**[Online freedoms](https://www.dawn.com/news/1781020/online-freedoms)**

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THE world is abuzz with the leaps artificial intelligence has made in the past couple of years. While citizens are excited to use free AI tools to create dreamy videos and fantasy worlds, governments are silently using AI to further censor and repress their people. The Freedom on the Net (FOTN) 2023 report sheds light on the repressive power of AI and how it is amplifying the scale, speed, and efficiency of digital repression.

The FOTN 2023 report is an annual report that highlights the state of internet freedom around the world. As this year’s report is unveiled, we find ourselves grappling with a sobering reality: the global landscape of internet freedom is facing profound challenges, and the need for action has never been more pressing.

The report confirms what many had sadly suspected: the world’s most repressive governments have quickly jumped on to exploiting AI to increase digital censorship and misinformation. Not only are governments using AI to increase their control over data and online spaces, AI is also enabling repressive regimes — and even democratic ones — to fabricate content to push their agendas and blur lines between reality and deception.

One of the biggest concerns that is ringing alarm bells across the corridors of social justice movements is the breach in information integrity that AI has enabled. Deepfakes, for instance, made headlines during an Indian electoral campaign in 2020, sparking a wave of fear and uncertainty. Trust in the veracity of information has become a constant worry as manipulation of data — including images, videos, and documents — has become a powerful and dangerous precedent in the digital age that is being used by governments across the world.

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While we might believe that AI is still in its early days, the FOTN 2023 report reveals that governments in at least 16 countries have already deployed AI-powered tools to escalate smear campaigns against opponents and influence public debate. Furthermore, at least 22 countries have forced digital platforms to deploy machine learning to remove political, social, and religious speech that doesn’t seem favourable to the governing parties.

However, this doesn’t mean that AI is replacing older methods of information control, as a record 41 countries continued to block websites with political, social, or religious content that should be protected under free expression standards within international human rights law. The FOTN 2023 report also suggests that traditional forms of digital repression actually surged with people from at least 55 countries facing legal repercussions for expressing themselves online.

In short, the report paints a disconcerting picture of global internet freedom being on a steady decline for the past decade. Authoritarian nations that perennially find themselves at the bottom of the barrel have shown little improvement and even the so-called democratic North has opted for intense control over digital freedoms, underscoring the entrenched nature of the repression we face on online spaces.

We cannot underestimate the importance of the transparent work that FOTN reports undertake, pushing us all to come to terms with the realities of today’s digital spaces. While celebrating these efforts, they should also be followed by creation of autonomous and unbiased bodies that can oversee the world’s performance in terms of enabling open access to the internet for all its citizens.

A cohesive, collaborative, and globally-led approach is critically needed in today’s internet, which is riddled with misinformation, information control, and AI-powered deepfakes. However, these bodies should not be solely based on the agendas of the Global North; instead, they should be established through a truly collaborative effort. If this year’s report is any indication, it is clear that even Western democracies have failed to protect internet freedom for their people. It is imperative to push the governments to meet the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights when it comes to digital spaces, as well.

Along with trusted watchdogs that are represented by people around the world, we also need to put more efforts and resources into fact-checking mechanisms in this era of information overload.

Finally, governments need to prioritise robust data protection for their citizens, especially as an increasing number of entities in the private sector exploit personal information. Any nation failing to offer this layer of safety to its citizens is doing a significant disservice. Personal data is the lifeblood of the digital age, and its protection should be a top priority.

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