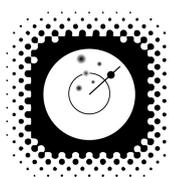


Internet Filtering in

Iraq



OpenNet Initiative

Overview

Iraq does not have an official national Internet filtering policy, nor is there evidence that the state Internet service provider (ISP) practices filtering. However, the government has declared plans to block “immoral” Web content, monitor Internet activities, and regulate Internet cafés. Current security conditions prevent many Iraqis from accessing the Internet.

Background

The security situation in Iraq has been unstable since the beginning of the United States-led removal of President Saddam Hussein in 2003.¹ Sectarian tensions and continued insurgency targeting both civilians and state security forces contribute to this volatility.² The media scene has changed considerably since the ousting of Saddam Hussein, though many journalists have been killed by insurgents and coalition forces.³

A Human Rights Watch 2008 report described the human rights condition in Iraq as “extremely poor” and said there are reports of widespread torture of detainees in facilities run by the Iraqi authorities.⁴ The country is one of the world’s most dangerous places for journalists, and in 2008 Iraqi authorities

established a special police unit to provide protection for journalists and to investigate murders of journalists.⁵

Internet in Iraq

The telecommunications industry boomed in 2003 when Iraqis first experienced unfettered access to the Internet and cell phones.⁶ In 2008, Iraq’s State Company for Internet Services (SCIS) said 250,000 Iraqis had subscribed to Internet services, though an American adviser to the Ministry of Communications estimated the number at 12 million, due to the reselling of service by private entrepreneurs.⁷ International Telecommunication Union (ITU) estimates put Iraq’s Internet penetration rate in 2008 at 0.9 percent.⁸

In April 2009, representatives of American technology companies, including Twitter, WordPress, YouTube, Google and AT&T, accompanied a U.S. State Department delegation to Baghdad to discuss how to build the country’s information infrastructure.⁹ According to the delegation, approximately 80 percent of the population own mobile phones, but only about 5 percent of homes have Internet access.¹⁰

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 \$).....	2,170	█	
Life expectancy at birth (years).....	59	██████████	
Literacy rate (% of people age 15+).....	74	██████████████████	
Human development index (out of 177).....	unavailable		
Rule of law (percentile).....	1	████	
Voice and accountability (percentile).....	10	████	
Digital opportunity index (out of 181).....	unavailable		
Internet users (% of population).....	0.95	█	

Iraq's Internet penetration rate is the lowest in the region.¹¹ An official with an Iraqi mobile network operator attributed this to the lack of a high-speed Internet backbone connecting cities within the country to the outside world and the lack of a unified national telecommunications law and regulatory framework.¹² Private telecommunication companies complain that telecom regulations are poor and that regulatory decisions have been made by the government's Ministry of Communications, which lacks independence.¹³

Different groups in Iraq have used social networking Web sites in different ways and for different purposes. For example, some Iraqis upload to YouTube video clips about everyday life in their country during the United States-led occupation, while insurgent groups upload video clips that show assaults on American and Iraqi forces in addition to pro-terrorism propaganda.¹⁴ Militant groups also use the Internet to recruit new members. The U.S. military said in March 2008 that it had captured and killed al-Qaeda members in Iraq responsible for producing and disseminating propaganda videos and other materials to thousands of Web sites.¹⁵ As the Internet continues to be a battleground for coalition forces and insurgent groups, terrorists have reportedly developed online encryption tools which provide secure Internet communication for the Iraqi insurgent groups.¹⁶

Interestingly, British soldiers serving in Iraq and Afghanistan have used the social networking sites and video-sharing sites, such as YouTube, to publicize their own grievances on issues such as poor equipment, accommodation and pay.¹⁷

Internet services in Iraq are provided by the State Company for Internet Services (SCIS), an offshoot of the Ministry of Communications.¹⁸ Private telecommunications operators in Iraq include Asiacell,¹⁹ Etisaluna,²⁰ and Zain.²¹

Legal and regulatory frameworks

The Iraqi constitution protects freedom of expression as long as the expression "does not violate public order and morality."²² Material that labels anyone an apostate – an accusation often leveled against Shiites by Sunni extremists – is specifically forbidden.²³ Though the U.S.-led invasion is credited with increasing freedoms of expression and the press, in July 2009 the government announced plans to begin restricting violent and sexually themed content, both online and off. The proposed reforms include banning Web sites that contain content relating to "drugs, terrorism, gambling, negative remarks about Islam and pornography."²⁴ Book publishers must sign agreements with the Ministry of Culture pledging not to publish offensive material, and Internet cafés must

register with the authorities or face closure.²⁵

These restrictions follow an April 2009 study by a committee established by the SCIS focused on blocking “immoral” Web content and how to prevent “abuse” of the Internet. Another committee, also established by SCIS, was given the task of regulating and licensing private Internet cafés and enforcing restrictions “to create a healthy and safe environment” for Internet users.²⁶

The Commission of Media and Communications (CMC), which was established in June 2004, regulates media and telecommunications in Iraq and has exclusive powers, as a legal authority, to grant licenses and regulate communications, broadcasting and information services in the country.²⁷ The CMC imposes a number of restrictions on media workers in Iraq. For example, it forced journalists to sign a “Code for Media during Elections” before they could be accredited to cover the January 2009 provisional elections. The Code prohibited journalists from criticizing candidates’ programs.²⁸ Reporters Without Borders called this measure a “threat to the freedom to work of Iraqi and foreign journalists.”²⁹

The media has also been targeted by legal offenses. In May 2009, Reporters Without Borders condemned what it described as “the Iraqi government’s continuing legal offensive against independent news media, which for the first time is also targeting Internet media.”³⁰ The condemnation came after a Baghdad court ordered the German-based Web site Kitabat to pay NID1 billion (EUR630,000) in damages. The lawsuit was brought by Iraq’s Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki after the site published an article accusing his chief of staff of using his position to get jobs for his relatives.

The Prime Minister later withdrew his action against the Web site, but he brought a libel suit against the London-

based Guardian newspaper, demanding a million dollars in damages from the paper for describing his government as “authoritarian.”³¹

In addition, even though a 2008 press law abolished prison sentences for press offenses, journalists face working restrictions, especially in the border region of Kurdistan, and there is pressure on local media to report positively about the country.³²

In addition to laws regulating the media in Iraq, the country’s security situation is also a serious consideration for media workers. The conflict in Iraq has been the among the deadliest for the press, and about 90 percent of media workers killed in the country have been Iraqis, who continue to be targeted by various groups.³³ According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, as of March 2009 at least 136 journalists have been killed in Iraq in work-related incidents since March 2003.³⁴

Surveillance

Iraq’s Ministry of Communications said in February 2009 that it signed a deal with a French company to implement a security system on the Internet network in Iraq. The Minister of Communications explained that with the new system, it will be possible to monitor the Internet and to block access to specific online content, especially if there is a concern over national security information or information related to public morals.³⁵

With respect to the U.S.-led occupation, 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.”³⁶

ONI testing results

ONI conducted 2008-2009 in-country tests on two Iraqi ISPs, the State Company for Internet Services and Itisaluna.

Similar to 2007-2008 results, tests revealed no evidence of technical filtering for any of the categories tested.

In August 2008, Internet users reported that a mobile phone operator in the city of Basra started to block violent as well as pornographic content. The company confirmed that it implements a filtering regime but said the regime was not mandated by the state but rather by the company’s management.³⁷

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.³⁸

Conclusion

Internet access in Iraq remains largely unfettered, but this is likely to change, as the authorities have initiated measures to censor Internet content and monitor online activities. In addition, the government has launched legal offensives against independent news media and Web sites.

Despite increase in media freedom since the fall of Saddam Hussein, the ongoing security condition has made the country one of the deadliest for the media and has made journalists and media professionals working in Iraq particularly vulnerable.

NOTES

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