Internet Filtering in

Oman

OpenNet Initiative

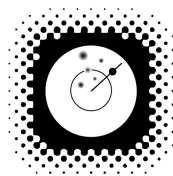## Overview

The Sultanate of Oman engages in extensive filtering of pornographic Web sites, gay and lesbian content, and anonymizer sites used to circumvent blocking. The censors have added content that is critical of Islam and Web sites on illegal drugs to the blacklist. Although there is no evidence of technical filtering of political content, laws and regulations restrict free expression online and encourage self-censorship.

Background

One of the more traditional countries in the Middle East, Oman is a monarchy under the rule of Sultan Qaboos bin Said, who took on the role of prime minister and heads the foreign, defense and finance ministries,[1] while the Consultative Council serves mainly as an advisory body.[2] Since Said attained power in 1970, he has embraced economic reforms and boosted spending on health, education and welfare.[3]

Oman's government has been progressively modernized and liberalized, allowing for the nomination of female candidates to join the Council.[4] Although citizens have the freedom to form associations on a national basis within the limits of the Basic Law, Oman has no legalized political parties.[5]

Like many of its neighbors–including UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen–Oman censors publications for political or cultural reasons, and self-censorship is prevalent among journalists who wish to avoid harassment.[6]

Internet in Oman

Over the past three decades, Oman's telecom sector has been developed almost entirely by the state-controlled Oman Telecommunications Company, which began providing Internet services in early 1997.[7] Omantel, previously known as the General Telecommunications Organization, is the official ISP, supplying the country with both telephone services and international networks. Omantel and another national company, Oman Mobile Telecommunications Company or Oman Mobile, provide a wide range of telecom services.[8]

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 $)............................	15,602		
Life expectancy at birth (years)..	75		
Literacy rate (% of people age 15+)...	81.4		
Human development index (out of 177).....................................	58		
Rule of law (percentile)...	72		
Voice and accountability (percentile).......................................	19		
Digital opportunity index (out of 181)......................................	81		
Internet users (% of population)...	10.7		

Even though mobile and fixed line services cover around 95 percent of the country,[9] Internet penetration rates remain low, at about 16.8 percent in 2008.[10] As of May 2008, the number of Internet subscribers in Oman reached 115,506, with dial-up customers totaling 52,351, ADSL subscribers 23,969, leased Internet lines 319, pre-paid Internet subscribers 37,600, and other Internet connections 1,267. Mobile phone subscribers reached 2.7 million.[11]

Although the Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (TRA) has attempted to create competition in the ISP market, most Internet services are still provided by Omantel alone. In March 2008, in response to a lack of infrastructure support for potential ISPs, the TRA published a Public Consultation Paper seeking written comments from parties interested in establishing new ISPs, especially operators and investors, on a license to establish and operate an Internet Exchange.[12]

Oman's low Internet penetration rate is largely a result of the limited number of computers in the country and its horizontal urban expansion, which makes delivering connectivity to dispersed neighborhoods difficult.[13] Another challenge is that all IP addresses have been entirely used up, limiting the capacity of the Internet network. To solve this issue, an Omantel official recommended establishing a plan to move to IPv6, the next generation protocol.[14]

In May 2003, the government agency of the Information Technology Authority (ITA) began to implement the Digital Oman Strategy.[15] Also known as the eOman Initiative, this strategy aims to transform the country into a sustainable knowledge-based society by leveraging ICTs to enhance government services, enrich businesses and empower individuals, and in 2007 the ITA began developing a web portal to make an integrated service delivery platform for government e-services.[16] The Ubar Portal serves as a gateway to a range of electronic government services such as e-tendering, e-taxation, and services of municipalities.[17] In April 2008, a group composed of students, academics, IT professionals, and business and members of various government institutions launched Oman's first IT knowledge Internet platform, a project which aims to bridge the information technology knowledge gap between students, professionals, and the industry sector.[18]

Legal and regulatory framework

Article 29 of Oman's constitution, often referred to as "The White Book," guarantees "freedom of opinion and expression … within the limits of the

Law."[19] "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.[20] As in many other Gulf States, law in Oman prohibits criticisms of key figures, such as the Sultan, by the media or individuals. In addition, the 1984 Press and Publication Law authorizes the government to censor publications deemed politically, culturally, or sexually offensive.[21]

Internet use in Oman is regulated by Omantel's Terms & Conditions, which mandate 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 or misuse of the Internet Services will "result in the termination of the subscription and/or in the proceedings of Criminal or Civil lawsuits against the Customer."[22]

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.[23]

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 financial fines.[24]

Surveillance

According to the US State Department Human Rights Report, the government monitors private communications, including mobile phones, e-mail, and Internet chat room exchanges, and interrogates chat room users who are critical of government officials or policies by tracking them through their ISP addresses.[25] In November 2006, the Omani authorities briefly detained the administrator and a number of moderators of Oman's most popular online discussion forum (omania.net) after an article about corruption in the country was posted in the forum.[26] The administrator and moderators were banned from traveling outside the country, awaiting charges of defamation under the publication law, telecommunications law, and penal code.[27] ONI monitored the site and found that 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.

To enforce surveillance, Omantel imposes physical restrictions on Internet access in Internet cafés.[28] 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.[29] Moreover, Internet café operators are asked to install proxy servers to monitor and log user activity.[30]

Article 37 of Oman's Telecommunications Regulatory Act & Amendments states that ISPs "shall maintain the confidentiality of the services provided to the beneficiaries, and shall not compromise or uncover it or uncover any of the beneficiary's data unless based on an order from a competent court."[31]

ONI test results

ONI conducted testing on Oman's exclusive ISP, Omantel, using dialup, "Log 'N' Surf" service, and ADSL connections. Results indicate that the filtering regime in Oman is now more extensive and covers content that was not previous targeted during previous testing.

The filtering regime extensively targets pornographic Web sites. Results show that forums that facilitate the exchange of Arabic-language explicit content have been blocked. Similar to earlier test results, some Web sites featuring provocative attire were blocked as well.

Two content categories have been added to the blocked content: content that is critical of Islam (www.answering-islam.org, www.prophetofdoom.net, www.freemuslim.org) and Web sites about illegal drugs (www.marijuana.com, www.marijuana.nl, www.amphetamines.com, www.heroin.org).

Blocking of gay and lesbian sites remains extensive, though sites relating to gay civil rights and equality issues (www.gayscape.com and www.gaywired.com) 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 (gayromeo.com). Anonymizing and proxy circumvention tools, such as Anonymizer and Proxify, were heavily blocked and, previously accessible tools such as Psiphon (psiphon.civisec.org) and TOR (tor.eff.org) were also blocked. Additionally, some Web sites dealing with hacking and cracking, such as www.passwordhq.com and www.crackspider.net, were blocked.

Even though the use of VoIP has been officially banned in Oman as mentioned above, the Web site skype.com was the only VoIP site found to be blocked. The video sharing Web site metacafe.com and the humor site collegehumor.com were found blocked, probably because they include nudity. Also blocked was the Web site Jihad Watch (www.jihadwatch.org).

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 "[a]n 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."[32] 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 could be re-categorized and unblocked.

Conclusion

Filtering of pornography, gay and lesbian content, and circumvention tools is pervasive in Oman. The authorities have extended the filtering regime to include more explicit content in Arabic and Web sites that are critical of Islam as well as sites about illegal drugs. In addition to the technical filtering, 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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[18] Ravindra Nath, "New 'Knowledge Platform' Aims to Bridge Digital Gap," *Khaleej Times Online*, April 13, 2008, http://www.khaleejtimes.com/DisplayArticleNew.asp?xfile=data/middleeast/2008/April/middleeast_April144.xml&section=middleeast&col=.

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