

Digital Repression in Yemen: The Internet Became a Tool of Intimidation

Since the Houthi movement seized control of Yemen's capital, Sana'a, in 2014, the country has undergone radical political and social transformations. Chief among them is the systematic crackdown on freedom of expression and the imposition of tight censorship on the digital space.

Social media, once seen as a vital platform for exchanging opinions and engaging in political discourse, has been weaponized by the Houthis to entrench their rule and impose their narrative on the public.

Over time, Yemen's digital sphere has turned into a battleground between the right to free expression and an unrelenting campaign of repression. The censorship has extended beyond content control to the outright persecution of political activists, journalists, and ordinary citizens.

Many of whom face arrest and torture merely for sharing dissenting views online. The internet has thus become an instrument of coercion used to silence any call for freedom or reform.

Nashwan (a pseudonym) was detained and pursued by security forces in September last year because of his posts on social media. He had used his Facebook platform to express his political and social opinions, never imagining that such activity would result in persecution by the Houthis.

"I was just sharing my thoughts on Facebook, like any young person my age," Nashwan told Noon Post. "I didn't expect it to matter, but things escalated far beyond what I ever imagined."

"When I saw them outside to arrest me, it felt like the ground swallowed me up," he continued. "I couldn't believe expressing an opinion would make me a target like this."

Despite a military siege imposed on his home, Nashwan chose to remain in hiding there for a month, constantly on edge. Eventually, under mounting pressure, his family intervened and negotiated with the authorities.

He was forced to sign a pledge to refrain from posting any political content online. As the danger persisted, his family smuggled him to Taiz, and later, out of the country.

"Abu Yazan" (a pseudonym) was subjected to heavy pressure ten days before his arrest. He was coerced into deleting all his videos and posts from social media platforms.

“They came to my workplace and forced me to erase every bit of political content,” he told Noon Post. “We even signed a pledge not to publish anything critical of the Houthis.”

Despite complying, he was arrested on September 26, 2024, just as he was preparing to mark the anniversary of the September Revolution—a yearly tradition for him—even after having deleted the requested posts and videos.

His arrest marked the beginning of a harrowing ordeal of interrogations and psychological torment. “Psychological torture is far worse than physical,” he said. “They told me every day I’d be released today or tomorrow. That mental game was pure agony.”

He was released on November 14, 2024. “Despite everything I endured, I still remember the voices of women and children suffering in that prison with me,” he added.

Journalist Mohammed Dubwan Al-Mayyahi was arrested on September 20, 2024, when armed men stormed his home at 6 a.m.

According to a relative, six plainclothes gunmen raided Al-Mayyahi’s home, arresting him in front of his wife and two children in a terrifying scene. The raid was described as violent and degrading, with no regard for the family’s privacy or humanity.

The assailants not only detained the journalist but also confiscated all his personal belongings, including IDs, phones, laptop, documents—even stationery.

Al-Mayyahi remains imprisoned in a Houthi jail. He was sentenced to one and a half years in prison, followed by three years of surveillance after his release.

The Fear of Checkpoints and Routine Surveillance

Arrests are not limited to homes or workplaces. Houthi checkpoints during travel have become notorious for inspecting travelers’ phones.

Marwan (pseudonym) shared his experience with Noon Post while traveling between Taiz and Sana’a. “Every time I traveled, I had to wipe my phone and log out of all accounts to avoid being searched,” he said.

“These checkpoints were like identity checks—you had to present your best self to avoid trouble.”

In 2021, Marwan was stopped at the entrance to Sana’a, where his phone was searched. Authorities discovered a satirical post he had published criticizing Yemen’s political situation. They saw it as a threat.

He was detained for several hours under threat of arrest if he repeated such actions. “Even a joke or a sarcastic post is now considered a crime,” he said.

Another man, Saddam (pseudonym), recounted how social media posts landed him in the National Security's secret prisons in Sana'a. After receiving threatening calls, he refused to comply and was soon surrounded by military forces who raided his home and arrested him in September last year.

"I was taken to a dark underground prison, held in solitary confinement and tortured for over a month," he said. "They accused me of treason just for criticizing the political situation. I wasn't even allowed a fair trial."

"They targeted me for my posts and threatened my family. They wanted to silence me at any cost." Saddam was eventually released in exchange for deleting his social media accounts and pledging not to post again.

Targeting Digital Journalism

In this oppressive environment, journalist Taha Ahmed Rashid Al-Maamari's story stands as a powerful testament to the risks faced by media workers in Yemen.

A pioneer in Yemen's digital media space, Al-Maamari paid dearly for his vision of a free press. In 2003, he founded Yemen Digital Media, aiming to transform the media landscape.

The company provided production and broadcasting services to over 25 local and international channels, offering journalists, human rights advocates, and activists a platform to reach the world—especially when traditional media was tightly controlled.

But these ambitions collapsed on April 18, 2021, when Houthi forces raided his company's headquarters in Sana'a and confiscated all media and broadcasting equipment—a move clearly aimed at eradicating any free media outlet.

"In that moment, everything crumbled," Al-Maamari told Noon Post. "I never imagined the digital media I worked so hard to build would become a target for suppression."

He added, "A Houthi-appointed judicial guard claimed he was enforcing a protective seizure order. Soon after, I was charged with 'collaborating with the enemy.'"

Later that year, Al-Maamari's digital freedoms work was reframed as a criminal offense. All his equipment was confiscated. What was once a platform for citizen and journalist voices became a pretext for repression.

On September 24, 2024, the Houthis sentenced Al-Maamari to death and seized all his property. He was not even allowed legal representation.

Cyber Threats and the Expanding Crackdown

As the Houthis tighten their grip on Yemen, digital surveillance and repression have intensified. The crackdown now extends across all forms of digital communication—from the internet and social media to phone calls—entrenching authoritarian control in cyberspace.

“Since the early days of the Houthi coup, Yemen has seen a drastic deterioration in digital freedoms,” said Fahmi, a researcher and digital rights advocate, in an interview with Noon Post. “They began by blocking news websites and opposition pages—clear signals of intent to suppress free speech.”

Fahmi explained that the repression goes beyond censorship. It includes arrests of journalists and activists simply for expressing their views online. “People are now afraid to publish anything that might be construed as critical—especially in Houthi-controlled areas,” he added.

He noted that the Houthis have taken control of Yemen’s telecom companies and internet service providers, granting them sweeping surveillance powers. “They monitor calls, track individuals, and harvest sensitive data, severely threatening privacy and civil liberties.”

Abdulrahman Barman, Executive Director of the American Center for Justice, echoed these concerns. “Social media is the last refuge for Yemenis to speak out,” he said. “But even that space has become a weapon in the hands of the Houthis.”

“Many journalists and activists have had to flee Houthi areas or use fake accounts to stay safe. Digital repression has become a defining feature of Houthi governance. The internet is now a surveillance tool used to crush dissent,” Barman said.

He added that digital repression isn’t limited to surveillance—it includes arrests and torture. “Threats are growing daily. Many citizens now avoid posting online altogether, fearing they might become the next target.”

Lawyer and human rights advocate Abdulmajid Sabra emphasized that freedom of expression is protected under Yemen’s constitution and international law. Yet in Houthi-controlled regions, digital rights are under severe threat.

Sabra told Noon Post that the Houthis prosecute journalists, activists, and even ordinary users in special security courts, often imposing harsh sentences—including death. He cited the case of ten journalists sentenced to death for their posts, and the continued detention of journalist Mohammed Dubwan Al-Mayyahi.

Sabra pointed out that the crackdown isn’t limited to direct critics. “Hundreds have been targeted just for showing support for the September 26 Revolution.

It’s a blatant violation of human rights.”

“Forcing people to sign pledges not to publish content is unconstitutional,” he added. “It directly violates Yemen’s laws and guarantees of free expression.”

He concluded: “Only the judiciary has the authority to impose publication bans in legitimate national security cases. Arbitrary bans violate the law. These abuses are evidence of mounting repression against press freedoms in Yemen. The international community must act swiftly to defend these fundamental rights.”

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