Sudan

Sudan openly acknowledges filtering content that transgresses public morality and ethics or threatens order.[1] The state's regulatory authority has established a special unit to monitor and implement filtration; this primarily targets pornography and, to a lesser extent, gay and lesbian content, dating sites, and provocative attire.

Background

Since gaining independence from the UK in 1953, Sudan has been plagued by constant strife and civil war, which have stunted the development of both the economy and the government.[2] Previously an authoritarian state with all effective power vested in the president, Sudan is currently in a period of transition following the historic signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005.[3] The CPA requires the sharing of power and wealth between the rebel Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) and the Government of Sudan.[4] The CPA has prompted the drafting of an interim national constitution that affords basic rights, including freedom of religion and of the press, and that prohibits human rights abuses, including torture and cruel punishment. In practice, however, violations of these provisions by the government and its security forces are numerous.[5] Non-Muslims, non-Arab Muslims, and Muslims from sects unaffiliated with the ruling party face discriminatory policies and practices, as evidenced in the allocation of government jobs.[6] Killings of civilians in conflict, abductions, life-threatening prison conditions, arbitrary arrests and detentions (of political opponents as well as journalists), and human trafficking (often for sexual exploitation, forced labor, or military conscription) constitute additional human rights violations.[7]

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 \$)........ 1,924		
Life expectancy at birth (years) 57		
Literacy rate (% of people age 15+) 61		
Human development index (out of 177).............................. 141		
Rule of law (out of 208) 201		
Voice and accountability (out of 208) 202		
Digital opportunity index (out of 180) 142		
Internet users (% of population) 7.7		

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

Violence and human rights abuses continue in the Darfur region of western Sudan, in a conflict that has spread across the Chad border. In February 2007, the government of Sudan denied the U.N. Human Rights Council visas to enter Darfur to conduct an impartial review.[8] U.N. officials say that conflict in the region has resulted in over 400,000 deaths and displaced approximately two million people.[9]

Internet in Sudan

Internet usage in Sudan is limited. Where infrastructure does exist, access can be prohibitively expensive. There are few locally produced Web pages.[10]

The infrastructure in Sudan is not optimized for high-speed data communications services, and both the capability and reliability of domestic data networks need improvement. Fifteen Internet service providers (ISPs) operate in Sudan (2006), but only two have direct connectivity to the global Internet; the rest are considered by the Sudanese government to be operating illegally.[11]

The number of home Internet subscriptions increased by a factor of ten between 2001 and 2005, rising from 50,000 to 500,000. During the same period, the number of Internet cafés more than doubled. However, Internet usage remains concentrated in Khartoum, accounting for 95 percent of Internet users. The majority of Internet users in Sudan rely on dialup connections (59 percent), and very few have high-speed Internet (19 percent). While 81 percent of universities in Sudan are Internet-equipped, most (65 percent) still use dialup connections.

The information and telecommunications sector in Sudan is regulated by the National Telecommunication Corporation (NTC). In 1993, the state-owned Public Telecommunication Corporation was transformed into the Sudan Telecommunication Company (Sudatel), allowing private investors to purchase a share in the enterprise. However, two-thirds of the shares of the company remained in government hands while it assumed exclusive operational control of the sector.[12]

In 2001, the Sudanese government adopted the National Strategy for Building the Information Industry, with the goal of enabling "all sectors of society to access information media in a way leading to the widest dissemination and utilization of information, all of which shall contribute to achieve an appreciated economic growth, wealth development, job opportunities, enhancement

of all-sector production rates and eradication of poverty."[13] As a result of the Strategy, Sudatel's monopoly over mobile telephony ended in 2002 and competitive operators—including several ISPs—in telecommunications were licensed.[14]

Legal and regulatory frameworks

Article 39 of the 2005 interim national constitution of the Republic of Sudan states that "[e]very citizen shall have an unrestricted right to the freedoms of expression, reception and dissemination of information, publication, and access to the press without prejudice to order, safety or public morals as determined by law."[15] The same article also states that the "state shall guarantee the freedom of the press and other media as shall be regulated by law in a democratic society."[16] However, in practice, these rights have been severely restricted.[17] Since emergency laws (which had provided for official censorship) were lifted on July 9th, 2005, the government has continued to censor print media.[18] In 2006, the New York–based Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) voiced alarm over "increasing censorship of opposition and independent newspapers in Sudan."[19] Additionally, fear of reprisals has led to self-censorship among journalists.[20]

The 2001 National Strategy for Building the Information Industry called for filtering Internet content that is "morally offensive and in violation of public ethics and order, [and] that may promote corruption and deface traditional identity."[21] The NTC declares that, although it targets several categories, "[t]he most important is the pornographic material, which accounts for over 95 percent of the total volume of the censored materials. Other categories include pages related to narcotics, explosives, alcohols, sacrilege, blasphemy, and gambling."[22] Interestingly, the NTC uses Western peer-reviewed research to support its decision to block these materials in defense of the public good. The NTC states that "[t]here is no political site among the list of blocked sites," and admits that "some translation sites were blocked as they were used to circumvent filtering."[23]

The NTC has set up a special filtering unit to screen Internet media before it reaches users in Sudan. The NTC asserts that sites are filtered based on their contents rather than their names, and that filtering is needed "to preserve noble values and . . . safeguard the society against evil."[24] According to the NTC, the Internet Service Control Unit receives daily requests to add Web sites to, or remove them from, the blacklist. The NTC makes available on its Web site an e-mail address for such requests.[25]

ONI testing results

Testing was conducted on two ISPs in Sudan, Sudanet and Zina Net. Their blocking behavior was identical.

Pornography was extensively filtered. However, some online discussion groups that facilitate the exchange of Arabic sex materials were found to be accessible. There was also some blocking of gay and lesbian, dating, and provocative-attire Web sites. Those dating Web sites that were blocked were those likely to host sexually explicit (for example, www.adultfriendfinder.com) or gay and lesbian (www.gayromeo.com) content. Other blocked gay and lesbian Web sites included a site addressing domestic violence (www.lesbians-against-violence.com) and a search portal (www.bglad.com), which were filtered due to being miscategorized as pornography by the commercial software SoftFilter.

Also blocked were health-related sites pertaining to the alteration of body parts, such as www.circumcision.org and www.breastenlargementmagazine.com. Similarly, most of the miscellaneous sites blocked—such as www.collegehumor.com, www.metacafe.com, and www.bootyologist.com—probably contain sexually explicit content.

Access to the feminist Web site www.feminista.com was blocked.

Many of the tested sites that facilitate anonymous Web surfing or circumvention of Internet filters were blocked. Additionally, some Web sites with hacking, cracking, or WAREZ content were blocked.

A small number of translation Web sites—which the NTC argues are used to circumvent filtering[26]—were blocked.

Only one tested blog, Boingboing, was blocked. This may have been an unintentional artifact of Smart Filter—the filtering software used by Sudan—which categorizes Boingboing as a pornographic Web site.[27] Still, blogging is subject to scrutiny and can incur serious consequences. In October 2006, Sudan expelled Jan Pronk, a top U.N. official, from the country after he posted in his blog (www.janpronk.nl) sensitive statements relating to the conflict in Darfur.[28] ONI has monitored and verified the blog's accessibility from Sudan.

Some Web sites discussing Christianity or criticizing Islam, such as www.islamreview.com, were blocked.

The Arab Network for Human Rights Information (www.hrinfo.org) reported that the NTC blocked access to the Web site www.sudaneseonline.com in 2004.[29] This site was not found to be blocked during ONI testing.

Conclusion

Online pornography is extensively blocked in Sudan, as the government openly acknowledges. Many anonymizer and proxy Web sites are blocked, as are some sites related to provocative attire, dating, and gay and lesbian interests. Sudan is relatively transparent in its filtering of the Internet compared with other Arab states, and even provides an appellate process for challenging the blocking of a site.

NOTES

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