

Libya

Libya continues to block Internet content related to political opposition, content critical of the government, and Web sites that advocate the rights of the minority group Amazigh (Berbers). This censorship of political content persists despite a trend toward greater openness and increasing freedom of the press.



Background

Libya has undertaken a radical shift in policies over the past few years. Formerly considered a state sponsor of terrorism and an international pariah, Libya moved to regain international acceptance by formally renouncing support of terrorism and dismantling their weapons of mass destruction development programs in 2003.¹ As a result, the United States, the European Union, and the United Nations lifted their respective embargoes on Libya soon after.² The United States recently established an embassy in Libya to further solidify relations between the two countries.³

Though much has changed, much has stayed the same. As Reporters Without Borders states, “despite Col. Muammar al-Gaddafi’s

recent pro-democracy pretensions, his regime still keeps a very tight rein on news.”⁴ Human rights watchdog groups still report serious violations, such as restriction of expression; prohibition of political parties and independent organizations; imprisonment of critics of the political system, the government, or its leader; torture; and unresolved disappearances from past years.⁵ The press laws from 1972 and 1973 impose large fines and up to two year prison sentences for violations of a variety of press restrictions, including “doubting the aims of the revolution.”⁶ As a result self-censorship in the media is widespread. Reporters Without Borders reports that journalists rarely challenge

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



Source (by indicator): IMF 2006; World Bank 2006a, 2006b; UNDP 2006; World Bank 2006c, 2006c; ITU 2006, 2004

the boundaries imposed by the government on content, especially those on topics relating to Gaddafi or his family or to the plight of the Berber minority.⁷ The press laws also make the formation of private media illegal by restricting the right to publish to only two public organizations.⁸

At the same time as the Libyan opposition has increasingly used the Internet to spread its message,⁹ the crackdown on journalistic freedom has moved into the realm of the Internet as well. In the country's most famous case, a fifty-one-year-old bookseller named Abdel Razak Al Mansouri was arrested in January 2005 and interrogated about a number his posts on the Akbar Libya Web site (www.akhbar-libya.com) that were critical of the government. Though never charged with a crime related to those posts, he was eventually charged, convicted, and sentenced to a year and a half in jail for possession of a gun without a license. He served a year before being granted amnesty.¹⁰

Internet in Libya

Internet access officially came to Libya at the end of 1998, but it was not widely available until early 2000.¹¹ Internet penetration remains low, at around 4 percent,¹² at least in part because of

the long-term economic sanctions imposed on the country.¹³ The primary means for people to connect is through Internet cafés.¹⁴

The state-owned General Post and Telecommunications Company (GPTC), run by Gaddafi's son, Mohamed al-Gaddafi,¹⁵ regulates and operates Libya's telecommunications infrastructure, providing "international and local voice services, digital leased lines, telex, fax, mobile (through a partially owned subsidiary) and Internet services."¹⁶ The GPTC also owns the country's primary ISP, Libya Telecom and Technology (LTT), which offers Internet services via dialup, DSL, broadband, and satellite,¹⁷ though at least seven companies other companies are licensed. These competitors are effectively subordinated to LTT, however, as LTT maintains a monopoly over the country's international Internet gateway.¹⁸

In October 2006 the government of Libya reached an agreement with One Laptop per Child, a nonprofit United States group developing an inexpensive, educational laptop computer, with the goal of supplying machines to all 1.2 million Libyan schoolchildren by June 2008.¹⁹ As the country only contained 130,000 computers in 2002,²⁰ this will be a major boost to the

availability of information communications technology (ICT) technologies and the Internet.

Legal and regulatory frameworks

Libya continues to maintain strict limits on what can be said or written in the country. Libya's penal code, for example, punishes with life imprisonment or death anyone convicted of disseminating information that conflicts with the constitutional principles or the country's "fundamental social structures" or that tarnishes Libya's image abroad. Criticism of President Gaddafi is punishable by death.²¹

Further, by the press laws mentioned earlier, print and broadcast media are owned and strictly controlled by the government, and expression of opinions contrary to official policy is strictly forbidden. According to the Freedom House report, the pervasive use of secret police, informants, and arbitrary arrests intimidates citizens from speaking out and renders independent and critical journalism virtually impossible.²²

With the rising threat from the Internet to government control over political information, the Libyan government appointed one of Gaddafi's closest friends to monitor and limit the growth of oppositional Web sites. Experts from Russia, Poland, and Pakistan were summoned to Libya to help handle the situation. One tactic that emerged was to force owners of Internet cafés to place stickers on computers that warn visitors from logging onto Web sites deemed oppositional.²³

Beyond merely political content, the Libyan official ".ly" registry rules mandate that ".ly" domains "must not contain obscene, scandalous, indecent, or contrary to Libyan law or Islamic morality words, phrases or abbreviations."²⁴ ONI did not, however, find any social blocking in its tests.

In 2006 Reporters Without Borders removed Libya from their list of the Internet enemies after a fact-finding visit found no evidence of Internet

ensorship.²⁵ ONI's test results contradict that conclusion, however, as noted below.

ONI testing results

In 2007 ONI ran tests on Libya's three ISPs: Libya Telecom and Technology (LTT), Modern World of Communications (MWC), and Al-Falak. All three ISPs were found to block oppositional content such as the Web site of the Libyan Muslim Brotherhood (www.almukhtar.org) and the Libyan Constitutional Union (www.lcu-libya.co.uk and www.libyanconstitutionalunion.net).

The three ISPs also block Web sites containing information critical of the Libyan regime. For example, ONI found Libya for Ever (www.libya4ever.com), Libya al-Mostakbal (www.libya-almostakbal.com), and Libya Our Home (www.libya-watanona.com) to be blocked.

Access to Web sites containing information about the Amazigh (Berbers), including the preservation and teaching of the Tamazight language and culture, is restricted as well. Examples in this category found to be blocked are www.libyaimal.com, an Amazigh-related Web site, and www.tawalt.com, a site run by a Libyan Amazigh cultural foundation.

The filtering regime also targets content critical of the human rights situation in the country, notably the Web site of the Libyan Union for Human Rights Defenders (www.libyanhumanrights.com).

Evidence from ONI testing reveals that Libya employs IP blocking at the international gateway, carried out by Libya Telecom and Technology Company (LTT). Users who attempt to access banned content are not served with a blockpage, but rather encounter time-out messages.

Conclusion

Despite the general trend toward greater freedom and openness, Libya maintains an active Internet filtration regime focused on Web sites of political opposition groups, antigovernment news and views, and content related to the minority group

Amazigh (Berbers). The filtering regime lacks transparency, as none of the three ISPs admits filtering or serves blockpages. If current trends hold, however, the government may decide to decrease their filtration efforts in the future.

NOTES

1. Elise Labott, "U.S. to normalize relations with Libya," CNN.com, May 15, 2006, <http://www.cnn.com/2006/US/05/15/libya/index.html>.
2. BBC News, "EU lifts weapons ban on Libya," October 11, 2004, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/3732514.stm>; Reporters Without Borders, "Libya: We can criticise Allah but not Gaddafi," October 2006, www.rsf.org/IMG/pdf/rapport_libye_gb.pdf.
3. U.S. Department of State, "About the Embassy," <http://libya.usembassy.gov/history2.html>.
4. Reporters Without Borders, Libya: Annual Report 2007, 2007, http://www.rsf.org/article.php3?id_article=20770&Valider=OK.
5. Human Rights Watch, Libya: Events of 2006, <http://hrw.org/englishwr2k7/docs/2007/01/11/libya14712.htm>.
6. BBC News, "EU lifts weapons ban on Libya," October 11, 2004, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/3732514.stm>; Reporters Without Borders, "Libya: We can criticise Allah but not Gaddafi," October 2006, www.rsf.org/IMG/pdf/rapport_libye_gb.pdf.
7. Reporters Without Borders, Libya: Annual Report 2007, 2007, http://www.rsf.org/article.php3?id_article=20770&Valider=OK.
8. United Nations Development Programme, Program on Governance in the Arab Region, Media and Government Regulations, <http://www.pogar.org/countries/civil.asp?cid=10#sub5>.
9. Islam Online, Breath for Youth, August 14, 2005, <http://www.islamonline.net/Arabic/news/2005-08/14/article14.shtml> (in Arabic).
10. Reporters Without Borders, "Imprisoned cyber-dissident in worrying condition after injury in fall from bunkbed," May 2005, http://www.rsf.org/article.php3?id_article=13890; Reporters Without Borders, Libya: Annual Report 2007, http://www.rsf.org/article.php3?id_article=20770&Valider=OK.
11. The Arab Network for Human Rights Information, "Libya: The Internet in a conflict zone," <http://www.hrinfo.net/en/reports/net2004/libya.shtml>.
12. International Telecommunication Union, *World Telecommunication Indicators 2006*.
13. The Initiative for an Open Arab Net, Libya, <http://www.openarab.net/en/reports/net2006/libya.shtml>, (accessed March 19, 2007).
14. Ibid.
15. Economist Intelligence Unit, Libya: Privatisation Possibilities March 19, 2007, http://globaltechforum.eiu.com/index.asp?layout=rich_story&channelid=4&categoryid=31&title=Libya%3A+Privatisation+possibilities&doc_id=10336.
16. Internet Assigned Numbers Authority, IANA Report on the Redelegation of the .ly Top-Level Domain, October 2004, <http://www.iana.org/reports/ly-report-05aug05.pdf>.
17. LTT Co. Web site, <http://lty.ly/english/services.php>.
18. Economist Intelligence Unit, Libya: Privatisation Possibilities, March 19, 2007, http://globaltechforum.eiu.com/index.asp?layout=rich_story&channelid=4&categoryid=31&title=Libya%3A+Privatisation+possibilities&doc_id=10336.
19. John Markoff, "U.S. group reaches deal to provide laptops to all Libyan children," The New York Times, October 11, 2006, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/10/11/world/africa/11laptop.html?ex=1318219200&en=84038e9ae540b091&ei=5088&partner=rssnyt&emc=rss>.
20. International Telecommunication Union, *World Telecommunication Indicators 2006*.
21. International Press Institute, World Press Freedom Review, Libya 2005, http://www.freemedia.at/cms/ipi/freedom_detail.html?country=/KW0001/KW0004/KW0098/&year=2005.
22. Ibid.
23. The Arab Network for Human Rights Information, "Libya: The Internet in a conflict zone," <http://www.hrinfo.net/en/reports/net2004/libya.shtml>.
24. Official ".ly" registry Web site, <http://www.nic.ly/regulations.php>.
25. Reporters Without Borders, "The list of 13 Internet enemies," November 7, 2006, http://www.rsf.org/article.php3?id_article=19603.