

Oman

The Sultanate of Oman engages in extensive filtering of pornographic Web sites, gay and lesbian content, and anonymizer sites used to circumvent blocking. Although filtering of political content is highly selective, laws and regulations restrict free expression online and encourage self-censorship.



Background

Oman is a monarchy, with Sultan Qaboos bin Said exercising absolute power and the bicameral Majlis Oman (Council of Oman) acting in a mostly advisory position. Although the government is generally protective of human rights, it has been criticized by international groups for restricting free speech and assembly.¹ In early 2005, thirty-one Omanis were imprisoned for allegedly plotting to overthrow the government; all were granted royal pardons later that year.² In July 2005, two Omani human rights activists were arrested for criticizing the government: Taiba al-Mawali was jailed for six months and Abdullah Al-Riyami, who accused the police of torturing prisoners, was detained incommunicado for a week.³

Internet in Oman

Oman's communications infrastructure is well developed.⁴ Oman Telecommunications Company (Omantel), the country's sole Internet service provider (ISP), is owned by the government. Omantel began providing full Internet service in early 1997. As of October 2006, Internet subscriptions numbered 92,126 (approximately 29 subscribers per 1,000 inhabitants).⁵ Approximately 14 percent (12,900) of these subscriptions were to high-speed Internet (ADSL) services. The majority of subscribers continue to rely on dialup connections.⁶

The low number of Internet subscribers has been attributed to the paucity of personal

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
GDP per capita, PPP (constant 2000 international \$).....	14,024		
Life expectancy at birth (years)	75		
Literacy rate (% of people age 15+)	81		
Human development index (out of 177).....	56		
Rule of law (out of 208)	61		
Voice and accountability (out of 208)	160		
Digital opportunity index (out of 180)	79		
Internet users (% of population)	11.1		

Source (by indicator): World Bank 2004, 2006a, 2006a; UNDP 2006; World Bank 2006c, 2006c; ITU 2006, 2005

computers, which in 2006 numbered 32 per 1,000 people.⁷ Prepaid Internet service cards and Omantel's "Log 'N' Surf" service provide alternatives to regular subscriptions; neither requires prior registration.⁸ Omantel is also working on a Wireless Local Loop (WLL) project to extend telecom services to rural areas where cable connectivity is either impossible or prohibitively expensive.⁹

Oman's government has plans to use the Internet to increase e-government and e-education. On January 9, 2007, Omantel launched the Easy Learning Service to provide hundreds of electronic training courses in accounting, sales, marketing, and customer services.¹⁰ In February 2007 Omantel began offering sixty free hours of Internet access to new subscribers, describing the initiative as part of a larger plan to spread digital culture.¹¹

The monarchy has also begun opening Oman's telecommunications sector to private investors and competitors. In 2005, the government sold a 30 percent stake in Omantel to local investors. The move came shortly after the country's second mobile-phone operator started operations, offering for the first time a choice to local consumers. The government has also

announced plans to offer licenses for fixed-line telecom services in competition with Omantel.¹²

Legal and regulatory frameworks

On November 6, 1996, Sultan Qaboos bin Said issued the Basic Law of the State ("The White Book"), considered to be Oman's first constitution. Article 29 of the White Book guarantees "freedom of opinion and expression ... within the limits of the Law."¹³ "Material that leads to public discord, violates the security of the State or abuses a person's dignity and his rights" may not be printed or published.¹⁴ In July 2005 former parliamentarian Taiba al-Mawali was arrested and sentenced to eighteen months imprisonment for insulting a public official and sending allegedly libelous text messages that criticized government actions.¹⁵ Her sentence was later reduced and she was released on January 31, 2006.¹⁶

Arrest and search warrants are not required by law, and the government can and does monitor both written and oral communications, including cell phone, e-mail, and Internet chat room exchanges. Publications that contravene cultural or political norms are subject to government censorship under the 1984 Press and Publication Law, and online forums admonish

visitors that criticism of the sultan or government officials will be censored and could lead to police questioning.¹⁷ Although some degree of criticism of the government has been tolerated in practice, especially on the Internet, writers and publishers generally exercise significant self-censorship. In November 2006, the Omani authorities briefly detained the administrator and a number of moderators of Oman's most popular online discussion forum (www.omania.net) after an article about corruption in the country was posted in the forum.¹⁸ The administrator and moderators were banned from traveling outside the country, awaiting charges of defamation under the publication law, telecommunications law, and penal code.¹⁹ In February 2007 a note in Arabic was posted on the Web site saying that the administrator was found innocent. No other details were mentioned.

Internet use in Oman is regulated by Omantel's Terms & Conditions, which mandates that users "not carry out any unlawful activities which contradict the social, cultural, political, religious or economical values of the Sultanate of Oman or could cause harm to any third party Any abuse and misuse of the Internet Services through e-mail or news or by any other means shall result in the termination of the subscription and may result in the proceedings of Criminal or Civil lawsuits against the Customer."²⁰

To use the Internet, individuals, companies, and institutions are asked to sign an agreement not to publish anything that destabilizes the state; insults or criticizes the head of state or the royal family; questions trust in the justice of the government; creates hatred toward the government or any ethnicity or religion; promotes religious extremism, pornography, or violence; promotes any religious or political system that contradicts the state's system; or insults other states. Users must also agree not to promote illegal goods or prescription drugs over the Internet.²¹

Omantel imposes additional physical restrictions on Internet access in Internet cafés.

Individuals or companies wishing to open an Internet café must submit a floor plan for the proposed site. The plan must be designed so that the computer screens are visible to the floor supervisor. No closed rooms or curtains are allowed that might obstruct view of the monitors.²² Moreover, Internet café operators are asked to install proxy servers to monitor and log user activity.²³

ONI testing results

Oman's exclusive ISP, Omantel, was tested using dialup, "Log 'N' Surf" service, and ADSL connections. As suggested by the text of Omantel's blockpage, results indicated extensive blocking of pornographic Web sites. Some Web sites featuring provocative attire were blocked as well.

There was also extensive blocking of gay and lesbian sites, though sites relating to gay civil rights and equality issues, such as www.glaad.com and www.hrc.org, were largely accessible.

Omantel also blocked some dating Web sites—probably because they contained either sexually explicit images (www.adultfriendfinder.com) or gay and lesbian content (www.gayromeo.com).

Anonymizing and proxy circumvention tools, such as Anonymizer and Proxify, were heavily blocked. Some Web sites dealing with hacking and cracking, such as keygenrack.com, were blocked. Only one of the many peer-to-peer Web sites tested was blocked (www.hyper-torrent.com).

Although testing did not reveal the Web sites of Voice-over Internet Protocol (VoIP) services to be blocked, subscriber complaints suggest that the functionality of Skype, a popular VoIP application, has been crippled.²⁴ Omantel sources have reported to the media that past filtering of Skype was unintentional and would be remedied, but this statement has raised suspicions because SmartFilter categorizes www.skype.com as a "Web Phone" site, a category that Omantel would have had to specifically activate.²⁵ In

March 2007 Oman's TRA openly banned the use of Internet telephony at Internet cafés and warned Internet café operators against providing basic voice service. The TRA also warned that violators face punishments that include imprisonment and fines.²⁶

Although all blog sites tested were found to be accessible, some adult humor sites, such as www.collegehumor.com, were blocked. The Web site of the Arab-American newspaper *Arab Times* (www.arabtimes.com) was blocked, as were its Google cache copies. Unlike many states in the region, Oman does not appear to block Web sites that criticize Islam or that attempt to convert Muslims to other religions.

Omantel uses the American-made commercial filtering software SmartFilter. Omantel's blockpage states that the blocking of banned sites is not a unilateral decision taken by the ISP, but rather that "an overwhelming number of requests from the subscribers made [Omantel] rethink [its] strategy and conform to the popular demand to block pornographic and certain hacking sites that encourage hacking."²⁷ The blockpage also suggests that users submit an e-mail link to a site if they feel it has been blocked unfairly and that such a page should be re-categorized and unblocked.

Conclusion

Filtering of pornography, gay and lesbian content, and circumvention tools is pervasive in Oman. In addition to blocking Web sites, the authorities impose legal and physical controls to ensure that the Internet community does not access or publish objectionable or unlawful material. These laws and regulations give rise to self-censorship among writers and publishers, both off- and online.

NOTES

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7. Telecommunications Regulatory Authority of Oman, Policy of Liberalization of the Telecommunication Sector, <http://www.tra.gov.om/test1/lib.htm>.
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11. *The Times of Oman*, Times News Service, "Free surfing hours for new Omantel subscribers," February 4, 2007, http://www.timesofoman.com/inner_cat.asp?cat=1&detail=2887.
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13. The White Book: The Basic Law of the Sultanate of Oman, Article 29, <http://www.omanet.om/english/government/basiclaw/overview.asp?cat=gov&subcat=blaw>.
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18. The Arabic Network for Human Rights Information, Internet and Freedom of Expression in the Sultanate of Oman, February 1, 2007, <http://www.hrinfo.net/mena/achr/2007/pr0120.shtml> (in Arabic).

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19. Ibid.
 20. Omantel, "Omantel Terms & conditions," <http://www.omantel.net.om/policy/terms.asp>.
 21. Oman Telecommunications Company, Terms and Conditions, http://www.omantel.net.om/services/business/internet/Terms_and_conditions_internet_cafe.pdf.
 22. Oman Telecommunications Company, Procedures for Internet Cyber Café Pre-Approval, <http://www.omantel.net.om/services/business/internet/preapprovaleng.pdf>.
 23. Logs are to be kept for at least three months. See http://www.omantel.net.om/services/business/internet/policy_using_internet_cafe.pdf.
 24. See, for example, Customer service enquiry submitted December 14, 2006, at Omantel Support Ticket Knowledge Base, http://www.omantel.net.om/help%5Fdesk/view_ticket.asp?ticket_id=1414.
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 27. See Omantel's blockpage at <http://www.omantel.net.om/new1.html>.