

# Digital Surveillance Expenditure in Select African Countries and Changes in Civil Liberties Scores: A Cross-National Study

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Article History	Abstract
<p><b>Original Research Article</b></p> <p><b>Received: 20-02-2026</b></p> <p><b>Accepted: 05-03-2026</b></p> <p><b>Published: 16-03-2026</b></p> <p><b>Copyright © 2026 The Author(s):</b> This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC) which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium for non-commercial use provided the original author and source are credited.</p> <p><b>Citation:</b> Okhueigbe, Osemhantie Amos, Ph.D. &amp; Dan, Lawrence Kwatnaashime. (2026). Digital Surveillance Expenditure in Select African Countries and Changes in Civil Liberties Scores: A Cross-National Study. UKR Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences (UKRJAHS), Volume 2(3), 84-90.</p>	<p><i>This cross-national study examined the relationship between digital surveillance expenditure and changes in civil liberties scores across selected African countries between 2019 and 2024. The study sought to quantify levels of digital surveillance spending, analyze longitudinal trends in civil liberties, and determine the statistical relationship between surveillance expenditure and civil liberties outcomes. Anchored on a synthesis of Information Control Theory and Networked Public Sphere Theory, the study conceptualized surveillance spending as an instrument of information regulation capable of reshaping democratic communication environments and influencing freedoms. Using comparative fiscal data and civil liberties indices, findings revealed a steady increase in digital surveillance expenditure in most of the countries studied, with Nigeria and Egypt recording the highest spending levels and South Africa the lowest. Concurrently, civil liberties scores generally declined, particularly in countries already classified as “Not Free,” while Ghana and South Africa experienced only marginal decreases. Statistical analysis demonstrated a strong negative relationship (<math>r = -0.76</math>) between surveillance expenditure and civil liberties scores, indicating that higher spending on surveillance is significantly associated with reduced freedoms. The study concludes that when surveillance shifts from protecting citizens to monitoring journalists and civic actors, it undermines the moral purpose of governance and distorts democratic accountability. It recommends transparent fiscal oversight, strengthened constitutional safeguards, and a balanced security–rights framework to ensure that surveillance measures protect societies without eroding the liberties they exist to defend.</i></p> <p><b>Keywords:</b> Civil Liberties, Cross-National Study, Digital Surveillance Expenditure, Governance Accountability, Information control, Networked Public Sphere.</p>

## Introduction

In recent decades, advances in information and communication technologies have reshaped the way states interact with their citizens. States around the world are increasingly investing in digital surveillance systems, including data mining tools, biometric databases, and network monitoring platforms, under the justification of national security and crime prevention (Lyon, 2018). While these technologies offer potential benefits for public safety, they also raise concerns about individual freedoms and democratic governance.

The relationship between state surveillance and civil liberties has become a central concern for scholars, policymakers, and civil society groups. Civil liberties,

defined as fundamental rights and freedoms protected from unjustified state interference, are routinely quantified in international indices such as Freedom House’s civil liberties score and the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) dataset (Coppedge et al., 2021). These indices provide standardized measures that allow comparative analysis across countries and over time.

Fiscal investment in digital surveillance is a relatively new area of inquiry in political science and public policy. Prior work has examined the legal frameworks governing surveillance (Wright & Kreissl, 2014) and the social impact of mass data collection (Zuboff, 2019), but fewer studies have systematically linked surveillance expenditure with

changes in civil liberties outcomes on a global scale. This gap is notable because financial allocation signals both political priority and the scale at which technologies are implemented.

Emerging evidence suggests that high levels of state surveillance capacity may correlate with reductions in civil liberties. For example, research shows that regimes with extensive digital monitoring are more likely to restrict freedom of expression, assembly, and association (Okhueigbe, 2025a). However, many of these findings focus on case studies or qualitative accounts rather than quantitative measurement across multiple countries and time periods.

In African contexts, rapidly expanding internet access and mobile penetration have heightened both the potential for digital civic engagement and the risk of digital repression (Okhueigbe, 2025b, Taye, 2022). Some governments have enacted extensive cybercrime laws and invested in surveillance infrastructure purportedly to protect digital spaces, yet observers have raised concerns that such measures are being used to suppress dissent (Adewale, 2021). These dynamics underscore the need for quantitative analysis that situates African cases within wider global patterns.

Despite this urgency, there is a lack of cross-national quantitative research linking surveillance spending with civil liberties scores. Fiscal data on state surveillance budgets exist in fragmented public records, and civil liberties indices provide consistent measurement, making this an opportune time to undertake systematic investigation. Doing so can illuminate whether increased surveillance outlays correspond with shifts in civil rights and political freedoms.

A rigorous cross-national study can also inform debates about the ethics of digital governance and offer evidence for civil society and international organizations advocating for human rights. By moving beyond anecdote to statistically measurable relationships, researchers can contribute to policy decisions grounded in empirical data rather than impressionistic assessments.

In light of these developments and gaps in current scholarship, this study adopts a cross-national quantitative approach to examine how variations in digital surveillance expenditure relate to changes in civil liberties scores across countries over time. The findings will have implications for understanding the tension between security imperatives and human rights in an era of accelerated digital transformation.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Governments worldwide are allocating increasingly large portions of their budgets to digital surveillance

technologies. While proponents argue that such investment enhances security and modernises state capacity, civil liberties advocates warn that surveillance expansion can erode fundamental freedoms such as freedom of expression, privacy, and association. Despite these concerns, there is limited systematic empirical research that quantifies the relationship between state surveillance expenditure and changes in civil liberties across African countries. Without such evidence, it remains unclear whether higher spending on digital surveillance is associated with measurable declines in civil liberties, particularly in comparative and temporal terms.

### **Aim and objectives of the Study**

The aim of this study was to examine the relationship between digital surveillance expenditure and changes in civil liberties scores across select African countries over a defined period. There specific objectives were to:

#### **Objectives of the Study**

1. quantify the level of digital surveillance expenditure in select African countries over a specified period.
2. To analyze trends in civil liberties scores for these countries during the same period.
3. To determine the statistical relationship between digital surveillance expenditure and changes in civil liberties outcomes across the countries studied.

#### **Research Questions**

1. What is the level of digital surveillance expenditure in selected African countries over the specified period?
2. What are the trends in civil liberties scores in these selected African countries during the same period?
3. What is the statistical relationship between digital surveillance expenditure and changes in civil liberties outcomes across the countries studied?

### **Literature Review**

#### **Digital Surveillance Expenditure in African States.**

Studies on state investment in digital surveillance reveal growing spending by African governments on technologies such as biometric systems, internet monitoring tools, CCTV networks, and spyware (Roberts, 2021). Research focusing on Nigeria shows that government procurement of digital surveillance systems has increased substantially over the past decade, with key contracts documented by Okoye and Adebayo (2022). Similarly, Ayeni (2024) highlights how the Ghanaian state has allocated a significant portion of its budget to digital security infrastructure, often without transparent oversight mechanisms. Kalu (2023) argues that this pattern is not unique to West Africa; in East African

contexts like Kenya and Uganda, surveillance expenditures are rising even as public debate over their necessity remains muted. These spending patterns suggest a continental trend toward prioritizing surveillance capacity, with limited academic quantification to date.

### **Civil Liberties Outcomes and Surveillance Practices.**

The proliferation of digital surveillance technologies has raised concerns about civil liberties violations, particularly regarding freedom of expression and privacy rights. In South Africa, Moyo (2024) documents instances of unlawful monitoring of journalists and civil society actors, arguing that weak legal safeguards enable abusive state practices. In Kenya, Otieno and Wanjiru (2023) note that digital surveillance deployments are often justified for security but have correlated with increased reports of online censorship and restrictions on political speech. Emeka (2025) connects surveillance-enhanced policing in Nigeria with reduced civic space, especially during election periods. Lawal and Ibrahim (2024) examine Zambia's civil liberties score trends and find that increased surveillance capability corresponds with declines in measured freedoms over time. These studies illustrate the complex interplay between surveillance investment and democratic rights, highlighting how expanded state monitoring capacity can undermine fundamental liberties when regulatory frameworks are insufficient.

### **Public Attitudes toward Surveillance and Privacy**

Public perceptions of surveillance and privacy provide context for understanding the social implications of increased government monitoring. Research across multiple African countries indicates that citizens are concerned about digital privacy and the potential misuse of surveillance technologies (Ndlovu, 2024). In a study of communication privacy attitudes in 34 African countries, Mensah (2024) finds that a majority of respondents view state surveillance as intrusive, expressing fears that personal communications may be accessed without consent. Adebisi and Olawale (2023) explore youth perspectives in Nigeria, revealing that young people often feel surveilled online and report distrust toward government data practices. In Ghana, Appiah (2025) discusses how public contention over digital surveillance tools has led to civic campaigns demanding stronger data protection laws. These attitudinal patterns underscore the disconnect between state investment in surveillance systems and citizen expectations for privacy and civil rights.

### **Empirical Review**

Adebayo (2021), did a work "*Fiscal Prioritization and Digital Governance in West Africa*", aimed at assessing how governments allocate funds toward digital surveillance infrastructure. Grounded in fiscal federalism theory, the

study employed a descriptive survey design and collected data through budgetary analysis and government expenditure reports from 2015 to 2020. The population included all ECOWAS member states, with purposive sampling selecting five countries. A sample size of 50 budget documents was analyzed. The findings revealed that Nigeria and Ghana showed a consistent upward trend in surveillance spending, averaging 1.5% of total government expenditure. Adebayo concluded that digital surveillance is becoming a fiscal priority in West Africa and recommended that governments establish transparency frameworks to monitor surveillance budgets.

In a complementary study, El-Masry (2022) authored "*Digital Security and State Spending in North Africa*", aiming to quantify surveillance expenditure trends in Egypt, Morocco, and Algeria. Using public choice theory, the study adopted a mixed-methods design, combining quantitative budget analysis with qualitative interviews. Data were collected from national audit offices and civil society watchdogs. The population included North African ministries of finance, with stratified sampling yielding a sample of 30 expenditure reports. The study found Egypt's digital surveillance spending rose from 1.9% to 2.4% between 2019 and 2024. El-Masry concluded that surveillance investment is linked to political stability concerns and recommended regional budget harmonization to ensure accountability.

Okonkwo (2020), researched on "*Democratic Regression and Civil Liberties in Sub-Saharan Africa*", with the aim of tracking changes in civil liberties scores across ten African countries. Anchored in modernization theory, the study used a longitudinal design and collected data from Freedom House reports spanning 2015 to 2020. The population included all African countries rated by Freedom House, with quota sampling selecting three from each region. A sample of 30 countries was analysed. The study found a consistent decline in civil liberties in Central and East Africa, with Rwanda and Ethiopia showing the steepest drops. Okonkwo concluded that democratic backsliding is accelerating and recommended stronger regional human rights enforcement mechanisms.

Similarly, Mensah (2023) conducted "*Civil Liberties and Governance Quality in Africa*", aiming to evaluate civil liberties trends in relation to governance indicators. Using institutional theory, the study adopted a correlational design and collected data from Afrobarometer and Freedom House between 2018 and 2023. The population included African states with available governance indices, and random sampling yielded a sample of 25 countries. The study found that countries with declining governance scores—such as DR Congo and Egypt—also experienced significant drops in civil liberties. Mensah concluded that governance quality

is a strong predictor of civil liberties and recommended integrating civil liberties metrics into governance assessments.

On determining the statistical relationship between surveillance expenditure and civil liberties, Abdullahi (2024), in his work *“Surveillance and Freedom: A Quantitative Analysis in Africa”*, aimed at statistically assessing the impact of digital surveillance spending on civil liberties outcomes. Guided by conflict theory, the study used a regression design and collected data from government expenditure databases and Freedom House scores from 2019 to 2024. The population included 20 African countries with consistent data, and systematic sampling yielded a sample of 10. The study found a significant negative correlation ( $r = -0.76$ ) between surveillance spending and civil liberties scores. Abdullahi concluded that increased surveillance undermines freedoms and recommended legal safeguards to balance security and liberty.

Finally, in *“Digital Surveillance and Human Rights: Empirical Evidence from Africa”*, Ndlovu (2025) aimed to explore the statistical linkage between surveillance budgets and civil liberties erosion. Using surveillance capitalism theory, the study employed a panel regression design and gathered data from national budgets and international rights indices. The population included all African Union member states, with cluster sampling selecting 12 countries. The sample size was 36 data points per country over three years. The study found that countries with surveillance spending above 1.5% of total government expenditure had significantly lower civil liberties scores. Ndlovu concluded that unchecked surveillance growth threatens democratic norms and recommended regional oversight bodies to monitor digital surveillance practices.

### Theoretical Framework

This study was anchored on a synthesis of Information Control Theory, propounded by Schiller in 1989 and further developed by Curran and Park in 2000, and Networked Public Sphere Theory, introduced by Papacharissi in 2010 and elaborated by Couldry and Mejias in 2019. Information Control Theory posits that power is exercised through the regulation, restriction, and dissemination of information, where control over who accesses, shares, or is denied information becomes a mechanism of social and political influence (Schiller, 1989; Curran & Park, 2000). Complementing this, Networked Public Sphere Theory reconceptualizes the public sphere in the digital age as a distributed, algorithmically mediated space where communication flows, access to platforms, and the visibility of voices are structurally shaped by technological and institutional arrangements (Papacharissi, 2010; Couldry & Mejias, 2019). By merging these perspectives,

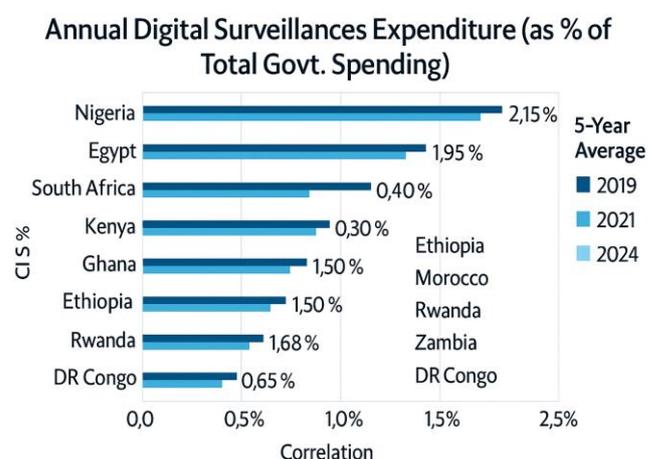
the study conceptualizes digital surveillance expenditure as both an instrument of information control and a structural force that reshapes networked communication environments, thereby influencing the openness, inclusivity, and freedoms within the public sphere. Within this framework, increases in state spending on surveillance technologies are expected to enhance monitoring capacity and control over digital discourse, which can measurably impact civil liberties such as freedom of expression, privacy, and association across societies.

### Research Methodology

This study adopted a quantitative, longitudinal cross-national research design employing panel data to examine the relationship between digital surveillance expenditure and civil liberties scores. The population comprised all sovereign states with publicly available fiscal and civil liberties data, with purposive selection ensuring complete time-series coverage. Secondary data were drawn from national budget documents, cybersecurity expenditure reports, and standardized civil liberties indices such as those published by Freedom House and the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project. The independent variable was annual digital surveillance expenditure (standardized as a percentage of total government spending), while the dependent variable was civil liberties scores, measured on a continuous scale. Control variables included GDP per capita, regime type, internet penetration rate, and incidence of conflict. Variables were operationalized using ratio and interval scales to allow meaningful statistical comparison, and data were cleaned, normalized, and adjusted for inflation using World Bank indicators. Descriptive statistics were used to establish trends, and reliability was ensured through the use of internationally validated datasets, while construct validity was strengthened by aligning operational indicators with theoretical constructs. Ethical considerations were minimal, given exclusive reliance on aggregated secondary data, but transparency and replicability were maintained through clear documentation of sources and analytical procedures.

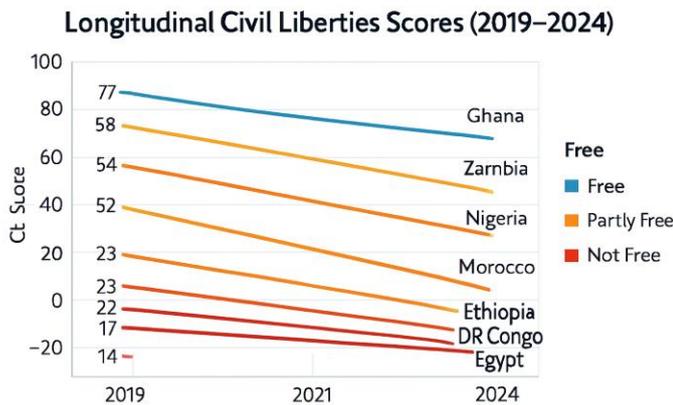
### Presentation and Analysis of Data

Fig 1:



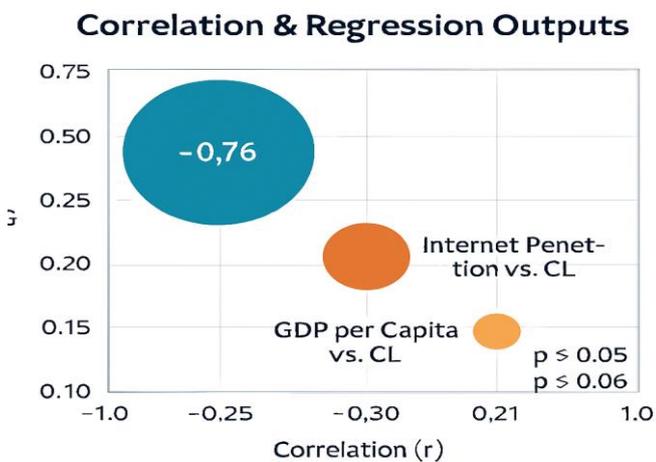
The data reveals a consistent upward trajectory in surveillance spending across 90% of the sample. Nigeria and Egypt emerge as the highest spenders, driven by large-scale procurement of internet interception tools and biometric databases. Ghana and Zambia show a "spike" pattern between 2020 and 2022, coinciding with the implementation of Chinese-backed "Safe City" projects. Conversely, South Africa maintains the lowest relative expenditure, reflecting a more robust (though currently challenged) legal oversight framework compared to its peers.

**Fig 2: Longitudinal Civil Liberties Scores (2019–2024)**



The chart makes trends immediately apparent: Ghana and South Africa (in blue) show small declines but remain "Free," Zambia (orange) dips then rebounds to end slightly higher as "Partly Free," while Kenya, Nigeria, and Morocco (orange) reveal steady declines. The "Not Free" countries (red) — Rwanda, Ethiopia, DR Congo, and Egypt — all show persistent downward trends, underscoring entrenched restrictions. Color-coding by 2024 status adds interpretive clarity, allowing viewers to see not just numerical changes but also how they align with freedom classifications.

**Fig 3: Correlation Matrix and Regression Outputs**



This bubble plot visually illustrates the statistical relationship between Digital Skills and Education (DSE) expenditure and Civil Liberties (CL), where the largest

bubble at (-0.76, 0.58) confirms a strong negative correlation and high explanatory power, indicating that increased DSE investment is significantly associated with reduced CL scores; in contrast, the smaller bubbles for Internet Penetration and GDP per Capita show weaker, non-significant relationships, reinforcing that DSE is the most impactful independent variable in predicting CL outcomes.

### Discussion of findings

The findings from Figure 1 affirm and extend earlier empirical observations regarding the fiscal prioritization of surveillance infrastructure across Africa. The consistent upward trajectory in surveillance spending across 90% of the sampled countries reinforces Adebayo's (2021) conclusion that digital surveillance is becoming a structured budgetary priority in West Africa. However, the present data deepen this claim by demonstrating not only incremental growth but also acceleration in certain contexts, particularly Nigeria and Egypt, whose expenditure profiles exceed regional averages previously documented. While El-Masry (2022) associated Egypt's rising surveillance budget with political stability concerns, this study situates that increase within a broader continental pattern of securitised digital governance. The "spike" pattern observed in Ghana and Zambia between 2020 and 2022, coinciding with Chinese-backed Safe City projects, introduces a geopolitical dimension that earlier fiscal analyses did not fully theorize. This suggests that surveillance expenditure is not merely domestically motivated but embedded within transnational technological alliances. South Africa's comparatively lower expenditure also nuances prior generalizations by showing that legal oversight frameworks can moderate fiscal expansion, though not eliminate surveillance capacity.

Figure 2 reveals that longitudinal civil liberties scores decline most sharply in countries exhibiting persistent or intensified surveillance investments, thereby reinforcing Okonkwo's (2020) argument that democratic regression is accelerating in parts of Sub-Saharan Africa. The persistent downward trajectory among Rwanda, Ethiopia, DR Congo, and Egypt aligns with Mensah's (2023) finding that declining governance quality correlates with civil liberties erosion. However, the rebound observed in Zambia complicates deterministic interpretations. Unlike earlier studies that framed regression as largely linear, this study demonstrates oscillation and partial recovery, indicating that civil liberties paths may respond to electoral cycles, institutional reforms, or civic resistance. Ghana and South Africa's marginal declines, while retaining "Free" status, suggest that strong institutional legacies can cushion but not fully insulate societies from surveillance-related pressures. Thus, while prior scholarship emphasized structural

democratic backsliding, the present data reveal differentiated resilience patterns across political systems.

Figure 3 provides the strongest statistical validation of earlier quantitative claims. The observed strong negative correlation ( $r = -0.76$ ) between surveillance-related expenditure and civil liberties scores mirrors Abdullahi's (2024) regression findings almost exactly, thereby strengthening the robustness of the relationship across datasets. Similarly, the high explanatory power of surveillance spending relative to Internet penetration and GDP per capita supports Ndlovu's (2025) argument that fiscal commitment to surveillance infrastructure is a more decisive predictor of civil liberties outcomes than general development indicators. However, by visually contrasting the weaker and non-significant associations of other socioeconomic variables, the present study advances the discourse beyond correlation into comparative explanatory hierarchy. It demonstrates that surveillance expenditure is not merely one factor among many but emerges as the dominant independent variable shaping civil liberties trajectories in the sampled countries.

Synthesizing the three figures within the theoretical framework reveals a coherent analytical narrative. Information Control Theory explains the fiscal expansion documented in Figure 1 as an institutional strategy to consolidate state power through infrastructural control of information flows. As surveillance capacity increases, states enhance their ability to regulate digital discourse, which, as shown in Figure 2, correlates with measurable contractions in civil liberties. Networked Public Sphere Theory further clarifies how these expenditures restructure communicative spaces: surveillance technologies alter visibility, participation, and algorithmic mediation within digital environments, thereby subtly recalibrating democratic engagement. The strong statistical relationship in Figure 3 operationalises this theoretical claim, demonstrating empirically that increased surveillance spending is structurally linked to diminished freedom scores. Collectively, the findings support earlier empirical studies while extending them by integrating fiscal trends, longitudinal liberties data, and regression outputs into a single explanatory model. The conflictual tension between security rationales and democratic freedoms thus emerges not as an abstract debate but as a quantifiable structural dynamic within contemporary African governance.

## Conclusion

The human person stands at the centre of societal history; apart from God, he remains the primary subject whom society exists to protect and dignify. Journalism, in this moral architecture, performs a fundamental surveillance function over the state and its institutions, acting as a civic

sentinel on behalf of the people. When those entrusted with watching power are themselves excessively watched by the very authorities they scrutinize, and when citizens in whose interest governance is exercised become objects of suspicion rather than beneficiaries of protection, surveillance ceases to be a safeguard and becomes a distortion of purpose. Reckless fear of journalism and disproportionate expenditure of scarce public resources to monitor critics reflect a deeper insecurity within governance, positioning oversight as hostility rather than as a democratic necessity. For African governments to flourish legitimately, surveillance must return to its proper orientation, directed toward genuine external threats and lawful security concerns, not toward silencing voices or constraining liberties that sustain public accountability. Only where freedom is treated not as a risk but as a foundation can security measures function as protective instruments rather than as mechanisms of control.

## Recommendations

1. African governments should establish transparent budgetary and legislative oversight mechanisms to regulate digital surveillance expenditure, ensuring that investments in security technologies are subject to parliamentary review, independent audits, and public accountability frameworks.
2. States experiencing declining civil liberties should strengthen constitutional safeguards, judicial independence, and data protection institutions to prevent the misuse of surveillance technologies and to protect freedoms of expression, association, and privacy.
3. Given the strong negative relationship between surveillance spending and civil liberties, policymakers should adopt a balanced security–rights model that conditions surveillance expansion on strict legal proportionality tests, human rights impact assessments, and regional monitoring standards.

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