

## WORLD PRESS FREEDOM DAY



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## PRESS FREEDOM UNDER ATTACK

# Global threats and local reforms

**Kamal Ahmed**  
is head of the Media Reform Commission in Bangladesh and an independent journalist. His X handle is @ahmedkamal.

## KAMAL AHMED

As we mark World Press Freedom Day under the theme "Reporting in the Brave New World—The Impact of Artificial Intelligence on Press Freedom and the Media," the sobering reality is that the world has already witnessed the deaths of 15 Palestinian journalists in the first quarter of this year alone. According to the Palestinian Journalists Syndicate, the total number of journalists killed since October 7, 2023 has surpassed 200.

The most unsettling aspect of this tragedy is the deafening silence from global powers—those who often portray themselves as defenders of press freedom—regarding what appear to be deliberate and targeted killings of journalists by Israel. This silence extends not only to the journalists themselves but to their families and the broader Palestinian population, including women and children.

Even more alarming are credible allegations suggesting that many Israeli military operations have employed artificial intelligence developed and supplied by powerful Western nations. Any discussion of AI's impact on journalism that ignores its militarised use would be incomplete. Silencing Palestinian voices—through whom the world has come to understand the extent of atrocities and the gravity of the ongoing humanitarian crisis—has been central to this strategy. Israel's refusal to grant access to international journalists in Gaza, a standard practice in other global conflicts, further reinforces this concern. Meanwhile, major tech companies complicit in these developments continue to evade scrutiny.

While we explore the potential benefits of AI in journalism—such as improved data analysis and operational efficiency—it is critical to confront its darker uses, especially when they imperil press freedom and human lives.

Beyond the Middle East, the inauguration of Donald Trump as the 47th US president has heralded a troubling redefinition of press freedom in what has long been considered the "free world." In his first 100 days, Trump's administration has shut down state-funded broadcasters like Voice of America and NPR on ideological grounds, expelled correspondents from the White House press corps, and replaced mainstream media outlets with fringe media aligned with his MAGA agenda.

Trump, who infamously labelled the press as the "enemy of the people" during his first term, continues to wage an aggressive campaign against journalism. Disturbingly, this is no longer an aberration but part of a broader global trend towards authoritarianism. His actions embolden autocrats elsewhere, legitimising crackdowns on press freedom.

Had Bangladesh's former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina remained in office, it is not far-fetched to assume that she might have cited Trump's approach as justification for further suppressing dissent and controlling the media.

Tasked by the interim government, led

by Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus, to recommend necessary reforms for making the media objective, strong, and independent, we in our recent exercise found that the previous regime established its control on the media in a planned and organised manner. Licences for setting up television channels were given strictly on the basis of the licensees' political identity and commitment, instead of experience and expertise in journalism and broadcasting. There was no oversight into whether investments came from legitimate, taxed income or were laundered through black money. This resulted in media becoming a tool for vested interests, used to shield business empires from scrutiny or extend influence over government affairs.

During consultations, high-ranking civil servants admitted their inability to resist pressure from media-owning business groups engaged in illegal activities, such as land-grabbing and river encroachment. Many called for stringent regulation of media licensing to prevent such abuse.

In the absence of any regulatory obligation regarding disclosure of the owners' interests, many of these owners use their media outlets to discredit, malign or undermine their business rivals or advance their cause. They suppress stories that go against their interests, manipulate narratives, and engage in smear campaigns against competitors.

Furthermore, many of these oligarchs employ monopolistic tactics, owning multiple media platforms across formats and languages, often through proxies. The content from these outlets is frequently duplicated, showing a clear intent to dominate rather than diversify the media landscape.

Globally, the question of "who owns our media" has now become an important issue, and it is being addressed through restrictions on cross ownership. Such restrictions mean a TV channel owner cannot own a newspaper or a newspaper proprietor is banned from owning a TV channel. Countries like the US, UK, Canada, and many in Europe have such regulations to preserve media plurality, which is crucial for a healthy democracy.

Since publication of the Media Reform Commission report in Bangladesh, a few critics have pointed out that India being the largest democracy in the world has not imposed any such restriction. But, India (151) is hardly an example of having a vibrant media, ranking below Bangladesh (149), Nepal (90), Sri Lanka (139) and Maldives (104) in the latest edition of World Press Freedom Index. Its media has earned the branding "Godi media" due to its alignment with the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). It must be noted here that in India, too, a bill to restrict cross ownership is pending in parliament.

Some critics have said that the suggestions for transforming media companies into public limited companies, as part of democratisation or diffusion of sole ownership, is too idealistic and not

appropriate for our country as most of the media houses are losing concerns, thereby making them unattractive to investors. However, our review of audited financials showed that more than a dozen media houses are profitable, disproving the notion that such a transformation is economically unfeasible.

The real challenge lies in an oversaturated market filled with poorly managed, politically-backed media entities that engage in unethical competition by undercutting ad rates. These practices hurt the entire sector.

One contentious reform proposal is to introduce a national minimum wage for journalists, benchmarked against civil service salaries. Detractors argue that this is impractical in a financially struggling sector. Yet, had the eighth wage board for journalists (announced in 2014) been properly implemented (by awarding yearly increments), it would have already reached the level of a Grade 9 civil servant. Media owners opposing this reform appear more interested in exploiting loopholes to deny fair wages while benefiting from government advertising rates they don't truly qualify for.

A recurring theme in our consultations was the financial insecurity faced by both journalists and media houses, which often forces them into questionable alliances. Adequate compensation and policy support are essential for reducing dependency on political or corporate patronage.

The Media Reform Commission has recommended several fiscal incentives and tax reliefs aimed at ensuring long term financial viability without compromising editorial freedom.

While discussing the reform agenda for the media, it would be imprudent not to delve into the matter of the current environment, which is still chaotic and somehow intimidating for independent journalism. There's still some self-censorship; quite often, journalists are coming under attack both verbally and physically, a good number of media personalities are being implicated with fabricated charges and some are imprisoned, though largely due to their political activism in favour of the fallen dictator and her party, which is tantamount to inciting violence. Most of these attacks and self-censorship are due to online intimidation and mob violence, which the government needs to rein in with strong preventative actions.

The interim government has been asserting that, so far, it has not intervened or dictated any news media on their editorial decision-making process and news coverage, but such assertion is inadequate to allay the fear of mob and ensuring safety of journalists. The recent dismissal of three journalists working for three different entities following confrontational questioning of an adviser—done on the same day and without due process—has raised suspicion of coordinated retaliation, even if indirect.

These dismissals have sparked widespread debate online, but there is currently no institutional mechanism for arbitration or redress. Enacting the proposed journalist protection ordinance and establishing an independent media commission would help investigate such incidents and uphold press freedom. Hopefully, the interim government would take sincere initiatives to implement the much-needed reforms in the media sector soon.

# Combating disinfo key to restoring trust in journalism

**Saad Hammadi**  
is policy and advocacy manager and a fellow at the Balsillie School of International Affairs in Canada.

SAAD HAMMADI

We observe World Press Freedom Day at a time when the transformation of technology has severely disrupted the notion and purpose of many things, including the press. While many, including myself, find comfort in reading the hard copy of the newspaper in the morning, and enjoy the distinct scent of the paper fresh off the press, technology is progressively changing the course by shifting news from print to digital devices.

The dissemination of news has never been faster and more multi-modal than it is today. The content and reliability of news have also never been this questionable. Thanks to the advent of artificial intelligence and general-purpose technologies (GPT) as well as the range of platforms, the disruption of technology has blurred the lines of what constitutes press, and therefore press freedom.

We are seeing a surge of propaganda and information war on social media platforms. Since the assumption of the interim government, some Indian mainstream media, bots, influencers, and users on social media platforms have waged a concerted disinformation campaign against Bangladesh. This includes false information about Bangladesh's economy, military coup, atrocities against the Hindu religious minority.

The CA Press Wing Facts, the fact-checking arm of the chief adviser's press wing, countered those narratives with facts on behalf of the government. Research by the Tech Global Institute finds that Google prioritised Indian sources on specific topics about Bangladesh, whereas credible reports from leading Bangladeshi media outlets were buried at least under a dozen pages. The algorithmic bias on social media platforms and search engines escalated those disinformation contents.

The Indian disinformation campaign undermines not only the journalistic integrity of that country's media, but also strains the relationship between the two countries by way of promoting hatred. This has serious implications on Bangladesh's national security as well.

This is where press freedom must be protected against the enablers of disinformation. We are in an era where the transformation of technology requires reimagination of governance frameworks.

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In the United States, Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act protects platforms of intermediary responsibility behind the atrocities that Facebook has enabled against the Rohingya. Two decades ago, this provision was in line with the First Amendment rights. Today, human rights advocates are concerned about whether this immunity is the best approach to protecting free speech.

Now, what does Facebook have to do with press freedom? In January, the White House decided to invite social media influencers alongside journalists to attend its press briefings. There are precedents of independent journalists doing exceptionally well in alternative and digital media, whereas Fox has demonstrated right-wing propaganda in the traditional media. Yet, diluting the role of journalists by having social media influencers relay the White House messages warrants a concern about opening the sluice gate for narratives that, in other words, amount to mis- and disinformation.

This requires a robust response—one that draws a clear distinction between press freedom and crackdown on disinformation. The European External Action Service (EEAS) has developed Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) as a policy framework to combat disinformation

and manipulative behaviour. The framework has four pillars: situational awareness; resilience building; disruption and regulation; and EU external action. Each of these pillars have a multi-layered approach.

At a time when Meta has decided to dismantle its fact-checking capability, and the company's founder Mark Zuckerberg admits that they "are going to catch less bad stuff," it is important that press freedom and the right to freedom of expression are not exploited to cater to disinformation.

The traditional approach to addressing disinformation has been robust dissemination of accurate information. But this approach faces a significant challenge when confronted against industrialised disinformation campaigns. Individuals and independent institutions don't have the resources and capacity alone to counter disinformation when produced at scale.

States, therefore, require a multi-pronged approach to assess threats and risks from disinformation, and to measure it against the international human rights law to ensure that any action initiated by the authorities are necessary, proportionate and legitimate, that all other means have been exhausted in a transparent and systematic manner, before any restrictive or punitive measures are applied.



A systematic approach to address and contain disinformation under the FIMI framework comprises open-source intelligence and impact assessment of the content as part of situational awareness. The content is then weighed against resilience-building measures such as fact-checking, capacity-building of institutions that can produce reliable news and counter false narratives, digital media and information literacy, and strategic communications.

A fundamental element of combating disinformation is having the right set of disruptive and regulatory framework that holds platforms accountable for the services they offer. Human rights groups welcomed the EU's Digital Services Act introduced last year to hold Big Tech accountable to protect human rights. These measures are critical to combat the industry-scale information operations or the disinformation machinery that some political parties and states patronise.

The EU's FIMI framework further consists of external actions that include restrictive measures, diplomatic responses, and multilateral cooperation, as well as the exercise of international norms and principles. At a recent discussion by an EU diplomat that I attended, I raised the question about how the EU draws distinction between combating disinformation and upholding media freedom. My takeaway from that discussion is that the laws such as the Digital Services Act and the Artificial Intelligence (AI) Act of the EU don't target what somebody says. Instead, they promote transparency. The AI Act, for example, divides services into four categories, starting from no-risk to high-risk. The high-risk services are considered unsuitable and therefore not allowed to operate. The risk-based approach does not put everybody under the same regulatory pressure.

Press freedom must be protected not only from repressive pieces of legislation, but also from the concerted disinformation that some platforms and actors patronise under the refuge of free speech.