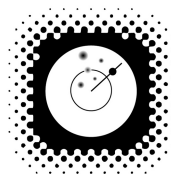**Internet Filtering in**

Jordan

OpenNet Initiative

Overview

Access to Internet content in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan remains largely unfettered, with filtering applied to a single news Web site that is often critical of the Jordanian and other Arab regimes. However, media laws and regulations encourage some measure of self-censorship in cyberspace, and the authorities have increased restrictions on Internet use in cyber cafés.
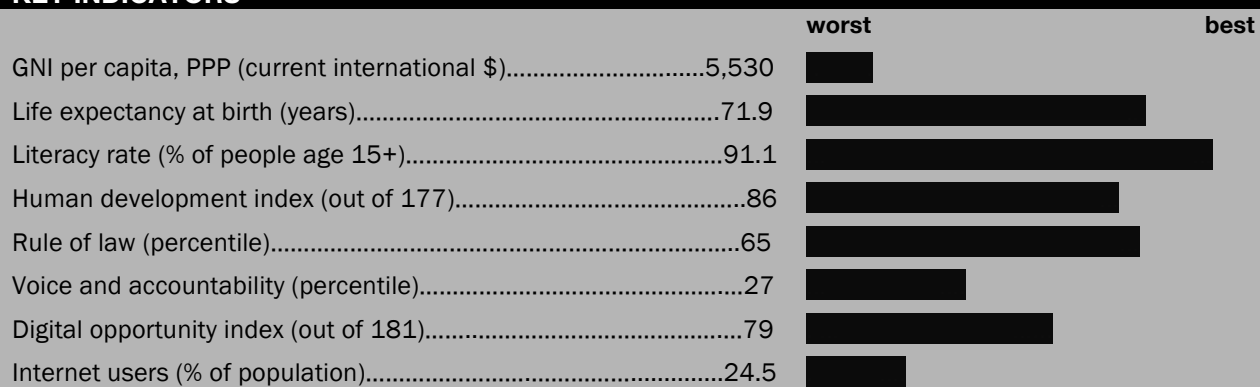
Background

The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan is a constitutional monarchy in which executive and legislative authority is primarily vested in the king, who is supported by a bicameral parliament.[1] Although Jordanian law mandates freedom of speech and press, these rights have been restricted in practice. Open criticism of the government is permissible, but the press often refrains from criticizing the royal family or reporting on other sensitive issues such as religion due to the threat of fines and detention. Civil liberties and the right of the people to participate in government have been infringed upon, reportedly in the form of torture, denial of due process, discrimination, restrictions on labor rights and other freedoms.[2] In June 2008, Human Rights Watch sent a letter to the Jordanian Prime Minister urging him to withdraw a draft law on nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and public assembly from consideration by parliament. The draft NGO law would further restrict the establishment of such organizations as well as their funding, while the draft assembly law would require the Ministry of Interior's approval for meetings on "public policies."[3]

The Internet, like other forms of media in the country, is subject to government control. Online publications were included in changes to the press law in September 2007, and in October of the same year a former Member of Parliament was sentenced to two years in prison for posting information on government corruption on his party's website and providing details of it to the U.S. government.[4]

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 $)	5,530		
Life expectancy at birth (years)	71.9		
Literacy rate (% of people age 15+)	91.1		
Human development index (out of 177)	86		
Rule of law (percentile)	65		
Voice and accountability (percentile)	27		
Digital opportunity index (out of 181)	79		
Internet users (% of population)	24.5		

Internet in Jordan

Although twelve ISPs are currently operating in Jordan,[5] by the end of 2007 Jordan's Internet penetration rate remained well behind Western markets in fixed-line and overall Internet usage at around 20 percent. The Telecommunications Regulatory Commission (TRC) has announced plans to increase penetration to 50 percent by 2011.[6] The general consensus is that the cost of computers and connectivity, as well as the lack of Arabic language content on the Web, act as major obstacles to Internet use in Jordan.[7] A 2007 government study indicated that approximately one third of Jordanian households have computers, but only 16 percent are connected to the Internet due to high connectivity costs.[8] The survey also indicated that the 64 percent of the households that do not have computers cannot afford one, while half of the family members in these households are computer illiterate.[9] While 73 percent of those connected use the Internet for personal purposes, 17 percent are connected for reasons related to their work.[10]

The Ministry of Information and Communications Technology reports that the IT sector has become a significant contributor to the GDP, as Jordan imposes a 16 percent sales tax on the Internet, while most other countries in the region impose 5 percent or less. Only Morocco has a higher rate, charging 20 percent.[11]

In an effort to fulfill its objective to link all government schools to the Internet, the Jordanian Ministry of Education recently signed a USD8.4 million deal to equip 1,148 schools across Jordan with 8,500 computers, projectors, scanners, printers, and network infrastructure by September 2008.[12]

Legal and regulatory framework

In September 2007, the Legislation Bureau in the Prime Minister's Office began requiring Web sites and electronic press to comply with the provisions of the publications and publishing law. The Bureau announced that Internet content would fall under the oversight of the Publications and Publishing Department, which began exercising its powers of supervision and censorship immediately.[13] With regard to the press law, a former MP was given a two-year prison sentence in October 2008 for publishing news considered harmful to the government's reputation.[14] In March 2007, the parliament canceled a law imposing prison terms for press offenses; however, journalists are known to practice self-censorship under pressure from state security police, which have seized content

produced by journalists and stopped publications from release.[15]

Writers and publishers can be prosecuted under the penal code for material deemed to be seditious.[16] The Press and Publications Department has taken writers to court for defaming religion and for authoring books deemed to be insulting to Islam; one such writer, Islam Samhan, faces up to three years in prison for using Qur'anic phrases in his poetry, considered by the authorities to be an insult to Islam.[17]

The Telecommunications Regulatory Commission, which operates under the oversight of the Prime Minister, was established as a financially and administratively independent entity. Its many duties include establishing the basis for regulation of the telecommunications and information technology sectors, promoting competition, ensuring high quality of service, and encouraging self-regulation.[18]

Surveillance

In March 2008, Jordan began increasing restrictions on the country's Internet cafés. Under the pretext of maintaining security, Internet cafés were installed with cameras to monitor users, and Internet café owners were required to register the IP number of the café, the users' personal data, the time of use and the data of Web sites explored.[19] The new measures also called for Internet café owners to install censorship programs to prevent access to Web sites containing pornographic, drug or tobacco-related, and anti-religious content.[20]

ONI testing results

ONI conducted in-country tests in Jordan on four ISPs: Jordan Telecom, Batelco, Orange, and Linkdotnet. Only arabtimes.com, a U.S.-based online

newspaper often critical of Arab leaders, was found to be blocked.

In October of 2008 the Mayor of Amman ordered the blocking of 600 local and international news Web sites from the Greater Amman Municipality computer network, claiming that some of the city's 3,000 employees spend too much time surfing news sites instead of working. The blockage was also ostensibly to reduce the load on the network. However, owners of local news Web sites and the journalists' association were skeptical of the reasons given and considered the decision an intrusion of personal freedom and a violation of the employees' constitutional rights to access information.[21] ONI is not able to confirm this blocking because the Amman municipal network is not publicly accessible.

Some Jordanian ISPs offer optional Internet filtering services for their clients. For example, in November of 2007, the ISP Orange launched a parental control service that prevents minors from accessing restricted sites.[22]

Conclusion

Jordanians appear to enjoy essentially unfiltered access to Internet content. However, the Press and Publications Law's broad provisions have been extended to online publications and may lead some writers to engage in self-censorship. Although Jordan's government continues to develop initiatives to expand access to the Internet, laws restricting freedom of speech preserve an intimidating atmosphere that discourages free discourse on political and social issues.

NOTES

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