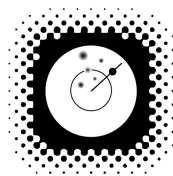


Internet Filtering in

Saudi Arabia



OpenNet Initiative

Overview

Saudi Arabia filters sites related to opposition political groups, human rights issues, and religious content deemed offensive to Muslims. Pornographic and gay sites are pervasively filtered, as well as circumvention and online privacy tools. Bloggers have been arrested, and blogs and sites run by online activists have been blocked.

Background

Saudi Arabia is the birthplace of the Prophet Muhammad and the cradle of Islam. It embraces a strict interpretation of Sunni Islam and has a strong religious self-identity. Political parties are banned and activists who publicly call for reform risk being jailed.¹ Journalism is strictly controlled, and journalists must exercise self-censorship in order to avoid government scrutiny and dismissal.²

Despite substantial Saudi investment in pan-Arab satellite television such as the Dubai-based MBC channels and the Bahrain-based Orbit Satellite Network, the media environment within Saudi Arabia is likely the most tightly-controlled in the region. The kingdom's four TV networks, including news channel Al-Ikhbaria, and its radio stations are operated by the state-owned Broadcasting Service of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

(BSKSA), which is chaired by the Minister of Culture and Information.³ Private television and radio stations are prohibited on Saudi soil.⁴ However, the Saudi Minister of Culture and Information said in May 2009 an official committee was formed to study the draft privatization project of Saudi television and the Saudi News Agency, and that the Ministry was considering granting a number of radio licenses.⁵

Blogging has grown as a medium for expression in Saudi Arabia, with the number of bloggers reached an estimated 2,000 in 2006.⁶ Half of these bloggers are women.⁷ In 2005 the government tried to ban the country's primary blogging tool, blogger.com.⁸ However, after a few days the ban was lifted, with the censors choosing to block specific content on the blogging Web site instead.⁹

The Committee to Protect Journalists ranked Saudi Arabia among the 10 worse countries to be a blogger, citing the widespread self-censorship and local calls by influential clerics for harsh punishment for online writers who post content deemed heretical.¹⁰

In November 2008, Saudi activists launched an online campaign to support human rights and called for a two-day public hunger strike to protest the detention without charges of human rights activists. The

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 \$).....	15,711		
Life expectancy at birth (years).....	72.2		
Literacy rate (% of people age 15+).....	82.9		
Human development index (out of 177).....	61		
Rule of law (percentile).....	59		
Voice and accountability (percentile).....	7		
Digital opportunity index (out of 181).....	75		
Internet users (% of population).....	28.5		

campaign was highly publicized and received coverage from international media such as CNN, Washington Post and France24.¹¹

Internet in Saudi Arabia

Since its creation in 1998, the state-run Saudi Telecom Company (STC) had been the sole provider of telecom services. However, in an effort to join the World Trade Organization (WTO), the government opened the telecommunication sector to competition in 2002.¹² To enhance the ICT infrastructure in Kingdom, STC began the installation of IP-VPN service at various speeds of up to 2.5 gigabytes.¹³

The telecom sector continues to grow with relative consistency. Service revenues have climbed steadily at an annual average rate of nearly 15 percent since 2001. Despite high mobile revenues, the kingdom's broadband penetration rate of about one percent remains well below the world average of five percent and the twenty percent benchmark of developed countries.¹⁴ This is likely to change, however, as advance ICT projects are introduced. These projects include STC's launch of a home fiber-optic service providing fast Internet speed reaching 100MB per second for its clients in the Kingdom.¹⁵

The government's Internet Services Unit (ISU), a department of the King Abdulaziz City for Science & Technology (KACST), has been responsible for overseeing Internet services in Saudi Arabia and for implementing government censorship.¹⁶ As its Web site explains, twenty-five licensed Internet service

providers (ISPs) connect users to the national network.¹⁷ In accordance with a Council of Ministers decision, the Saudi Communications Commission was renamed the Communications and Information Technology Commission (CTIC) and took charge of licensing and filtering processes previously managed by KACST.¹⁸

Due to numerous restrictions on the public interaction of unrelated men and women and the limited roles of women in open society, the Internet has not only emerged as a popular means of socialization but also one that is dominated by women. A local company estimated that two thirds of Saudi Internet users are women. Some Saudis believe that cyberspace has encouraged people to lead "double lives," conducting themselves in a more conservative manner in the public eye while engaging in far more liberal behavior online.¹⁹

Legal and regulatory framework

Saudi newspapers are established by decree. Although pan-Arab newspapers are available, they are subject to censorship and tend to conform to the state's standards regarding the publication of sensitive content.²⁰ Public criticism of the Saudi leadership and the questioning of Islamic beliefs are not generally tolerated, but in the post 9/11 era and amidst instances of internal militancy, a bolder and more candid approach has brought about at least some press and TV coverage of more controversial topics.²¹ This approach remains to be limited, though. For example, the Ministry of Culture and Information imposed in January 2008 a nationwide ban on all live

broadcasts on Saudi public television just two days after disgruntled viewers called Al-Ikhbariya news channel and made critical remarks targeting senior Saudi officials. The ban prompted Reporters Without Borders to call for a reversal of the government's action and the reinstatement of the network's director, who had been fired after the incident.²²

The Saudi government makes no secret of its filtering, which is explained on a section of the ISU Web site.²³ According to this Web site, KACST is directly responsible for filtering pornographic content, while other sites are blocked upon request from "government security bodies." The Web site also has forms by which Internet users can request that certain sites be blocked or unblocked. A KACST official said that, "the majority of blocked Web sites contain pornographic content, and over 90 percent of Internet users have tried to access a blocked Web site."²⁴ The censors rely on citizens who send in roughly 1,200 requests a day to have sites blocked.²⁵

In January 2008, Saudi Arabia implemented 16 articles of new law on the use of technology. These laws include penalties of ten years in prison and a fine for Web site operators that advocate or support terrorism; three years and fine for financial fraud or invasion of privacy; and five years and fine for those guilty of distributing pornography or other materials that violate public law, religious values and social standards of the kingdom. Accomplices of the guilty parties and even those who are proven to have only intended to engage in unlawful IT acts can receive up to half of maximum punishments.²⁶

Providers and distributors of Internet equipment can also be held liable under the new law, including internet café managers whose facilities are used to post content that infringes upon the "values" of the kingdom.²⁷

The new law was implemented amidst global scrutiny of the landmark imprisonment of Saudi blogger Ahmad Fouad Al-Farhan, who was arrested by the Saudi government for violating "non-security regulations." Al-Farhan is reported to have stated that he was

arrested because he "wrote about political prisoners in Saudi Arabia."²⁸ Al-Farhan was freed after more than four months in prison.²⁹

The new law has also been applied in nonpolitical cases. For example, a court fined a young man 50,000 Saudi Riyal (approximately USD 13,000) and sentenced him to 22 months in jail and 200 lashes after he was found guilty of breaking into a woman's email account and stealing photos of her. The man threatened to post the photos online if the woman did not agree to have an affair with him.³⁰

In July 2008, the Saudi authorities reportedly refused to renew the residence permit of an Egyptian national who had lived in Saudi Arabia for 44 years for writing in newspapers and on the Internet articles that are critical of the Egyptian regime.³¹ The Arabic Network for Human Rights Information said the writer's activities "only amount to writings about his concerns and opinions about Egypt and do not include any Saudi related matters."³²

In an unprecedented move, Saudi Arabia's National Human Rights Society announced attempts to have Web sites of Arab and international human rights organizations unblocked by the Saudi authorities.³³ The chairman of the society said that they are aware of the blocking of Web sites of Human Rights Watch, Reporters Without Borders and the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information inside Saudi Arabia. He added that, "blocking these sites is tantamount to depriving Saudi Arabia of its rights as a member of the UN Human Rights Council" and that "blocking those websites violates clause 19 of the International Human Rights Declaration, which deals with freedom of expression and clause 23 of the Arab Human Rights Charter."³⁴

In May 2009, thirteen Saudi women journalists filed complaints with the Ministry of Interior accusing the local online newspaper Kul Al-Watan (All of the Homeland) of "defaming and distorting the image of the Saudi media." The Saudi women journalists said the online newspaper published an offensive report entitled "Saudi Women in Red Nights" in which it alleged that prostitution,

alcohol and drugs have become widespread in Saudi society, and that women journalists rely on illicit relationships with newspaper bosses to get support and fame. One of the women journalists accused the writer of taking advantage of an absence of censorship on online publishing in Saudi Arabia.³⁵

Just few days later the Minister of Culture and Information said Saudi Arabia intends to enact laws, regulation, and legislation for newspapers and Internet Web sites. This regulation will require Saudi based Web sites to get official licenses from a special agency under the purview of his Ministry. The Minister said the proposed regulation aims to deter “dangerous” writing in the newspapers and the Web sites.³⁶

Surveillance

Like many countries in the Middle East, the Saudi authorities monitor Internet activities. In March 2009 the Ministry of Internet orders Internet cafés to install hidden cameras and provide a record of names and identities of their customers.³⁷

The Saudi religious police have also expressed interest in practicing online surveillance. Members of the religious police (the Commission for Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice) asked the Chairman of the Saudi Shura (Consultative) Council to enable them to have access to blocked Web sites, “to monitor immoral practices by visitors of these sites.”³⁸ The religious police argued that some male and female youngsters “get involved in negative practices away from the eyes of the Saudi authorities” on these blocked Web sites, so they want to put an end to the “immoral practices” online.³⁹

The Chairman of the Saudi Shura Council however, questioned the legitimacy of the request and said, “These justifications must be supported by clear evidence, otherwise there is no need for it.”⁴⁰

ONI testing results

ONI conducted in-country testing on three ISPs: STC, National Engineering Services & Marketing (Nesma) and Arabian Internet and Communications Services (Awalnet). The three providers blocked the same Web sites, as

expected given the centrally administered filtering system.

Using Secure Computing’s “SmartFilter” software for technical implementation and to identify sites for blocking, the Saudi censors have increased the number of targeted Saudi political reformists and opposition groups. In addition to the previously blocked sites such as the Web sites of the Islah movement (www.islah.tv and islah.info) and the Tajdeed movement (tagdeed.net), the authorities have added more opposition sites to the blocked sites. Examples include www.alumah.com and www.alhijazonline.com

Phase 2 testing also revealed that the censors now target user-generated oppositional content such as the forum New Arabia (www.newarabia.org)

ONI monitored in-country access to the blog of Saudi blogger Ahmad Fouad Al-Farhan, who was jailed for more than four months. His blog was found to be blocked during his arrest and continued to be blocked even after he was released from prison.

Also, ONI verified that the Web site of the Voice of Saudi Women (www.saudiwomen.net) was blocked in October 2008. The Web site, according to Reporters Without Borders, published a number of analytical reports about the status of women in Saudi society, and it denounced impediments to women becoming effective actors in Saudi society.⁴¹

ONI also found that the blog Saudi Christian (christforsaudi.blogspot.com) was blocked in Saudi Arabia in January 2009, after reports that Saudi blogger Hamoud Bin Saleh declared in his blog that he converted from Islam to Christianity. ONI monitored the blog and found that it was removed in March 2009 for unknown reasons. It was not clear who removed the blog.

In keeping with the Saudi government’s emphasis on protecting the “sanctity of Islam” and the legitimacy of the regime, several religious sites are also blocked. These include sites relating to minority Shia groups (www.yahosein.com), the Bahai faith (www.bahai.com) and sites that espouse alternative views of Islam such as the Web site of the Institute for the Secularization of the Islamic Society (www.secularislam.org).

Sites that present critical reviews of the religion of Islam and/or try to convert Muslims to other religions are also censored (answering-islam.org, www.islamreview.com)

The Web pages of a few global free speech advocates, such as Article19 (www.article19.org) and the Free Speech Coalition (www.freespeechcoalition.com), are blocked. However, filtering of human rights content primarily targets Saudi or regional organizations. All Web pages of the Saudi Human Rights Center (www.saudihr.org) are blocked.

The entire human rights Web site www.humum.net was found blocked in phase 2 results. Phase 1 results showed that only the Saudi page on the site was blocked. The site receives complaints on human rights violations from Arab citizens and is run by the Cairo-based Arab Human Rights Information Network.

Most global media sites tested, including Israel-based news outlets such as the daily Haaretz (www.haaretz.com), were accessible. However, sites of few prominent Arabic newspapers and news portals were blocked. These include the Arab-language newspaper Al-Quds Al Arabi (www.alquds.co.uk) and the news portal Elaph (www.elaph.com). ONI found that access to Elaph was allowed few months after testing.

“Immoral” social content continues to be a priority target for Saudi censors. The vast majority of pornographic Web sites and most sites featuring provocative attire or gambling that were tested were blocked. Phase 2 testing showed that the censors have added forums which facilitate the exchange of Arabic explicit content.

Also blocked were numerous sites relating to alcohol and drugs, gays and lesbians, and sex-education and family planning. A substantial number of Internet tools, including anonymizers and translators, were filtered.

Conclusion

Saudi Arabia publically acknowledges censoring morally inappropriate and religiously sensitive material, but the authorities also filter oppositional political sites and sites focused on human rights

issues. In addition, the state has introduced new surveillance measures at Internet cafés and has announced plans to start a system that will require local sites to register with the authorities.

Saudi citizens have started to use the Internet for online activism, but the authorities have arrested several online writers and blocked their content. A local human rights group expressed interest in legally challenging the government’s censorship of human rights sites.

Generally, Internet filtering in Saudi Arabia mirrors broader attempts by the state to repress opposition and promote a single religious creed.

NOTES

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