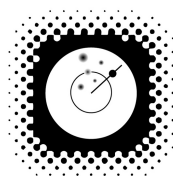


Internet Filtering in

Bahrain



OpenNet Initiative

Overview

Bahrain is a regional ICT leader and is one of the most Internet-connected countries in the Middle East. The country's Internet filtering regime focuses on political Web sites that are critical of the Bahraini government and ruling family but also targets content related to pornography, gays and lesbians and content that is critical of Islam.

Background

The king of Bahrain undertook important reforms in 2001-2002, but freedom of expression, assembly, and association are still subject to arbitrary restrictions.¹ The long-running tensions between Bahrain's Sunnis and the Shia Muslim majority result in occasional civil unrest,² and the Sunni-led state must delicately balance its policies to preserve the government's power.³ Despite its reforms and United States partnership, Bahrain continues to act and pass laws contrary to its supposed democratization.⁴ Decree no. 56 of 2002 grants blanket immunity to government officials suspected of human rights

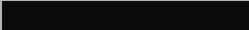
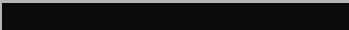
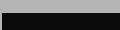
abuses committed before 2001,⁵ and Law no. 32 of 2006 requires meeting organizers to send a three days' notice of meetings to Public Safety to receive authorization. This law was invoked as justification for the use of rubber bullets and teargas by police to break up a meeting of the Movement of Liberties and Democracy on September 22, 2006.⁶

The Bahraini authorities use a 2002 press law (Law 47/2002) to restrict coverage of sensitive subjects and to prosecute journalists and activists for allegedly defaming government officials, insulting the king, or inciting hatred against the government.⁷ Not surprisingly, this law has created a culture of self-censorship in the media.⁸ In addition, in October 2006 the Supreme Court banned any mention in the media of a scandal known as "Bandargate," which involved the royal family and other politicians. Two journalists were threatened anonymously over the phone for writing on the subject.⁹ It appears, as Reporters Without Borders argues, that the democratization trend has "quickly faded before the demands of

RESULTS AT A GLANCE

Filtering	No evidence of filtering	Suspected filtering	Selective filtering	Substantial filtering	Pervasive filtering
Political					●
Social					●
Conflict/security			●		
Internet tools				●	
Other factors	Low	Medium	High	Not applicable	
Transparency		●			
Consistency			●		

KEY INDICATORS

		worst	best
GNI per capita, PPP (current international \$).....	21,482		
Life expectancy at birth (years).....	75.2		
Literacy rate (% of people age 15+).....	86.5		
Human development index (out of 177).....	41		
Rule of law (percentile).....	69		
Voice and accountability (percentile).....	25		
Digital opportunity index (out of 181).....	35		
Internet users (% of population).....	33.22		

the country's Shiite majority for a voice."¹⁰

Internet in Bahrain

The growth in fixed telephone lines and the Internet has made Bahrain a regional ICT leader. The country's connectivity score (a statistic which measures both Internet access and fixed and mobile telephone lines) is 210.4 percent per person, while the regional average in the Gulf States is 135.37 percent.¹¹ The number of Bahraini Internet users has risen from 40,000 in 2000¹² to 250,000 in 2008,¹³ or from 5.95 to 33 percent of the population. The telecom market witnessed a remarkable development in November 2008 when Mena Telecom launched its nationwide WiMAX network, a service that provides high speed wireless voice and data services.¹⁴

To encourage creativity in domestic online content, in 2005 Bahrain launched an e-content award organized by the eGovernment Authority in Bahrain and the Bahrain Internet Society. The goal of the award is to select quality online content and to promote creativity and innovation in the development of new media applications in Bahrain.¹⁵

Bahrain's online community is small but dynamic. As of January 2008, there were over 535 Web sites based in Bahrain, focusing on 25 different themes

(e.g., public forums); 59 Web sites for governmental organizations; and about 200 blogs, the majority of which are authored anonymously.¹⁶ Internet users in Bahrain use the Internet to debate sensitive issues and to exchange content that is not available in the traditional media. The authorities have blocked a number of news, religion, human rights, and humor Web sites run by Bahrainis and by non-Bahrainis, but users manage to access them using proxies.¹⁷

Bahrain's telecom market is regulated by the Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (TRA), which was established by Legislative Decree No. 48 of 2002 to protect the interests of subscribers and users and to promote effective and fair competition among established and new licensed operators.¹⁸ As of 2008, the TRA has licensed 22 Internet Service Providers,¹⁹ the largest of which is Batelco.

Legal and regulatory frameworks

Censorship of online media and print journalism in Bahrain is governed by the 2002 Press Law. In September 2008, the Web site wattani.net, which is blocked in Bahrain, was referred by the Bahraini Ministry of Information to the Public Prosecution for violating the law.²⁰ The Ministry of Information has also used the

Press Law to ban publications that “harmed the regime, the official state religion, morality or different confessions in a way likely to cause a breach of the peace.”²¹

In addition to the Press Law, the Bahrain Center for Human Rights says that “protecting royal dignity” has been used to suppress freedom of expression by shutting down electronic forums, arresting and prosecuting journalists or bloggers and threatening the press, political groups and civil society institutions.²² In May 2008 the Bahraini government introduced amendments to the 2002 Press Law that eliminate prison sentences for journalists as well as prior censorship, though journalists can still be charged and jailed using the penal code and anti-terrorism law.²³

Bahrain’s Internet is regulated by legal infrastructure governing both access and available content. The Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (TRA), created by the 2002 Telecommunications Law, is tasked with liberalizing Bahrain’s telecommunications market. More specifically, the TRA seeks “to protect the interests of subscribers and users of telecommunications services and maintain effective and fair competition between established and new entrants to the telecommunications market of the Kingdom of Bahrain.”²⁴

However, the Telecommunications Law of 2002 also contains penalties for illicit use of the network, including the transmission of messages that are offensive to public policy or morals.²⁵

Internet censorship in Bahrain began in 2002 with the issuance of law number 47, which regulates press, printing and publishing. Even though civil society and Web site owners objected to the law, the Ministry of Information has blocked and shut down more than 100 pornographic, political and anti-Islam Web sites.²⁶ The

Ministry of Information required in 2005 that Web sites be registered as a means to keep track of the number of Web sites, but Web sites owners rejected this mandate and considered it an attempt to curtail their freedom to publish.²⁷

On January 5, 2009, the Ministry of Information decreed that it can order the blocking of a Web site without referring the case to a court. The same decree also requires ISPs to “prohibit any means that allow access to sites blocked by the ministry, whether by Internet address, use of a proxy server or any other means.”²⁸ On January 14, 2009 the Ministry of Information issued a second decree ordering all ISPs to block Web sites containing pornography or material that may provoke viewers to violence or religious hatred.²⁹ Affected sites include political and human rights sites, Shia community forums and sites including the word “proxy” in their domain names. The Ministry of Information has claimed that some of these sites were blocked in error; it is investigating more advanced forms of technology to help prevent accidental blocking.³⁰

In an effort to curb sectarianism, Webmasters and bloggers signed a code of ethics in September 2008 to promote tolerance and mutual acceptance for users of electronic media, a move that was welcomed by political groups, journalists and government officials. This move came a few months after Sunni and Shiite bloggers were briefly detained in July for writing what the government perceived as hate speech inciting sectarian divisions.³¹

In August 2007, a few days after the release of a local human rights report that focused on Internet Web sites promoting prostitution, Bahrain’s largest Shiite Islamic parliamentary bloc, the Al Wefaq Islamic Society, announced their interest in tightening sanctions on the patrons of

prostitution by reviewing the country's penal code. According to the report, more than 1,000 people had subscribed to an online networking promoting prostitution, and more than 50 websites had links to prostitution networks in Bahrain.³²

According to Reporters Without Borders, Bahrain blocked access in October 2006 to several Web sites that were critical of the government. Among these Web sites is the Bahrain Center for Human Rights (www.bahrainrights.org) and the popular blog www.mahmood.tv, which openly criticizes the government and parliament members.³³

Surveillance

The Ministry of Information has established a special unit which monitors Web sites for possible blocking. The government has indicated an interest in setting up a commission to monitor the press and Internet content to "report any incitement to confessionnalism."³⁴ Government efforts to monitor Web sites have also been confirmed by media reports that cite an official source saying that in addition to Web sites being monitored on a daily basis, the use of circumvention techniques to update banned Web sites is also being watched.³⁵ Furthermore, a stipulation in the Legislative Decree no. 48 of 2002 Promulgating the Telecommunications Law allows "security organs to have access to the network for fulfilling the requirements of national security."³⁶

ONI testing results

ONI ran in-country tests on Bahrain's ISP, Batelco, using dialup as well as broadband access points. Batelco's filtering was found to focus on several Web sites that are critical of the Bahraini government, parliament, and the ruling family. These include the Web sites of the Bahrain Center for Human Rights

(<http://www.bahrainrights.org>), the Haaq Political Movement (<http://www.haaq.org>), Ahrar Bahrain (<http://www.ahraralbahrain.com>), Bahrain Martyrs Forums (<http://www.shaheedbh.com>), Bahrain Times (<http://www.bahraintimes.org>), Bahrain Forums (<http://www.montadayat.org>), Alduraz Network Forums (<http://www.alduraz.net>) and Bahrain Online (<http://www.bahrainonline.org>). Some of these Web sites are now defunct or have been apparently abandoned by their operators.

ONI testing also found that few secular and leftist Web sites are blocked (e.g., <http://www.ladeeni.net> and <http://www.rezgar.com>), as are Web sites that are critical of Islam or attempt to convert Muslims to Christianity (e.g., <http://www.islameyat.com>, <http://answering-islam.org>, and <http://www.arabchurch.com>).

Also blocked are the Web sites of the Cairo-based Arabic Network for Human Rights Information, which contains reports critical of human rights practices in Bahrain, and that of the Arabic regional portal and blog hosting service Al-Bawaba (<http://blogs.albawaba.com>).

Results from first 2008-2009 test runs found limited blocking of pornographic and LGBT content and proxy and anonymizing services. However, after the January 2009 Ministerial decree, which ordered ISPs to implement an official filtering system, ONI found that the filtering of content in officially prohibited categories has become pervasive, which is an indication that the ISPs have started to use a commercial filtering system. Also, the ISPs have started to serve an explicit blockpage with a reference to the Ministerial decree.

Unlike most of the Gulf States' ISPs, Batelco is not always transparent about its

blocking policy; users do not always get a blockpage, especially when they try to access banned political Web sites. For some blocked Web sites, users receive error messages such as "The page cannot be displayed."

In August 2006, Bahrain banned access to Google Earth for three days. Soon after the blocking of Google Earth, cyberactivists circulated via e-mail a PDF file with annotated Google Earth screenshots of Bahrain highlighting what they claimed as the inequity of land distribution in Bahrain.³⁷ The file can be found at <http://www.ogleearth.com/BahrainandGoogleEarth.pdf>.

Conclusion

Despite the broad range of topics that are filtered, until January 2009 Bahrain allowed relatively unfettered access to the Internet, especially compared with its neighbors. ONI found an increase in the number of banned Web sites that criticize the Bahraini government, parliament, and royal family, and filtering of pornography, gay and lesbian material, content related to the conversion of Arab Muslims to Christianity, and secular leftist Arabic content. Bahrain lacks transparency especially when it comes to political filtering.

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