press freedom in alarming ways: AI-Enhanced Surveillance, through facial recognition, data scraping, and behavioral tracking, governments can monitor and target journalists in real time. Often implemented without legal safeguards or transparency, these technologies place reporters at significant risk, especially during protests, electoral coverage, or corruption investigations. Phishing attacks have also become more prevalent, tricking individuals into revealing sensitive personal data.

Automated Censorship, AI-powered content moderation systems whether developed by platforms or co-opted by governments can instantly suppress news content and social media posts. For example, an investigative report by Nation Media Group revealed that Safaricom, in collaboration with Neural Technologies Limited, developed software granting Kenyan security agencies access to private consumer data. Under the pretense of enforcing “community standards” or curbing disinformation, entire narratives can be erased without accountability, allowing governments to silence critical journalism.

Synthetic Disinformation, generative AI tools are now used to produce fake videos, audio, and news articles that discredit journalists, distort facts, and propagate state-sponsored narratives. These disinformation campaigns are often amplified by bot networks, which overwhelm digital platforms and drown out credible voices. Simultaneously, vaguely defined anti-misinformation laws are being exploited to justify online and offline crackdowns, transforming censorship from overt control to sophisticated manipulation.

This is the new face of digital repression: quiet, automated, and dangerously effective.

“The future of press freedom must not be left to algorithms or unchecked power. It must be built on the unwavering principle that journalism is not a crime — and that no journalist should be silenced by violence, surveillance, or digital repression.”

— Hassan Shire, Executive Director, DefendDefenders

A free, independent, and protected press is the cornerstone of any democracy. It plays a vital role in holding governments accountable, amplifying marginalised voices, and protecting the public’s right to know. As we embrace technological advances, AI must be regulated with robust safeguards aligned with international human rights standards to protect freedom of expression and preserve press freedom.