Iraq

Iraq does not have a declared Internet filtering policy, nor is there evidence of Internet filtering practiced by the state Internet service provider (ISP). However, ongoing conflict and deteriorating conditions prevent many Iraqis from accessing the Internet.

Background

Although the Iraqi constitution, ratified in October 2005, guarantees the freedoms of "expression, press, printing, advertisement, media, publication, assembly, and peaceful demonstration,"[1] on February 13, 2007, Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki gave far-reaching martial law powers to military commanders. These powers include the power to conduct searches and seizures without warrants, to arrest, detain, and interrogate people, and to monitor, search, and confiscate "all mail parcels, letters, cables, and wire and wireless communications devices," and to restrict all public gatherings, including "centers, clubs, organizations, unions, companies, institutions, and offices."[2] A joint Johns Hopkins-MIT study in October 2006 estimates that Iraq has suffered 650,000 "excess deaths" (600,000 of them violent deaths) since the onset of the Iraq war in 2003 and that Iraqi death rates are continually rising.[3] Reporters Without Borders reports that 150 journalists and media assistants have died since the start of the war.[4] The Associated Press reports that the U.S. military has suffered 3,150 deaths in the initial invasion and subsequent efforts to stabilize the country.[5]
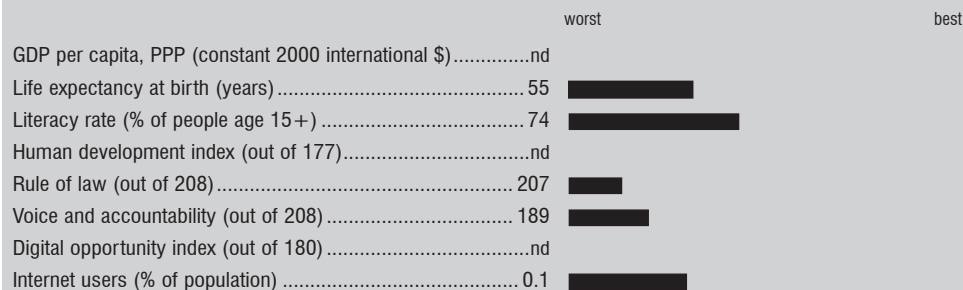
Internet in Iraq

Saddam Hussein placed severe restrictions on Iraqis' ability to receive and impart information. The press and broadcast media were tightly controlled, as was access to the Internet. In 2002, there were only 45,000 Internet users, many of

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				●

them state officials, in Iraq.[6] But after the war Internet cafés spread throughout the country to serve an increasing number of Internet users. There are no recent studies that enumerate Internet users in Iraq, but the ITU estimated the number to have reached 50,000 users by the end of 2004.[7]

The U.S. Defense Department spent more than USD165 million to set up cybercafés in Iraq. In 2004, Iraq contained 36 cafés, and by July 2006 it had more than 170.[8] According to a report from the London-based pan-Arab daily *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, approximately 45 percent of those who frequent Internet cafés are women, and both male and female users use matchmaking Web sites to find future spouses from outside Iraq so that they can get out of the country.[9]

Iraq's primary ISP, uruklink, provides dial-up, DSL, and wireless connection services,[10] and it also provides wireless high-capacity data and voice communications to government sites through the Baghdad Wireless Broadband Network in Baghdad.[11]

There is a very active Iraqi blogging community that blogs mostly about the experience of living in a war zone and the effects of the conflict on citizens' lives. Several Iraqi bloggers have caught the attention of international media. The blog Baghdad Burning, for example, was adapted for stage[12] and a book.[13] The blog was started in 2003 by a twenty-four-year-old Iraqi girl using the pseudonym Riverbend.

In November 2005, Iraq secured the .IQ ccTLD, and entrusted its administration to Iraq's National Communications and Media Commission (NCMC). [14]

Legal and regulatory frameworks

The new Iraqi government has placed few restrictions or regulations on the Internet in Iraq. Article 36 of the Iraqi constitution guarantees freedom of expression. The sweeping powers Prime Minister al-Maliki granted to the military in the name of security did not place unusual restrictions on the right to free expression, but they did circumscribe the corollary rights to privacy and assembly.[15] Provisions of the penal code restricting freedom of the press remain on the books; these provisions have been used to sentence journalists to long prison sentences in recent years.[16]

Iraqi security forces detained at least thirty reporters over the course of 2006, with four still held without charge at year's end.[17] The Committee to Protect Journalists reports that

U.S. forces have detained dozens of journalists since the war began in 2003. Though they quickly released most, at least eight were detained for weeks or months. On September 7, 2006, the Iraqi government closed the Baghdad bureau of the pan-Arab satellite news station Al-Arabiyya for one month on the grounds that its reporting amounted to "incitement." Iraqi networks were ordered not to show scenes of violence. The government continued to prevent the pan-Arab satellite station Al-Jazeera from reopening its Baghdad bureau. In 2004, Reporters Without Borders stated that "[t]he United States has total control of the country's telecommunications system."[18]

ONI testing results

ONI conducted in-country tests in 2006 on Iraq's ISP uruklink. The tests revealed no evidence of filtering for any of the categories tested.

On the other hand, the BBC reported that the "Pentagon is keeping a close eye on what its troops post online, with special attention being paid to videos that show the aftermath of combat." The BBC added that, "[o]ne soldier who served in Iraq in 2005 told the BBC there was 'a tight watch' being kept on video and pictures posted to MySpace, with civilian contractors monitoring the internet on behalf of the Pentagon." The BBC has not been able to confirm that contractors are scouring the Internet for inappropriate material from the military, but reported that "US Central Command—which is responsible for troops in Iraq and Afghanistan—does have a team reading blogs and responding to what they consider inaccuracies about the so-called war on terror."[19]

Other reports stated that some liberal Web sites were blocked on military computers in Iraq as part of filtering nonconservative content. Examples include The Memory Hole[20] and Wonkette.[21] However, officials from the U.S. Defense Department denied that they block political Web sites for soldiers serving in Iraq.[22]

In January 2007, at the request of the British government, Google agreed to remove updated images that included British bases in Iraq from Google Earth after British divisional headquarters came under almost daily mortar barrages.[23]

Conclusion

Iraqi citizens have unfettered access to the Internet, but this fact is overshadowed by the ongoing security condition. The deadly conflict makes journalists and media professionals working in Iraq particularly vulnerable.

"Though Iraq's state of disorder has opened up a space of freedom, it has also produced serious fears. Living conditions continue to deteriorate. Owners of Internet centers close their stores at night out of fear—fear of both the occupying forces and those of the resistance."[24]

NOTES

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