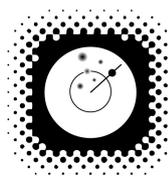


Internet Filtering in

Libya



OpenNet Initiative

Overview

In the past few years, Internet filtering in Libya has become more selective, focusing on a few political opposition Web sites. This relatively lenient filtering policy coincides with what is arguably a trend toward greater openness and increasing freedom of the press. However, the legal and political climate continues to encourage self-censorship in online media.

Background

After years of isolation, Libya began to open to the international community and to improve its relationship with the West in 2003 by taking responsibility for the 1988 bombing of a PanAm plane above the Scotland and formally renouncing weapons of mass destruction.¹ The United States, the European Union, and the United Nations lifted their respective embargoes on Libya shortly thereafter,² and in 2004 a U.S. Embassy was established in Libya to further solidify relations between the two countries.³

The governance system in Libya differs from those in most Arab countries. Various people's committees hold power through a system called "Jamahiriya," Arabic for "state of the masses," but President Muammar al-

Gaddafi has ultimate power. The media are prohibited from criticizing his regime.⁴

Human rights advocates criticize the country for its poor human rights practices. Though Human Rights Watch described Libya's release of two political prisoners in March 2009 as "one of a series of steps that indicates that the government is willing to change its policies,"⁵ the advocacy group called upon the government to release others who remain in prison.⁶ The country was named by the democracy watchdog organization Freedom House in May 2008 as among the "worst of the worst" of the most repressive regimes in the world. Libya was among eight countries judged to have the worst human rights records.⁷

Criticism for the lack of media freedom and democracy in Libya comes also from Seif al-Islam Muammar Qaddafi, son of the Libyan president, who said in August 2006, "in all frankness and transparency, there is no freedom of the press in Libya; actually there is no press, even, and there is no real 'direct people's democracy' on the ground."⁸

Libya was ranked 160th out of 173 countries in Reporters Without Borders's

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 \$).....	10,335		
Life expectancy at birth (years).....	73.4		
Literacy rate (% of people age 15+).....	84.2		
Human development index (out of 177).....	56		
Rule of law (percentile).....	32		
Voice and accountability (percentile).....	2		
Digital opportunity index (out of 181).....	109		
Internet users (% of population).....	4.7		

Press Freedom Index 2008.⁹

Internet in Libya

The state-owned General Post and Telecommunications Company (GPTC) owns the country's primary ISP, Libya Telecom and Technology (LTT), and the two mobile operators, Almadar for Mobile Phone and Libyana Mobile Phone Network.¹⁰ LTT has been the country's main provider of communications and Internet services since 1997 and offers Internet services via dialup, DSL, broadband, and satellite.¹¹ Though at least seven companies provide Internet services, they are effectively subordinated to LTT, as LTT maintains a monopoly over the country's international Internet gateway.¹²

In 2008, Libya was the first African country to reach 100 percent mobile telephone penetration.¹³ Poor telecommunications infrastructure limits the spread of Internet use in Libya, however; the Internet penetration rate as of 2008 was 4.7 percent. A large number of users still rely on dialup connections to access the Internet, and there only about 51,000 broadband subscriptions in the country.¹⁴ Internet use is expected to grow with the introduction of the first commercial wireless network (WiMax) by the state-owned ISP in January 2009.¹⁵

Libyan blogs remain limited in number and tend to focus on culture and literature, avoiding politics for fear of government repression. However, many

Libyans access various political opposition Web sites run by reform advocates who live in exile.¹⁶ Libyan Internet users utilize sophisticated proxy tools and often seek help from experts from other Arab countries to learn ways to bypass filtering. This resulted in an increase in the crackdown on circumvention measures by government censors and security authorities.¹⁷

Legal and regulatory framework

The state controls the media in Libya, and press laws make the formation of private media illegal by restricting the right to publish to only two public organizations.¹⁸ As a result, the country did not have any independent media until 2007, when several privately owned news organizations were established by one of President Gaddafi's sons.¹⁹ These independent media have covered some politically sensitive issues and have dared to criticize the government; however, the government decided in June 2009 to nationalize these media and to bring them under its control.²⁰ Reporters Without Borders described the government's decision as a "retrograde measure."²¹

Criticism of Gaddafi is forbidden by *lèse-majesté*, a law prohibiting offenses against the president. Self-censorship is commonplace,²² especially on issues such as the plight of the Berber minority and high-level corruption.²³ In addition, the government blocks oppositional Web

sites and arrests and imprisons cyber-dissidents.²⁴

The regime not only bans criticism of the president in the local media but also launches legal offenses on media outside the country for criticizing the Libyan leader. For example, President Gaddafi brought a defamation case against three Moroccan newspapers in a Moroccan court for publishing articles critical of him.²⁵ In June 2009, the court fined the dailies for “publicly harming” Gaddafi and “injuring his dignity.”²⁶ The Committee to Protect Journalists condemned the court’s decision as a “harsh judgment.” The group’s program coordinator in the region said, “We are dismayed that Morocco’s judiciary has chosen to punish journalists who express views that do not conform to those of the political leadership.”²⁷

In a previous libel suit also brought by Libyan leader Gaddafi, a court in Algeria sentenced two Algerian journalists to six months in prison for publishing reports that allegedly attacked the Libyan president. An appeals court suspended the prison sentence in April 2007, but Reporters Without Borders said, “even a suspended prison sentence is a serious press freedom violation.”²⁸

Beyond merely political content, the official Libyan country-code top level domain registry rules mandate that .ly domains “must not contain obscene, scandalous, indecent, or contrary to Libyan law or Islamic morality words, phrases nor abbreviations.”²⁹

In 2006 Reporters Without Borders removed Libya from their list of Internet enemies after a fact-finding visit found no evidence of Internet censorship.³⁰ ONI’s 2007-2008 technical test results contradicted that conclusion, however.

Surveillance

Internet users in Libya have told the Arabic media that security personnel and Internet café operators closely monitor Internet cafés and often harass Internet

users. Several Internet cafés have been shut down by security, which has prompted café operators to do the monitoring themselves to avoid being shut down. Internet users also reported that notes are posted in Internet cafés warning users against accessing opposition Web sites. A user said that he was questioned by security for visiting a popular Libyan news Web site.³¹

ONI testing results

ONI conducted in-country tests on two Libyan ISPs, LTT and Modern World of Communications (MWC).

Results from 2008-2009 tests indicate that some previously blocked Web sites were accessible from Libya, while some opposition Web sites remained blocked. Blocked Web sites include the sites of the National Front For the Salvation of Libya (www.libyanfsl.com), Libya al-Mostakbal (www.libya-al-mostakbal.org), and Libya Watanona (www.libya-watanona.com).

Interestingly, during 2008-2009 ONI testing, a number of independent and pro-opposition Web sites were found to be sporadically. ONI monitored these Web sites and found that the sites were apparently hacked and defaced, and their content was replaced with pro-Libyan leader content. Among the targeted Web sites were Akhbar Libya (www.akhbar-libyaonline.com) and the New Libya (www.thenewlibya.com), whose domain name seemed to have been hijacked.

A number of Libyan online publications reported a wave of hacking incidents that targeted mostly independent and opposition Web sites, but it is unclear who might be behind the attacks.³²

ONI found that some previously blocked Web sites are now defunct, including the Web site of the Libyan Muslim Brotherhood (www.almukhtar.org).

Evidence from ONI testing reveals that Libya employs IP blocking at the

international gateway, carried out by LTT. Users who attempt to access banned content are not served with a blockpage, but rather encounter time-out messages.

Conclusion

Libya has decreased its filtration efforts and opened up access to previous blocked political Web sites as well as sites related to the minority group Amazigh (Berbers). Few political sites were found blocked, though the censorship still lacks transparency, as none of the three ISPs admits filtering or serves blockpages. Despite signs of progress toward greater media freedom, self-censorship remains widely practiced by both online and offline media for fear of government retribution. The scarcity of political discourse online is probably the result of this self-censorship.

NOTES

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