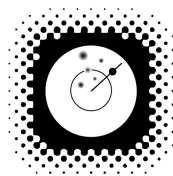**Internet Filtering in**

Lebanon

OpenNet Initiative

Overview

Lebanon is one of the more democratic countries in the Middle East, though it has its own challenges as the home of different religious groups that share power in a unique way. The complex regime necessitates the creation of a liberal media environment to accommodate the diverse religious sects and political groups, which sometimes run into conflict with each other, politically as well as physically. The online environment mirrors the liberal traditional media scene; Lebanon is one of very few countries in the Middle East where ONI found no evidence of technical filtering.

Background

Lebanon is one of the most complex and divided countries in the Middle East. The country serves as a refuge for the region's persecuted minorities; its population is a mixture of Christian sects, Sunni Muslims, Shia Muslims, Druze and others.[1] Lebanon's National Pact of 1943 states that the President must be a Maronite Christian, the Prime Minister a Sunni Muslim, and the Speaker of the parliament a Shi'a Muslim. Christians and Muslims are equally represented in the Parliament.[2]

Considered one of the more democratic countries in the Middle East, Lebanon was the first Arab country to privatize broadcast media, though media stations must first be approved by the government. [3]

Lebanon is described by the International Press Institute as having "a long tradition of press freedom, though nearly all media outlets are owned by prominent political and commercial elites."[4] A human rights report by the State Department says the law in Lebanon provides for freedom of speech and of the press, and the government generally respects these rights in practice, but the report also says the law permits the censoring of pornography, political opinions, and religious materials when considered a threat to national security.[5]

Internet in Lebanon

According to the International Telecommunications Union 2008 statistics, the Internet penetration rate in

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 $)	5,584		
Life expectancy at birth (years)	71.5		
Literacy rate (% of people age 15+)	88.3		
Human development index (out of 177)	88		
Rule of law (percentile)	30		
Voice and accountability (percentile)	34		
Digital opportunity index (out of 181)	93		
Internet users (% of population)	38.3		

Lebanon is 38.30 percent,[6] up from 8.83 percent in 2000.[7] The government has a monopoly over international telecommunications and the use of the national phone network.[8] The price of domestic telecommunication services is set by the state.[9] The number of active ISPs reached fifteen by the end of December 2007.[10]

In January 2006, the Lebanese Ministry of Telecommunications signed an agreement with private sector data providers and ISP's to launch DSL services,[11] a development that came fairly late compared to other countries in the region.

In 2006 Lebanon only had 11.62 computers for every 100 people.[12] Many users access the Internet through Internet cafes since the cost of the Internet at home can be expensive.[13] The government started to apply fixed tariffs for Internet dial up accounts in July 2006,[14] and in June 2008 the TRA announced plans to invite bids to introduce broadband services.[15]

There are about 7,000 Lebanese Web sites, an unusually high number compared to other Arab countries,[16] and the year 2007 witnessed an increase in the number and popularity of news Web sites, as Lebanese were following news about the presidential election crisis.[17]

Legal and regulatory framework

Lebanese press laws do not restrict freedom of speech, and there is no direct censorship from the government.[18] However, Lebanon's intelligence agency, the Sûreté Générale (SG, General Security Directorate), "reviews and censors all foreign newspapers, magazines, and books before they enter the country."[19] One of SG's functions, as listed on its Web site, is "[e]nsuring the right implementation of laws and rules related to the censorship of Medias [sic] and information."[20]

In this regard, in April 2008 the head of the General Security Department said, "I know that with the Internet censorship may appear to be ridiculous, but we ban works damaging to religion because it is such a sensitive topic".[21] Censorship in Lebanon is also applied to movies and musical works if they are perceived to be Israeli propaganda.[22]

Many journalists have complained about restrictions imposed by the army, supposedly for security reasons, during clashes with Palestinian militants in a refugee camp in May 2007. Five journalists were fined, some heavily, for libel in 2007. Journalists have also been victims of political killings or assassination attempts.[23]

The Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (TRA) was established in

accordance with Law 431 of 2002 as an independent government agency tasked with liberalizing, regulating, and developing telecommunications in Lebanon. TRA's duties include encouraging competition and transparency in the telecommunications field and preparing draft decrees and regulations.[24]

Under the TRA, public telecommunication service providers can receive a license for a maximum of twenty years and must make sure that the quality of service meets the needs of the public interest (Article 25).[25] The law stresses the importance of transparency and competition (Article 5) as well as the accessibility of telecommunication services to "all nationals and residents in all regions of the country" (Article 26).[26] Regarding national security, Article 47 states that the "Council of Ministers may instruct Service Providers to give full priority to the telecommunications needs of the security forces and the civil organizations operating under their control."[27]

Voice over Internet Protocol services (VoIPs) and videoconferencing are illegal in Lebanon.[28]

In February 2008, the TRA required all ISPs to submit a status report on their practices and policies regarding user confidentiality. These reports were to include a description of how and to what capacity an ISP used its customers' personal information and what measures the ISP had taken to protect this information. [29]

In January 2008, four male college students were briefly detained for defaming a female colleague on the social networking Web site Facebook.[30] The arrests in this unique case highlighted the lack of legislation regulating electronic media in Lebanon.[31]

Surveillance

According to the US State Department Human Rights Report, the government of Lebanon did not restrict access to the Internet or monitor e-mail or Internet chat rooms in 2007.[32] Interestingly, some Internet café operators in Lebanon admit that they use computer surveillance software that enables them to monitor the desktops and browsing habits of their clients under the pretext of protecting the security of their computer networks or stopping their clients from accessing pornography.[33]

ONI testing results

ONI carried out technical tests in Lebanon using several ISPs, including Cyberia, IDM, and Lebanon On Line, using different connections and found no evidence of the use of technical filtering to limit access to Web content.

Conclusion

Even though the media enjoys liberal regulations in Lebanon, the often tense political relationships between the rival religious and political affiliations have resulted in assassinations and assassination attempts of political figures – as senior as a prime minister of the country – as well as media professionals and journalists. Access to the Internet is not restricted by filtration, but the poor infrastructure and low ICT penetration rate, as well as the cost of connectivity, remain serious challenges. Some Internet café operators prevent their clients from accessing objectionable content such as pornography, however, there is no evidence that these practices are required or encouraged by the state.

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